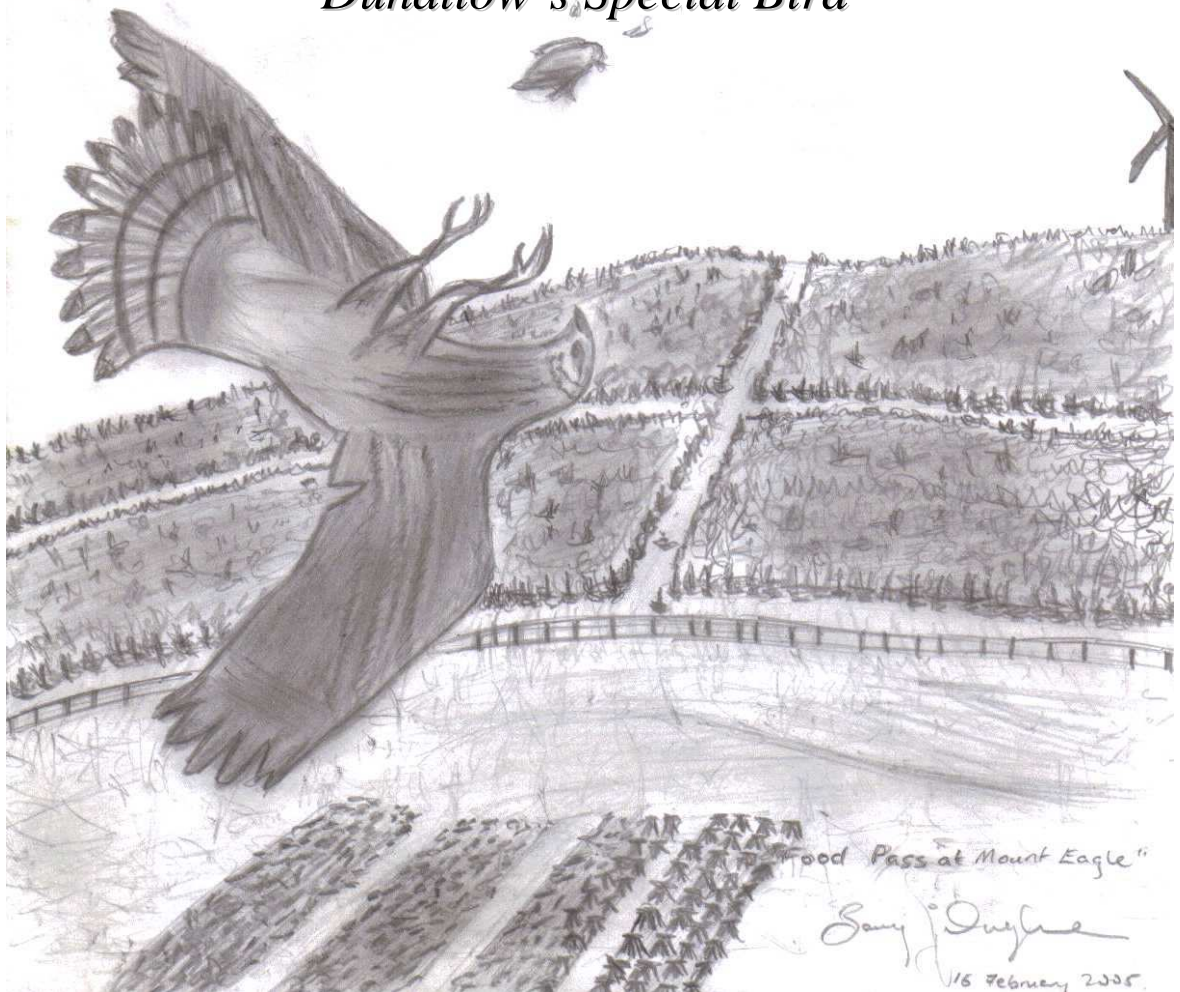


The Hen Harrier



Duhallow's Special Bird



Barry O'Donoghue April 2011

Hen Harrier (Cromán na gCearc) (*Circus cyaneus*)

Introduction

The *Hen Harrier* is one of, if not the most elegant and graceful, spectacular and exciting birds in the world. It is an asset to the *life, biodiversity* and *heritage* of any country in which it is found.

In Ireland, the Hen Harrier is a rare *Bird of Prey*, found mainly on the uplands during the breeding season throughout the spring and summer, and mainly on the lowlands during the autumn and winter. One of the most striking things about the bird is that the male and female differ remarkably in size and colour, so much so, that for many years, the two were thought to be separate *species*! As with most birds of prey (e.g. Peregrine Falcon, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel), the female is larger than the male. Typically the wingspan of adult males varies between 97 and 109 cm (a bit bigger than a crow). The wingspan of adult females varies between 111 and 122 cm. The male is a stunning looking white or silver bird with a bluish tinge, and broad black tips to the wings. The female is a larger bird of a beautiful rich brown plumage with a white rump and brown and white barring or rings on the tail. The white rump on the back of the tail is very important in being sure if it is a Hen Harrier. There are other brown birds of prey in Duhallow (e.g. Kestrel and Sparrowhawk) but only the Hen Harrier has the white rump and holds its wings out fully when gliding/flying. Also, Hen Harriers are more likely to be seen gliding/flying low over the ground than the other birds of prey. The male is unmistakable, no other bird of prey in Ireland looks like him. It is interesting to learn that males are brown when young. This gives them camouflage in the nest. They begin to turn white when they are 1 year old onwards.



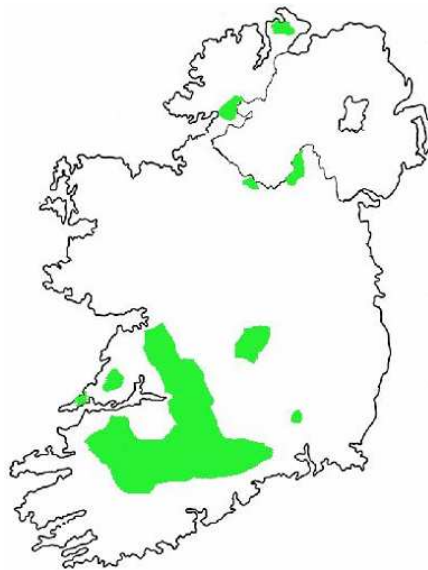
Male Hen Harrier in Kerry carrying food (Photo Mike Brown).



Female Hen Harrier at roost. (Photo Barry O'Donoghue)

Distribution and Habitat

The Hen Harrier is confined mostly to the South and Mid West of the country, with a few pairs in the midlands and North West and in other outlying locations. Its *distribution* has declined seriously over the years. In many areas where it was once common e.g. Wicklow, it is now extinct because of habitat loss. Duhallow is one of the most important areas in Ireland and indeed Europe for the Hen Harrier, and the region holds two Special Protection Areas for the species.



Distribution of the Hen Harrier in Ireland (O'Donoghue, 2004)

Hen Harriers have been here for thousands of years, but at one stage around the 1960s there were very few if any because they were all shot. This was at a time when people did not care as much about wildlife, and birds of prey in particular were shot and poisoned. Today however the Hen Harrier is hanging on but is threatened by habitat loss. It would be a shame to lose this bird again in our area, as future generations would not know the bird we were talking about if we mentioned the magnificent white hawk that used fly around our hills.

The habitat the Hen Harrier requires is special mix of farmland, scrub and bogs. This provides the Hen Harrier with the *habitat* which it needs to live. Forestry is useful when the trees are small but when the trees grow up, it blocks out the ground and the habitat is lost. In addition, forestry harbours predators. We have to be careful to save our traditional farmland and bogs, which upland wildlife has become accustomed to. Hen Harrier, Merlin, Kestrel, Red Grouse, Golden Plover, Cuckoo, Snipe, Curlew, Greenland White-fronted Geese and various other species have been lost throughout Duhallow and Ireland as a result of forestry. If the habitat is lost, there is no bringing back these species, particularly the Hen Harrier, which is an *indicator species*, indicating the health of the upland ecosystem. Farmers in Hen Harrier Special Protection Areas are now getting paid to farm in a way which will help the Hen Harrier.

Breeding Season



Male Hen Harrier 'Skydancing' (Watson, 1977)

In Spring (around March and April), the males impress the females with a courtship display in the sky (the *sky dance*). This is incredible to see and can last for some time. It involves the male flying very high into the sky, free falling from the sky, spinning and somersaulting better than any fighter jet could ever do in an air-show! This will show the female how strong and fit and agile the male is. Watching this you would think the male is out of control and about to hit the ground, but just inches from the ground – after dropping from a great height, the male again picks himself up to rise high again before dropping again like a roller-coaster! Males commonly have ‘dance-offs’, in vying for the female’s attention. The female may decide herself to take part in this sky dancing!

When the pair forms, they chose their location very carefully. The Hen Harriers in Ireland will typically nest in heather bogs, young forestry, scrub and mountain glens. The female lays her eggs in the soft warm nest which she and the male have carefully built on the ground made of grass, twigs and heather. The harriers chose a secret location where it is hard for predators and humans to find the nest. Hen Harriers should never be disturbed from their nests and this is against the law.



Nest in Kerry (Photo Barry O’Donoghue)

When the eggs hatch out after about a month of incubation, the mother has to protect the young (typically 1-4 chicks) from the weather (e.g. sun, rain, cold) as well as potential predators which include the fox, mink and crows. As the mother cannot go too far from the nest, the male does the hunting. Being birds of prey, they will capture mice, rats, shrews and Bank Voles, a small mammal which is particularly devastating to young coniferous forestry plantations in this part of Ireland. They can also take small birds, such as Skylarks and Meadow Pipits which co-exist on their upland/boggy environments. They will only take as many as they need to feed themselves and the smaller birds will replenish their numbers again (otherwise the harrier would have no food!). One can rest assured that despite the name, Hen Harriers will not take hens or any other poultry. The Hen Harrier exists in the most remote parts of the countryside and will shy away from human contact. Hen Harriers have very keen senses of sight and hearing.

Another amazing and spectacular trait of the Hen Harrier is the *food pass*. The male, carrying prey in his talons will call to the female as he approaches the nest area. The female will rise to meet the male and as she comes near him, will somersault upside down, and the food is passed from his talons to hers, mid-air! It really is out of this world and no words could do this unique acrobatic feat justice.



Food pass from male to female, who has turned upside down to catch the food in the air.



A Young Hen Harrier Chick in West Clare nest (Photo Barry O'Donoghue).

When the chicks get big enough, they are able to fly up to the parents themselves and get the food in the air! It is a beautiful sight to see a little Hen Harrier chick calling spiritedly when it sees or hears its mother or father coming back with food and flying up to meet the parent and attempt its own food pass! The young will remain around the nest area for just a few weeks after *fledging*, during which time they will practise flying and hunting, before having to fend for themselves for the rest of their lives.

Winter Season



Hen Harriers at Winter Roost

The young will follow the adult birds to milder lowland resorts for the winter. While it may be somewhat difficult to find the birds scattered throughout the mountains during the breeding season, over the winter months, it is possible to witness quite a number of Hen Harriers in the one plot of land, coming together in a *communal roost* every evening. They will typically go for wetland areas, particularly reedbeds and bogs, often along the coast. Such sites (used almost solely as a sleeping place) offer shelter and protection from the winter weather and their predators. Watching Hen Harriers criss-cross one another on a mild winter's evening with the sun going down in the horizon is something that has to be experienced by anybody interested in nature or life. Some Hen Harriers still remain around the mountains to look after their patch during the winter, so it is possible to still see Hen Harriers in upland areas over the winter, though most have gone to the lowlands.

What we can do to help the Hen Harrier

The Hen Harrier is an endangered species throughout much of its global range. In Ireland, it has suffered much decline and is particularly endangered due to loss of habitat, with the national breeding survey of 2005 confirming just 132 breeding pairs, so the Hen Harrier is *rarer than the Corncrake*. Between 2005 and 2010, numbers of Hen Harriers in Duhallow further declined drastically. Under the European Union Birds Directive, to preserve what is left of the species, Ireland is obliged to implement Special Protection Areas for the Hen Harrier and apply appropriate land management directions and other measures within these areas. These measures mainly concentrate on preserving the traditional or present methods of farming and land use. Custodians of the countryside have a most important part to play in continuing to support this beautiful piece of Ireland's natural heritage, which has been there throughout the ages, in the same way that the people of Ireland would look after our heritage and legacy of traditional music, dancing, folklore, hurling or football.

The Hen Harrier is indeed Duhallow's own special bird and if we don't look after the harriers and their landscape, they may soon be consigned to history in Ireland and cannot be re-introduced.

Anybody with sightings of Hen Harriers is encouraged to contact Dr. Barry O'Donoghue of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and IRD Duhallow on 087-9110715 or by email to harriers@environ.ie.