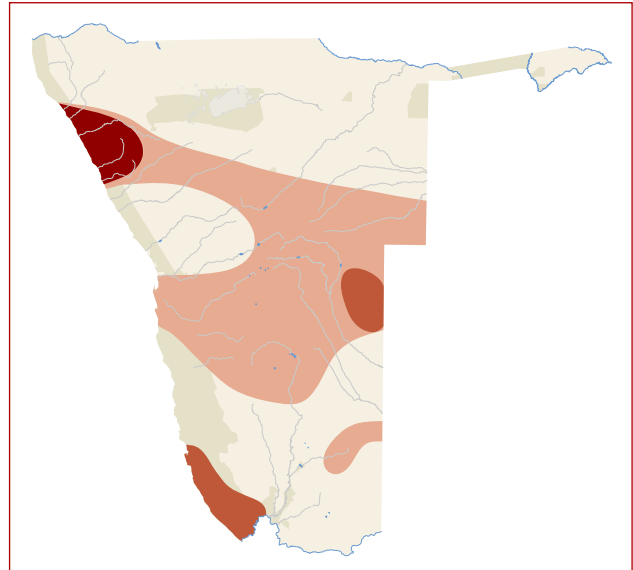


BLACK HARRIER | *Circus maurus*

RE Simmons | Reviewed by: A Jenkins



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Conservation Status:	Endangered
Southern African Range:	Namibia, South Africa
Area of Occupancy:	23,000 km ²
Population Estimate:	Fewer than 50 birds, five (suspected) pairs
Population Trend:	Fluctuating
Habitat:	Desert floodplains, karoid scrub
Threats:	No known threats in Namibia



DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

This species is endemic to southern Africa with a world population estimated at fewer than 1,000 birds (van der Merwe 1981, Siegfried 1992). Most of this population occurs in South Africa, with centres of distribution in the coastal (strandveld) areas of the Western Cape and to a lesser extent in the mountains and the higher grassland areas of the Eastern Cape and Free State (Simmons 1997f, Curtis *et al.* 2004). This harrier's range extends into KwaZulu-

Natal, north of the Drakensberg and there are scattered records of residents in the Northern Cape and seasonal (winter) incursions into the southern Kalahari and central Namibia (Simmons 1997f). It reaches farthest north on Namibia's cool desert coast around the ephemeral Hoanib River floodplain and Uniab River delta (S Braine, J Paterson pers. obs.). There have been six recorded sightings from Botswana, as far north as Lake Ngami (Penry 1994). The most northerly confirmed nest sites are 28.5°S near Royal Natal National Park in eastern South Africa (Van Jaarsveld 1986) and near Kleinsee at 29°S on South Africa's west coast (Simmons *et al.* 2002). It has the most restricted distribution of any continental harrier species (Simmons & Simmons 2000), calculated from SABAP1 data as 386,750 km² (Simmons 1997f). In Namibia, it covers a range of about 23,000 km² (Jarvis *et al.* 2001).

Densities in coastal South African regions are higher than anywhere else and its small population elsewhere is probably the result of the modification of previously common lowland renosterveld for agriculture in the Overberg region of the southern Cape, South Africa (Curtis *et al.* 2004). Black Harriers prey predominantly on mice, and their populations are believed to fluctuate with time as mice populations fluctuate in response to rainfall. This may explain the changes reported during the 20th century when it was variously described as going extinct or common (van der Merwe 1981, Steyn 1982). They are irruptive in the grasslands of the Free State (B Colahan pers. comm.) and the Succulent Karoo plains of the Northern Cape, with years of abundance often followed by a complete lack of

breeding birds the following year (Simmons *et al.* 2002). The 5,800 km journey of a satellite-tracked bird breeding in the salt marshes south of Langebaan, South Africa, that moved to Lesotho (where it over-summered) and back in six months, demonstrates that these birds do move great distances. These data also indicate that the species is spatially highly responsive to climatic conditions and the population may be smaller than previously suspected.



ECOLOGY

The Black Harrier mainly occurs in coastal areas of Namibia, especially the salt-bush vegetation in the floodplains of the Hoanib and Uniab Rivers, where temperatures are relatively cool and small mammal populations are sometimes abundant (S Braine, J Paterson pers. obs.). In the Western Cape, this species is mostly found in fynbos vegetation, especially coastal thicket and mountain fynbos and less often in the lowland renosterveld and dry restios between these habitats (Simmons *et al.* 1998c, Curtis *et al.* 2004, Jenkins *et al.* 2012).

Given frequent sightings of immature Black Harriers in the Hoanib and Uniab River deltas, it is believed to breed in small numbers (maximum of five pairs) in Namibia (S Braine, J Paterson pers. obs.), although this has yet to be confirmed. Sightings of immature birds in the grasslands of southern Namibia (//Karas region) following good rains also suggest that breeding may occur there (RE Simmons pers. obs.). Egg laying peaks in August and September in South Africa (van der Merwe 1981, Curtis *et al.* 2004). Breeding success of 1.6 to 2.5 fledglings per pair (Curtis *et al.* 2004) is recorded in South Africa. Birds forage over areas covering more than 100 km² and ranging 20 to 30 km from their nests (RE Simmons unpubl. data). They forage by flying between one and three metres high over many types of fynbos and grassland vegetation, especially coastal and mountain fynbos, and less often over grain fields and other modified habitats. Black Harriers specialise in hunting mice, by slow quartering and a lightning strike into short vegetation, or in small birds, which they catch after a short chase (Steyn 1982). Diet in Namibia is unknown, but one adult harrier was observed chasing and catching sparrowlarks *Eremopterix sp.* or Lark-like Buntings *Emberiza impetuani* breeding in the southern grasslands of Namibia (RE Simmons pers. obs.).



THREATS

There are few known threats to this species in Namibia. The small population that migrates northwards from South Africa covers a wide variety of karoid habitat that may be overgrazed, especially in southern Namibia. The resident population in the north-western floodplains occurs within the Skeleton Coast National Park and is thus protected from cattle grazing and fire.

In South Africa, fragmentation of lowland habitat is the main threat to Black Harrier populations, but most of the birds found breeding occur in protected areas such as the West Coast National Park or private reserves (Curtis *et al.* 2004). The intense grazing pressure in southern Namibia may isolate the birds found in the northern regions from the core South African population, but this may have little direct impact on a migratory species such as this.

Climate change, expected to decrease rainfall over large areas of western Namibia (Midgley *et al.* 2005, Turpie *et al.* 2010), may reduce the likelihood of favourable breeding conditions for mice and passerine birds, which may in turn reduce the likelihood of harriers breeding in Namibia.



CONSERVATION STATUS

This species is classified as *Endangered* because of its very small population of less than 50 birds in Namibia, and only about five suspected breeding pairs. There is no indication of decline but, like South African populations, the population fluctuates in Namibia with many birds in some years and few in others.

It was classified as *Near Threatened* in South Africa (Barnes 2000), but was uplisted to *Endangered* in 2015 (Taylor *et al.* in press), because of the small population and declines in the Overberg and other farming areas. It is considered globally *Vulnerable* (IUCN 2014) because of its small global population, restricted distribution and its vulnerability to changing land use and climate change. Fortunately, about 60% of its populations today occur in protected coastal areas, while many others occur in mountains not under agriculture. In Namibia, birds that may be breeding are protected within the Skeleton Coast National Park; revised or new Parks and Wildlife legislation should afford it *Specially Protected* status.



ACTIONS

Monitoring of populations in Namibia's north-western rivers is a priority, especially to confirm that breeding occurs (probably in October and November). This is best done when small mammals are abundant and the presence of birds can be checked in other coastal rivers where extensive *Salicornia* thickets are present. Breeding birds may occur in the wetter areas. The distribution of birds that migrate to central Namibia in winter is poorly known, but the winter habitat may be crucial to the well-being of the Western Cape core population. Thus, understanding the habitat requirements of wintering birds and protecting the grasslands or shrublands of the Nama Karoo may prove to be an important conservation action. Priority should, however, be given to safeguarding the core populations in South Africa and Lesotho.