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Fotografía portada / Cover photograph

The first ever published photograph in life of Santa Marta Wren *Troglodytes monticola*, an Endangered and Colombian endemic species restricted to a highly degraded timberline ecotone in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. By Juan Carlos Luna. All rights reserved © Fundación ProAves.

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Note on the identification of Lesser Nighthawk *Chordeiles acutipennis* in northern Colombia

Nota para la identificación de Chordeiles acutipennis en el norte de Colombia

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Abstract

The identification of Lesser Nighthawks in northern Colombia, is discussed. The predominantly rusty and sandy-buff plumage of these birds suggests the possibility of confusion with Antillean Nighthawk, which is so far unrecorded from the Colombian mainland. The extent of variation in the plumage of Lesser Nighthawk in Colombia is perhaps not fully appreciated.

Resumen

Se discute la identificación de Chordeiles acutipennis en el norte de Colombia. La predominante coloración rufa del plumaje de estas aves permite la posibilidad de confundirse con Chordeiles gundlachii, el cual no está registrado en la región continental de Colombia. La amplia variación en el plumaje del Chotacabras enano en Colombia no es completamente conocida.

Identification of Nighthawks in Santa Marta

On 12th and 13th of October 2012 ten individuals of a Nighthawk *Chordeiles* species were found roosting in trees at the Estelar Santamar hotel, Santa Marta (Dept. of Magdalena) (Figs. 1-4). The birds were roosting on bare branches of small trees in the hotel grounds at heights of 4-6 metres, some low enough for photographs. Nine of the Nighthawks had prominent white tail bands easily seen from below (supposedly a male character) and one did not (Fig. 4). All were broadly similar in plumage with strongly buffy underparts and with variably bright rusty markings on the upperparts.

Based on the illustration in McMullan *et al.* (2010), these birds most closely resembled Antillean Nighthawk (*Chordeiles gundlachii*) and certain plumage and structural features seemed supportive of this identification. The difference between Common and Antillean Nighthawks has been extensively discussed given the status of the latter as a vagrant in the United States. Early enquiries suggested the birds in Santa Marta could indeed be Antillean Nighthawks and this was of interest because, although this Caribbean species is expected to winter in South America, there are no confirmed records from the mainland (Salaman *et al.* 2010).



Figures 1 a-b. Roosting Lesser Nighthawks.

It has been recorded on the Colombian islands of Providencia and San Andres (Salaman *et al.* 2010, McMullan *et al.* 2010). Based on published accounts and discussions on [birdforum](http://www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=35731) (<http://www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=35731>) some

of the features more consistent with Antillean Nighthawk than Common include:

1. Wing length not extending appreciably beyond tail (in Common Nighthawk, *Chordeiles minor*, wings usually extend beyond tail).
2. Rusty markings on head, neck, mantle and scapulars.
3. Contrastingly pale tertials.
4. Small headed appearance and “petite” body structure.
5. Broad and round-tipped primaries.
6. Bright buff colouration on vent and lower belly, paler colouration on upper breast.

A key distinction between Lesser Nighthawk and Common/Antillean Nighthawks is the position of the white patch on the primaries. Typical features for Common or Antillean Nighthawk wing patches are:

1. The patch is positioned closer to the base of the wing not extending past the tertials. In Lesser Nighthawk, the position of the patch is closer to the end of the wing, meaning that it usually extends past the end of the tertials.
2. The primary wing patch is more ‘staggered’, so that, for each successive feather, the white patch is further along the wing making the patch more diagonal than square.
3. Primaries lack buff spotting in front of the wing patch.

I consulted with Thomas Donegan and Nigel Cleere, who were both of the view however that these birds were Lesser Nighthawk. Lesser Nighthawk is the expected *Chordeiles* species at this elevation and locality in Colombia, being known to occur in secondary habitats west of the Andes, as well as occurring east of the Andes. Features consistent with Lesser Nighthawk include that the wing patch is relatively large and in the folded wing appears uneven (Fig. 3) and, on the primaries in front of the patch, some buff spotting is present (although it is far less extensive than shown on the illustration of Lesser Nighthawk in Sibley, 2000). Furthermore, the pattern of large and contrasting buffy or fawn spots on the wing coverts, and elsewhere, is a feature of Lesser Nighthawk. Common Nighthawk and Antillean Nighthawk both show less contrasting markings. This is shown particularly well in the illustration of a male *C. a. texensis* in Holyoak (2001, plate 7, figure 3a). This illustration shows close similarity to the bird in Figure 1 and in photographs by Cleere (2010).



Figure 2. Wings side view.



Figure 3. Female (or juvenile?).

The Lesser Nighthawk in Colombia

The seven currently recognised subspecies of Lesser Nighthawk range from a migratory form which breeds from Texas through Central America south through to Brazil. The subspecies in northern Colombia is generally considered to be *C. a. acutipennis*, which is found across much of tropical South America. Another Colombian race is *C. a. crissalis*, which is found in the tropical zone of the upper Magdalena Valley (Dept. of Huila). The movements of this species are not well understood and many populations are assumed to be residents. The subspecies *C. a. texensis*, which breeds from south western USA southwards to north and central Mexico, is known to be migratory, wintering from central and southern Mexico southwards through Central America to northern and western Colombia. In Colombia northern migrants have been reported from December to April (Hilty and Brown, 1986). Holyoak (2001) notes that winter records of the form *C. a. micromeris* (which breeds from southern Mexico to Belize) might actually refer to *C. a. littoralis* (which breeds from south central Mexico to Costa Rica). Hilty and Brown (1986) considered the five subspecies

recorded in Colombia to be inseparable in the field. However, birds with very buffy or fawn colored covert markings and sandy belly – approaching the plumage of Antillean – photographed here do appear to show differences in plumage from the less strongly-marked eastern and northern populations illustrated in Cleere (2000), McMullan *et al.* (2010) and other references.

Conclusions

The three Nighthawk species which occur in northern Colombia present identification challenges. This note illustrates that, even when armed with photographs of roosting birds, a confusing overlap of features make accurate determination difficult. Further work into subspecies limits in Lesser Nighthawk is needed, with particular reference to Colombia. Both Common and Antillean Nighthawks (males and females) are known to show plumages which range from very rusty above and buffy below to very grey above with little or no buff colour on the underparts. In contrast, for Lesser Nighthawk, Holyoak (2001) records that there are two poorly defined colour phases, one darker, and one greyer, and that “variation in colouration appears to be continuous and not especially great in this species”. However, it seems likely that wide variability in colouration also applies to Lesser Nighthawk, particularly when the full range of sub-specific variation is considered.

The Antillean Nighthawk is expected to winter somewhere in South America, but has apparently never been recorded

from the mainland. Many sources suggest it is not easily separable in the field from Common Nighthawk (particularly the rufous-plumaged forms). Although Antillean Nighthawk may winter on the Colombian mainland, confirmation of this will present challenges given the relatively poor understanding of the extent of variation shown by the three Nighthawk species discussed here. It is hoped this note will stimulate interest in searching for Antillean Nighthawk and in better establishing the plumage and field identification characteristics of Nighthawks in Colombia.

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