

## Some photographic studies of the Nightjar

*Photographs by John Markham, Ronald Thompson, C. R. Brown,  
Eric Hosking and M. S. Wood*

(Plates 10-17)

IN GENERAL WE TRY to publish photographs for their biological interest or because they illustrate points of identification, rather than for their aesthetic value. This aim is always borne in mind in the selection and presentation of the photographs in our series "Studies of less familiar birds", but we are more than prepared to interrupt this series with sets of photographs of species that nest commonly in Britain and Ireland when we receive prints which are unusual or have something new and interesting to show. These photographs of the Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) include some in both these categories.

In this set there are two photographs that seem of outstanding interest. Plate 11 shows a female Nightjar perched on a dead stump which was about ten yards from her nest in Kinmel Park, just on the Flintshire side of the county boundary with Denbighshire; the male is immediately overhead and apparently braking, judging from the widely spread and depressed tail and the forward-curved wings. As this photograph was taken at night by flash, so that Ronald Thompson was alternately dazzled by the light or unable to see because of the darkness, it is impossible for him to say exactly what was happening. The birds may have been about to copulate, but he considers this unlikely. The female was in the habit of flying to this stump in daylight when disturbed from the nest. At night both birds used it as a perch. On the night in question he knew that a Nightjar was on the stump and he could just discern the male flying round and calling softly. He suggests that both birds were rather puzzled by the flashes and that there is possibly no special significance in this photograph. It may simply be that he released his shutter just as the male was coming near to the female. There were small young in the nest at the time (plate 10), but this perhaps does not entirely preclude the first suggestion since Nightjars sometimes start their second broods when the young of the first brood are as little as ten days old, though more usually when they are about 13 days old and up to about 17, the male taking them over while the female lays and incubates again (the young start to fly at 14-18 days and become independent at between four and five weeks). Incidentally, this particular photograph unfortunately became slightly fogged before it was developed, probably as a result of the slide being taken out of its case in strong sunlight, and this is the reason for the slightly ethereal effect.

*The Handbook* states that the Nightjar "normally perches lengthways on branches, resting on breast, but will exceptionally perch across branch; also, with body more slanting, on bush, stump, or . . . tip of young conifer, etc., or on outer twigs on top of larger tree". It also states that the song is "delivered with closed bill". These two statements are still generally accepted and therefore the photograph on plate 13 is of special interest. John Markham took it at about 10 p.m. on 9th July 1960 at Minsmere, Suffolk. This male Nightjar had been in the habit of singing from this post for the previous five or six weeks. Whenever it alighted on the post it used to start churring immediately while still standing on its short legs and tiny feet. After about 20 or 30 seconds it would either gradually lower itself on to its belly, without a pause in its song, or leap into the air to chase a neighbouring male with which it was having a lot of trouble. On the occasion when the photograph was taken it began to churr immediately on alighting, as usual, and Mr. Markham waited for about ten seconds for the song to gain its full strength before he released the shutter. His reason for waiting was that he had long suspected, from the nature of the sound, that sometimes Nightjars sing with the mandibles slightly parted, and this certainly appears to be the case in this photograph. The inset on plate 13, which was taken four years earlier at Walberswick in the same county, shows another male balanced precariously on one of five very similar song posts that it was in the habit of using regularly. This bird had no need to choose such awkward perches, for its territory contained scores of trees with horizontal dead boughs at almost the same height. Another male, also in 1956, which Mr. Markham frequently saw using a horizontal bough every evening, nearly always alighted crosswise or at an angle of 45° and sang for a minute or so in that position before arranging itself along the bough. Thus it seems that Nightjars vary individually in their singing behaviour more than is generally supposed. Incidentally, at another site in 1960 Mr. Markham saw the female alight near the lower end of a sloping dead bough and then walk carefully, just like a pigeon, up to the top before it gently lowered its body and relaxed.

Two other pictures in this set which also seem especially striking to us are those on plates 10 and 17, by the same two photographers. Ronald Thompson's photograph of a change-over at the nest (plate 10), the male coming in to land and passing in front of the female as the latter takes off, is most delightful and very interesting, while John Markham's shot of a female fluttering away over the bracken makes a most unusual and arresting study. Incidentally, a comparison between this plate and any of those of males in flight (plates 11, 14 and 15) brings out the differences between the wing and tail markings of the

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two sexes, as also does plate 10.

The shape of the Nightjar's broad flat head is well shown in plates 15 and 16b, while in the latter one can just see the line of long and very stiff bristles along the edge of the upper mandible. It is also interesting to compare the tiny beak as it appears in most of these photographs (particularly plates 13 and 14) with the huge gape that is revealed on plate 16a as the bird yawns. The Nightjar of course catches its insect food in flight and such a gape is necessary to secure the moths and beetles which form nine-tenths of its prey. Plate 12c illustrates how the beaks of adult and young are arranged as the parent passes food to its chick, and a comparison of plates 12a and 12b with this one demonstrates the way in which the closed eye aids the camouflage of the sitting bird. Some of the differences in habitat are also brought out here: nest-sites vary from fairly overgrown wood edges (plate 10) to open commons (plate 12) and, less familiar, marram-covered sand-dunes (plate 15) and even shingle.

In conclusion, one cannot refrain from drawing attention to the fact that C. R. Brown's photograph on plate 15 was taken almost 50 years ago and yet holds its own surprisingly well with all the others.

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PLATE 10. Pair of Nightjars (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) changing over at nest, Flintshire, June 1950. The male often covers the eggs when the female feeds and both brood the young; tiny chicks can just be seen here (*bottom right*). Note the white-spotted wings and tail of the male (pages 69-71) (*photo: Ronald Thompson*)



PLATE 11. Male Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) braking above perched female, Flintshire, June 1950. These birds may have been about to copulate or were perhaps puzzled by the firing of the flashes (page 70) (photo: Ronald Thompson)

PLATE 12. These illustrate the completeness of the bird's camouflage, the effect being lessened when it opens its eyes. In feeding (bottom) the parent puts its beak into the chick's gape (photos: Eric Hosking and, centre, M. S. Wood)







PLATE 14. Male in flight, Flintshire, June 1950, illustrating white wing and tail markings (cf. plate 17), large eye, and small bill and legs (photo: Ronald Thompson)

PLATE 13. Male Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) churring on stump, Suffolk, July 1960. Note the slightly open bill and the even more surprising fact that the bird is standing, not resting lengthways along a branch (page 70). Inset, male churring from a high upright tree, Suffolk, July 1956 (photos: John Markham)





PLATE 15. Male Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) brooding young on marram dunes, Lancashire, 1912. Taken, surprisingly, nearly 50 years ago, this shows a less familiar habitat (though Nightjars will also nest on shingly beaches). The eggshells are left lying and the chicks soon start moving off (photo: C. R. Brown)



PLATE 16. Left, Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) yawning, showing the enormous extent of the open gape compared with the small bill (*photo: Eric Hosking*). Below, female and young, Suffolk, July 1956; an unusual front view illustrating the broad flat head, the row of long and very stiff bristles directed forwards and outwards along the edge of the upper mandible, and again the remarkable camouflage of the protective plumage (*photo: John Markham*)





PLATE 17. Female Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) fluttering away over bracken, Suffolk, July 1960. This delightful and unusual view from above and behind well illustrates the lack of white spots on the outer primaries and outer tail-feathers of the female (cf. plates 10-11, 14-15) (photo: John Markham)