

# SentinelSource.com

New Hampshire  
An Online Edition of *The Keene Sentinel*

## ENTERTAINMENT > NEWS

### A really special baby

#### *Only known nighthawk tot is closely monitored*

By Anika Clark  
Sentinel Staff

Published:  
Monday, August 3, 2009 12:18 PM EDT

Each year, babies are born to parents throughout the Elm City. But the winged wee one Antioch University New England student Kenneth Klapper met this month is extra special.

Perched on a rooftop in downtown Keene, the baby nighthawk represents hope for a bird species that has largely disappeared from New Hampshire's cities.

It signifies the only known young and surviving nighthawk born this year in the state.

And for Klapper, it's also the culmination of years of studying the species, which is considered endangered in New Hampshire.

"We were ecstatic," Klapper said, recalling the July 23 evening when he and Ashuelot Valley Environmental Observatory Executive Director David M. Moon first saw the chick.

The two watched as father and baby flew to where they stood, on the rooftop of a Keene Housing Authority building on Central Square.

"Since we've been doing this, this is exactly what we wanted" to see, Klapper said.

Every night since the discovery, one of the researchers has gone back to that spot. They've watched as the fledgling's father swoops in to feed his baby, which seems to spend most of its time on a nearby rooftop.

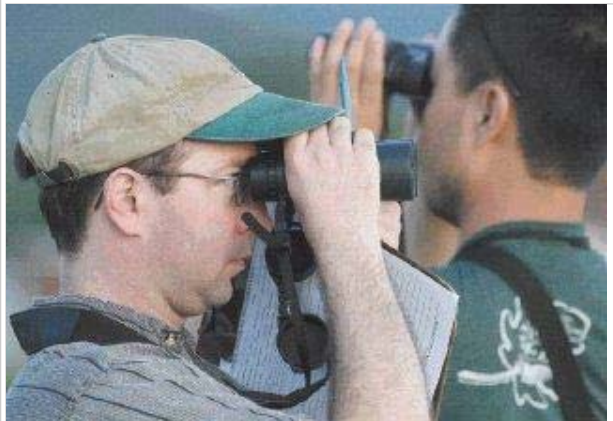
Keeping detailed notes he'll use for his master's thesis, Klapper can describe the young bird's nighttime routine with the precision of a parent — the slow way he or she wakes up, the shimmying movements to Dad and those short flights that will have to be perfected before the upcoming migration.

By Tuesday, the young bird had grown to about 3/4 of adult size, according to Klapper: "It's kind of in its gangly, teenage years," he explained.

And while researchers have yet to find the little bird's nest, Klapper said, "To see a fledgling is as good. It shows nighthawks are successfully breeding here in Keene."

This wasn't always such a rarity.

Piercing the air with their characteristic, beeping call, territorial dives and bright white wing bands, the bird

[Print Page](#)


7/31/09. Hooper foto. Environment. Bird experts Ken Klapper, left, and Lance Tanino look to the Keene skies Thursday night to track an adult nighthawk. Both live in Keene. ONE OF TWO PICS.

[Play again ▶](#)

**09 Forester Starting  
at \$19,590 or  
\$219/month**

**SUBARU OF KEENE**  
A Fenton Family Dealership

Sound  
is off

used to be much more prevalent in the night skies.

But their numbers are dropping, according to N.H. Audubon Biologist Rebecca W. Suomala, who said this is true everywhere from their strongholds in Northern Canada and the plains and prairies of the western United States to the Northeast.

Based on Audubon data, "New Hampshire had (about) 30 communities that had nighthawks detected in the summertime ... up until the mid-80s or so," Moon said.

That number has dropped to two.

Keene and Concord are the only Granite State municipalities where nighthawks are still being confirmed, but even in the Elm City, Moon said they used to be much more common.

Suomala described it as "highly unlikely" that a bird species nesting in an area would just pick up and leave.

When a species nests somewhere for several years and then disappears, it's not likely because it relocated, she said.

Instead, she said, they've probably just ceased to exist. What scientists don't know is why.

One theory links the bird's decline to the shift from the once-common pea stone gravel rooftops where nighthawks laid their eggs to roofs made of rubber or polyvinyl chloride (PVC).

Nighthawks are ground-nesting birds that historically have nested in pine barrens and other open spaces, according to Suomala. But, she said, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, they were increasingly spotted with eggs on gravel rooftops as natural areas gave way to developing cities.

Old-style gravel roofs offer them some clear advantages to those made of rubber.

Nighthawk eggs "blend in beautifully with the gravel," Moon said.

And with the bird's speckled brown, grey and white colors, according to Klapper, "It's a perfect camouflage in that environment."

Vincent Marzilli — who studied nighthawks at the University of Maine in Orono — wrote in a 1989 article for Maine Fish and Wildlife that eggs on rubber roofs can roll into drains or low spots filled with water.

And on a sunny July day, he wrote, a black rubber roof was an average of 18 degrees hotter.

Meanwhile, Suomala questioned whether the decline in gravel roofs could leave nighthawk nests more vulnerable to predators.

"When you have a lot of stone roofs, one nest is hard to find," she explained. "When you only have a couple of stone roofs, one nest is easy to find."

At the same time, researchers have documented declines in several species of aerial insectivores — a term that includes nighthawks, barn swallows and other birds that feed on insects in the air.

As insect-eating birds face a host of threats, insect populations are "one of the big unknowns," according to Suomala.

"If insect populations are changing because of climate change, if they're declining because of pesticide use here or in South America or on their migration route, (insectivores) won't have enough food," she said.

New Hampshire researchers are studying the role changes in roofing material have in the decline of nighthawks by building 9-foot by 9-foot patches of gravel on rooftops.

The study is called Project Nighthawk and is coordinated by Suomala in Concord. Klapper heads the work in Keene, supported by volunteers from the Ashuelot Valley Environmental Observatory.

Project Nighthawk's also extended to the Hanover Lebanon area, according to Suomala, although she said a nighthawk has yet to be spotted there.

The study's rooted in an idea Marzilli pioneered in the 1980s.

By laying gravel patches on rubber rooftops previously made of stone, Marzilli was able to attract nighthawks to lay their eggs.

New Hampshire researchers haven't been so lucky. While nests have been found in both Concord and Keene, Suomala said, "Nobody has had a nighthawk nesting on a patch."

In 2007, when the project was launched in New Hampshire, and in 2008 and 2009, researchers confirmed a ground nest in East Concord.

This year, a chick hatched from the nest, and another was "pipping" — or beginning to break through its shell — when heavy July rains drowned them both. Since then, the parents have re-nested on a stone roof — not on a Project Nighthawk gravel patch.

Klapper said that after the fledgling leaves the Keene area, he'll search nearby roofs for egg fragments in an attempt to find the nest.

"It's sort of like the ultimate Easter egg hunt," he said.

But, he said, he hasn't noticed any nesting this breeding season on any of Keene's 15 gravel patches.

Researchers in Pennsylvania similarly haven't found any nests on gravel patches since they started studying them in 2007, according to Suomala.

Still, some nighthawk nests could be flying under the radar.

The fact that nighthawks generally lay their eggs in pairs, for instance, brings up a key question: Where's Keene's other chick?

Since researchers have only spotted a male nighthawk feeding the fledgling downtown, Suomala speculated the mother might be feeding another fledgling elsewhere.

Regardless, Moon described how important it is to understand nighthawks' breeding needs.

"To figure out how to support the species, we really need to know more about what it requires in order to breed successfully," he said.

Klapper's on the case, spending an hour-and-a-half every night charting the father and fledgling's every move.

After scanning the roof with no sight of the fledgling Tuesday, Klapper figured the bird may have taken flight for good.

"They grow up fast," he said.

But then, at about 8:15 p.m., Klapper perked up.

"Here he comes! He's early," he said as he pointed his binoculars to the sky.

The father bird flew over the nearby rooftop roosting spot, then disappeared for several minutes before swooping down to feed his youngster.

What followed was an impressive display of aerial acrobatics. With Klapper standing in the audience, the dad circled and dove in and out of the shadows before he was finally swallowed by the night.

Anika Clark can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1432, or [aclark@keenesentinel.com](mailto:aclark@keenesentinel.com).

Copyright © 2009 - The Keene Sentinel

[x] Close Window