

A unique, and strange, bird



A drawing of the rarely seen common poorwill

To me, one sound sums up nighttime in the Great Basin. This one bird call is heard only at night, usually while camping somewhere beside a small stream bordered with willows. It is not heard in town or in the mountains but among the sagebrush. This call reminds me of lying in my sleeping bag and hearing the distinctive, repeated call “poor will, poor will, poor will”.

The common poorwill is a strange bird in a strange family called nightjars. The family is also called goatsuckers, due to an ancient folk tale that said they sucked the milk from goats. The family is made up of nocturnal birds such as whip-poor-wills, nighthawks, and paraques.

The common poorwill is the smallest member of the family, its range covers the Southwest U.S., and the bird migrates south into Mexico each winter. This rarely seen bird is larger than a robin, camouflaged but having a white band across the throat. It has long wings, a short body, and a very large mouth which it uses to catch night-flying insects. The bird typically sits on the ground, watching for night insects and flying up to catch them. It forages at dawn and dusk, or during moonlit nights.

It nests on the ground but forms no more of a nest than a scrape usually beneath a bush. Its night calls function to defend the male's territory.

The strangest fact about this strange poorwill is that this is the only bird known to hibernate during winter. Ancient science used to think various birds hibernated, such as swallows that were thought to spend winter in the mud at the bottom of ponds. These birds disappeared each winter and were usually seen again each spring flying low over ponds.

A common poorwill was discovered in 1946, in a rock crevice in a California desert. The bird seemed to be hibernating, its respiration and heart rate were barely detectable, and its body temperature was about half the usual level for birds. This is not actually hibernation, but a state known as "torpor." During cold weather, a poorwill may remain in torpor for several weeks, allowing the bird to go long periods of time without food. They can be induced to enter torpor in the laboratory by depriving them of food. Although "discovered" by science in the 1940s, the Hopi people knew it long before that and they call it "the sleeping one."

The only time I have seen a poorwill is when one flew up in my headlights while I drove on a dirt road. They often sit on dirt roads to watch for flying insects.

September 2018

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