

Hen harrier

Hen harriers (*Circus cyaneus*) breed on moorland and winter on more low-lying sites around the country



This harrier of the moorland performs spectacular sky-dancing courtship displays.

The adult males have pale grey plumage with white body and rump and black wing tips. Distinguished from the Montagu's harrier by lack of any barring on the wings. Females and immature birds are dark brown above with white rump and banded tail, hence the name 'ringtail' (illustrated above). The under wings are also banded, and the chest streaked with dark brown, pale collar and no obvious white under the eye again distinguishes them from Montagu's.

Length: 44-52cm; wingspan: 100-120cm

Status in UK

800 pairs, recent increase; RED listed; resident and winter visitor

Population trends

At the beginning of the 19th century hen harriers were widespread in both the uplands and in suitable habitats in the lowlands. But by the latter part of the 1800s persecution and loss of habitat had reduced this species to an occasional breeder in the north of England, the South-west and parts of Wales, though it was still found throughout much of Scotland.

By the end of the First World War the hen harrier was confined to the Scottish islands. It returned to the mainland of Scotland during the Second World War and its recolonisation was helped by the spread of young forestry plantations - ideal nesting sites in their early stages. It returned to the moors of northern England in the late 1960s, but its population and range here and on grouse moors of Scotland is deliberately suppressed by illegal persecution.

Habitat and distribution

Hen harriers breed on rolling heather and grass moors in the Southern Uplands, the Highlands of Scotland, the Western Isles and Orkney. South of the border they are found in north Wales, the south Pennines and Northumberland.

In winter they move to the lowlands and around the coast and roost communally. For more than 20 years the Hawk and Owl Trust and the British Trust for Ornithology have organised a Hen Harrier Winter Roost Survey. Birds wintering in the south and eastern coastal areas of England are probably of continental origin.

Breeding

Hen harriers nest on the ground in heather and in young conifer plantations. Tree nesting occurs in Northern Ireland. Courtship display involves elaborate sky-dancing and food passing.

Feeding

Small mammals, most commonly short tailed voles, and ground nesting birds, such as pipits, especially young in the nest and fledglings are all taken. They also take gamebirds and waders, and their young. More birds are eaten in years when vole numbers are low.