Getting to know the gray ghosts

A male northern harrier hunting.

NORTHERN HARRIERS RULE THE DAY FLYING LOW AND HUNTING OVER FIELDS AND MARSH.

Story and photos by Don Blegen

If you should see a large bird skimming over fields or marshy areas while you are hunting, hiking or driving through open country, and the bird is zigging and zagging about 10 feet above the ground, you are probably watching a northern harrier.

If it has a prominent white patch at the base of its tail, it is certainly a harrier, although many old timers would call it a marsh hawk. The bird is likely hunting for voles, mice and other rodents, and it is quite remarkable for its hunting tactics.

The name "harrier" refers to its back-and-forth hunting style over open country. "Harrier" also refers to certain hounds in medieval Europe that coursed back-and-forth in front of the hunters of hares. There are several species of harriers around the world, in Europe, Asia and even Africa. But the northern harrier is the only harrier that has circumpolar distribution that includes North America.

The harrier is a kind of hawk, but there are hawks — and there are hawks. Most people are familiar with soaring hawks like red-tailed and red-shouldered, often misnamed "chicken hawks." Their diets consist largely of rodents, snakes and other small prey that they spot while soaring high above the ground. Yet these hawks are most often blamed when a poultry owner loses chickens.

But the real chicken killers are the accipiters (goshawks, sharp-shinned hawks and especially Cooper's hawks). They are ambush hunters and come in low out of nowhere and grab a bird or chicken by surprise — usually without anyone ever seeing it happen. Meanwhile the soaring hawk up above tends to get the blame and sometimes even some "12-gauge therapy."

Falcons, like duck hawks (peregrine falcons), pigeon hawks (merlins) and prairie falcons are relatively rare. They spot their prey from high up, too, but their prey are mostly birds such as waterfowl and pigeons. They spot their prey and dive on them at speeds that may exceed 100 mph. They hit their prey in flight with the shock of a shotgun blast, killing it on contact, and often catching the dead bird before it hits the ground.

But a marsh hawk, or harrier, has a much different hunting style. It doesn't soar. It doesn't ambush. It doesn't dive from great heights. It's out there in plain sight. It never flies very fast, and it is rarely ever more than a few feet off the ground. Its flight is random. There is no discernible pattern, except that it covers a lot of territory.

And a harrier has its secrets. It has the excellent eyesight of all hawks and eagles, but its eyes are also sensitive to ultraviolet light, which works to its advantage. Rodents mark their trails with urine and rodent urine reflects ultraviolet light. This evidence gives a harrier an idea where the rodent trails might lead to a mouse or vole.

The harrier also has the super sensi-

tive hearing of its much more distantly related predators, the owls. Owls and harriers both possess facial discs, feather constructions that efficiently focus sounds to ears supremely tuned to the high-pitched squeals and rustlings of rodents below.

Owls have excellent night vision, and can even hunt solely by sound if they have to. While owls are adapted primarily for poor light, harriers rule the day, having excellent daytime eyesight, plus hearing beyond our comprehension.

The harrier's hunting flight is low and often changes direction. Flap, flap, glide. Veer left. Flap, flap, glide and then a switch to the right. Flap, flap, glide. As they sweep back and forth across the fields, they are focused on both sight and sound, waiting for a visual or aural clue of a rodent's presence below. If they get that clue, they may hover in one spot momentarily and then dive straight down. Or a gliding bird may suddenly do a kind of sideways swoop down into the weeds. This maneuver is hard to describe, but once seen impresses one with its quickness and efficiency. It takes a very quick mouse to avoid the talons that seek to squeeze out its life, and the chances are good that the mouse just dived upon was not quick enough, and ends up as harrier lunch.

Harriers exhibit sexual dimorphism: females are bigger than males, and are brown and white. Males are smaller and vary in color from dark gray and white to light gray and white, with black wingtips. The males have been called "gray ghosts" because of their striking coloration.

One male may attend to two, three or four females in separate nests. The nests are on the ground, not in trees or on cliffs like most raptors. Each nest will have three to five eggs that need 28 to 34 days of incubation. If food is abundant and parents are good hunters, the young hawks fledge in about a month. The harrier diet is mostly small rodents like mice and voles, but also includes frogs, small birds, snakes and lizards.

Harriers of warmer climates may be permanent residents. Most harriers, however, migrate. And they migrate singly, not in flocks. It is in the migrating seasons of spring or fall that you have the best chance of seeing a harrier in its low, zigzagging flight in open country: watch for a large gray or brown bird with a white patch at the base of its tail.

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A female northern harrier. The females are larger than the males and colored brown and white.