



◀ Telling apart male, female and juvenile harriers can be challenging. Left: female/juvenile type Marsh Harrier, top right: male Marsh Harrier, middle right: male Hen Harrier, bottom right: female/juvenile type Hen Harrier.

## Winter harriers

Immature and female Marsh Harriers are uniformly dark with a pale golden cap and chin, whereas immature and female Hen Harriers are mottled brown with an obvious, broad, white rump. In brown birds the rump is always a starting place; look for white on Hen Harriers. On closer views, the barred tail of female and immature Hen Harriers can be visible and as the ages are often not otherwise separable in the field these are often referred to as 'ringtail' Hen Harriers. Adult male Marsh Harrier show a brown mantle and forewing whereas Hen Harrier are uniform grey above with black wing-tips.



## FIELD CRAFT

# How to identify winter raptors

In a past life Sarah Harris worked on the Isle of Skye, monitoring White-tailed Eagles through the breeding season. So she was surprised when visiting the island last year, in winter, at how 'showy' both Golden and White-tailed Eagles are at this time of year. Not tending to an egg or chick, they were often seen to be 'enjoying' the air currents and circling over their domain. In this feature, she focuses on how to ID soaring eagles and another winter-birding highlight: harrier roosts.

### EAGLES

Eagles are big – really big. Golden Eagles having a wingspan about 70% larger than that of a Buzzard, whereas White-tailed Eagles are famously described as a 'flying barn door'. Both inhabiting north and west Scotland, they are classic confusion species. It's nice to think the clue is in the name, but Golden Eagles have white in their tail base until they are around five years old and White-tailed Eagles have a buff, occasionally hinting gold head and neck as adults. On sighting a flying eagle, silhouette is often the place to start.

Both White-tailed and Golden Eagles can cruise by almost anywhere in their key homeranges; it is a case of keeping an eye on the sky! Golden Eagles can often be picked up quartering hillsides on the side the wind is blowing onto (rather than the sheltered side), using the updraft of wind to their advantage

as they drift back and forth not far from the ground at all, in search of prey.

It is always worth scanning skerries out in bays and headlands along the coast for White-tailed Eagles, as these impressive birds do enjoy sitting about (although if on a telegraph pole, it's much more likely a Buzzard!).

### HARRIER ROOSTS

Harrier roosts can be a cold experience, but they are well worth it. Wrap up warm and take a flask! There is the chance to see a variety of species – not just harriers – including Short-eared and Barn Owls, Merlins, Peregrines and, in Norfolk, Cranes. The majority of harrier roosts are in reedbeds, saltmarsh or moorland bogs. A couple of the best-known sites are shown in the map.

The first thing to do is make sure you are comfortable; warm and with a good vantage point. Set up an hour or so before dusk and wait. Harrier numbers will start to build as the evening approaches and they quarter back and forth before dropping into cover to roost.

The most likely harriers to be seen at a roost will be Marsh or Hen Harrier, depending on the site. At a winter roost, Montagu's Harrier can be discounted as they will be sunning themselves in Africa for the winter, but it may be worth acquainting yourself with Pallid Harrier features, as they occasionally have been found in roosts in recent years. Unlike the eagles, which will most likely be seen against a bright

## Identifying silhouettes

Eagles and buzzards are often seen flying overhead. Silhouettes are key to identification.



### GOLDEN EAGLE

- ▶ Wings are narrower at the base, have an S-trailing edge and are held forward
  - ▶ Long, square-shaped tail
  - ▶ Powerful flight, wings
  - ▶ Head & neck protrude
- Head on:** Wings held in a shallow 'V', occasionally arched or flatter

### WHITE-TAILED EAGLE

- ▶ Broad, rectangular wings
  - ▶ Fairly short, wedge-shaped tail
  - ▶ Heavy bill and long, thick neck
  - ▶ Lazy, lolling flight
- Head on:** Wings flat most of the time; arms raised, hand lowered, primaries flicking up at the end

## Where to find them

Good sites to see the winter raptors.

- 1 **Skye:** White-tailed Eagles, Golden Eagles, Buzzards
- 2 **Mull:** White-tailed Eagles, Golden Eagles, Buzzards
- 3 **Stubb Mill (Norfolk Wildlife Trust):** Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier, Crane, Barn Owl
- 4 **Blacktoft Sands (RSPB):** Marsh Harrier, Hen Harrier, Merlin
- 5 **Ballaugh Curragh:** Hen Harrier



sky, this event will more likely involve identifying the species by plumage characteristics rather than silhouette as the birds fly low below the skyline.

The two main harriers at winter roosts are very different in shape, with Marsh being a heavier bird and Hen are slighter, although neither could be described as 'bulky'. Harriers on the whole are described as long-tailed and long-winged and all hold their wings in a 'V' in flight.

### BUZZARD CONFUSION

As well as possible confusion with eagles when scale is misjudged in the field, Buzzard is a potential confusion species at harrier roosts too. Buzzards are widespread in the UK now and increasing in most areas. They are stocky, with shorter tails, a compressed neck and wide head and more rounded wings tips than their lankier cousins, the

harriers. Plumage colourations vary a lot with Buzzards, but even with darker morphs, the barring on the underside of the wings and tail, and paler belly than chest, should all be visible to enable comparison to an all-dark immature or adult female Marsh Harrier from below.

Immature or female Hen Harrier can be fairly easily separated on shape, with longer, thinner wings and a longer tail than a Buzzard. In addition to shape, the 'ringtail' harriers will have a distinct, broad, white rump – Buzzards, at most, may have a diffuse pale base to their tail feathers and upper tail coverts.

### 'GENNING UP'

There is no quick cheat to raptor identification, but it helps to know the situation in which you will be seeing the birds, i.e. overhead silhouettes of eagles, or harriers against a dark backdrop allowing plumage characteristics to be seen and used in identification. It helps studying the differences using field guides before venturing out in the field. Of course, nothing beats being out in the field gaining practical experience! ■

### RAPTOR PERSECUTION

As with all birds, large numbers of raptors die naturally each year but undeniably, some are illegally killed. If you are concerned about any dead bird of prey you find, particularly if it's lying next to another dead animal or bird or obviously looks shot, then please call the Police on 101 and RSPB Investigations on 01767 680551 or email [crime@rspb.org.uk](mailto:crime@rspb.org.uk). If possible take photographs, but don't touch any dead birds.

### Get involved

Sarah's recommended field guide: *The Raptors of Europe and the Middle East: A Handbook to Field Identification*

BTO field guide videos can be found at [www.bto.org/eagle-id](http://www.bto.org/eagle-id)

FEMALE MARSH HARRIER: ABDULLAH ALSHATTI, MALE MARSH HARRIER: TONY COOMBS, MALE HEN HARRIER: JOHN DUNN, FEMALE HEN HARRIER: GRAHAM CATLEY, SILHOUETTES: FAYE VOGELY