

GEHR Watershed Minute #45

Northern Harrier: (240 words)

The Northern Harrier or Marsh Hawk is a medium size hawk that is a low flying hunter over the open coastal marshes of the Great Egg Harbor Estuary. In typical marsh habitat, the harrier is easily recognized by the very low, coursing flight, white rump, and wings held at an angle.

This hawk eats small rodents and other small mammals, birds, reptiles, insects, and carrion. Unlike most hawks, Harriers have an owl-like facial disk to help with directional hearing and soft feathers for a quieter flight. And the female bird is quite a bit larger than the male.

Northern harriers usually return to the same area to nest. They nest on the ground in well-concealed locations, often near low shrubs or in tall clumps of vegetation. Nesting locations are usually in abandoned fields, wet meadows, and coastal and inland marshes.

Northern Harrier populations declined significantly in the 20th century from hunting, DDT pesticide use, and habitat loss. Consequently this hawk is currently listed as an endangered species here in New Jersey.

Great Egg Harbor River Council sponsored winter bird counts for the past 5 years have averaged 30 Harriers per survey day with 47 Harriers counted on 2 days in 2 different years. The Great Egg Harbor Estuary received national recognition in 1992 when it was designated into the Wild and Scenic River System by Congress for its resting, feeding and breeding areas for birds, which includes the Northern Harrier.