

Chordeiles nacunda (Nacunda Nighthawk)

Family: Caprimulgidae (Nightjars)

Order: Caprimulgiformes (Nightbirds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Nacunda nighthawk, *Chordeiles nacunda*.

[<http://picssr.com/tags/podager>, downloaded 27 February 2017]

TRAITS. *Chordeiles nacunda* (formerly *Podager nacunda*) is the largest species of the nightjars, ranging in length from 28-33cm. They have very large heads and grey legs with a black bill. The underside is of a white-cream colour (Fig. 1). The head and upper chest are speckled in black and brown with a bright white V-shaped band around the underside of the throat, with white wing bands bordered by black on their long wings. They have an average mass of 188g. The males and females can be distinguished due to the males having tail feathers that are white only at the tips (Holyoak, 2001).

DISTRIBUTION. Found mainly in the northern and eastern parts of South America, in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, the Guianas, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela (Fig. 2). It is a rare visitor to Trinidad and Tobago.

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. Found in dry savannahs, the edges of forests, tropical, as well as subtropical and wet lowlands, this bird spends most of its time on the ground (Fig. 3). Though this bird is a nighthawk, it is very misleading as it is not related to the hawk family and nor is it only active in the night. They are said to be diurnal, as it may also be active in the daytime, which sets it apart from the other nighthawks (Inaturalist.Org, 2017). They are said to be crepuscular, that is, they are most active at dawn and dusk (Encyclopedia of Life, 2017). This nightjar flies rather slowly, and does not often swerve or fly in zig-zag patterns. *Chordeiles nacunda* usually have soft voices and are often silent when feeding. The nacunda nighthawk roosts in open areas but blends into the background, and so easily escapes detection.

FOOD AND FEEDING. These nightjars usually fly high, feeding along open fields and along rivers. They usually feed in dim light conditions such as just before dark or under slight illumination from nearby cities and makes use of flying insects including winged ants, froghoppers, beetles, bugs and locusts. Beetles and hemipteran pests (of soybeans) were found in the gizzards of these birds. They often feed alone or in small groups and sometimes may even be seen feeding in large flocks of up to 500 individuals (McKay, 1980).

REPRODUCTION. These birds have varying breeding seasons according to their geographical location. In Colombia, it is usually from January to June and in Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Paraguay from September to November. The males flaunt themselves to the females by singing. This nightjar does not usually make nests like the other bird species but instead, keep their eggs on open ground or in rocky areas covered with bushes and fallen leaves, often keeping their eggs near to their feeding sites. The female nightjar usually lay one or two, which possesses a pinkish cream colour with brown patches (Fig. 4). The eggs are 25.4-27.2mm in length and hatch within 19-24 days. In the daytime, the female usually incubates the eggs, however though, in the night, both parents share the task (Cleere, 1998).

BEHAVIOUR. The chicks are only capable of travelling a short distance within 24 hours after hatching. The male uptakes a security role, that is, by guarding the nest and the young. The parents and other adult nightjars use a series soft clocking sounds to communicate with the young. The young is cared for and fed by both parents who regurgitate insects for them. This occurs until the chicks are 20-21 days old and are capable of fledging. If the conditions are satisfactory, a second clutch of eggs may be laid near the first set and the males usually care for the young from the first brood during this time.

Antipredator behaviour: The nacunda nighthawk utilise a few adaptations that allow them to avoid predation. These include such things like having a nocturnal lifestyle, where the chances of being attacked are much less and for during the day, their cryptic coats helps to blend in with the earthy background. When they are nesting, they

avoid movement in order to prevent detection. If an intruder comes close to the nest, the parents perform a distraction while the young sneaks away. Also, both parents never stay near the nest unless necessary, that is, to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Owls usually prey upon nightjars; hence, whenever they hear the calls of an owl, they stay perfectly quiet (Cleere, 1998).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. The nacunda nighthawk is listed as Least Concern (IUCN, 2017). The population trend of this bird seems to be stable, though one cannot confirm this statement with much accuracy, as there is not real quantification.

REFERENCES

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Posted online: 2017



Fig. 2. Nacunda nighthawk geographic distribution.

[<http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/22689723>, downloaded 27 February 2017]



Fig. 3. Nacunda nighthawk spends most of its time on the ground.

[<http://www.ecoregistros.org/site/imagen.php?id=15704>, downloaded 27 February 2017]



Fig. 4. Nacunda nighthawk's eggs hidden, blending in with the background.

[<http://picssr.com/tags/podager>, downloaded 27 February 2017]