

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)

Pennsylvania Candidate at Risk Bird Species

State Rank: S3B; S4N (vulnerable, breeding; apparently secure, non-breeding) **Global Rank: G5** (secure)

Identification

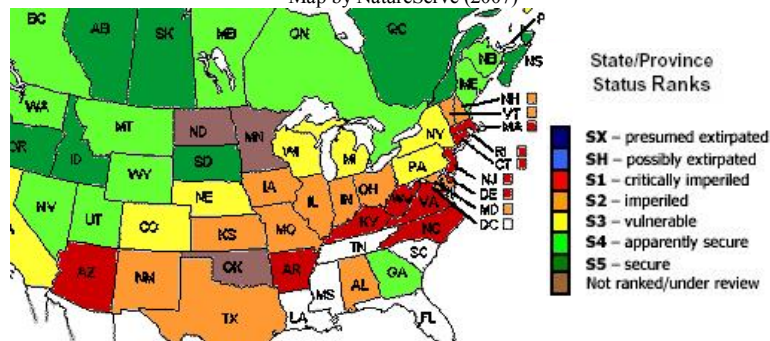
Northern Harriers are medium-sized, long-winged, long-tailed hawks with rounded wings that can appear pointed while gliding. This species is typically 16.5 inches long with a wingspan of 42 inches, with the females averaging a bit larger. Field marks include a white rump, short, dark, hooked beak, and flat face with an owl-like facial disk. This species has the behavior of often flying low over marshes and fields on wings held in a strong dihedral. The male is pale gray above and even paler on the underside with a dark gray head, with dark tips on the flight feathers, and narrow dark bars on the tail. The female is dark brown above, with buff underparts with dark streaks on the breast, belly, and under wing coverts, dark barring on the tail, and dark patch on inner wing created by dark secondaries and secondary coverts.



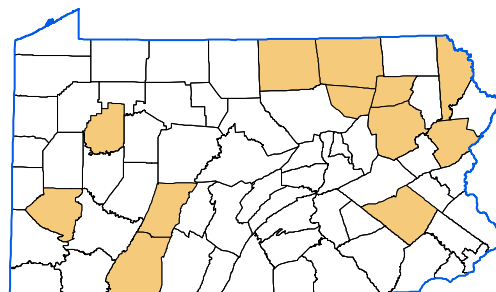
photo source: Ron Austing

North American State/Province Conservation Status

Map by NatureServe (2007)



Pennsylvania Distribution by County



Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program data 2007

Range

This species breeds widely but is locally distributed in North America, from N. Alaska and Canada, south to n. Baja Peninsula, Mexico, and east to s. Nevada, s. Utah, n. Texas, s. Kansas, central Iowa, central Wisconsin, s. Michigan, n. Ohio, s. Pennsylvania, se Virginia and northeast North Carolina. It is an absent breeder in parts of New England and mountain and arid regions of the west.

Habitat

Northern Harriers use open wetlands, including marshy meadows, wet lightly grazed pastures, old fields, freshwater and brackish marshes, also dry uplands, including upland prairies, mesic grasslands, drained marshlands, croplands, cold desert shrub-steppe, and riparian woodlands. In Pennsylvania, this species also uses reclaimed strip mines for nesting in some areas.

Conservation Status

Breeding Northern Harriers declined slowly from 1966 to 1987 throughout North America, including Pennsylvania, where there is little data to report. Loss of wetlands and suitable field habitat are the primary causes of the widespread decline. Other reasons for decline may include suburban development, reforestation, conversion of hay crops to row crops, and intensive farming. This species is listed as an endangered species in Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Missouri, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Rhode Island and it is listed as threatened in several other states. The protection of large, open wetlands and open fields in Pennsylvania will secure the future for the Northern Harrier in Pennsylvania.

References

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- Brauning, D.W. (ed.). 1992. Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA. 484 pp.
- Gough, G. A., Sauer, J.R., Iliff, M. *Patuxent Bird Identification Infocenter*. 1998. Version 97.1. Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD. <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/Infocenter/infocenter.html>
- NatureServe. 2007. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 6.2. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>. (Accessed: September 4, 2007).



Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program