

Counting on Moonlight

Why are all those folks on the roadside looking for moonlight? If they're out between now and July 15, there's a good chance they're counting nightjars – birds that also go by the not-so-melodious name of goatsuckers. Conservationists believe the nocturnal birds, which become more active in the brighter phases of the moon, are declining in number. But data are scarce. Hence the citizen survey, organized by the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va.

In the survey – the third for the Southeast and second for the continental United States – volunteers will cover 400 or more nightjar survey routes in 38 states. The routes cross or skirt more than 60 national wildlife refuges.

Biologists at several national wildlife refuges, including St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, both in Florida, Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama and Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota, will also take part in an effort to add to knowledge about a species on refuge lands. “Refuges have the same interest we do in being able to document bird population trends,” said Mike Wilson, a senior biologist at William and Mary and a project coordinator.

Survey volunteers conduct roadside counts on nights with at least a half moon by driving and stopping at 10 points along a nine-mile route. At each point, they count all nightjars seen or heard during a six-minute period. For more information: <http://ccb-wm.org/nightjars.htm>.