



Northern Harrier

The **northern harrier** (*Circus cyaneus*) is the sole North American species of this group of long-winged, long-tailed, long-legged hawks.

General description: Northern harriers are 18-20 inches (45-50 centimeters) long with wingspans of 40-46 inches (100-120 cm). Males weigh from 10.5-14.0 ounces (300-400 grams), and females from 10.75-26.5 ounces (310-750 g).

Sexes are markedly dimorphic in plumage coloration as well as size, but a diagnostic characteristic of all forms is the white or buffy rump patch, which is plainly visible in flight. Adult males are pearly gray on the back, wings, head, and upper chest, with white bellies and underwings spotted delicately with brown or black. In flight, wingtips appear as though dipped in black ink. Females are mottled dark brown on the back and wings, with individual feathers outlined in tawny or buff. Underparts are whitish or tan, streaked with brown. The head is brown with face outlined by a white facial disk, and the tail is brown with dark brown bars. Immature harriers are similar to adult females, but with mostly unstreaked underparts washed with rust. Immatures flying in direct sunlight often give an orange appearance.

Habitat: Harriers frequent open marsh, grassland, and tundra. They are found across the state, especially along tideflats, coastal marshes, freshwater marshes, open tundra, and low mountain ridges. In the winter, northern harriers migrate to the open farmland and marshes of Canada and the Lower 48 states, and may travel as far as Central America or northern South America.

Food habits: Northern harriers prey primarily on small mammals and small birds, captured after quick pounces from flight. Their long, slightly-built legs are well-suited for seizing small rodents from marshland vegetation. They are capable of opportunistically taking larger prey, including ducks, grouse, ptarmigan, ground squirrels, and hares. Some observers have reported harriers subduing large prey by drowning.

Harriers hunt almost entirely on the wing in a low, coursing pattern of flight. They fly in a loose, flexible fashion, and dip, rock, bounce, and wheel buoyantly over open country. When gliding, harriers hold their wings slightly above the horizontal in a shallow "V."

Hunting harriers rely heavily on acute hearing as well as sharp vision to locate prey. A ruff of stiff feathers surrounds the face and helps gather and focus sounds to the ears, in the same way as owls' facial disks.

Reproduction and nesting: Harriers build nests directly on the ground, often using low shrubs or bushes for protection, but nests are still vulnerable to ground predators. Harriers are therefore vigorous defenders of their nests, with both adults commonly teaming up to drive intruders away.

Females typically lay four to six eggs, but may lay as many as ten. Frequently, male Northern Harriers are mated to more than one female at the same time; individual males have been known to have as many as five mates in a breeding season. Females incubate eggs, defend the nest, and brood the young, and males provide food for their mates and their young. Not surprisingly, females begin hunting as soon as nestlings can maintain their own body temperatures, as multiple nests full of young present a daunting demand for food no single male could fulfill.

Conservation, management, and protection: As with many Alaska raptors, regular, detailed population surveys are lacking. Declines in other parts of its range, resulting mostly from loss of wetlands and changes in farming practices, are not apparently mirrored in the north. Drastic changes to tundra and marshland resulting from global warming could significantly alter or eliminate huge expanses of harrier habitat. Pollution, especially pesticide contamination of prey on winter ranges is a potential problem, as are the other ills that visit wild raptors: starvation; disease; parasite infestations; illegal shooting; collisions with vehicles, windows, towers, utility lines, fences, and guy wires; electrocution; and predation by larger raptors.

