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A review of Common Nighthawks in Britain

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Abstract

The Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor* remains a very rare autumn vagrant to Britain from North America, with only 27 individuals recorded between 1927 and 2022. It has occurred mostly in September and October, with one record in early November, and the majority of birds involved have been recorded as immatures. Of the vagrants so far documented in Britain, five were reported as males, four as females, 12 as juveniles or immatures, three as adults and seven as of indeterminate age or sex. Most of the birds survived their journey of almost 4,200 km across the Atlantic Ocean, but six were either found dead or died shortly after their initial discovery. Only one bird reported from Britain has so far been identified to race. Subspecies are separable by coloration and size and are usually not readily identifiable in the field, especially away from the breeding grounds. It may occasionally be possible to assign some birds to a group of subspecies, especially if their general coloration is seen well. Of the six vagrants that died, five were found

dead while the sixth was shot, but only four of the corpses were preserved; three are currently housed in museum collections and the fourth is privately held. Examination of some of these preserved specimens reveals that two distinct subspecies, 'Eastern Nighthawk' *C. m. minor* and 'Chapman's Nighthawk' *C. m. chapmani*, have occurred in Britain, while photographs of living birds suggest that other races might also have found their way here. Should any future vagrants be found dead or dying, finders should be encouraged to recover and freeze the corpses as soon as possible after discovery and donate them to a natural history museum for preservation and identification. This should, of course, be done within the legal frameworks and with landowner permission. Although no potential splits are currently under consideration, it would nevertheless seem important to document which populations might be subject to vagrancy to Britain.

Introduction

The Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor* is a widespread, polytypic species that breeds throughout much of North and Central America. Most populations are highly migratory, wintering in South America, mainly east of the Andes, south as far as northern Argentina (Poulin *et al.* 1996; Cleere 1998; Holyoak 2001; Brigham 2020).

Nine subspecies are generally recognised by most authorities and are separated mainly by the coloration and patterning of the upperparts and breast and the barring and general coloration of the belly and flanks, although it should also be noted that intermediates occur in zones of intergradation. Two of these subspecies breed along the eastern seaboard of the United States and thus might be considered as the most likely candidates for vagrancy to Britain. The nominate race, 'Eastern Nighthawk' *C. m. minor*, is by

far the most widespread, breeding from southeastern Alaska to British Columbia and from southern Canada and northern United States to Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia and Oklahoma. It is a large, darkish race with the underparts generally greyish white tinged buff and barred brown.

'Chapman's Nighthawk' *C. m. chapmani* breeds from southeastern Kansas to eastern North Carolina and south to southeastern Texas and southern Florida. This race is similar to Eastern Nighthawk but is smaller, with slightly paler upperparts that are more greyish than blackish, and generally more mottled with buff or whitish markings. The ground colour of the underparts between the barring is usually whiter.

Satellite-tagging has shown that birds migrate towards and down the eastern seaboard in autumn, crossing the eastern side of the Gulf of Mexico and then heading over the Caribbean Sea to the northern coast of South America (Ng *et al.* 2018; Knight *et al.* 2021; fig. 1). Autumn migrants following this route may get caught up in fast-moving depressions arriving from the Atlantic Ocean that then travel across the Caribbean and head north along the eastern seaboard of the United States. Migrants encountering these weather systems might therefore find themselves subject to vagrancy to Britain and other countries within the Western Palearctic.

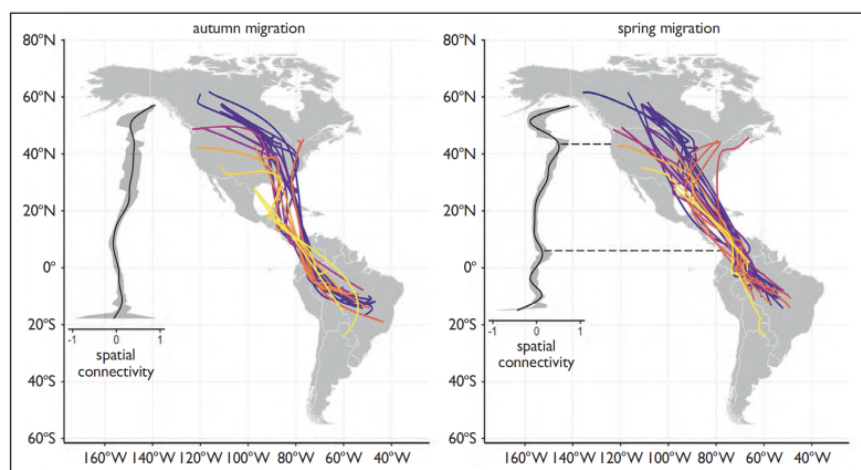


Fig. 1. Migration routes of satellite-tagged Common Nighthawks *Chordeiles minor* in North America, reproduced from the research undertaken and published by Knight *et al.* (2021). See Knight *et al.* (2021) for further details.

Frequent records from the West Indies and Bermuda suggest that some birds may also undertake a transoceanic migration route, which would further expose birds to being caught up in weather systems.

Ageing, sexing and moult

Adult male Common Nighthawks of all subspecies have a large white throat patch, a broad, white band almost midway along the outer wing, across the five outer primaries, and a broad, white, subterminal band across all but the central pair of tail feathers. Adult females have a buff or buffish-white throat patch, a thinner, less-distinct white band across the outer primaries, and lack white on the tail. In both sexes, the white band across the outer primaries becomes broader towards the trailing edge of the wing. Above the white band, the inner primaries appear blackish and unmarked.

Young birds are similar to the adults but are more heavily barred on the underparts, have a paler throat patch, which is barred or spotted brown, lack the white subterminal band on the tail and have all primaries and secondaries narrowly tipped white. Immature males often have a slightly whiter and more

thinly barred throat patch than females, while immature females often have a buff tinge to the throat patch, which may be more heavily barred or spotted than in immature males.

Young birds undergo a near-complete post-juvenile moult in their first calendar-year (1CY), with moult commencing on the breeding grounds, where a variable number of body feathers are moulted. The moult continues on the wintering grounds, where the remainder of the body feathers as well as a variable number of flight feathers are moulted. A block of juvenile coverts, secondaries and primary coverts are usually retained, and some juvenile secondaries can be retained for the first few years of a bird's life. Adults (2CY+) undergo a complete or near-complete annual moult, which is started on the breeding grounds and completed on the wintering grounds (Pyle 2022).

Correctly ageing and sexing birds in autumn may prove to be difficult unless the bird is seen well at close range or photographed.

Subspecific identification

The following descriptions and distributions of the Common Nighthawk subspecies are based on Cleere (1998).

C. m. minor ('Eastern Nighthawk')

Adult male Forehead and crown blackish brown spotted greyish white, tawny or buff; sides and rear of crown spotted greyish white. Nape blackish brown spotted buff, which shows as an indistinct hindneck collar on some individuals. Mantle, back, rump and uppertail-coverts blackish brown, spotted

and speckled greyish white, cinnamon and buff. Lesser coverts blackish brown, lightly spotted greyish white, cinnamon and pale buff; marginal wing-coverts closest to alula, white. Rest of wing-coverts blackish brown speckled greyish white or white. Scapulars blackish brown spotted buff around feather edges. Primaries blackish brown. Broad white patch, c. 25 mm, almost midway along feather, on inner web of P10 (outermost primary) and across both webs of P6–P9. P1–P3 spotted greyish white on inner webs, and very narrowly tipped greyish white. Secondaries blackish brown very narrowly tipped greyish white, with greyish-white bars along edges of inner webs. Tertiaries blackish brown, densely mottled greyish white. Tail dark brown. White subterminal band, c. 8 mm wide across both webs of R2–5. Band c. 15 mm away from feather tips. R2–R5 indistinctly barred with greyish white or pale buff mottling above white band. Central pair (R1) indistinctly barred with greyish-brown or cinnamon mottling. Greyish-white supercilium. Lores buff, lightly spotted brown, ear-coverts dark brown spotted buff. Rictal bristles semi stiff and extremely short, 3 mm in length, with filaments along entire length. Chin dark brown, spotted buff. Large triangular white patch on throat. Lower throat dark brown spotted buff. Breast blackish brown, barred and spotted greyish white. Belly and flanks greyish white tinged buff, barred brown. Undertail-coverts white or buff or white, barred brown. Underwing-coverts greyish white barred brown.

Adult female

Similar to the male but has a buff or buffish-white throat patch, buffier underparts, a thinner, less well-defined white band across P6–P10 and lacks the white subterminal band on the tail.

Immature Similar to the adults but is more heavily barred on the underparts,

has a paler throat patch, which is barred or spotted brown, and lacks the white subterminal band on the tail. All primaries and secondaries are narrowly tipped white.

Juvenile Similar to the immature but paler, with less heavily barred underparts and occasionally buffier upperparts. The primaries are often narrowly tipped buff.

Bare parts Iris dark brown, bill blackish, legs and feet brownish.

Measurements Wing of male 184–208 mm, female 187–203 mm; tail of male 103–118 mm, female 105–118 mm.

Range Canada (southern Yukon and British Columbia, including Vancouver Island, east through Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba to Ontario, southern Quebec and southern Newfoundland) and northern and northeastern USA (north-central and western Washington to extreme northwestern Oregon and Minnesota south to northwestern Arkansas, east to the east coast). Birds in Washington and northwestern Oregon are apparently of an atypical form. Intergrades with *C. m. hesperis* in southeastern British Columbia, southern Alberta, southeastern Washington and central Oregon; with *C. m. sennetti* in central Saskatchewan and southwestern Manitoba, and possibly with *C. m. chapmani* in the southeast of its range.

Autumn migration Some populations move south along the Central/Mississippi flyway then head south across the Gulf of Mexico, through Central America, follow a narrow route through the Colombian Andes and then cross the Amazon Basin to reach the wintering grounds. Some central and eastern populations may, however, use transoceanic routes, with birds migrating towards and down the eastern seaboard, crossing the eastern

side of the Gulf of Mexico and then heading over the Caribbean Sea to the northern coast of South America.

C. m. sennetti

Paler than the nominate race, with upperparts more silvery grey. Differs from *C. m. hesperis* in the paler ground colour of its upperparts, which are densely covered in finer markings. The underparts are greyer, with paler and narrower brown bars.

Measurements Wing of male 186–223 mm, female 175–201 mm; tail of male 101–114 mm, female 102–115 mm.

Range Central-southern Canada (southern Saskatchewan and extreme southwestern Manitoba) and north-central USA (North Dakota, South Dakota, northwestern Iowa, northern Nebraska, eastern Montana east of the Rocky Mountains, eastern Wyoming and extreme northwestern Colorado east of the Front Range). Intergrades with the nominate race in central Saskatchewan and southwestern Manitoba, with *C. m. hesperis* in southern Saskatchewan, central Montana and central Wyoming and with *C. m. howelli* in northeastern Colorado.

Autumn migration Some populations move south through Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma and possibly the eastern side of Central America before heading towards South America, while others follow similar routes to those of the nominate race.

C. m. hesperis

Similar to the nominate race, but upperparts are less blackish with whiter

markings. The underparts are sparsely, more narrowly barred brown. The white markings on the throat, outer primaries and, in the male, the tail are noticeably larger than those of the nominate race. This race is darker than both *C. m. sennetti* and *C. m. henryi*.

Measurements Wing of male 188–208 mm, female 188–208 mm; tail of male 100–120 mm, female 101–120 mm.

Range Southwestern Canada (southeastern British Columbia and southern Alberta) and western USA (southeastern Washington, eastern and southern Oregon, Idaho, western and central Montana, western Wyoming, extreme northern Colorado west of the Front Range, central and western Utah, Nevada and California, Cascade/Sierra Nevada region and San Bernadino Mountains). Intergrades with the nominate race in southern British Columbia, southern Alberta, southeastern Washington and central Oregon; with *C. m. sennetti* in southern Saskatchewan, central Montana and central Wyoming; with *C. m. howelli* in south central Wyoming and northwestern Colorado; with *C. m. henryi* and *C. m. howelli* in eastern Utah and western Colorado, and with *C. m. henryi* in southeastern Utah.

Autumn migration Some populations move south through southwestern USA and Central America, while others might follow similar routes to those of the nominate race.

C. m. henryi

Similar to *C. m. hesperis* but browner with coarser, more rufescent markings on the upperparts. The underparts are usually suffused buff or pale tawny, with narrower, paler barring. The white band across P6–10 is often thinner and less distinct than in other races. This race shows a north–south cline in

coloration, with southern birds being the darkest.

Measurements Wing of male 188–209 mm, female 188–209 mm; tail of male 103–115 mm, female 103–115 mm.

Range Southwestern USA (southeastern Utah, southwestern Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and extreme western Texas) and central northern Mexico (south to southern Durango). Intergrades with *C. m. hesperis* in southeastern Utah and southwestern Colorado and *C. m. howelli* in southwestern Colorado.

Autumn migration Some populations move southeast through Central America and possibly the Gulf of Mexico, while others might follow similar routes to those of the nominate race.

C. m. howelli

Paler and browner than the nominate race, with buffier or more ochraceous markings on the upperparts. The underparts are less heavily barred. More rufescent than *C. m. sennetti*, and slightly browner than *C. m. henryi*. Also differs from *C. m. henryi* in the denser, finer markings on the upperparts, the paler, more finely barred underparts, and the broader white patch across P6–P10.

Measurements Wing of male 185–211 mm, female 185–203 mm; tail of male 104–121 mm, female 104–122 mm.

Range Western-central and southern-central USA (southern-central Wyoming, northeastern Utah, eastern and central Colorado, western Kansas, western and central Oklahoma and northern central Texas). Intergrades with *C. m.*

henryi in southwestern Colorado, with *C. m. hesperis* and *C. m. henryi* in northern central Wyoming and extreme northern Colorado, and with *C. m. sennetti* in northeastern Colorado.

Autumn migration Moves south through the central southern states, Mexico (Campeche) and Nicaragua.

C. m. chapmani

('Chapman's Nighthawk')

Similar to the nominate race, but smaller. Upperparts fractionally paler, less blackish, with slightly more white and buff spotting. The belly and undertail-coverts average whiter.

Measurements Wing of male 178–196 mm, female 172–184 mm; tail of male 98–110 mm, female 99–108 mm.

Range Southeastern USA (eastern Texas and southeastern Arkansas, north along the Mississippi Valley to southern Indiana, east to the east coast, from North Carolina to Florida). Probably intergrades with the nominate race in the north and *C. m. howelli* in the west.

Autumn migration Follows similar migration routes to those of the nominate race.

C. m. neotropicalis

Darker than *C. m. henryi*, with fewer but coarser and buffier markings on the upperparts. The underparts are pale buff, not tawny. The white patch across P6–P10 is thinner and, on the male, the white subterminal band on the tail is

also thinner.

Measurements Wing of male 188–199 mm, female 178–187 mm; tail of male 103–112 mm, female 95–96 mm.

Range Eastern and southern Mexico (Tamaulipas south to central Guerrero, southeast to Chiapas) and possibly Guatemala, where it is a local and uncommon summer visitor which possibly breeds.

Autumn migration The migration routes are apparently poorly known.

C. m. aserriensis

Smaller and paler than the nominate race, with less barring on the underparts.

Measurements Wing of male 183–193 mm, female 179–184 mm; tail of male 95–106 mm, female 101–103 mm.

Range Southern-central USA (southeastern Texas) and extreme northeastern Mexico (northern Tamaulipas).

Autumn migration Moves southeast through Central America.

C. m. panamensis

Similar to *C. m. chapmani*, but markings on the upperparts are more tawny or rufous, the white patch across P6–P10 is thinner and the underparts are more tawny buff.

Measurements Wing of male 181–189 mm, female 172–184 mm; tail of male 96–99 mm, female 93–99 mm.

Range Southern Central America. Locally distributed from Belize and possibly eastern Honduras through Nicaragua to northwestern Costa Rica (Guanacaste) and Panama (western Chiriqui to eastern Panama).

Autumn migration The migration routes are apparently poorly known.

Vagrancy to Britain

To date, there are 27 records of Common Nighthawk in Britain (Bacon *et al.* 2023), the species having been recorded in 18 different years between 1927 and 2022 (Appendix 1). Single individuals were reported in 12 years; two individuals in six years; and three were accepted as occurring in 1999.

An analysis of these records, based on Naylor (2023), shows that five birds were accepted as males, four as females, 12 as juveniles/immatures, three as adults and seven were of indeterminate age or sex. Although most records involved birds that had survived crossing the Atlantic Ocean, six were either found dead or moribund or died shortly after their initial discovery.

To date, only one British record has been assigned to race.

The first record in Britain involved an unaged female that was reported to have been shot by Major Dorrien Smith (probably Major Arthur Algernon Dorrien-Smith, 1876–1955) at Tresco Abbey, Isles of Scilly, on 16th September 1927 (but see below). The bird was preserved as a mounted specimen and exhibited at a meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club in November 1927 and was considered to be a typical *Chordeiles virginianus* (now a synonym of *Chordeiles minor minor*). The specimen was deposited in the collections at the Isles of Scilly Museum, where it was

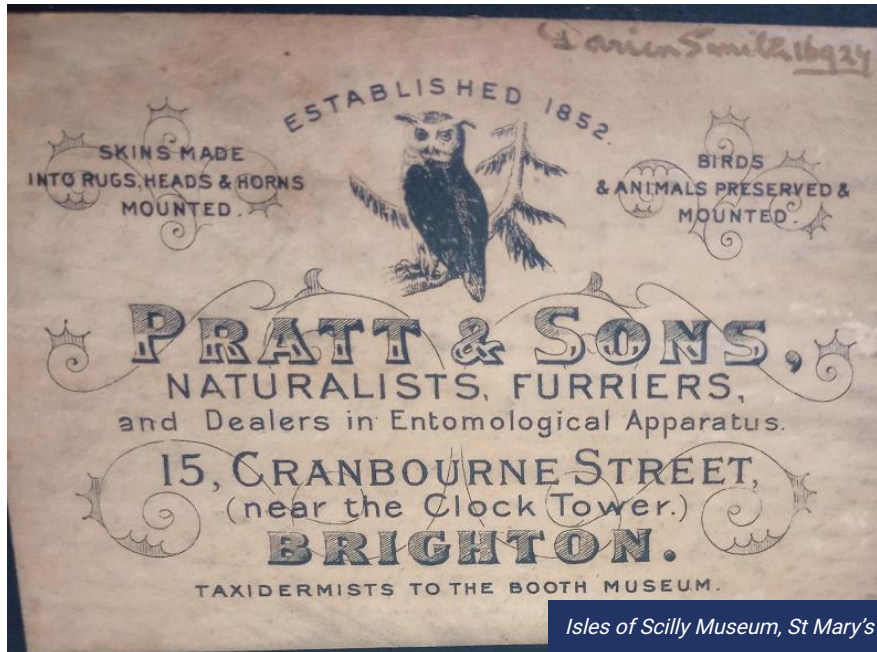
accessioned with the museum number IOSM RN956.8. The bird's primaries have rounded tips and a rather narrow white band across the four outer primaries, but lack white edging, while the tail feathers are broad with rounded tips. The tail lacks a white band. This all suggests that the bird was an adult female (plate 6). The throat patch is white, edged buff and lacks any dark spotting, which also suggests that the bird was an adult female (plate 7). There is a taxidermist's label, the bird having been prepared as a mounted specimen by Pratt & Sons of Brighton. On the printed label, there is a handwritten inscription: 'Dorrien Smith 16927' (plate 8), which probably refers to the collector and collection date. Some authors, such as Flood *et al.* (2007) and Robinson (2003), cite the collection date as 11th September 1927, while the early literature, including Witherby (1928) and Alexander & Fitter (1955), gave the collection date as 17th September 1927. The label attached to the specimen and the Isles of Scilly Museum data both give the date the bird was shot as 16th September 1927, so it seems prudent to adjust the record to that date.



6. Adult female 'Eastern Nighthawk'
Chordeiles minor minor, shot at Tresco
Abbey, Isles of Scilly, on 16th September
1927.



7. Adult female Eastern Nighthawk, shot at
Tresco Abbey, Isles of Scilly, on 16th
September 1927.



8. Taxidermist's label relating to female Eastern Nighthawk shot at Tresco Abbey, Isles of Scilly, on 16th September 1927.

The next occurrence of Common Nighthawk in Britain involved two birds: an unaged female and an unsexed juvenile at the Lighthouse and Parsonage, St Agnes, Isles of Scilly, on 28th September 1955. The female was not seen again but the juvenile remained until 5th October.

It was to be nearly 20 years before the next records of Common Nighthawks in Britain, which involved **unsexed** immatures at St Agnes, **Isles of Scilly**, **on** 12th and 13th October 1971, and at **Bulcote, Nottinghamshire**, **between** 18th and 21st October 1971 (Dobbs 1972; Harding 1972). The bird on the Isles of Scilly was photographed in flight; the large white primary patches suggest that the bird was a male, while the rest of the plumage confirms that it was an immature. The description of the bird in Nottinghamshire suggests that it might also have been an immature male

and, in view of the dates, it is not inconceivable that the same bird was involved at both locations.

In 1976, two unaged females were both found dead on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly. The first was at Porth Hellick beach on 14th October; this bird was preserved as a mounted specimen in the collections at the Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro, where it was accessioned as RCM TRURI:2007.30.405. This bird appears to be an adult or subadult, probably a 3CY, nominate-race bird (plate 9). It has new secondaries, pale mottled tips to the greater coverts and the inner three primary coverts, and pale tips to P6–8, though the outer two primaries appear all black due to wear. The contrast between the worn inner primaries (P1–P3) and the remaining fresher primaries (P4–10) may possibly be a result of a suspended moult, suggesting that P1–3 were moulted on the breeding grounds prior to migration the previous year, before P4–P10 were moulted on the wintering grounds (Peter Pyle pers. comm.). The dishevelled throat patch appears mottled, but many of the feathers are actually plain buff (plate 10).



Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro

9. Adult female (2CY+, probably 3CY)

Common Nighthawk, probably Eastern Nighthawk, collected at Porth Hellick beach, Isles of Scilly, on 14th October 1976.



10. Adult female (2CY+, probably 3CY)

Common Nighthawk, probably Eastern Nighthawk, collected at Porth Hellick beach, Isles of Scilly, on 14th October 1976.

The second bird in 1976 was found at St Mary's Airfield on 25th October.

Two years later, an **unsexed and unaged bird was caught in a mist net 3 km east of Kirkwood**, Orkney, on 12th September 1978 and later released near Finstown (Ramsey 1980). Although the bird was photographed, the images do not appear to have been published, but the description suggests that the bird was an immature male.

Six records occurred in the 1980s. The first was an unsexed and unaged bird at Rocky Hill on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, from 12th to 14th October 1981. The following year, **an unsexed immature was seen at St Warna's Cove on St Agnes, Isles of Scilly, between 20th October and 4th November 1982.** The next record involved **an unsexed and unaged bird** at Studland village in Dorset on 25th October 1983. Continuing the annual appearances, **an adult male was found moribund on Barnes Common in Greater London/Surrey on 23rd October 1984** but, sadly, it died in care on 28th October. The bird was then prepared as a mounted specimen, photographed and is now in the possession of B. A. Marsh (Moon 1984). Unfortunately, the photograph is in black and white and it is not possible to assign the bird to subspecies.

The next record involved a more fortunate individual. **An unsexed immature was found exhausted and photographed at Moreton, Wirral, Cheshire & Wirral, on 11th October 1985.** It was taken into care, ringed and transported by courtesy of the Royal Air Force to Belize, Central America, where it was released back into the wild in good health, on or about 25th October 1985.

The last record in the 1980s involved **an unsexed immature that was seen and photographed at Castle Down and Borough Farm, on Tresco, Isles of Scilly, from 16th to 22nd September 1989 (plate 11).** Photographs of the bird in flight show large white primary patches, which would suggest that the bird was in fact a male (plate 12).



11. Immature (1CY) Common Nighthawk, probably male, Castle Down and Borough Farm, Tresco, Isles of Scilly, September 1989.



12. Immature (1CY) Common Nighthawk, probably male, Castle Down and Borough Farm, Tresco, Isles of Scilly, September 1989.

It was to be nearly ten years before the next records of this species in Britain, although five individuals were involved, two in 1998 and three in 1999, the latter constituting the most occurrences in a single year. The first record was of an **adult male that was seen and photographed at** Lower Town, St Agnes, **Isles of Scilly, between** 9th and 13th September 1998. What was perhaps the same bird had reportedly been seen hawking for insects on the evening of 8th September (Wagstaff 1998). It was found dead on 14th September. It is not known if this bird was preserved as a museum specimen, but comparison with other material would be extremely interesting, as its wing length was measured at 209 mm (Wagstaff 1998), which is just outside the upper limit known for nominate *C. m. minor*. A second bird occurred at about the same time as the first in 1998, also on the Isles of Scilly: an immature **female at** Borough Farm in the Green Lane area, St Mary's, on 12th September, which remained until 20th September.

The first of three individuals in 1999 saw an **unsexed and unaged bird at** Coastguards and Browarth on St Agnes, **Isles of Scilly**, on 22nd September. The second also occurred on the Isles of Scilly: an **unsexed 1CY at** Fraggie Rock on Bryher between 23rd and 30th October. The final bird of the year was an **unsexed immature that was found dead at** Mwnt, **Ceredigion**, on 28th October. The corpse was preserved as a mounted museum specimen and is now in the collection at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, where it was accessioned with the registration number NMW.Z.2001.082.001 (plates 13–16). The buff tinge to the spotted throat patch indicates that the individual is an immature female and the rather dull, off-white barring on the underparts suggests that it might be of the nominate race, although direct comparison with other museum specimens would be needed to confirm this.



National Museum of Wales, Cardiff

13–16. Immature (1CY) female Common Nighthawk (NMW.Z.2001.082.001), possibly Eastern Nighthawk *C. m. minor*, found at Mwnt, Ceredigion, 28th October 1999.





Another gap in sightings was eventually ended in 2008, when two birds were found. The first was an **immature male that was found dead at Porthloo Lane, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, on 6th October** (see below). The following day, an **unsexed and unaged bird was seen and photographed** arriving in off the sea at Church Cove, The Lizard, Cornwall.

On 11th October 2010, an **immature male was seen and photographed at Warren House Gill, Horden, Co. Durham.**

Another barren period for the species followed, which stretched for nine years, until two birds were documented in 2019. The first was an **unsexed immature at** Loch Laich, Portnacroish, Argyll, on 11th September, which constituted the first record for Argyll and the second for Scotland (Cooper 2020). This was shortly followed by an **adult male at** Bushy Park, Greater London, on 19th October, which, in flight, showed some missing or damaged central tail feathers (plates 17 & 18). This individual followed hot on the heels of the first record for Northern Ireland, a well-watched adult male that was present between 4th and 17th October along the River Maine, close to Galgorm, west of Ballymena. Flight photographs revealed that this bird had some similar tail damage, suggesting that the same individual might have been involved in both records. During its stay in Northern Ireland, it was frequently photographed while perched, and these images reveal brownish upperparts with small white markings and white underparts that are thinly barred brown, all features that suggest the bird could have been a Chapman's Nighthawk.



17 & 18. Adult (2CY+) male Common Nighthawk, possibly 'Chapman's Nighthawk' *C. m. chapmani*, Bushy Park, Greater London, October 2019.

Lewis Newman



The following year saw two records accepted, both from the southeast of England. The first **was seen and photographed in flight at** Church Norton, Sussex, on 8th October 2020 (plate 19). The relatively small white primary patches, lack of a white tail band and dull, spotted throat patch would seem to suggest it was an immature female. The second was seen and **photographed in flight at** Burham Marshes, Maidstone, Kent, on 6th November 2020. The white primary patches appear rather broad, which, together with an apparent lack of white on the throat and tail, suggest that the bird was an immature male.



19. Immature (1CY) Common Nighthawk, possibly female, Church Norton, Sussex, October 2020.

The most recent record of a Common Nighthawk in Britain was of an immature female on 26th September 2022, which spent most of the day roosting on top of a garden fence in a suburban neighbourhood in Wantage, Oxfordshire. The bird was well studied, photographed and video recorded (plates 20 & 21); its rather pale plumage, the upperparts being spotted white and buff and the base colour of the underparts being rather whitish all suggest that it was neither an Eastern Nighthawk nor a Chapman's. It may be the case that this bird was of the race *C. m. sennetti* of central-southern Canada and north-central USA, although further study would be needed to substantiate this.



20 & 21. Immature female Common Nighthawk, possibly *C. m. sennetti*, Wantage, Oxfordshire, September 2022.



The 2008 Isles of Scilly bird

The bird found dead in Porthloo Lane on St Mary's on 6th October 2008 had been hit by a vehicle and was heavily damaged, with some of its intestines missing. It is unclear how long it had been dead before being discovered, or

the time lapse between discovery and preservation by freezing, but the corpse was exhibited at the Scillonian Club on the day of discovery (*Isles of Scilly Bird and Natural History Review, 2008*). Joanne Cooper and Ren Hathway kindly arranged for the donation and delivery of the corpse to the Bird Group at the Natural History Museum, Tring. Upon arrival at the museum, it was found to be in an unacceptable state to preserve as a study skin, so it was decided to preserve it as a mummified specimen. This was undertaken by Hein van Grouw, who removed the remaining intestines and stored it in 80% alcohol for two weeks. It was then removed from solution and dried (mummified) before being accessioned into the museum collections under the registration number NHMUK 2012.1.1.

The bird can be aged as an immature on the basis of several plumage features. The primaries are finely tipped buff, the tips becoming whiter on P1–4 (the inner four primaries). The white band across the outer primaries is thinner than on an adult male, but slightly larger than on an adult female. Five tail feathers are missing, with only the two outermost on the left side and three outermost on the right side remaining. These feathers are less broad than on an adult bird, with less rounded tips; they also lack a white subterminal band. The bird can be sexed as a male based on the pure-white throat patch. Immature birds in autumn normally have the throat patch heavily spotted brown, so it is assumed that this individual had already moulted some body feathers during a post-juvenile moult on the breeding grounds.

At the time of examination of the specimen, Robert Dickerman was visiting the collections from the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Robert was a published authority on nighthawks and it was he who originally suggested that its identity might be Chapman's Nighthawk. The Isles of Scilly

specimen was therefore compared with existing study skins of *C. m. minor* and *C. m. chapmani* held in the museum's collections. Next to *C. m. minor*, the upperparts are paler, more greyish white and more finely mottled (plate 22). The underparts are more revealing, the ground colour of the belly, flanks and undertail-coverts being noticeably whiter (plate 23). When the specimen is placed next to a small series of *C. m. chapmani*, the upperparts appear to share a similar coloration and patterning (plate 24), while the underparts are clearly a match in the white coloration of the feathering between the brown barring (plate 24). The wing length was measured at 184.5 mm and the tail length at 103 mm, both of which place it very near the bottom of the range known for *C. m. minor* but almost midway within the range given for *C. m. chapmani*. Following the examination of all relevant material, it is my recommendation that the bird found dead on the Isles of Scilly on 6th October 2008 should be identified as Chapman's Nighthawk *C. m. chapmani*, the first record for Britain if accepted.



Natural History Museum, Tring

22. Common Nighthawks, (l-r) apparent Chapman's Nighthawk, 1CY male, NHMUK 2012.1.1, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, 6th October 2008; Eastern Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1888.10.10.6720, Lyons Falls, New York, 26th June 1876; Eastern Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1906.12.7.694, North Bay, Ontario, 11th August 1897; Eastern Nighthawk, NHMUK 1906.1.205, female, Braxton County, West Virginia, 3rd September 1905.



Natural History Museum, Tring

23. Common Nighthawks, (l-r) apparent Chapman's Nighthawk, 1CY male, NHMUK 2012.1.1, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, 6th October 2008; Eastern Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1888.10.10.6720, Lyons Falls, New York, 26th June 1876; Eastern Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1906.12.7.694, North Bay, Ontario, 11th August 1897; Eastern Nighthawk, NHMUK 1906.1.205, female, Braxton County, West Virginia, 3rd September 1905.



Natural History Museum, Tring

24. Common Nighthawks, (l-r) apparent Chapman's Nighthawk, 1CY male, NHMUK 2012.1.1, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, 6th October 2008; Chapman's Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1897.2.1.157, Tarpon Springs, Florida, 16th May 1888; Chapman's Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1892.2.1.155, no data; Chapman's Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1900.7.20.153, Hillsboro County, Florida, 16th May 1888; Chapman's Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1897.2.1.152, Tarpon Springs, Florida, 17th June 1887.



25. Common Nighthawks, (l-r) apparent Chapman's Nighthawk, 1CY male, NHMUK 2012.1.1, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, 6th October 2008; Chapman's Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1897.2.1.157, Tarpon Springs, Florida, 16th May 1888; Chapman's Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1892.2.1.155, no data; Chapman's Nighthawk, male, NHMUK1900.7.20.153, Hillsboro County, Florida, 16th May 1888; Chapman's Nighthawk, male, NHMUK 1897.2.1.152, Tarpon Springs, Florida, 17th June 1887.

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Appendix 1.

Accepted records of Common Nighthawks *Chordeiles minor* in Britain.

1. Adult (2CY+) female, nominate race, Tresco Abbey, Tresco, Isles of Scilly, shot 16th September 1927; mounted specimen now in the collections at the Isles of Scilly Museum, St Mary's (IOSM RN956.8).

2–3. 1CY+ female and 1CY unsexed, Parsonage and Lighthouse, St Agnes, Isles of Scilly, 28th September 1955, the juvenile remaining to 5th October.

4. 1CY, probably male, photographed, St Agnes, Isles of Scilly, 12th–13th October 1971.

5. 1CY, probably male, Bulcote, Nottinghamshire, 18th and 21st October

1971.

6. Adult (possibly 3CY) female, nominate race, found dead and photographed, Porth Hellick beach, St Mary's, **Isles of Scilly**, 14th October 1976; mounted specimen now in the collections at the Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro (RCM TRURI:2007.30.405).

7. 1CY+ female, found dead, Airfield, St Mary's, **Isles of Scilly**, 25th October 1976.

8. 1CY+ unsexed (possibly 1CY male), trapped and photographed, 3 km east of Kirkwall, Mainland, Orkney; released near Finstown, 12th September 1978.

9. 1CY+ unsexed, Rocky Hill, St Mary's, **Isles of Scilly** 12th–14th October 1981.

10. 1CY unsexed, St Warna's Cove, St Agnes, **Isles of Scilly**, 20th October to 4th November 1982.

11. An unsexed and unaged bird, Studland village, Dorset, 25th October 1983.

12. Adult (2CY+) male, found moribund, Barnes Common, Greater London/**Surrey**, 23rd October 1984; died in care 28th October 1984. Preserved as a mounted specimen, photographed and now in the possession of B. A. Marsh.

13. 1CY unsexed, found exhausted and photographed, Moreton, **Cheshire & Wirral**, 11th October 1985, taken into care, ringed and transported to Belize, by courtesy of Royal Air Force; released on or about 25th October 1985.

- 14. 1CY, probably male, photographed, Castle Down and Borough Farm, Tresco, Isles of Scilly, 16th–22nd September 1989.**
- 15. Adult (2CY+) male, photographed, Lower Town, St Agnes, Isles of Scilly, 9th–13th September 1998, possibly also 8th September 1998; found dead 14th September 1998.**
- 16. 1CY female, photographed, Borough Farm, Green Lane area, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, 12th–20th September 1998.**
- 17. 1CY+ unsexed, Coastguards and Browarth, St Agnes, Isles of Scilly, 22nd September 1999.**
- 18. 1CY unsexed, Fraggie Rock, Bryher, Isles of Scilly, 23rd–30th October 1999.**
- 19. 1CY female, possibly *C. m. minor*, found dead and photographed, Mwnt, Ceredigion, 28th October 1999; mounted specimen now at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff (NMW.Z.2001.082.001).**
- 20. 1CY male, apparent *C. m. chapmani* (see main text), found dead and photographed, Porthloo Lane, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, 6th October 2008; specimen now at the Natural History Museum, Tring (NHMUK 2012.1.1.).**
- 21. 1CY+ unsexed, photographed in flight, Church Cove, The Lizard, Cornwall, 7th October 2008.**
- 22. 1CY male, photographed, Warren House Gill, Horden, Co. Durham, 11th October 2010.**

23. 1CY unsexed, Loch Laich, Portnacroish, Argyll, Scotland, 11th September 2019.

24. Adult (2CY+) male, possibly *C. m. chapmani*, photographed in flight, Bushy Park, Greater London, 19th October 2019.

25. 1CY+ unsexed (probably 1CY female), photographed in flight, Church Norton, Sussex, 8th October 2020.

26. 1CY+ unsexed (probably 1CY male), photographed in flight, Burham Marshes, Maidstone, Kent, 6th November 2020.

27. 1CY female, possibly *C. m. sennetti*, photographed, Wantage, Oxfordshire, 26th September 2022.

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