

## THE CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW IN CAPE MAY COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

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At Sally Marshall's Crossing on the Shore Road, a mile and a quarter south of Rio Grande, Cresse's Lane meanders off eastward to the thoroughfares and salt marshes about a mile away.

The lane runs through farms and woodland and the change in the environment to that of the sea is abrupt and sharp. Here the Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus carolinensis*) is the conspicuous bird, and Doctor Stone in his incomparable "Bird Studies at Old Cape May" (310) portrays this and similar areas as a "never to be forgotten picture of that delectable borderland where the elements of land and sea meet and intermingle". Less than a half a mile along the lane from the Shore Road, is a stone farm house built around 1840 by one Uriah Cresse who sailed the products of the farm to New York City markets in a sloop which he docked at a wharf, the remains of which can still be traced on the banks of nearby Jones Thoroughfare.

Having purchased the old Cresse place in March 1950, we turned in the lane on the evening of April 28, 1950 to spend the week-end at the farm. It was dusk, a warm evening, and as we ran down the lane, from the adjoining oak clearing along with calls of the Whippoorwills (*Caprimulgus v. vociferus*) came the raucous and authoritative chant—"chuck-will's-widow, chuck-will's-widow!" This continued for hours as the bird or birds moved around the farmhouse during the night. This is probably not an arrival date. For comparison it might be mentioned that Bent (Life Histories of N. A. Birds, U. S. Nat. Museum Bulletin 176:162) gives early dates of arrival in North Carolina as: Raleigh April 10, Louisburg, April 17.

There are not many records of the Chuck-will's-widow (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*) in Cape May County, Stone (636) reports that Otway Brown heard one for several nights near his home at nearby Cold Springs; Harry Fox heard one at Cape May Point; Frank Dickinson at Erma, June 22, 1930 heard a strange Whippoorwill near his home and Walker Hand identified it at once as a Chuck-will's-widow. Stone visited the spot July 15, and heard it calling "chuck!-woo-woo; chuck!-woo-woo". It began to call at dusk and had been heard in June but not after the middle of July. A bird was killed (1930) by a car and was identified by a local taxidermist as a chuck. Charles Page, familiar with the bird in the South, heard one repeatedly near his cabin in the woods at Cape May Point during June 1932 and 1934. The minutes of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club are spotted with isolated records of calls heard at the Point, many of them by Ernest Choate.

We continued to hear the chuck calling regularly on week-ends at the farm. May 14, 1950 was the day of the DVOC Roundup, and since the team headed by Julian K. Potter and Dale R. Coman usually winds up its long and exacting day about nightfall on the beaches of Cape May County, I pointed out to them the opportunity they had of adding one species to their list if, after dark at the end of the run, they could swing into Cresse's Lane. They did, and the obliging chuck was calling for them, making the last bird on their list, number 168! Also they continued on down the lane to the thoroughfare and heard another chuck calling from the splendid oak woods north along the marsh.

On May 21 at 4:40 a.m. with the faint light of dawn in the east, my wife awakened me to hear the chuck calling loudly outside our front door. I dressed hurriedly and warmly and went out to listen to the bird now calling 32 to the minute. The calls now came from back in the woods to the north, and as the bird then moved to the east I followed it along the lane about three-eighths of a mile. Reaching an open field, I moved north and then could hear, back in a dense woods behind a tangle of catbrier and honeysuckle, two birds close together which seemed to be answering one another. This kept up until 5:10, when, it being all quiet and quite light, I walked back to the house and bed. I estimated that in this short sortie alone the bird had covered about half a mile square of territory. May 26, on retiring we heard the chuck calling faintly in the distance and then closer until we went to sleep with his stentorian chant going on just outside our front door.

May 27 at 8:00 p.m. I went to a spot on the lane where the chuck was calling and saw him fly away. After 8:30 the bird was calling from a tree north of the lane and then moved to a tree on the lane just east of the house. We walked quietly to the spot. The moonlight was very bright and we moved slowly until we stood in the lane certainly not more than six feet from the bird. At this distance it seemed to be calling like a maniac, the din being terrific and constant. Awed, we "froze", and then hoping to see the bird in the sharp black shadows we moved carefully toward it. The calls ceased. Again we stopped not more than four feet away. After about two minutes it resumed calling from the same spot as loudly as before and again 30 to the minute, seemingly in a frenzy. We moved closer and away he flew. We heard him calling at once in the distance, and faintly, further off an answering call of another, probably a rival.

From then on the bird was with us constantly, more or less, from dusk to sunrise, although our observations were confined to week-end visits usually from Friday night to late Sunday afternoon. Making the old farm house livable was an interesting but arduous and demanding job and ornithology suffered. It was indeed fortunate that the chuck with his calling kept us so aware of his presence with no necessity for effort on our part beyond listening.

Like the Whippoorwill the chuck frequented the clearing around the farm house, and while the nesting area undoubtedly was in the oak clearing, the bird spent the greater part of the night calling from the trees opposite the house. These trees probably gave it the vantage point from which to sally forth over the open fields in feeding. No other spot in the neighborhood of the probable nesting area is suited to this so well. The oak clearing had recently been lumbered of everything down to piling size and the resulting leaf-covered open woods seems typical of the area used by the bird in nesting in the Carolina lowlands as described so entertainingly in the instructive article by Alexander Sprunt, Jr. in Arthur Cleveland Bent's "Life Histories of North American Cuckoos, Goatsuckers, Hummingbirds and their Allies" (pp. 147-161). The area is a portion of the site where from 1880 to 1890 efforts were made to raise sugar and sorghum cane by the Rio Grande Sugar Company and others. The natives point to the remains of the old roadbed of a railway used in transporting the cane to the sugar house at Rio Grande.

The farmers in the neighborhood were all aware of the bird calling and had been for years and, strangely enough like the natives of the Carolina lowlands (Bent's "Life Histories"), they persisted in crediting this to the Whippoorwill! The accent of the call is on the third syllable "wid". The first, or "chuck" seems lower, and while at close range it is quite as loud as the second "will's" and fourth "ow" I found that at a distance, my progressive losing of bird songs was extended to this first syllable, and I heard but the last three. It may be then, that at a distance the chuck's call, if shortened to the last three syllables, would bear some superficial resemblance to the call of the Whippoorwill. There is no real reason, however, to confuse the calls if listened to by one at all familiar with both.

Edward Taylor, a farmer at the Crossing, has regularly heard the "whippoorwill" for ten or twelve years and one night after I had aroused his interest and correctly identified the bird for him, he called my attention to a third bird, a "whippoorwill", calling in a piece of woodland to the south of the lane. This makes three birds calling definitely in the area. Stephen Forsythe, living across the railroad tracks at Erma, heard birds calling around his home June 3, but I know the birds move around a lot at night and do not believe these were additional birds, particularly as I heard in our areas only three calls on June 2 at 8:30 p.m. and then none on June 3 or June 4 in the morning.

My notes for June 18 were representative of the bird's activity at this time. "Heard chuck calling a couple of times last night June 17, at about 10:00 p.m. Tonight he cut loose three or four times at 8:30 p.m. but at 9:00 p.m. he really went to it. Soon came down the lane in front of and to left of the house. Called twenty times then shifted about fifty feet east and called ninety-four times (32 to minute), finally he missed two calls, flew off and was heard no more that night."

Calls gradually but noticeably became fewer and for shorter periods until finally on September 3, 1950, at 7:50 p.m. on an overcast evening we heard the chuck call just three times from the north woods across the line. This was our last 1950 record of the bird. It began to rain at nine. Bent (162) gives comparable late dates of departure in North Carolina as: Louisburg September 19 and Raleigh, September 21.

The Chuck-will's-widow therefore is and has been for years a regular summer resident in Cape May County at Sally Marshall's Crossing, and we look forward to the finding of the eggs next season.

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