

Northern Harrier

With its stiff facial feathers in a disk shape, the northern harrier may give the impression that it might be an owl, but it is definitely a hawk! These unique features actually improve the bird's foraging skills by enhancing its ability to hear the movements of prey hiding in vegetation. This is also a little ironic because in winter northern harriers occasionally roost on the ground with short-eared owls.



Northern harriers normally forage for small mammals and birds, but also take larger animals like rabbits

and ducks. They are known to sometimes drown their prey, and normally eat on the ground.

Mature males and females measure 18 to almost 20 inches in length, weigh 10.5 to 26.5 ounces, and have 30- to 46.5-inch wingspans. Adult males are gray above and whitish below, with black wingtips, dark trailing edges on their wings and black-banded tails. Females and juveniles are brown with black tail bands. Adult females have whitish undersides with brown streaks, while juveniles are buff-colored with fewer streaks. All northern harriers have the prominent white rump patch. The eyes of young males are yellow-green where those of juvenile females are brown, but with maturity the eye color for both sexes changes to yellow.

A male may mate with several females during the breeding season and select nesting sites, normally in dense vegetation such as willows, grasses, sedges, reeds, bulrushes or cattails. The male may also start construction while the female completes the nest, lining it with grasses, sedges and rushes. The female incubates the single seasonal brood, consisting of four or five pale white eggs, and cares for the hatchlings, while the male provides most of the food for the family. Incubation is 28-36 days, with

a nesting time of about two weeks, and chicks hatch helpless and covered with short white down.

To add a northern harrier to your 2024 bird list, your best chance is to visit Willow or Watson Lake or the Highlands Center for Natural History, and with a bit of luck you'll be rewarded.

Happy birding!