

# IRISH **HEN HARRIER**

## WINTER SURVEY



# SURVEY GUIDE

**Hen Harrier Roost Types and Guidelines to Roost Watching**  
O'Donoghue, 2019

Submit Roost Watches Online:  
[www.ihhws.ie/submit](http://www.ihhws.ie/submit)

Contact:  
[info@ihhws.ie](mailto:info@ihhws.ie)

FIRSTLY

THANK YOU

FOR CONSIDERING  
JOINING THE SURVEY!

Hen Harrier numbers in Ireland have been in decline for decades as their habitat has been lost to non-native conifer plantations, wind farm development and changes in agriculture.

Establishing the location, demographics, dynamics and threats of Hen Harrier in their winter quarters, particularly roosts, is as vital to the conservation of the species in Ireland as establishing these parameters during the breeding season.

Over the last 15 years, the Irish Hen Harrier Winter Survey has amassed a large dataset that provides vital information on Hen Harrier wintering ecology. Join our skilled and determined group of surveyors monitoring Hen Harriers during the non-breeding period and contribute to our understanding and conservation of these special birds.

**Dr. Barry O'Donoghue**

Survey Co-Ordinator

# INTRO

The threats and pressures acting on the Hen Harrier population are not limited to the breeding season, a period that accounts for only 4-5 months of the year. The Irish Hen Harrier Winter Survey (IHHWS) has been identifying and monitoring Hen Harrier roost sites in Ireland since 2004 and has significantly advanced our understanding of the ecological requirements of Hen Harrier during the normal part of its annual cycle.

Hen Harriers will spend at least 8 months (mid-July to mid-March) in what can essentially be considered 'normal time', either remaining on breeding grounds, dispersing widely, and establishing a core winter range.

During winter Hen Harriers gather at suitable, safe communal roost sites at night, from which they can radiate and hunt across the hinterland during the short winter days. Hen Harrier roost sites can be communal (frequently used by several individuals and other raptor species) or solitary (used by individual birds regularly and/or infrequently). The numbers of individual wintering birds occupying each roost site are highly variable through-out the winter, often in response to the weather, availability of prey, disturbance and presence of predators. A number of "winter" roosting sites are also "summer" breeding sites, thus some sites hold Hen Harriers 365 days of the year. Identifying and monitoring these roost locations is crucial for species and site protection and for assessing the national and regional conservation status of Hen Harriers.

Collaborating with Hen Harrier experts across Europe and academic researchers in Ireland the data gathered by our network of fieldworkers is providing invaluable data to inform future conservation measures, land management, planning and policy.

This is a short guide to assist surveyors in contributing to the the Irish Hen Harrier Winter Survey by identifying what sites may offer suitable Hen Harrier roost habitat, and the best way to watch for Hen Harriers to increase chances of detection.



# HABITATS USED FOR ROOSTING

A series of photographs are presented below, showing roost types, which have been found in Ireland. in the depths of winter Harriers must withstand extreme weather and go 14 hours without food in the dark. Roosts therefore must provide three essential things, shelter, protection and food.



**Roost Type 1. Bog with scattered scrub vegetation, bracken, tussocky purple moor grass and rushy patches etc.**

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**Roost Type 2. Heather dominated upland or lowland blanket bog**



The IHHWS can allocate you a site to survey, or you can use your own initiative and select a potentially suitable location to check each winter.



**Roost Type 3. Tussocky rush dominated wet pastures, overgrown with rushes or scrub.**



**Roost Type 4. Reed beds and fens.**





**Roost Type 5. Upper Saltmarsh with suitable vegetation to provide cover and protection.**



**Roost Type 6. Bracken and rush or scrub mosaics.**

The above are a catalogue of what has been found to date, but it should be borne in mind that more habitats may yet be proven to hold roosting Hen Harriers (e.g. standing cereal fields, maize fields, suitable forestry, sand dunes amongst others). When deciding what sites to check to find new roosts, consider whether the site provides those key cues for Hen Harriers... shelter, protection and food.

## SURVEYING A ROOST SITE

Hen Harriers generally return to roost at dusk and leave the roost at dawn. While this is a general rule, harriers may be found at a roost sites at any time of day, whether not having yet departed, or having arrived and settled early. In the evenings, the best time to observe harriers at a winter roost is from a vantage point offering good panoramic views of the area at least **40 minutes before sunset** until it is no longer feasible to continue observations in the dark. In the morning, observers should be stationed at the vantage point **30 minutes before sunrise until at least 30 minutes after sunrise**. From the vantage point, the fieldworker should record any harriers entering the roost, noting the time as well as sex and age if possible. If distinguishable, it is helpful to note the location of the roosting spot used by each individual bird.

Sunrise and Sunset times for local areas can be found at:  
<https://www.timeanddate.com/sun/ireland>

**Watches at roosts should be carried out at least once a month from October to March, on the first day of the month or as close to the first as possible.** This is important in the interests of coordination with your fellow surveyors all across Ireland. Suitable vantage point(s) which cover the entire extent of the area of interest should be used, **at a discrete distance which does not disclose the location of the observer(s)** (to the birds or humans), but which is not so far as to impair identification in fading light. As a rule of thumb, if you need a scope from a chosen vantage point, you are too far away. Binoculars should be the strongest optical equipment needed, unless one wishes to identify a character on a wing tag for example. Depending on the size of the site and area of interest, more than one person may often be needed for observations.

Observations should not be carried out in heavy rain or very strong winds which will impair visibility and may affect bird's activity levels or the number of birds returning to roost.

Care should be taken not to draw attention to the location, as instances of persecution are known to have occurred at roosts. **Roost locations should never be disclosed to third parties.**



## SUBMITTING

# DATA

Survey sheets provided by IHHWS are completed online via the website whether or not Hen Harriers are seen or not. **A null count is as important as a confirmed sighting at a roost.**

When in the field, a dictaphone or a voice recording app on a smart phone is best to record birds arriving to or departing from roosts, direction of flight, interactions etc. If a dictaphone is not available, details should be noted on a IHHWS roost recording sheet available via our website. Roost recording sheets are disseminated with this guideline document via email when you join the survey, and if required again are available from <http://www.ihhws.ie/Form.pdf> or by emailing the survey for a copy [info@ihhws.ie](mailto:info@ihhws.ie).

Immediately after a roost watch, the details of the survey should be completed fully and submitted, preferably using our online form on your mobile android device, tablet or computer

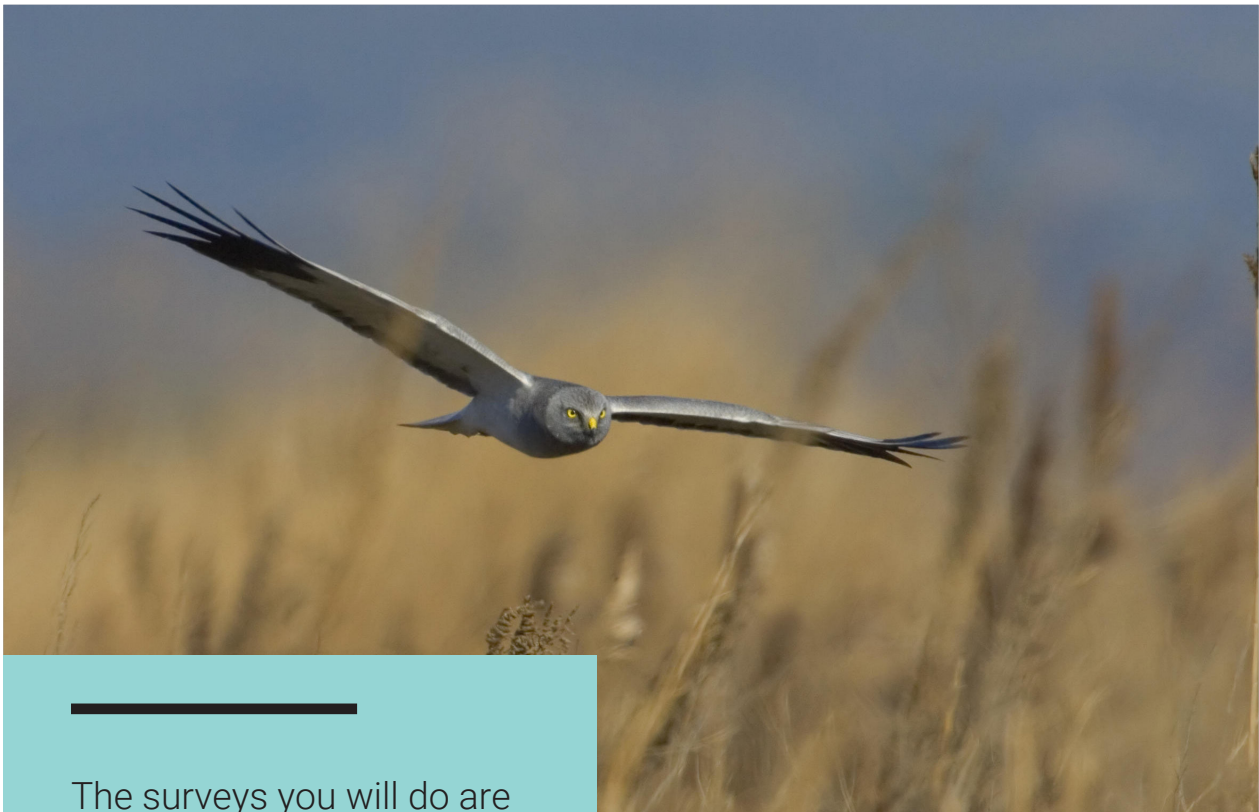
<http://www.ihhws.ie/submit>

Alternatively you can fill in a paper recording sheet, take a photo or scan it and email it to the Irish Hen Harrier Winter Roost Survey ([info@ihhws.ie](mailto:info@ihhws.ie)).

If Hen Harriers are seen to pass through a site which is under observation at dusk or dawn, such sightings should be noted and reported on, and likely or suspected roosting areas in that area should be examined for roosting. A wealth of other wildlife can be noted at Hen Harrier winter roosts, and should be noted.



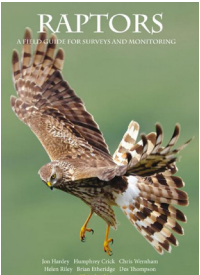
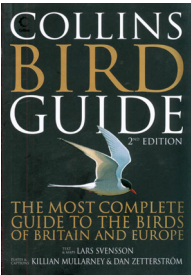




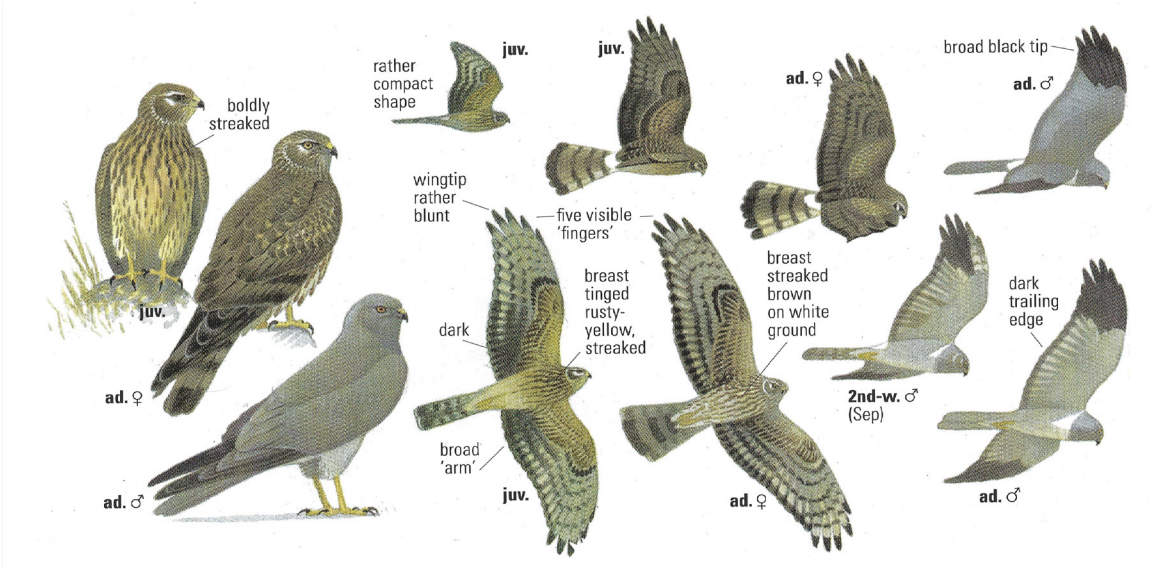
The surveys you will do are  
of direct benefit to the Hen  
Harrier’s conservation.

Collins Bird  
Guide

Raptors: A Field  
Guide for Surveys  
and Monitoring



# RESOURCES



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