

Puerto Rican Nightjar

Caprimulgus noctitherus



Maricao, Puerto Rico, 2004

Photo: © Rafael Rodríguez Mojica

Population: 1,400-2,000 ↔

History

1877 – mongooses are introduced to Puerto Rico.

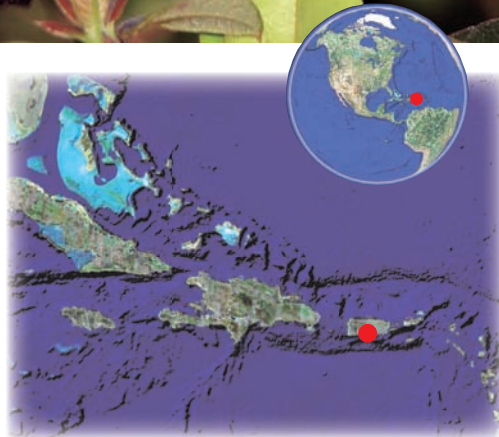
1888 – the species is discovered on 29th October near Bayamon, but thought to be a migrant Whip-poor-will *Caprimulgus vociferous*.

1919 – American biologist Alexander Wetmore (1886-1978) describes the species.

1961 – the second specimen is collected by Ricardo Cotte and William Blasini at Guanica Forest.

1984 – a population estimate gives 670 – 800 pairs. A Puerto Rican Whip-poor-will (nightjar) Recovery Plan is approved by the US Fish and Wildlife Service

2004 – 1,400 to 2,000 pairs are estimated to occur.



Range & population

This nightjar probably occupied large areas of Puerto Rico, but is now restricted to the south-west, notably Susúa-Maricao, Guayanilla-Peñuelas and Guánica-Bermeja. There are further recent records from the Parguera Hills and Sierra Bermeja (c. 10 km west of Parguera). Studies in 1985-1987, 1989-1990 and 1992 found 712 singing males in 98 km² of fragmented habitat, with 347 in the Guánica area, 177 in the Susúa-Maricao area and 188 in the Guayanilla area. The historical range probably comprised moist limestone and coastal forest, dry limestone forest, drier sections of the lower cordillera forest and perhaps dry coastal forest. It now occurs at higher densities in closed-canopy dry forest on limestone soils, composed mainly of semi-deciduous hardwood trees,

and an open understorey (little or no ground vegetation), at elevations up to 230 m, but more commonly above 75 m. It occurs at lower densities in dry, open, scrubby secondary growth, xeric or dry scrubland, open scrub-forest, thorny forest undergrowth, with a few birds in *Eucalyptus robusta* plantations. It feeds on night-flying insects by making forays from a perch. The male is territorial throughout the year but calling is at its peak during breeding which occurs from late February to early July, but mainly in April-June. One or two eggs are laid on the ground on leaf litter as it does not construct a nest. Birds are perhaps permanently territorial, exhibiting strong site fidelity. In Guánica forest, c. 87% of nests in one year produced at least one fledgling. It feeds on beetles, moths and other insects.

Threats

The introduction of mongooses is considered responsible for

the initial drastic population decline, but the differing habitat preferences of the two species suggests very little overlap in their current ranges. Habitat loss and degradation now have a more significant impact, especially from residential, industrial and recreational expansion, with associated increases in disturbance and fire risk. A proposed wind farm development in Karso del Sur IBA has the potential to wipe out 5% of the total breeding population. Young birds are predated by Short-eared Owls *Asio flammeus*, and young and eggs may be predated by Pearly-eyed Thrashers *Margarops fuscatus*, fire-ants and feral cats.

Conservation actions to date

It is legally protected. Guánica, Susúa and Maricao are public lands designated as state forests, and Guánica is a biosphere reserve. The Puerto Rico Conservation Trust has acquired lands in the Guayanilla Hills harbouring nightjars. Research is ongoing to generate current population estimates and develop landscape-level habitat models.

Conservation actions required

- Perform surveys to better quantify abundance throughout known range, identify additional areas for protection, and ascertain the species' status outside its current known range.
- Monitor to assess population trends and the effects of management.
- Effectively conserve existing reserves, including peripheral private lands.
- Reforest disturbed areas with native and selected plantation species.
- Acquire privately owned tracts of mature dry limestone forest.
- Lobby for priority site conservation through existing initiatives and Site Support Groups.

BirdLife Species Guardian Sociedad Ornitológica Puertorriqueña, Inc (SOPI)



Guanica State Forest, June 2007

Photo: © Jonathan Morel



Guanica State Forest, May 2007

Photo: © Michael J Morel