

## Eastern Whip-poor-will *Antrostomus vociferous*



**Folk Name:** Bull-bat

**Status:** Breeder

**Abundance:** Rare to Uncommon

**Habitat:** Woodlands often near open fields

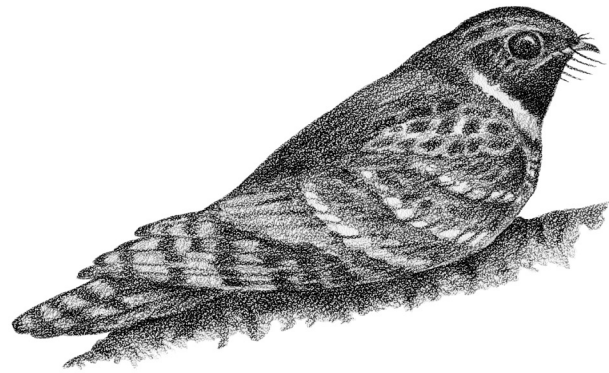
(Refer above to the Chuck-will's-widow account for more details on the Whip-poor-will.)

The Eastern Whip-poor-will gets its name from the call the male makes that sounds like it is saying *WHIP-poor-Will* over and over. It is the smallest of our three Caprimulgids, and today it remains the most common breeder of the three in this region. The continental breeding range of the Whip-poor-will ranges from northern Georgia and Alabama northward into Canada. Most Whip-poor-wills winter from Florida, south along the Gulf Coast to Central America. Some Whip-poor-wills winter as far north as the Coastal Plain of South Carolina, and in the past three decades, individuals have been found with increasing frequency wintering in eastern North Carolina. Birds wintering in the Carolinas are believed to move northward before Chuck-will's-widows arrive.

Our earliest spring arrival dates for Whip-poor-will's in this region are 20 March reported by Elmer Brown in Salisbury in 1920 and 21 March reported by Patric Patterson in Iredell County in 2008. R.B. McLaughlin reported the spring arrival of the Whip-poor-will in the Statesville area on April 2, 1885; April 7, 1887; and March 30, 1888. In Charlotte on April 9, 1928, William McIlwaine reported: "More than once I have had the screech owls and the whip-poor-wills calling around my



*Eastern Whip-poor-will defending nest. (Phil Fowler)*



house on Lyndhurst Avenue.”

In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson shared two separate reports of Whip-poor-wills arriving in Charlotte on 8 April. She considered them “late,” as she had recorded their arrival on 2 April in both 1942 and 1943. On April 1, 1953, Clarkson wrote: “This morning a Whip-poor-will awakened us at twenty minutes to five. Bradford, our dog, heard it too, and got out of bed and stood listening to it call close to the window.” Today, arrival dates seem similar with most reported showing up in late March or the first two weeks of April. Males generally arrive first. A male Whip-poor-will was found dead in Mecklenburg County on April 10, 2001. The specimen was sent to the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences for use as a study skin. The testes were measured and showed the bird was in full breeding condition. A male Whip-poor-will was found injured in Charlotte on April 1, 2002, and was turned over to Animal Control for care. The photograph of the bird prominently shows the white corners of a male bird's tail.

Fall migrants have generally moved through the region by the end of the second week of September. Our latest report of a bird in the fall was provided by Frances Covington in Troy, NC, on October 20, 1955. Winter reports of Whip-poor-wills from the Carolina Piedmont are extremely rare. There are three from around this region. Naomi Goforth heard a lingering bird calling in New London, Stanly County, as late as the third week of December in 1970. Ornithologist R.O. Bierregaard reported one in the historic Myers Park neighborhood of Charlotte on February 24, 2003, and Jane Lewis reported one in southwest Randolph County on January 2, 2004.

Breeding males are on territory by April or early May, and calling by males can be incessant into June, echoing throughout local woodlands. High counts include five birds on territory at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge in Mecklenburg County on June 17, 2016, and six birds on

June 5, 2007, at Carolina Sandhills NWR in Chesterfield County. Rhett Chamberlain and his son Norman observed a male Whip-poor-will calling while perched on top of the roof of their home in the Town of Matthews at 7:30 p.m. on the evening of June 8, 1954. Chamberlain wrote:

We were indoors when it started but not for long. Picking up glasses on the way, we slipped out and backed away from the house until we could see the bird clearly against a fairly light sky. It was sitting along the composition ridge capping, about three feet away from the chimney and facing away from it. There was enough light left to get a bit more than a silhouette. The bird had continued to call without interruption and we easily heard the low “kuk” that comes between each complete call. For the first time for both of us, we watched the mouth and body action that accompanies the calling. The “whip” and “poor” notes came out with no noticeable opening of the mouth. The “will” was driven with considerable force. The mouth opened abruptly to some sixty degrees and then closed as quickly. At the same moment, the tail, or the ends of the primaries—or both—jerked upward sharply. We wondered if it was just the wings. There wasn’t enough light to see the shoulders but they must have moved with the lung action that produced such a vociferous note. As for the fourth—or first—note, the low “kuk,” I got the impression that it had to do with breath catching, but I couldn’t be sure. The complete calls pour out at a rate somewhat above one per second and they go on and on and on. Somewhere in the train there is inhaling and it doesn’t seem to be in or between the principal notes. Our bird flew after a demonstration of a couple of minutes.



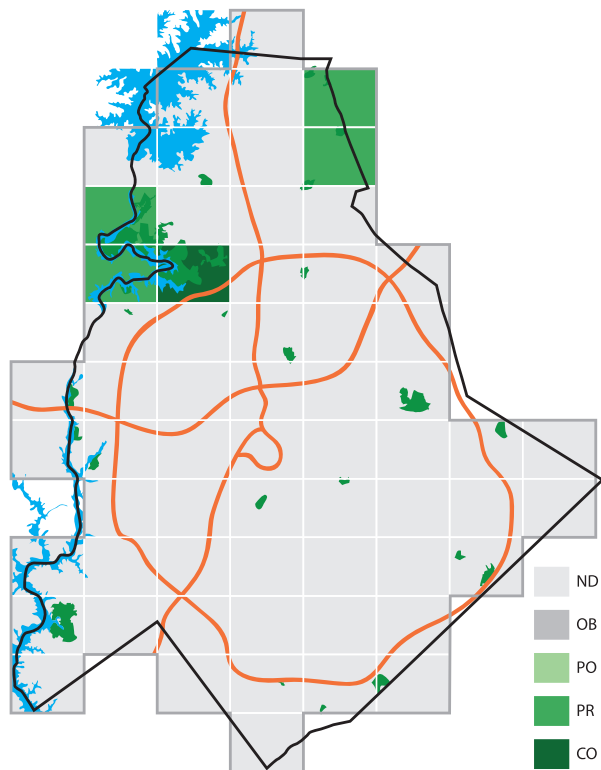
Nest at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge. (Donald W. Seriff)

The nest of a Whip-poor-will is always on the ground in woods. We have several nest records from the region with egg dates ranging from mid-May into early July:

One egg was found on May 25th, 1946, within a hundred yards of Big Sugar Creek, a few miles north of Pineville, N.C. There was no appreciable depression; the egg was placed on oak leaves and it appeared quite fresh when found. On June 15, the bird had hatched and was probably two days old. The thick down was orange-yellow. The young bird was about one foot away from the nest, probably having been kicked there by the parent for protection as it flew up.

Jack Hamilton found a Whip-poor-will nest near Charlotte on May 14, 1964. The nest had two eggs in it. He returned later and found the birds had hatched prior to 30 June. The author discovered and photographed a Whip-poor-will nest at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on July 7, 1999. The nest contained two eggs. A Whip-poor-will nest was discovered 2 miles east of Gold Hill in Rowan County by Bill Smith on July 13, 2007. The habitat was described as deciduous forest mixed with pine at about the 20-year regeneration stage. Photographs were taken of one young bird about 5 inches long that was left after the adult was accidentally flushed.

On July 5, 2014, Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Local (PR/4, CO/1)

Atlas volunteers Jan and Phil Fowler went birding at Latta Plantation Nature Preserve. At 10:00 a.m., they were standing on the Cove Connector trail listening for bird activity. The Fowlers provided this report: "After approximately 6 minutes in the same area, Jan heard the sounds of wing fluttering and alarm calls of an approaching bird on her right and turned to look. She saw a bird flutter and drop to the ground a few feet down the trail, in some leaves and brush. The bird then performed a 'distressed bird/injured bird' display (holding its wings out and walking to one side), still making grunts and chup sounds. We stayed within 6 feet of our original spot while the bird continued to move down the trail, appearing to

try to draw us to it. Phil took numerous photos and Jan recorded the sound of the chups and grunts. The bird stayed on the trail for approximately ten minutes. Not wanting to distress the bird further, Phil and Jan turned to leave the area, looked for a nest on the ground on the way back to the main trail, but found none. Phil's photos later revealed the identifying tail marks of a female Eastern Whip-poor-will." This mother bird's distraction display had served her well.

The Eastern Whip-poor-will is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both "troubling" population declines and "high threats." It is in need of conservation action.