

# Northern Harrier

*Circus cyaneus*



The northern harrier, also known in North America as the marsh hawk, is a bird of prey that is common in Texas during the winter months. It preys on small rodents, reptiles, and amphibians. It is the only species of harrier found in North America.

Coastal Wetlands

# Northern Harrier

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## APPEARANCE

**Height:** Males: 16 to 18 inches (40 to 45 cm)

Females: 20 inches (50 cm)

**Wingspan:** 3 feet (0.9 m); females: 4 feet (1.2 m)

### Distinguishing Characteristics

- Males: bluish-gray backs, white undersides and black wing-tips
- Females: brown backs and cream-colored bellies and breasts with dark brown streaks
- White rumps, yellow eyes, yellow legs and a yellow *cere*, the leathery patch of skin where the nostrils are located
- Like other hawk-like birds, they have a sharp, down-turned beak and long sharp talons.
- When gliding, harriers sometimes hold their wings in a *dihedral* or "V" shape.

## LIFE HISTORY

**Range:** From central Canada south to Texas. They migrate southward in the winter, and may be found throughout all of Texas between September and May.

**Diet:** Small rodents (mice and voles), amphibians, small reptiles, small rabbits, other birds, as well as some invertebrates

**Predators:** Striped skunk and raccoons (on eggs), red fox, feral cats and other birds

**Sexual maturity:** At one year

**Mating season:** March through June

**Nesting:** Nests are built on the ground or on a mound of dirt or vegetation. They are made of sticks and are lined inside with grass and leaves. The nests are usually 15 to 30 inches (38 to 76 cm) in diameter.

**Eggs:** Four to eight eggs are laid over several days. The eggs are bluish-white and usually unmarked.

**Incubation:** Between 24 to 39 days

**Young:** The young birds may leave the nest 30 days after they hatched.

**Life span:** 12 years

## HABITAT

The northern harrier prefers coastal prairies, marshes, grasslands, swamps and other open areas.

## BEHAVIOR

Northern harriers hunt by flying low to the ground in open areas. Harriers circle an area several times listening and looking for prey. When they spot prey, they swoop down and grab the prey with their sharp claws. These are the only hawk-like bird known to practice *polygyny*—one male mates with several females. When incubating eggs, the female sits on the nest while the male hunts and brings food to her and the chicks.

## NOW YOU KNOW!

- The genus name, *Circus*, comes from the Greek word *kirkos* and describes the bird's habit of flying in low circles while hunting; *cyaneus* refers to their blue-gray color.
- Northern harriers can fly more than 100 miles (161 km) every day.
- Harriers and other hawk-like birds can see eight times more clearly than humans.
- Since they nest on the ground, their nests are in danger of being trampled by cattle and deer and are unprotected from fires.
- They depend heavily on hearing while hunting; the ruffled feathers around their faces help direct sound towards their ears.

## NORTHERN HARRIERS AND PEOPLE

Once upon a time, in some parts of Europe people believed that seeing a harrier perched on a house was a sign that three people would die; on a happier note, some Native American tribes believe that seeing a hawk on your wedding day is a sign of a long, happy marriage.

Many farmers like northern harriers because they eat predators of quail eggs and mice that damage crops. Harriers are sometimes called "good hawks" because they pose no threat to poultry as some hawks do. Heavy pesticide use in the 1970s and 1980s caused a decline in harrier populations.