

Ghost bird of the twilight



By Bill Naylor



In medieval times, Nightjars were seen as a bad omen. When hunting moths and other insects in farmyards, they were believed to drink milk from the udders of sleeping goats, transmitting a disease that would cause blindness.

At the time of Aristotle throughout Europe, 'goatsucker' was its common name, enshrined in the Latin name, *Caprimulgus*. In the UK, with its falcon-shaped wings and frequenting heaths and moorland, it was also known as 'Fern hawk.' Once widely distributed across the UK, the post-war building boom destroyed almost half of its heathland habitat. But by 2004, its population had doubled.

The name 'Moth Owl' derives from its loose plumage, which absorbs the sound of its wings. Its eyes, like those of an owl, possess *tapedum lucidum*, a reflective tissue behind the retina, enhancing its light gathering ability and responsible for the startling red or pink eye reflection when caught in a car headlight.

Silhouetted against a moonlit sky, the males reveal white spots on the outer tail feathers and wings. In flight it hovers, wings raised and tail spread before suddenly disappearing in the night. During the day it hides in plain sight, camouflaged among leaf litter or perched lengthways on a branch.

Active at dusk and dawn, male Nightjars sing with their beaks closed. They have the smallest beaks after swifts, but their large gape opens horizontally and vertically. Rigid bristles protect the eyes. Numerous varieties of insects including moths and beetles, are taken in flight. In Europe, the Dor

beetle is common prey hence the Cornish country name Dor Hawk. Like swifts they drink by skimming the surface of lakes and ponds. Grit and small stones are also swallowed.

Nightjars arrive in the UK in April or May from winter grounds in central Africa. The male's vocals include 'churring'. Another call resembles a spinning wheel or a two-stroke engine giving rise to names such as Razor Grinder, Wheel bird and Night Churr. The calls are occasionally accompanied by it slapping its wings behind its back, similar to woodpigeons. A female also produces this sound when excited by a male's presence.

Paired birds indulge in duets and aerial manoeuvres. The nest is non-existent but a male will choose a ground location, shuffling and turning on the spot as if moulding nest material. In this location, two oval white or attractive purple-blotched eggs are laid. Incubation, mainly by the female, is undertaken for 17-21 days after the first egg is laid. Hatching occurs when lunar visibility favours increased hunting for the nestling's food.

Youngsters are fed by regurgitation. If disturbed the female will move her eggs or young to another location. The brown, downy youngsters vacate the nest while unable to fly, which they do at around 16-18 days. The parents care for them for a month afterwards. The male takes care of the first brood if the female lays a second clutch.

The world's 98 species of Nightjars include the North American Common whip-poor-will ("My Blue Heaven"). The only bird known to hibernate.