

Swamp Harrier

Circus approximans

#7 JULY 2022



Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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A female Swamp Harrier, with the trailing edge on the wing broadening closer to the body (photo: Kim Prior)

Description

This is a common bird of wetlands around much of Australia, instantly recognisable from its low and slow flight and its habit of gliding on upswept wings. There are no sub-species. All birds have a pale rump; however, for juveniles that is not such an obvious feature (see below). Swamp Harriers have broad wings which are extensively “fingered”, the fingers being much darker than the paler wings.

There are several plumage differences between males and females but all of them are difficult to apply with certainty in the field. Females are larger than males, and the dark trailing edge to the secondaries on their wings broadens

out closer to the body whereas for males it has uniform narrow thickness all across the wing. The female tail is dark grey and heavily barred, while for males it is pale grey and lightly barred (and older males have no tail barring). Only the female incubates.

Juvenile Swamp Harriers have a pale rufous rump and a pale underside to the base of their primaries – the remainder of the underside wing is dark. The post-juvenile moult is completed at about 12 months. Adulthood is reached at 2 years of age; however, immature birds are indistinguishable from adults.



Swamp Harrier, showing the characteristic white rump of adults and the upswept wings when gliding (photo: Mick Roderick)

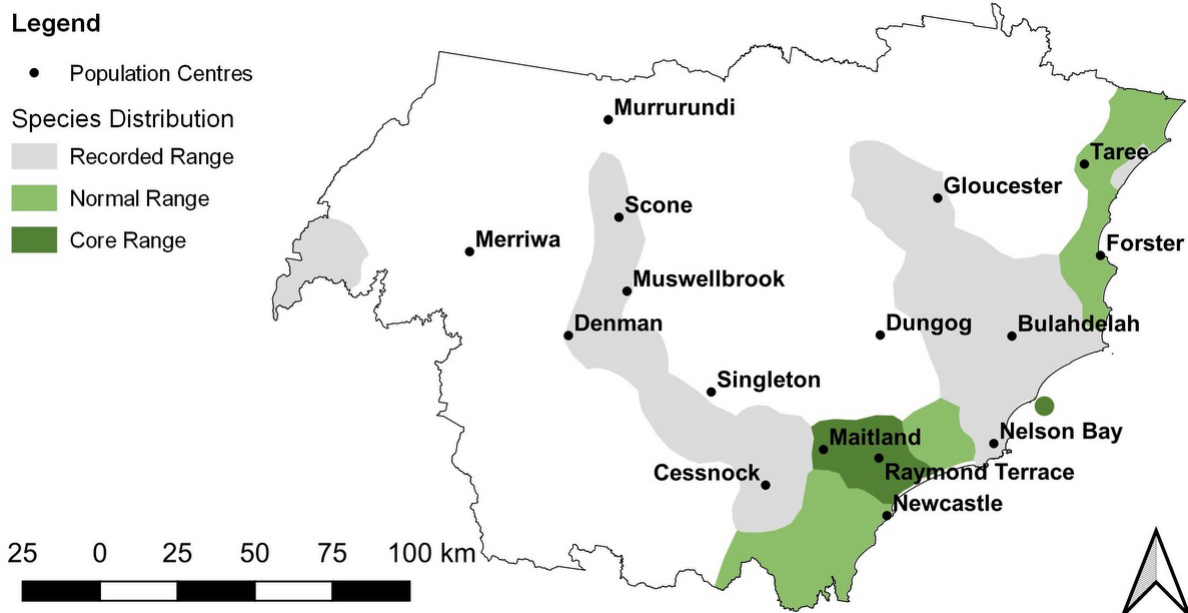
Regional Status

The Swamp Harrier is a breeding resident of our region. However, it is mainly restricted to the flood plains of the Hunter and Manning rivers with less-frequent records from the middle and upper parts of both those valleys and from locations around Port Stephens and Lake Macquarie (see map). The handful of records from around the Ulan/Wollar area are intriguing – some of them perhaps could be mis-identification of Spotted Harriers which are more to be expected in that area. However, there are some waterbodies, which perhaps attract a wandering Swamp Harrier from time to time.

There are relatively few breeding records for our region, which reflects that Swamp Harriers are ground-nesting birds that construct their nests in difficultly-penetrated areas of reeds and other wetland vegetation.

Legend

- Population Centres
- Species Distribution
- Recorded Range
 - Normal Range
 - Core Range



Distribution map for Swamp Harrier (map prepared by Dan Williams)

Distribution and movement

The Swamp Harrier is a common bird of New Zealand as well as Australia, and there are occasional records from islands in the Pacific (including even some from Macquarie Island). It also is common on many of New Zealand's offshore islands. In NZ it is considered non-migratory although some birds disperse from their breeding areas in winter. In Australia it is partly migratory, with many (but not all) Tasmanian birds departing from late summer and similarly for mainland birds from the southern parts of the range (e.g. from Victoria). There is no evidence of movement of Swamp Harriers into or away from the Hunter Region although there seems not to have been any close study of local movements.



An old male Swamp Harrier, with mainly whitish underparts and no barring in its tail (photo: Steve Merrett)

About the name

Swamp Harrier

“Swamp” describes the bird’s typical foraging and breeding habitat. A “harrier” can be a person or a bird – it means one who harries (i.e. raids or ravages). For birds, the term is used almost exclusively for those of the genus *Circus*.

Circus approximans

The genus name means “circling hawk” and derives from the Greek word *kirkos* – that being the name for an unspecified type of hawk which had a wheeling flight (*kirkos* also means a circle or a ring). The species name is from the Latin *approximare* in the sense of “approximate”. In other words, our bird is quite like most of the other harrier species, and in particular the European version of the harrier, which early ornithologists knew well. In the same vein, the other resident Australian harrier (the Spotted Harrier) has the species name *assimilis* which means “similar”.



A juvenile Swamp Harrier, with pale rufous rump (photo: Rob Palazzi)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide .
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