

AT HEADLANDS STATE PARK: THE NORTHERN HARRIER

Donald Shephard



Take a walk down Little Lake Street in the Mendocino Headlands in the evening to watch the sunset and your attention will divert to a low-flying hawk with a distinctive white rump and long, barred tail, the Northern Harrier, or Marsh Hawk. Other ramblers in Europe and Asia watch this same species but they call it the Hen Harrier. Whatever we call these birds, their preference for open space such as marshes, meadows, pastures, and wetlands, and their low flight with wings set in a dihedral make them a snap to identify. Take a closer look and you will see the owl-like facial disk due to the presence of "filo feathers" that focus prey noises into large, off-set ears enabling the bird to use triangulation of sound to help locate prey. This characteristic, and soft feathers for a quieter flight, facilitate twilight hunting and locating prey in areas of higher grass which limit the predator's vision.

Harriers show a greater difference between male and female plumage than typical of raptors. Females, brown above with varying degrees of brown and buff streaking below, contrast with males, gray above with an unmarked lighter color below. Few raptors share this sexual dimorphism. Juveniles show brown above and plain orange-brown below. The Northern Harrier's wing span of about 4 feet enables it to fly at 24 to 38 mph low over the ground at about 10-30 feet in a pattern of a few beats followed by a short glide, wings held slightly up in a V shape. It drops quickly to its prey.

The availability of the species' principal prey in spring, usually voles, strongly influences annual breeding numbers and productivity. Northern Harriers also consume other small vertebrates, including snakes, frogs, passerine birds, and small waterfowl notably Eared Grebes, Phalaropes and even teal. Females take larger prey than the smaller males.

Like most other harriers, the Northern Harrier nests on the ground, usually in tall, dense clumps of vegetation, either alone or in loose colonies. The female lays 4-5 pale blue eggs, sometimes marked with light brown spots.

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Northern Harrier female, photo by Ron LeValley

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Most males are monogamous or simultaneously bigamous, although some males pair with up to five mates in a season. The abundance of food in spring, and, to a lesser extent, the sex ratio, influences the frequency of polygyny. Females incubate eggs and brood offspring, and males provide the bulk of food for their mates and nestlings.

Harriers choose a new mate each breeding season. The male attracts potential mates by "sky dancing." He swoops down from 60-100 feet to about 10 feet, then climbs back up and repeats the maneuver.

During the nesting period the male does most of the hunting while the female watches the nest and her chicks. The female feeds the chicks, tearing the prey into small manageable pieces. If the female dies during the time the chicks are dependent on her for food, they will usually die as well. The male will bring prey to the nest but will not tear it into pieces, and the chicks starve. Northern Harriers spend approximately 50% of the day searching for prey. They might fly up to 100 miles in a day in search of food.

One of the most amazing aerial acts I have witnessed occurred by the Point Cabrillo Light House. After a successful hunt, a male Northern Harrier called his mate from the nest. She flew beneath him as he released the vole, turned upside down in flight, caught the corpse, and rolled back all in one smooth action. As fine a piece of acrobatics as any raven dancing on the updraft on the bluffs of Lansing Street.

Microtus sp.
Field mouse,
primary prey of the Northern Harrier,
photo by Donald Shephard.

