

PALLID HARRIER | *Circus macrourus*

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Conservation Status:	Near Threatened
Southern African Range:	Namibia, Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe
Area of Occupancy:	15,500 km ²
Population Estimate:	Unknown, but probably fewer than 500 birds in southern Africa
Population Trend:	Possibly increasing
Habitat:	Grasslands associated with open pans or flood plains, open areas in woodland
Threats:	Agriculture, pesticides, climate change

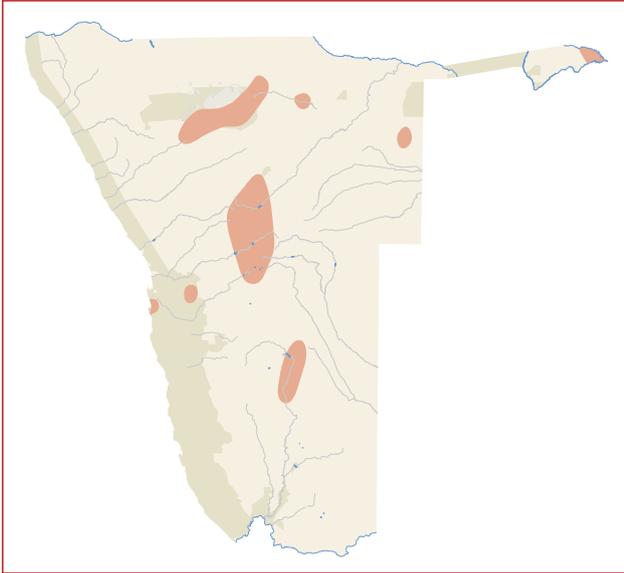


DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

The Pallid Harrier is a rare non-breeding visitor to southern Africa, with most records widely scattered from the south-eastern and northern Botswanan grasslands, northern South Africa and Zimbabwe (Simmons 1997e, S Tyler *in litt.*). It is more widespread than the Montagu's Harrier *C. pygargus*, occurring farther west into Namibia and farther south into South Africa (Steyn 1982), but is less common. Its core migration grounds appear to be central and eastern Africa, especially the grasslands of Kenya and Tanzania, where locusts are common (Clarke 1996). The Eurasian distribution has become highly fragmented (Galushin *et al.* 2003) leading to a decline in world numbers that were estimated at 20,000 pairs in the early 1990s (del Hoyo *et*

al. 1994) and are presently estimated at 9,000 to 15,000 pairs (Galushin *et al.* 2003, IUCN 2012a).

During the SABAP1 atlassing period, the Pallid Harrier was reported in Namibia at a rate of 4.6% from 15,500 km² of which 25% lies within protected areas (Simmons 1997e, Jarvis *et al.* 2001). Numbers visiting Namibia are unknown, but it is unlikely that more than 500 birds spend the austral summer in southern Africa. Numbers may be higher when high rainfall leads to increased locust and small mammal populations. Of 150 harriers estimated in the dry Lake Liambezi, Zambezi region, about 15 Pallid Harriers, 10 Western Marsh-Harriers (European Marsh-Harriers) *C. aeruginosus* and 125 Monagu's Harriers were recorded (C Hines unpubl. data). Other areas in Namibia that hold



substantial numbers at times are the adjacent Salambala Conservancy (on the Chobe floodplain), the Tsumkwe Pans (RE Simmons pers. obs.) and the grasslands in the Witvlei-Gobabis region (Hines 1998).



ECOLOGY

The Pallid Harrier prefers dry to damp grasslands associated with open pans or flood plains, or open areas in woodland where it quarters the ground at one to five metres, catching prey such as insects and birds. These are mainly taken on the ground, but locusts may be taken on the wing (Steyn 1982, RE Simmons pers. obs.). It flies less buoyantly than the Montagu's Harrier and travels faster during direct flight (Clarke 1996). It is attracted to rodent populations that have reached plague proportions in dry lake beds in Namibia (C Hines unpubl. data); these are its main prey in eastern Europe (Galushin *et al.* 2003). Birds begin to arrive in southern Africa in November, with peak numbers from December to February before leaving in March or April (Steyn 1982, Simmons 1997e).

Breeding is extralimital. It often roosts communally with other harriers in large numbers (Clarke 1993), but no communal roosts have ever been located in southern Africa.



THREATS

The Pallid Harrier is primarily threatened by agricultural intensification and the degradation of wetlands among remaining islands of natural or semi-natural grasslands, especially in Eurasia. In Africa, the use of pesticides to control locust outbreaks is a severe threat. Other threats include the recent drying of the climate, as well as localised threats such as disturbance and shooting (Galushin *et al.*

2003). In western Africa, the bird was formerly the most common harrier, but is now outnumbered by Montagu's Harrier (Brown *et al.* 1982). Both Pallid and Montagu's harriers (in roughly equal proportions) were common in East African grasslands in the 1980s, then declined in the 1990s and subsequently became more common from the mid-2000s (S Thomsett unpubl. data). The high frequency of grassland burning in northern Namibia (Mendelsohn & Roberts 1997) may assist this species as it opens up otherwise bushy or treed landscapes; it is also attracted to grass fires where prey may be more vulnerable (Steyn 1982). This is tempered by the effects of global climate change and increased carbon dioxide levels, which are expected to increase tree savannahs at the expense of C4 grasslands (Bond *et al.* 2003).



CONSERVATION STATUS

This species is designated as *Near Threatened* in Namibia because of its globally threatened status and the small, but significant summering population in grasslands of northern Namibia. It is the most threatened harrier in Eurasia, where populations are declining because of a highly fragmented distribution due to agriculture (Galushin *et al.* 2003) and has been listed as globally *Near Threatened* (IUCN 2012a). Reduced sightings and a decreased range compared with historical sightings (Steyn 1982, Tarboton *et al.* 1987, A Tree in Simmons 1997e, S Tyler *in litt.*) suggest that it has declined in southern Africa and for that reason is considered *Near Threatened* in South Africa (Barnes 2000a, Taylor *et al.* in press). The Pallid Harrier is listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), in Appendix II of the Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and should be given *Specially Protected* status in Namibia.



ACTIONS

A species action plan was formulated in 2003 (Galushin *et al.* 2003) and recommended conservation measures should be implemented across its range. In southern Africa, these measures include the conservation of grassland areas that may be under threat from agriculture and the implementation of strategies to control excessive use of pesticides to combat locusts. Research should focus on finding and protecting roost sites (Galushin *et al.* 2003) where significant numbers of the southern African population probably congregate. All sightings should be reported to local authorities and conservancies should be promoted in any identified core areas. Witvlei-Gobabis, east of Windhoek, and the grasslands of the Zambezi region are two such places that require survey work following good rains in January and February. Pellets should be collected from roosts in order to determine the poorly documented diet in southern Africa.