

Species Sheets: Northern Harrier



photo by Kate Davis ©

Common name: Northern Harrier

Latin Name: *Circus cyaneus*

Field Marks: Length 17-38 inches
Wing span 38-48 inches



A slim medium-sized hawk with long narrow wings and a long tail. Males gray above and white below with black-tipped wings. Females brown above and white with brown streaks below. White rump, or feathers covering the base of the tail. Juveniles resemble adult females, with buffy underparts. Spend a great deal of time on the wing, low to the ground, slowly flapping or gliding with wings held in a dihedral, or little V. Perches on ground and fence posts, rarely in trees.

Male performs spectacular swooping and diving flight to mark territory in spring.

Nest and eggs:

Ground nest of sticks and grasses built mostly by the female. Male transfers food to female in flight. Aerial prey transfer occurs during incubating and early brood rearing. Parents aggressively defend nest site. 3-9 eggs, usually 5.

Habitat:

Open country grasslands, fields, meadows and marshes. Used to be called Marsh Hawk, but harrier is the correct term for this group of birds that lives all around the world. The Northern Harrier lives all across the Northern Hemisphere and is called the Hen Harrier in Europe.

Movement:

All of the northern birds migrate south in the fall, but may be present year-round in much of U.S. Migration as far as southern Mexico in the winter.

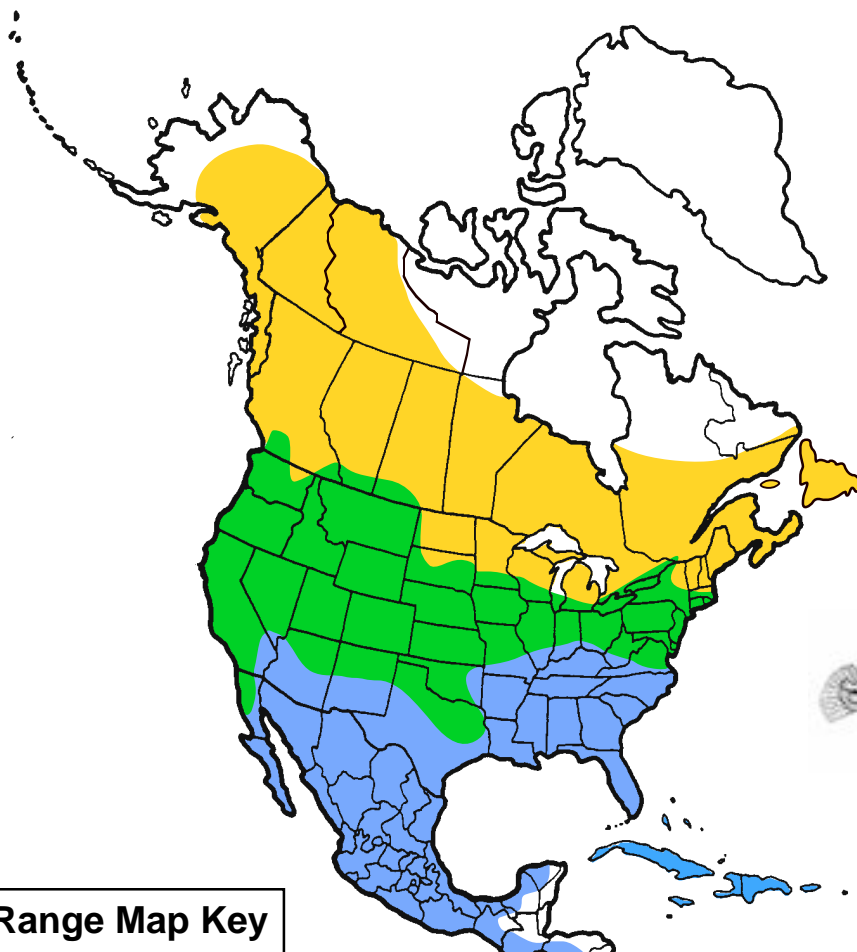
Behavior:

Eats wide range of mammals like mice and voles, small to medium-sized birds, and lizards. Has facial disc like owls and may hunt using hearing as well as sight. In winter, may roost communally, or spend the night in groups several birds to over one hundred.

Interesting Fact:

May practice polygyny, in which males may have more than one mate and tend to several nests at the same time. Perhaps certain males are better providers, or there are more females present than males. The reason is not known.

Range Map: Northern Harrier



Northern Harrier. Copyright © Kate Davis

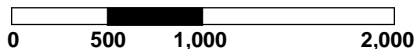


These maps are designed to show the general limits of occurrence. Within those limits, each species will likely be found only in appropriate habitat.

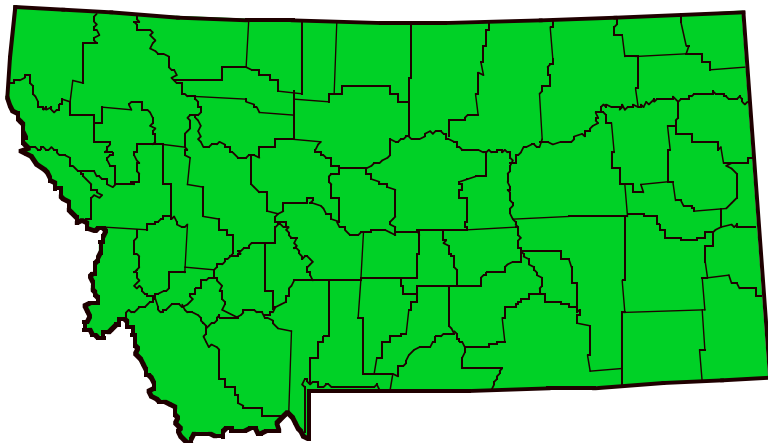
Range Map Key

-  Summer
-  Year-round
-  Winter

scale: 1 inch = 1,000 miles



Raptor Range in Montana



Montana range maps are based on the Montana Bird Distribution data.