

Northern Harrier (NH)

I HAVE SEEN THIS HAWK ONLY ONCE in Eldorado, although I know other bird watchers have also seen the NH here. I was driving west on Avenida Eldorado near the west end of Eldorado when the female was coursing low about 10 feet above the grass, traveling parallel with me. So identification was easy, and I enjoyed the long look I had of the hunting bird. NHs fly low to the ground, usually over grasslands or marshes, surprising small birds and mammals below them. They are on the large side of hawks, 18 inches long with a wingspan of 43 inches. They exhibit an extreme case of sexual dimorphism among hawks: the adult female is quite dark, with stripes on the under wing. The adult male is almost white, with black wing tips. The bird is slender and has an owl-like facial disk. This shape allows them to locate some prey using their hearing. The NH is the only Harrier in the United States. They occur here in winter or during migration (my sighting was in late fall). NHs migrate to Columbia, Venezuela, and Barbados.

Breeding areas are in the northern U.S. and Canada. Courting males perform dives, barrel rolls, and multiple U-shaped loops. A flimsy nest of sticks lined with grasses is placed on elevated ground or in thick vegetation. There is one brood per year, with four to six eggs hatching in 32 days and fledging in 30 to 35 days. When prey is abundant (especially voles),

the males may have multiple mates. The female feeds and broods the young. The male provides the bulk of the food for mate(s) and young. Outside the breeding season, NHs can sometimes be found roosting communally on the ground. A prior name for the Northern Harrier is Marsh Hawk.

FIELD CHECKLISTS

Printed checklists are available at most National Parks and Monuments. Often you must ask for them. I have lists from the Randall Davey Audubon Center, Las Vegas National Wildlife Refuge, Pecos National Monument, Maxwell Wildlife Reserve, and Bosque del Apache, as well as a comprehensive list for the State of New Mexico. These can be very useful when you think you have seen a bird that MIGHT be in this area. Approximately 523 species (the number changes!) have been sighted in New Mexico. A good online site is www.nmbirds.org.

—Pam Henline



Above: Juvenile, male northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*). Notice the distinct facial disk. Photo: © Tanya Dewey. **Below:** Northern harrier, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. Photo: © Phil Myers. From Animal Diversity Web, University of Michigan Museum of Zoology