



African Marsh Harrier

Afrikaanse Paddavreter

Circus ranivorus

As the smallest species of the marsh harrier complex, the African Marsh Harrier was incorrectly considered a subspecies of the European Marsh Harrier *C. aeruginosus* for many years (Brown *et al.* 1982). It is thinly distributed throughout the remaining wetlands in southcentral Africa as far north as Uganda (Snow 1978; Brown *et al.* 1982). Its strongholds in southern Africa are the extensive marshes of the Okavango and eastern Caprivi, the coastal and upland wetlands of KwaZulu-Natal and the fynbos biome of the southern and southwestern Cape Province. Probably only in the Okavango could it be considered common, although Tarboton *et al.* (1987b) considered it locally common with 500–1000 breeding pairs in the Transvaal. Breeding densities of up to 8 pairs/10 km² have been recorded (unpubl. data).

It is easy to confuse its young with female European Marsh Harriers, but the scarcity of the latter makes this a minor problem in mapping the African Marsh Harrier.

Habitat: It can be considered a waterbird and like other marsh harriers it nests in extensive reedbeds, often high over water (Malherbe 1970). Some breeding takes place in short sedge areas (A. Kemp pers. comm.), and fynbos vegetation (pers. obs; SAOS Nest Record Scheme). Birds forage over reeds, lake margins, floodplains and occasionally even woodland in search of mainly small mammals (>70% of items), wetland birds and passerines (Kemp & Dean 1988; Simmons *et al.* 1991). It is almost entirely absent from areas below c. 300 mm of rainfall, probably because wetland habitats are sparse. Combining this isohyet with the range of its main prey, the Striped Mouse *Rhabdomys pumilio* (Smithers 1983; Simmons 1989b), explains the distribution pattern of this harrier.

Movements: The models do not show any substantial seasonal variation in reporting rates consistent with large-scale migration. In the Okavango region, however, there is a marked increase in reporting rates during the late winter–early summer (July–October), and in Zones 6 and 8 there is a slight increase during midsummer (December–February). Nomadic wanderings were apparent from two marked immatures which moved 40 km and over 1000 km (to the Transvaal) from the southern Cape Province within their first year (Simmons 1986b). The

bird is a strong flier, foraging up to 200 km/day during breeding (unpubl. data) and it can arrive at isolated Namib desert wetlands.

Breeding: Most South African records were September–December. Egg-laying is known to occur mainly January–July in Zimbabwe as compared to mainly August–November in South Africa (Winterbottom 1968a; Dean 1971; Irwin 1981; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b). The reasons for this are not known but appear not to be related directly to rainfall regimes, as breeding in the winter-rainfall southwestern Cape Province occurs at the same time as in the summer-rainfall remainder of South Africa. Differences in the seasonality of prey abundance and availability are likely to be relevant.

Historical distribution and conservation: Boshoff *et al.* (1983) found no historical change in distribution in the Cape Province. There has been a decline in numbers in Zimbabwe following several years of below-average rainfall (A.J. Tree pers. comm.). However, as individual wetlands have been drained, population sizes must have declined in all areas, except perhaps the eastern Caprivi and the Okavango Delta.

Although the dense vegetation it inhabits and its secretive behaviour make it difficult to gain accurate population figures, I concur with Steyn (1982b) and Boshoff *et al.* (1983) that the species should be classed as a 'vulnerable' Red Data species. While it can be locally common, the massive drainage of wetlands in KwaZulu-Natal (Begg 1986), loss of habitat in the Nama Karoo (Boshoff *et al.* 1983), pesticides (De Kock & Simmons 1988) and a complete lack of records following a public appeal for breeding data (Simmons 1985) suggest that its conservation status is cause for concern. Its distribution is highly fragmented and reporting rates are noticeably lower on the central plateau of South Africa (Free State, southcentral and southwestern Transvaal), compared with most other regions, suggesting that a substantial decline in this area may have occurred. Conservation efforts should focus on monitoring populations within existing nature reserves, rehabilitating critical wetlands, and improving the protection status of wetlands in general.

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Recorded in 668 grid cells, 14.7%
Total number of records: 5914
Mean reporting rate for range: 7.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



