

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

NORTHERN HARRIER

Circus cyaneus

ENDANGERED



Habitat: Open marshland and meadows.

Weight: Males, 12.75-13.75 ounces; females, 13 ounces-1 pound, 4 ounces.

Length: 17.5-24 inches.

Wingspan: 40-54 inches.

Life Expectancy: Banding results have shown several to be over 16 years of age.

Food: Small mammals (mainly mice), frogs, snakes, crayfish and small birds.

Status: State endangered.

Identification: The slender-bodied northern harrier has a long tail and wings, yellow legs, owl-like facial discs, a conspicuous white rump patch and yellow eyes. Adult males have blue-gray upperparts and white underparts. The females are brown above and buffy below, with brown streaking down the sides of the chest and flanks. Juvenile harriers of both sexes have dark brown backs with rusty overtones and cinnamon underparts, with no streaking.

Range: The northern harrier occurs throughout the United States, Canada and north to Alaska. They are also found in Europe and Asia. The species winters over parts of its nesting range, but more commonly south through Mexico, Central America, northwestern South America and the West Indies.

Reproduction: Northern harriers usually return to the same area to nest. The nest is built on the ground, often near low shrubs. The species is not monogamous; a male may have two mates, but usually only one female is able to successfully produce young because the male typically favors one mate and her nestlings with food. The 4 to 9 (commonly 5) eggs are laid from March through July. The eggs are pale blue when first laid but then turn to dull white. They are usually unmarked, although some may be spotted with brown. Incubation is done by the female. It begins with the second to fourth egg and lasts for 31 to 32 days. The young are brooded by the female, with the male bringing food and passing it to the female in mid-air. Young harriers can fly about 30 to 35 days after hatching. In years when prey is abun-

nant, harriers are more likely to raise young to the fledgling stage. Unless prey is unusually abundant, the birds do not breed until they are 2 years old.

Reason for Decline: The loss and degradation of marshlands, plus past use of the pesticide DDT, have severely reduced the numbers of the northern harrier.

History in Connecticut: There is very little historical documentation of northern harriers in Connecticut. The species was considered common in the 1800s. Little additional information is available about population changes through the early 1900s. There have been a dozen or so pairs observed in the state during the breeding season in recent years, but no nests have been confirmed by the Wildlife Division.

Interesting Facts: The northern harrier has a remarkable sense of hearing. Like owls, it has a curved, sound-reflecting facial ruff which, when combined with characteristic low flight, enables the bird to locate prey by sound.

The species is often called the marsh hawk because it inhabits open marshlands and wet meadows. It got the name "harrier" due to its habit of raiding or harrying its prey.

A female, after receiving prey in flight from the male, will not return directly to the nest but will make several false landings to confuse predators.

Female harriers will repeatedly attack other hawks that soar over the nesting territory; they will even drive away crows and eagles. Humans that approach too close to a nest are often dived at by females protecting their nest.

Protective Legislation: *Federal* - Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-311.

What You Can Do: The recovery of the northern harrier in Connecticut depends on the conservation and protection of large areas of inland and coastal marshes, wet meadows, upland heaths and grasslands through land acquisition or landowner agreements. Supporting measures to protect and enhance wintering habitats in Central and South America is also important.

Since the nesting activities of the northern harrier are often difficult to survey and monitor, any confirmed nests should be reported to the Wildlife Division to help increase our knowledge of the activities of these birds in Connecticut.

CONNECTICUT RANGE

