



# Northern Harrier

*Circus cyaneus*

# January 2018

## Field Notes



Mick Thompson, Creative Commons

Juvenile northern harrier—note owl-like facial disk.

## General Description

Flying low over grassy fields and open wetlands, the northern harrier, or marsh hawk, is a treat to see, and not just for its striking plumage. Its exceptional hearing, starkly contrasting male and female plumage (a form of sexual dimorphism), and propensity for polygyny make it unique in the hawk and eagle family (Accipitridae).

Northern harriers are slim, long-tailed and long-winged hawks, with a wingspan of 109 cm (43 in). They fly with wings angled upward. Females are almost 50% heavier, and slightly longer, than males. Females have an overall brownish color, with a dark face and brown streaked underparts. Males are almost all white below and light gray above, except for their black wingtips. Juveniles look like adult females, but with rufous below. If you catch sight of the white rump patch above the tail, you'll know it's a harrier—no other North American hawk has it. (Accipiters [goshawks, Cooper's hawks, sharp-shinned hawks] have white patches *underneath* the base of their tails.)

The harrier's distinctly round facial disk makes it look more like an owl—and hear more like an owl—than other hawks.

Harriers occur worldwide, and this species is no exception. *Circus cyaneus* includes a

North America subspecies and a Eurasian subspecies (called the hen harrier).

## Habitat and Distribution

Although found coast to coast in North America, most harriers breed in Canada and the northern United States. As the name, marsh hawk, implies, these birds frequent wet, open areas with tall, dense clumps of vegetation. Suitable habitat is varied: marshy meadows; wet, lightly grazed pastures; old fields; freshwater and brackish marshes; tundra; upland prairies; croplands; and cold desert shrub-steppe.

## Behavior and Feeding

The harrier hunts on the wing, locating prey by sight and sound. With the help of its satellite-dish face, it can zero in on moving prey, sometimes without any visual clues. Prey in the dense, grassy landscapes it favors include rodents (especially *Microtus* voles), passerine birds, reptiles, and frogs.

Like many raptors, harriers vocalize when hungry, threatened, and during courtship. Females scream a piercing, descending Food Call to solicit a nearby mate for food or copulation. Recently fledged young beg for food using a version of this call. Both adults utter a rapid series of high-pitched “kek” calls in response to a predator, intruding harrier, or other disturbance.

During courtship, males (typically) perform a “Sky-Dance”: an undulating series of steep dives and recoveries, complete with a body twist. When a neighboring harrier invades, either sex will engage the intruder by “Leg-Lowering”—hanging the legs straight down with talons visibly displayed.

## Life Cycle and Reproduction

Northern harriers engage in polygyny more often and to a greater degree than other raptors. In years with abundant food, males may pair with up to five mates.

Harriers are migratory and pairing begins in early spring upon return to breeding grounds. They build their nests (38 to 63 cm [15 to 24 in] wide) on the ground, and sometimes above water, from grasses, reeds, and other plants. The female lays 4 to 5 dull white (initially pale blue hue) eggs and handles all incubation. In a little over a month, the eggs hatch into nestlings, which then fledge 5 to 6 weeks later. The female broods the young, sometimes spreading her wings as shelter from rain or intense sun. The male provides food.

## Conservation

Globally, harriers are not a species of concern. Populations have declined in some areas, however, and it is a California Species of Special Concern. Habitat loss, from draining wetlands or converting native grassland prairies to monotypic (single crop) farms, for example, is a threat.

## Where to See

Northern harriers commonly occur at Redwood National and State Parks and Lava Beds NM. At Lassen Volcanic NP they are rare, nonbreeding visitors. They are probably present in Crater Lake NP.



Scot Close, Creative Commons

NPS/Robert Bennetts

Left: male northern harrier—note white rump patch. Right: female northern harrier.

## More Information

<https://birdsna.org/Species-Account/bna/species/norhar/introduction>

[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern\\_Harrier/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Harrier/id)