

Northern Harrier

Migratory Species

Busard St-Martin
Circus cyaneus

Wingspan: 100 cm to 120 cm



The Northern Harrier is often observed gliding at low altitude above fields or swampland. Its facial feathers are placed in the form of a mask, similar to those of owls. A white spot on the rump is characteristic and allows for easy identification even while the bird is in flight. The Northern Harrier is the only diurnal bird of prey in Quebec to hunt both by sound and sight.



The female is larger than the male. She also has a brown back and both her stomach and chest are striped with brown. The male has a pale grey back and both his stomach and chest are white.



The Northern Harrier is typically found in open humid areas, such as fields, swamps and prairies.



The bird's diet is primarily composed of voles, but it also feeds on other rodents, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and insects. The harrier spends about 40% of its flight time in search of prey.



The Northern Harrier record for longevity is set at 16 years 5 months.



The nest, made of twigs, grass, and aquatic plants, is built right on the ground. The female lays 4 to 6 eggs.



The young leave the nest at 1 to 3 weeks of age to hide in vegetation at a distance. The males will make their first flight attempt at 31 to 34 days of age. Females make their first flight attempt at 35 to 38 days. The young remain dependant upon their parents the first 8 weeks of life.



In the early 1950s, the North American population of Northern Harriers decreased drastically, probably due to industrial use of DDT and other pesticides in agricultural regions et due to habitat loss resulting from the filling in of swamps. The population of southern Quebec stabilized by the mid-70s. It is, however, difficult to count the Northern Harrier population, as it fluctuates greatly in response to its primary prey, the lemming.



The male Northern Harrier is polygamous, meaning he breeds with and cares for several females during a single breeding season. The male can do this for up to 5 females and their young at the same time.