

Montagu's harrier

Montagu's harrier (*Circus pygargus*) is a very rare breeding visitor at the limit of its northern range



A small bird of prey with long pointed wings and long tail which has a buoyant, butterfly-like flight. Males are pale grey with black wing tips. The dark markings on the inner parts of the wings both above and below distinguishes them from male hen harriers. Females and juveniles are very similar being brown above and paler below with a white rump. They are distinguished from hen harriers by a conspicuous white patch below the eye and lack of pale neck collar.

Length: 43-47cm; wingspan: 105-120cm

Status in UK

Less than 10 pairs; AMBER listed; summer visitor (April to September/October), winters in sub-Saharan Africa

Population trends

The Montagu's harrier was only recognised as a separate species in 1802, its numbers have always been low in Britain. In the 19th century it was confined to Cornwall and central England - mainly the New Forest, Kent and East Anglia.

During the first half of the 20th century the population was some 20 pairs, but by the 1950s numbers had increased to c.30 pairs. Sadly over the next 20 years it declined with none recorded by the mid '70s. Numbers have gradually increased since then and, as it is moving north in continental Europe, perhaps this trend will continue in Britain. It is still persecuted, especially on migration through southern Europe, and poisoning may occur from persistent pesticides in its winter quarters.

Habitat and distribution

A later breeding harrier, the planting of 'winter' cereal crops provides ideal habitat for nesting. Before these crops were available young conifer plantations, heathland and marshes were favoured.

Occurs in south and eastern England, and occasionally on the northern moors.

Breeding

The nest is on the ground in tall vegetation - grass, reeds, heather and arable crops.

Feeding

They hunt by quartering low over open country principally for shrews, voles and large insects, such as grasshoppers, beetles and dragonflies. Will also take birds including larks and pipits, which it is agile enough to take in flight, unlike the other harriers.