

A Little Night(jar) Music

Ted Cable— Kansas

It's twilight at Madera Canyon in southeastern Arizona. I am here to hear nightjars. Specifically, I have come to listen to the staccato song of the rare Buff-collared Nightjar. This bird's range is mostly in Mexico, but it extends north just barely across the border into Arizona.

In the past, birders made a difficult and potentially dangerous drive into a remote area called California Gulch to listen for these night birds. But for the past two years, Buff-collared Nightjars have been heard at this easily accessible location. So these birds typically play to good crowds lining a dirt road at the mouth of the canyon. But being a Wednesday night it was a small "house" for this performance. Waiting for the curtain of darkness to rise, the audience's ears were tuned to a rocky slope, but our eyes were drawn to the sky. The desert sky was on fire with a blazing sunset, while simultaneously the moon peeked over the mountains to the east.

In one of those moments of profundity that deserts and mountains evoke, a birder poignantly noted the positive energy we were experiencing as we were caught between the sunlight and the moonlight. Well technically it's *all* sunlight, but the moon seemed to not only be reflecting it, but amplifying it. I felt the luminous energy too.

Amidst these celestial vibes, the nervous tension felt by birders awaiting lifers soon surfaced. I paced up down the sandy road, holding my cupped hands to my ears and slowly swiveled my head back and forth creating a goatsucker-seeking radar.

Pugnacious poorwills vied for our attention, incessantly calling out of their name. These attention-seeking Common Poorwills seemed to be saying, "Look here! Look here!" But we stayed true to listening for their Buff-collared cousin.

First planets and then the brightest stars appeared. More pacing. Then at exactly 7:51 pm the feathered diva of this star-studded evening began calling. It was soft and choppy at first. Like an orchestra tuning up. Was that it? I froze and my radar ears focused on the rocky hillside to the south. Yes! A Buff-colored Nightjar was now calling enthusiastically. Soon another of its tribe began singing along.

Unlike the mellow easily imitated songs of Whip-poor-wills, Poor-wills and Chuck-wills-widows, the Buff-collared has a rising rapid fire song like the firing of a toy Tommy gun. These Tommy guns shot it out between the boulders for about 10 minutes. Then there was silence. Was it intermission or the end of the show? I did not wait to find out. I had a third goatsucker that I wanted to hear on this night.

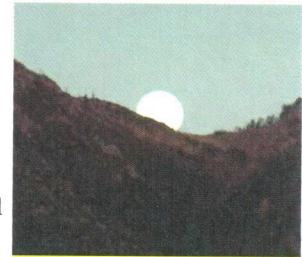
The Mexican Whip-poor-will is a new species recently split from the Eastern Whip-poor-will. The Mexican Whip-poor-will sounds much like the Eastern, except it says "Whip-Olé! Whip-Olé! Just kidding. Actually, it sounds almost identical to the Eastern except that the voice is raspy – like Eastern Whip-poor-will with a cold.

I drove up the canyon to the campground amphitheater – a fitting venue for another vocal performance. The bold Madera moon brashly illuminated the landscape, casting sharp shadows as if competing with the now retreated sun. I was late for this performance. As I stepped out of the car I immediately heard two Mexican Whip-poor-wills already singing. I lingered and listened to this duet while hanging the moon and stars from silhouetted branches in the canopy.

With the satisfaction that only two lifers can bring, I leisurely drove down out of the canyon and back out into the desert. I kept the windows down and listened for yet a fourth member of the goatsucker family -- a Lesser Night-hawk. Just before getting back to town a nighthawk flashed through my headlights. I had completed the *Grand Slam of Goatsuckers!*

Hey maybe that should have been the title!

Note: I gave the title considerable thought. With apologies to Mozart and Sondheim I decided on "*A Little Night (jar) Music.*" But it was not an easy decision. "*Goatsuckers Gone Wild*" sounded fun, but a little sleazy and "*Caprimulgidae – The Musical*" was succinct, but a bit stuffy. *A Cornucopia of Caprimulgs* sounded like a Chamber of Commerce exaggeration. So "*A Little Night(jar) Music*" it is.



Adventure awaits as the moon rises over Madera Canyon.