

# Hen Harrier (Cromán na gCearc) (*Circus cyaneus*)

## A Precious Jewel in the Crown of Irish Wildlife and Slieve Aughty Natural Heritage

The *Hen Harrier* is one of, if not the most elegant and graceful, spectacular and exciting birds in the world. It is an asset to the *life, biodiversity* and *heritage* of any country in which it is found.

In Ireland, the Hen Harrier is a rare *Bird of Prey*, found on the uplands during the breeding season throughout the spring and summer, and generally on the lowlands during the autumn and winter. One of the most striking things about the bird is that the male and female differ remarkably in size and colour, so much so, that for many years, the two were thought to be separate *species*!

The male is a stunning looking white or silver bird with a bluish tinge, and broad black tips to the wings. The female is a larger bird of a beautiful rich brown plumage with a white rump and brown and white barring or rings on the tail. The white rump on the back of the tail is very important in being sure if it is a Hen Harrier. There are other brown birds of prey in Ireland (e.g. Kestrel and Sparrowhawk) but only the Hen Harrier has the white rump and holds its elegant wings out fully when gliding/flying. Also, Hen Harriers are more likely to be seen flying low over the ground than the other birds of prey. The male is unmistakable, no other bird of prey in Ireland looks like him. It is interesting to learn that males are brown when young. This gives them camouflage in the nest. They begin to turn white when they are 1 year old onwards.



*Female Hen Harrier*

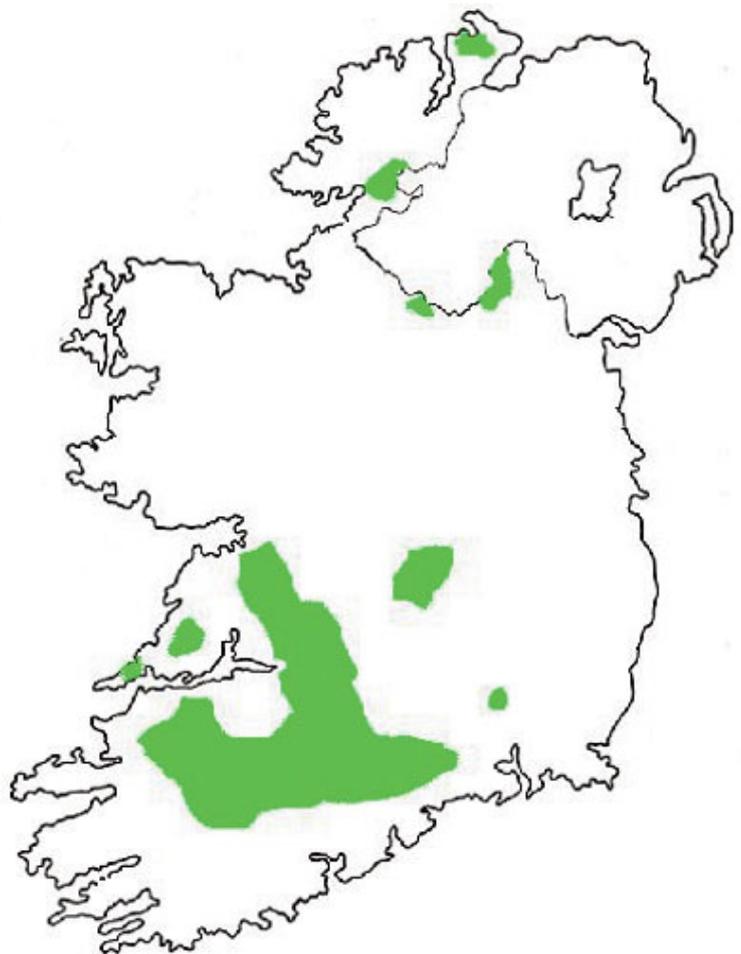


*Male Hen Harrier*

## **Distribution and Habitat**

The Hen Harrier is found mostly in just the South and Mid West of the country, with a few pairs in the midlands and North West. Its breeding distribution has declined over the years. In many areas where it was once common e.g. Wicklow, it is now extinct because of habitat loss such as afforestation.

The reason these areas, including the Slieve Aughties, are so important is because of the special mix of farmland and bogs. This provides the Hen Harrier with the habitat which it needs to live. Forestry is good for the harriers when the trees are small but when the trees grow up, it blocks out the ground and the harrier cannot fly between the trees. Too much forestry will mean that the harrier's habitat is lost for the 30 years when it is tall. We have to be careful to save our farmland and bogs and be careful about how forestry is managed so as not to have too much tall forestry at the one time.

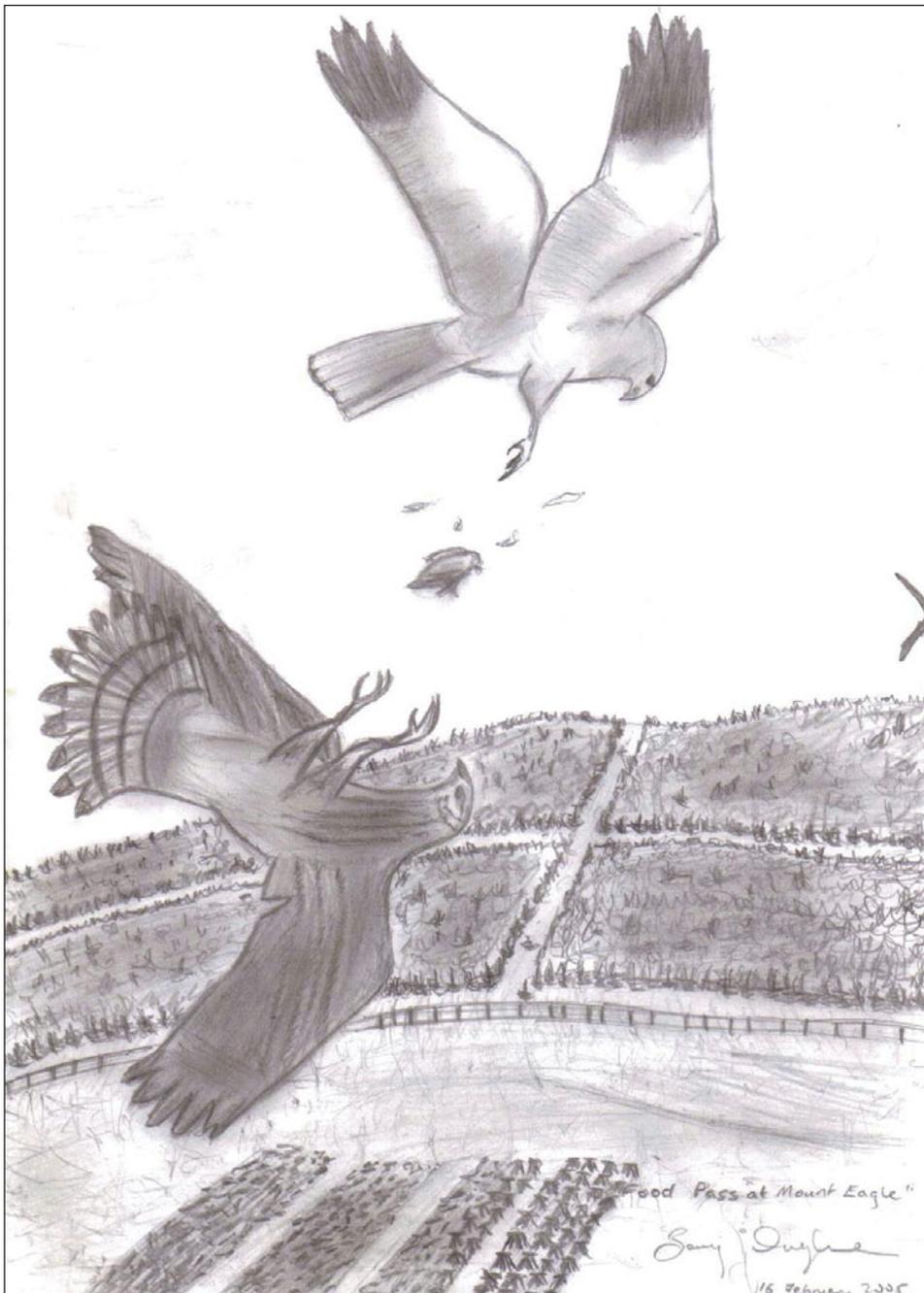


*Distribution of the Hen Harrier in Ireland (O'Donoghue, 2004)*

## Skydancing and aerial re-fuelling!

In Spring (around March and April), the males impress the females by doing a dance in the sky (*skydance*). This is incredible to see and can last over 10 minutes long. It involves the male flying very high into the sky, free falling from the sky, spinning and somersaulting better than any fighter jet could ever do in an air-show! This will show the female how strong and fit and agile the male is. Watching this you would think the male is out of control and about to hit the ground, but just inches from the ground – after dropping 100s of metres, the male again picks himself up to rise high again before dropping again like a roller-coaster! The female may decide herself to take part in this sky dancing!

Another amazing and spectacular trait of the Hen Harrier is the *food pass* from the male to female. The male, carrying prey in his talons will call to the female as he approaches the nest area. The female will rise to meet the male and as she comes near him, will summersault upside down, so as to take the prey from his feet with her own feet. It really is out of this world and no words could do this acrobatic feat justice.



*Food pass from male to female, who has turned upside down to catch the food in the air.*

## Winter Season

Over the winter months, it is possible to witness quite a number of Hen Harriers in the one plot of land, coming together in a *communal roost* every evening. They will typically go for wetland areas, particularly reedbeds and bogs, often along the coast. Such sites offer shelter and protection from the winter weather and their predators. Watching Hen Harriers criss-cross one another on a mild winter's evening with the sun going down in the horizon is something that has to be experienced by anybody interested in nature or life. Though most Hen Harriers move to milder lowland locations to spend the winter, some Hen Harriers still remain around the mountains to look after their patch during the winter, so it is possible to still see Hen Harriers in upland areas of Ireland over the winter, though most have gone to the lowlands.



*Hen Harriers at Winter Roost*

## What you can do to help the Hen Harrier in the Slieve Aughties

The Hen Harrier is an endangered species throughout much of its global range. In Ireland, it has suffered much decline and is particularly endangered due to loss of habitat by afforestation, with the national breeding survey of 2005 confirming just 132 breeding pairs, so the Hen Harrier is *rarer than the Corncrake*. The Slieve Aughties was found to be one of the most important areas in all of Ireland for breeding Hen Harriers, with a

confirmed at least 24 pairs of these magnificent birds. Custodians of the countryside have a most important part to play in continuing to support this beautiful piece of Ireland and the Aughty's natural heritage, which has been there throughout the ages, in the same way that the people of the area would look after our heritage and legacy of traditional music, dancing, folklore or football.

If anyone sees Hen Harriers they are encouraged to contact local Slieve Aughties NPWS Conservation Rangers Sinéad Biggane (sinead.biggane@environ.ie) or Jacinta Murphy (jacinta.murphy@environ.ie), or Barry O'Donoghue (harriers@environ.ie), who are all working tirelessly to protect Hen Harriers. National research includes following Hen Harriers all over the country, all year round. Some birds have been tagged so that they can be recognised when seen again. For example, young birds tagged in the Slieve Aughties have been seen as far away as County Louth over winter, and to return again to their home during the summer, while chicks tagged in nearby West Clare have travelled to Derry, Donegal and Antrim!

Please send any sightings of Hen Harriers to the above addresses or see [www.npws.ie](http://www.npws.ie) for further information. Your sightings (of all harriers, tagged and untagged) will help monitor the population to see if it is *increasing or decreasing*. To date, there have been relatively few sightings of harriers in the Aughties over winter, though they do occur here. We need to know what the Hen Harriers of the Slieve Aughties do for the other 8 months of the year when they are not enveloped in their breeding season. ***So keep a look out when out and about!***

*Aughties J, a Young Female from the Slieve Aughties pictured in Co. Louth. (Photo Noel Marry)*



**With your help, we can find out so much about Hen Harriers which we have never known before and this will give us better information on how to protect the Hen Harrier to make sure it is a sight on the Aughties upland landscape for generations to come!**

*Barry O'Donoghue (harriers@environ.ie)*