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Birds of New Zealand - Locality Guide. 3rd edn.

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Australasian harrier: pp 119-120.



AUSTRALASIAN HARRIER

Family Accipitridae

Species *Circus approximans*

Common names Harrier, Hawk, Kahu.

Status Native

Abundance Common generally regarded as a scavenger rather than a hunter and so benefiting from pastoral development.

Size 550 mm (cf sparrow 145 mm, New Zealand Falcon 430 mm)

Habitat A bird of the open countryside rather than forests, occasionally straying over towns and cities.

Range worldwide Widely spread through the Pacific islands, Australia and New

Guinea. Birds of prey in New Zealand are few, the others being the uncommon New Zealand Falcon (*Falco novaeseelandiae*) and the occasional visitor, the Nankeen Kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*).

New Zealand range Throughout New Zealand and to the offshore islands.

Description

Upperparts Dark brown. **Underparts** Reddish-brown streaked with dark brown.

Rump White. **Eye** Yellow, with brown centre. It is very yellow in male birds. **Legs and feet** Yellow.

Conspicuous features

- Light colouring of underparts.
- Whitish rump is seen on birds in the air.
- Paler colour of older birds.

Conspicuous characteristics

- Except at first light when it flies low and level, the Harrier soars and glides and rises on thermals.
- During the mating season Harriers circle and make “scree” type calls.
- It is regularly disturbed on roadsides eating road-killed rabbits or possums.
- Young birds will follow their parents in level flight calling plaintively.
- Occasionally it takes live ducks but seldom new-born lambs.
- Generally considered more a carrion eater than a hunter of live prey as is the New Zealand Falcon.

Call The mating “scree” calls are common over the spring months.

Nest A platform of twigs in among rushes. Up to 5 white eggs are laid.

Differences between the Harrier and the New Zealand Falcon

- The Harrier is the common raptor of the open New Zealand countryside. The New Zealand Falcon seldom ventures out over farmland in the North Island but does in eastern parts of the South Island high country.
- The Harrier is much larger than the New Zealand Falcon – 550 mm compared with 430 mm.
- The Harrier constantly soars and rises on thermals. The New Zealand Falcon is usually seen flying in a direct manner with a flight pattern similar to a New Zealand Pigeon, although it will spiral on thermals.
- The yellow eye colouring separates the Harrier from the New Zealand Falcon which has a brown eye.

Where to find – North and South Islands

New Zealand – Common throughout all open areas, but at times it will venture into the suburbs. Cornwall Park in Auckland has known a bird at times as has Orakei Basin. Often seen picking up dead possums from roads. Also regularly seen on off-shore islands around the coastline.