

AN UNUSUAL NIGHTHAWK FLIGHT IN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

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Late afternoon on 10 Nov 2002, my wife Marjorie and I were walking on Spring St. in Fredonia when I noticed a small flock of birds, quite high, and flying in a northwesterly direction toward Lake Erie. I remarked that they were too small for ducks or geese or the usual flocks of Ring-billed Gulls which we often see overhead. At that moment, I could not think of any bird of this appearance that would be likely to be flying over in flocks at this time of the year, but at that distance with no binoculars, I concluded I might never know what they were.

My wife then noted that were more birds coming, this time a flock of fifty or more and lower down. As we watched them approach, one dropped down as if to catch a flying insect. This time I realized this was a flock of Common Nighthawks!

The flock flew directly over us and though the day was dark and all we could see were silhouettes, the size, shape and flight behavior were all distinctively those of nighthawks. Behind this flock, another appeared, and then yet another. Counting one of these flocks as well as I could, I came up with a total of sixty birds. The flight continued for some minutes, during which time we estimated that five hundred (500) birds or so had passed. I had seen similar nighthawk flights in previous years but never at this date, which was nearly a month later than the norm and most remarkably, going in the wrong direction!

I notified Dick Miga who put this observation on the local birding hotline, and I received a call the next morning from Terence Mosher, a local veteran birder, who expressed his amazement at the sighting. We discussed the possible reasons but could come up with no answers. He then called back to tell me that his wife, Judy, had advanced the following plausible explanation.

This was the weekend that an immense storm front with high winds and tornadoes had swept north from the Gulf states, and possibly this flock had become caught up in this storm somewhere in the south and blown northwards. Their course over us would have taken them to the south shore of Lake Erie in a few minutes, and then perhaps they would reorient and resume a normal flight direction as the storm had abated by this time.

If this were the case, the question is whether they would have sufficient fat reserves to allow them to return to an area where airborne insects were still abundant. While we had a very mild autumn and a few moths were still flying, it did not seem likely that there were enough insects aloft to feed flocks of this magnitude, unless of course numbers of insects had been carried north along with the birds.