

THE YEARS OF THE NIGHTHAWK

JULY 1969. After a busy morning limbing and sawing up a fallen tree at my summer place in South Granville, I glanced up to find that the activity had attracted a people-watcher. Looking like a bump on the bark, it crouched lengthwise on the branch of a dead spruce. Obliging, our observer waited while I fetched the camera and took her picture, then when I took my eyes from her for a moment, she vanished on silent wings.

This was a Common Nighthawk--one of the species of expert flyers commonly seen over cities where it nests on flat-roofed buildings. It should be noted that the nighthawk is not a hawk at all but a goatsucker.

1970

JUNE 14, 1970. We were walking a trail about 150 yards back in the woods when a nighthawk lit soundlessly in front of us and went into the wounded bird act. To find the nest we returned later and watched closely for her to fly off. On the ground lay one densely freckled egg (normally two are laid). After photographing the egg, I approached the mother bird. She put on a great show of ferocity with her whole face opened up to display a great red yawning cavity as she uttered a hissing sound. I returned and photographed her in characteristic poses on June 20 and 24 at which time she was still brooding the egg. On August 6 the nest was vacant and no nighthawk were observed.

1971

JUNE 27, 1971 brought a delightful surprise. A nighthawk had moved into the next lot and was brooding two eggs under some wild cherry trees in a clearing at the edge of the woods. This was only about 100 feet from our outdoor fireplace. During a few days stay in July I often went to see her and talked to her. What do you say when you talk to a bird? Consistently I said: "Pretty bird" when greeting her. On July 11 there was one egg, one empty shell and a bit of fluff. I gazed with disbelief. That bit of fluff, could it possibly be a live little bird? Then I detected a tiny node and decided it might pass for a beak. Next day the second little bird had hatched and I photographed the two tiny nighthawks with an empty shell on either side.

For the next 10 or 11 days they remained on their patch of greyish duff about four feet in diameter. Within it they moved to various positions. Sitting there with their eyes closed to merest slits they were perfectly camouflaged. It was amusing to watch people look directly at them and yet not see them. Soon brownish feathers began to appear among the soft down. By July 23 the mother bird had moved them several feet away to a patch of brown dead leaves where again they were practically invisible.

1972

JUNE 18, 1972 found the nighthawk back at the same bare spot under the wild cherry trees. No pictures were taken this summer. I had learned that a person, however well-intentioned, is a menace when inspecting a bird's nest and may be the means of leading a curious or hungry predator straight to the eggs or the young birds. Therefore I kept my distance and seldom disturbed her, but I always spoke to her.

1973

JUNE 20, 1973. I found the nighthawk brooding two eggs in the same old spot. By this time I had to resort to waving a long stick in front of her to put her off the nest without having to go too close. She would flop on the ground nearby, apparently unafraid, and no longer showing the big red mouth. On July 9 there was one little nighthawk; the other egg, or tiny bird had disappeared. By July 21 the birds had moved several yards from the nest and I deemed it safe now to get close-up pictures of the young one. As I set up the camera, the little fellow lunged at me with wings outspread in typical nighthawk "attack." With wide-open mouth he hissed just like his mother used to do. Two days later I located him and was about to take another picture when he took to the air and flew about 100 feet, landing within 50 feet of the fireplace. That same evening Father Nighthawk came out of obscurity,