

OBSERVATIONS ON A CAPTIVE CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW

James C. and Margaret L. Robinson

The Chuck-will's-widow (*Caprimulgus carolinensis* Gmelin) is a summer resident of the Brownsboro, Alabama area, usually arriving from the south the second week in April and departing by September 1st. Our records of arrival and departure dates include early arrivals on April 7, 1964 and 1965.

In our banding operations, we have learned that the Chuck-will's-widow is a very elusive bird. Although several spend the summer in our valley (sometimes as many as six may be heard at the same time) and often call from the fields adjacent to our nets, we have never caught one to band. This has been surprising to us, because in the early days of migration, when the Chucks and the Whip-poor-wills can be heard at the same time from approximately the same place, we have caught several Whip-poor-wills but never a Chuck-will's-widow.

The following account of our attempt to raise a young Chuck-will's-widow can hardly be termed a technical description of a scientific experiment, but it may prove to be of some interest to the reader, perhaps even to the serious student of bird life.

On June 28, 1966, a neighbor brought us a young Chuck-will's-widow which had been found at a house construction site outside Huntsville, Alabama.

When measurements were made on July 5, the wing chord was 133 mm (5.25 inches), and the total wing span was eighteen inches. The bird was not fully feathered at that time, and we estimate its age at time of capture as two or three weeks.

On June 31, it was observed to be capable of short flights (four to five feet) when released from the hand, and on July 2, it arose from the floor and flew at head height approximately 21 feet before flying into a glass door. The flight was slow and noiseless.

The donor of the bird, having kept it for only half a day, had fed it generously on oatmeal and water, apparently with no ill effect. Not knowing what to feed it, we first tried live insects, including a katydid and some dismantled beetles, but it threw them violently from its beak. Then we tried ground beef rolled into small pellets and the bird swallowed those without hesitation. We fed it on ground beef for a few days and then decided to give it ground beef, baby food (Jr. beef), and high protein baby cereal--equal amounts of each, rolled into $\frac{1}{2}$ " pellets. We fed it two or three times a day until it hesitated to swallow or tried to throw the food from its mouth. When it appeared to have trouble swallowing a pellet, we put a small amount of water ($\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoonful) into its mouth. We began feeding about two ounces per day and increased the amount as the bird grew.

The behavior of the little "chuck" in captivity was very interesting. At first, it never took any food voluntarily. At each feeding its beak had to be pried open and food dropped in. It was not necessary to hold its mouth closed after inserting the food; it usually swallowed without protest. After several days of observation, we realized that the bird made two sounds: one somewhat like the growl of an angry cat, and the other a low-pitched, one-note whistle. The growl was uttered whenever anything approached, and we recognized it as a warning cry which the bird used with its display to frighten away would-be molesters. The single note call, we decided, was a food call with which the young bird announced its hunger. The hunger cry was given only two of three times during the day, usually in the morning before six o'clock and at night after eight o'clock. Sometimes, a few minutes after feeding, it would utter its food call again. This signified, to us, that we had not given it enough, so we fed it more.

When we first received the "chuck", it would utter its growl, rock from side to side, and open its large, white mouth. Later, it began to spread its wings and actually strike at anything coming close. Of course, it could not hurt anything at all, because its beak was soft and pliable, incapable of inflicting the slightest injury.

On July 3, our young bird developed a new sound and a new activity. The sound consisted of a series of low chucking notes as it sat with half-closed eyes in its daytime position. When Kim (our 10 year old daughter) approached with a gob of baby food on her finger, it lunged forward in typical manner with mouth open as if to frighten a predator, but it closed its mouth on her finger and raked off the food which it swallowed. It repeated this procedure until it would take no more food. From then on whenever we approached the bird and stayed nearby, it would begin its low clucking and eat, if offered food.

By the thirteenth of July, it was capable of short flights of from sixty to one-hundred feet, but would not fly up of its own volition. To get it to fly, we had to toss it in the air. Incidentally, by this time it had managed to lose all its tail feathers.

In a few days we learned that our bird was giving still another call. It was a low pitched trill which apparently was a more urgent call for food than the clucking call or the single note whistle described previously. Even though it then expected food from Kim and took it readily from her hand, it still registered its call of annoyance whenever anything approached its cage.

Around the first of August, our "chuck", after doing nicely for two weeks or more, suddenly developed an apparent nervous disorder or co-ordination problem. When approached for feeding or otherwise, the bird would go into its menacing posture, but would raise its head upward and backward with wings extended until it turned a complete somersault; sometimes several in rapid succession. We supposed that confinement in the gloomy room might have had some bearing on the problem, so we took the bird out into the yard for fresh air and exercise, but with no marked improvement. After a short normal flight, the bird, on alighting, would begin to flop

over and eventually would come to rest on its back. This condition lasted for almost a week during which time the bird took no food voluntarily, but did swallow when its mouth was pried open and food pellets were inserted.

Quite as suddenly as it appeared, the disorder vanished, leaving the Chuck in as good shape as it had been previously.

During the next two weeks our chuck ceased to be an object of study and became a pet. He became very insistent when calling for food, and when we arose in the mornings, he would begin calling with his single call note until someone brought him food. As we approached his cage he would fluff his feathers, waddle back and forth, and cluck and peep until someone reached into the cage. Then he would extend his wings and flutter up to one's hand with his mouth open and take the food from the finger. We observed that his waddling amounted to a ritual and was repeated consistently. He would extend his wings with tips down, stretch his neck with head down, and go into his dance which consisted of two steps to the right, four steps to the left, and two steps back to his original position. The dance did not always mean the bird was hungry.

Occasionally we gave him water from a teaspoon. At first we had to pry his mouth open, but later, he would take water from the spoon of his own accord. Often he would take a food pellet and sling it onto the cage floor. This, we finally learned, meant he was thirsty and would take water from the spoon.

Sometimes, after feeding, the bird would settle down on the floor of his cage and cluck and peep very lowly. Margaret would then engage him in conversation by imitating his sounds. Often he would begin his conversational sounds when anyone entered the room.

During the period between the first and fifteenth of August, the bird would fly up from the floor to the window or across the room, but not strongly, and we fear he was not exercised enough.

He would not eat insects of any kind unless the wings and legs were removed. We suppose he became adapted to civilization too readily. In order to avoid any misunderstanding about Chuck's intelligence, it must be disclosed that when our cat approached the cage the bird would give his hunger call and open his mouth for food.

In all we observed nine different calls: (1) the whistle expressing hunger, (2) the clucking expressing hunger, (3) the trill expressing hunger, (4) the growl expressing annoyance or fear or given as a warning note, (5) the trill given when attacking, (6) soft clucks and peeps expressing satiation or contentment, (7) louder notes expressing satiation or contentment, (8) notes given during the "dance", and (9) a single note call for which there seemed no reason.

A characteristic of some interest was the bird's method of voiding. It would carefully back up three steps from its resting position, defecate, then waddle back into the original place.

In mid-August we had to leave home for a few days and had no choice but to take the chuck along in his cage. Whether from the exhaust fumes or the movement, the trip did him no good, and for three days while we were gone he would take no food; we had to force feed him and even so, he ate little.

Upon returning home to his familiar place in the den, he immediately changed back to his congenial ways which he maintained until near the end.

Around the first of September we became concerned because migration for Chuck-will's-widows was under way and our bird could not fly, would not eat insects, and had managed to lose tail feathers as fast as they grew in. We could not try to keep him alive through the winter.

After the first week in September, Chuck began to call less often and to refuse his food at regular feeding times. He became less active and made fewer sounds. On September 28th, he refused food, made no aggressive movements, seeming content to make low peeping noises when someone stroked or petted his head. On the morning of September 30th, we found him dead in the cage. We realized at that moment that we were not even slightly objective in our attitude.

The only reference we found on raising the young of the Chuck-will's-widow was the very interesting article of Mr. Albert F. Ganier in the December, 1964, issue of The Migrant, the journal of the Tennessee Ornithological Society.

In his article, Mr. Ganier described his experience in caring for a young Chuck-will's-widow estimated to be three or four weeks old at time of capture (7.85 inch wing chord). He was able to look after his bird for only thirteen days. We were fortunate to keep ours alive for three months and are thankful for the opportunity to observe its behavior in captivity, but we hope that no one brings us another to raise anytime soon. We had much rather witness its dancing and hear its calls by the light of the moon than in the glare of a 100W bulb!

Route 1, Box 91
Brownsboro, Alabama 35741