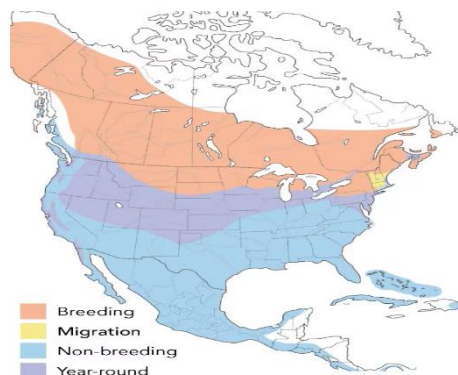


Northern Harrier



Classification

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Aves
Order: Accipitriformes
Family: Accipitridae
Genus: *Circus*
Species: *hudsonius*



Range, Habitat, Conservation Status

- **Range:** Throughout North America, breeding from northern Alaska and Canada to northern Mexico. It overwinters as far south as Central America and northern South America.
- **Habitat:** Prefers wide open spaces, including wetlands, marshes, prairies, grasslands, old fields, and meadows.
- **Conservation Status:** Least Concern with population decreasing. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has listed it as Special Concern in certain states.

Physical Characteristics

- **Body Length:** 18.1 to 19.7 inches (46-50 cm)
- **Wingspan:** 40.2 to 46.5 inches (102-118 cm)
- **Weight:** 0.6 to 1.6 pounds (300-750 g)
- **Lifespan:** Oldest known individual in the wild was at least 15 years of age.
- **Identifying Traits:** Slender, medium-sized raptors with long, broad wings and a long, rounded tail. Flat, owl-like face with a small, sharply hooked beak. When perched, they have long wings, and long tails. Sexually dimorphic hawk, with males' appearance very different to females. Males have light gray heads, chests and upper backs with whitish below, black wingtips, a dark trailing edge to the wing, and a black-banded tail. Females are brown on the back, and striped brown and whitish below. The wings and tail are marked with dark barring. Females have whitish undersides with brown streaks. Juveniles are similar to females except buffy and with less streaking. All individuals have a white rump patch that is noticeable while in flight.

Behaviors

- **Feeding:** Fly low with wings tipped up to form a V shape. Uses hearing to locate prey beneath vegetation. Small mammals, such as voles, mice, and ground squirrels. Also eat reptiles, amphibians and other birds.
- **Breeding:** Western populations breed in dry upland habitats. Northeastern and Midwestern populations breed in wetlands. Males will mate with anywhere from one to five females. Use sky-dancing displays to court females and advertise territory.
- **Nesting:** On the ground, in a dense clump of vegetation, such as reeds, grasses, willows, cattails, sedges, and bulrushes. Made with thick-stalked plants and lined using rushes, grasses, and sedges. Lay 4 to 5 dull white eggs, usually without markings.
- **Migration:** Resident to long-distance migrant. Generally, migrate alone and during daytime. On the map, the purple is year-round, the blue is nonbreeding, and orange is breeding.
- **Call:** Fast series of “kek” notes that last 1 to 2 seconds during courtship. When threatened, call will become higher pitched.

Fun Facts!

- The Northern Harrier goes by many other names including the Marsh Hawk, Hen Harrier, Blue Hawk (male), Frog Hawk, Mouse Hawk, or White-rumped Hawk harrier.
- Unlike other hawks, the Northern Harrier relies on hearing as well as vision to capture prey. They have a facial disk comprised of feathers that form a circle around the face. These feathers can be raised and lowered with a raised facial disk helping to direct sounds to the bird’s ears.
- Northern Harriers have been observed stealing food from other raptors by chasing and harassing them until they drop their prey.
- Northern Harriers can be polygamous with males having as many as five mates at once, although they commonly have only one or two.

Importance

Northern Harriers eat rodents that can damage crops, which is beneficial to farmers.

Threats and Conservation measures

Conservation status is of least concern. Populations rebounded after dramatic declines in the 1960s from DDT contamination and other organochlorine pesticides. However, the North American Breeding Bird Survey records a steady decline of over 1% per year from 1966 to 2019, resulting in a cumulative



population loss of about 34%. This decline is due to habitat loss following drainage of marshes and the conversion of grasslands to agricultural fields. Other threats include pesticide use such as rodenticides that kill rodents. Ask visitors at the center to refrain from using rodenticides as it can kill raptors indirectly. Alternative effective humane traps are available for use from local hardware stores.

Sources

- <https://peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/hawks/northern-harrier>
- https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Harrier/overview
- Probst, R. and Probst, R., 2025. Winter Ecology of the Hen Harrier, *Circus cyaneus*: Bridging Behavioral Insights and Conservation Requirements. *Animals*, 15(7), p.1057.
- Sauer, J.R., Link, W.A. and Hines, J.E., 2020. The North American breeding bird survey, analysis results 1966-2019. *US Geological Survey (USGS) Data Release*, p.1051.