

Northern Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

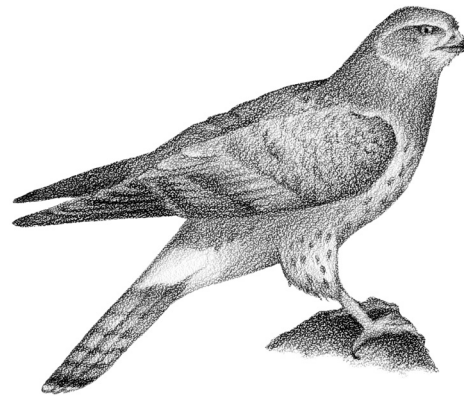


Folk Name: Marsh Hawk, Old Field Hawk, Rabbit Hawk, Bullet Hawk

Status: Migrant, Winter Resident

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Large open fields



The Northern Harrier breeds in northern North America, and it is only found in our region during migration or in winter. This medium-sized hawk averages about 18 inches long, which is right between the size of the Red-shouldered and the Red-tailed Hawk. Female Northern Harriers are larger than males, and they are dusky-brown above with brownish streaks below. Males are grayish-blue above and white below. They have long wings and long tails, and both sexes have obvious white-rump patches that are distinctive in flight.

The Harrier is one of our most unique diurnal raptors. It regularly relies on its hearing to locate its prey. In fact, it has a special “owl-like” facial disk that helps it gather sound to locate prey in densely grassy fields and weedy marshes. The Harrier hunts by flying very low, back and forth across large open fields. It slowly flaps its long wings, glides buoyantly, and then, when it hears or sees its prey, it pulls up, hovers, and quickly pounces. Some of its favored prey are voles, shrews, mice, rabbits, frogs, birds, and especially cotton rats.

In the Central Carolinas, this bird usually shows up in late August or September and is gone by April or the first week of May. Our earliest reported arrival date of a Harrier in the region is 25 August, and our latest departure dates on file are 12 May and 28 May. Northern Harriers are solitary birds that require a great deal of open space for foraging. Usually only one or two birds are reported at a time. The highest single-day tallies of this species in the region are two counts of 20 recorded on the Pee Dee NWR CBC in Anson County in 1999 and 2003.

Winter site fidelity is low for this species as the populations of the small mammals that it relies on for the bulk of its diet vary greatly from year to year. When prey is abundant, the Harriers will be seen. When the prey population is low, wintering Harriers will find somewhere else to spend their days.

The Harrier was once a “very common” bird in this region. Unfortunately, extensive open field habitat is being lost every year to development, and reports of Northern Harriers in the region have been in a slow decline since the 1980s, especially around growing urban areas. Little habitat for this bird remains in Mecklenburg County. However, Northern Harriers are still found at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge and the prairie restoration site at McDowell Nature Preserve, and they are occasionally



seen at the Charlotte-Douglas International Airport as well.

There is one historic record of this species from this region that must be addressed. Charlie Sellers reported a “Marsh Hawk” nest in Gaston County in May of 1938. Northern Harriers have been confirmed breeding a few times on the coast of North Carolina, and breeding has occasionally been suspected on the coast of South Carolina, but no breeding is known from the Carolina Piedmont. Sellers was an excellent birder and a student of renowned ornithologist Ludlow Griscom at Harvard. Unfortunately, though it is intriguing, this nest report that he submitted to the U.S. Biological Survey was not supported by definitive details or any physical evidence, and it should not be considered as valid.



Northern Harrier in Huntersville. (Jeff Lemons)