

NOTES

FIRST RECORD OF A MELANISTIC NORTHERN HARRIER IN NORTH AMERICA

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On 16 January 1991, Prairie spotted a melanistic adult male Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) at the intersection of Road 70 and Road Z, between Butte Creek and the Sacramento River, about 6 miles northwest of Gray Lodge Waterfowl

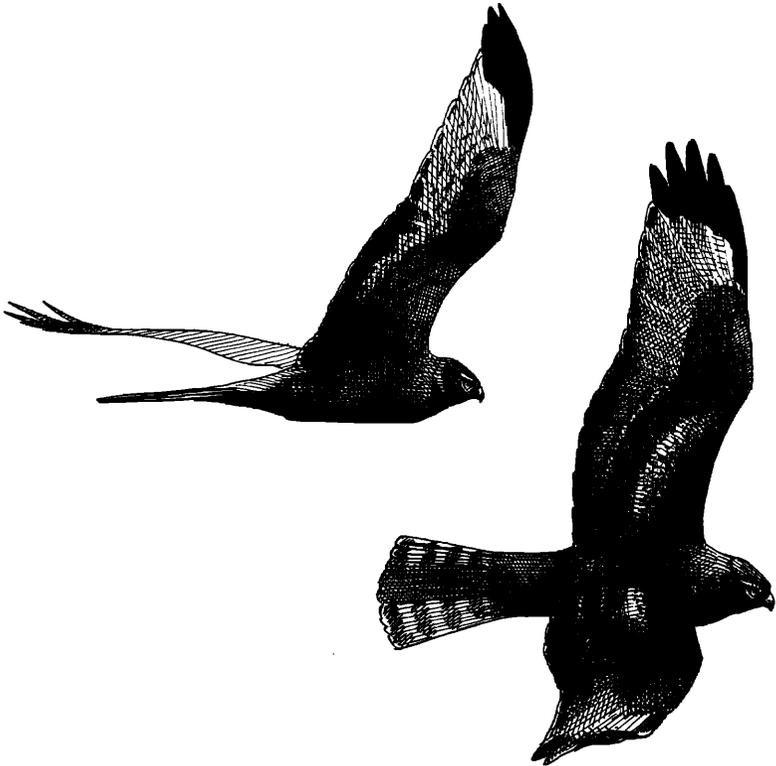


Figure 1. Melanistic Northern Harrier seen near Gray Lodge, Glenn County, California, on 16 January 1991.

Sketch by David A. Sibley

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Management Area, Glenn County, California. The authors, together with Eli Holst, Emilie Strauss, Peter Watkins, and Janet Wessel, watched the bird for 20 minutes at ranges down to 50 m in good light. At least six other harriers were hunting over the same area but we saw no interactions between them and the dark bird. The following description is taken from the field notes of Howell, Webb, and Sibley. Figure 1 illustrates the appearance of the bird; particularly striking was the absence of the white band across the upper tail-coverts.

The size, shape, and behavior of the dark bird were all much like those of nearby male Northern Harriers. The head, body (including upper tail-coverts), and wing-coverts were uniform dark sooty charcoal gray, at times showing a faint brown tinge in bright light. The paler tips of the median and greater upper secondary-coverts formed two faint narrow wingbars. The irides were yellow, the cere was yellowish, and the legs and feet were orange-yellow.

The upperside of the remiges was smoky gray, paler than the wing-coverts, and marked by black tips on the outer primaries and a dark trailing edge on the secondaries. Overall, the upperwings displayed a muted tricolored pattern suggesting a male Marsh Harrier (*C. aeruginosus*), a species with which Howell is familiar from the western Palearctic. The upperside of the tail was smoky gray, similar in shade to the remiges or perhaps slightly darker, with three or four narrow darker bars and a broader dark subterminal (or terminal?) band. The undersides of the remiges and tail were colored and patterned like the upperside but paler gray, with a paler, at times silvery looking, panel inside the black wingtips. Thus the flight feathers showed the basic pattern of a typical male Northern Harrier, though the contrast was somewhat diffused by the overall dark pigmentation.

Size and structure support the bird's identification as a male Northern Harrier (rather than one of the potentially similar Old World harriers), as does the pattern of the flight feathers, which also indicates an adult male.

Apparently there are no previous reports of melanistic Northern Harriers in the New World (Palmer 1988), although at least one case has been reported from the Old World (Watson 1977). Although this bird differed strikingly in color from typical Northern Harriers, its distinctive shape and behavior enabled us to identify it immediately as a harrier; in fact, at a distance it could have been simply passed over.

The dark harrier was still present on 18 February 1991 when, with directions supplied by Prairie, Kathleen Smallfield and Catherine Syversen found it in the same area.

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LITERATURE CITED

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