



giving
nature
a home

Name:

Hen harrier

History

Hen harriers used to live all over the UK but people killed them and so by 1900, the only ones left were on islands off the coast of Scotland.

A new law in 1954 made killing hen harriers illegal, but sadly people still break the law. This includes some gamekeepers who kill hen harriers to stop them eating red grouse, which some people like to shoot for sport. As a result, hen harriers are much rarer than they should be – especially in England.

What is special about this bird?

Male and female hen harriers look very different. The female hen harrier is brown, which gives her camouflage when she is nesting. The grey male is much brighter and some people used to think the male and female were two different species.

General info

Scientific name: *Circus cyaneus*

Size: Around 48cm long, with a wingspan up to 1.1m (the average armspan of a 9-year-old child is 1.3m).

Weight: On average, males weigh 350g and females weigh 500g.

Where they live: Hen harriers live in open areas with low plants, such as heather. Most live on moorland in Scotland, but some are also found in northern England, Wales and Ireland.

How long they live: On average they live for seven years. The oldest recorded wild bird lived for 15 years, nine months and two days.

What they eat: Mostly small birds, mice and voles and, when smaller mammals are not available, young rabbits and hares.

Conservation status: Hen harriers are the UK's most threatened birds of prey because they are illegally killed over much of their potential breeding range in the uplands. There are less than 600 pairs in the UK, but there is enough habitat for many more than this. Therefore, hen harriers are on our Red List, as we are very concerned about them.

Fascinating fact

In spring, male and female hen harriers exchange food in mid-air, as part of a spectacular display known as "sky-dancing".

