



The Birds of Prey in Northern Ireland



An Introduction to Birds of Prey and Owls

Raptors, or birds of prey, include the following types of birds: eagles, hawks, kites, buzzards, falcons, the osprey, and owls. They are all predatory species. Many other bird species have predatory traits but raptors are defined as those which typically catch live prey with their feet (although some also eat a lot of carrion). The word 'raptor' is derived from the Latin verb 'rapere', meaning to "take" or "seize" by force.

Raptors are specially adapted for their predatory role with sharp talons, excellent eyesight and a hooked beak to tear into flesh. Owls are particularly well adapted to their night-time environment as they have soft, velvety feathers which reduce the sound of flapping and allow the owl to fly silently in search of prey.

Many raptor species (but not all) are unusual in that the female is often larger than the male. This is called Reversed Sexual Size Dimorphism. In some raptor species, such as the Peregrine, this size difference is very pronounced and the female can be as much as one-third bigger than the male.

Raptors are special. There is something about them that has fascinated humans for centuries. They are iconic symbols of the natural world, now recovering from past human actions that caused many of them to vanish. They still need our protection as they make their comeback.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Previously a resident breeder but persecuted to extinction by the early 1900s. Recently reintroduced to the Republic of Ireland (Co. Kerry) where now breeding; expected to breed again in Northern Ireland in coming years. Sub-adults currently seen infrequently. Listed as a Northern Ireland Priority Species.

Length: 77-95cm

Wingspan: 199-250cm

Weight: 3.0-6.8kg

A massive sea eagle often called a 'flying barn door'. Adult plumage is identical between sexes, with mostly brown upper and underparts with pale mottling, a pale head, large yellow bill and a distinctive white tail. Juveniles have similar mottled dark plumage with a black bill and a dark head and tail. The sea eagle frequents large inland water bodies and coastal areas. A generalist predator with a varied diet but especially seabirds, fish and carrion. Builds huge stick nests in trees or on cliffs, sometimes on the ground. Conservation threats include illegal persecution such as shooting and poisoning.



Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Previously a resident breeder but persecuted to extinction by the early 1900s. Recently reintroduced to the Republic of Ireland (Co. Donegal) where now breeding; expected to breed again in Northern Ireland in the near future. Sub-adults currently seen infrequently.

Length: 76-96cm

Wingspan: 180-230cm

Weight: 3.0-6.4kg

A very large raptor, adult male and female Golden Eagles have identical plumage which is uniformly dark brown with a golden sheen on the back of the neck and head. Upperparts can sometimes show variable pale mottling. Juveniles are similarly dark but have distinctive white patches in the wings and a white tail with a thick black terminal band. The Golden Eagle is a bird of open country, especially upland moorland, mountains, hills and cliffs. An immensely powerful predator with a generalist diet but especially medium to large mammals, birds and carrion. Builds huge stick nests in trees, on cliffs and sometimes on the ground. Extremely vulnerable to illegal persecution such as poisoning and shooting.



Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Previously a common breeder but persecuted to extinction by the 19th century. Regularly seen on migration in spring and autumn; expected to breed again in Northern Ireland in the near future.

Length: 53-66cm

Wingspan: 147-174cm

Weight: 1.0-2.0kg

The Osprey is a strikingly distinctive medium-large sized raptor. Adult plumage is similar between the sexes with uniformly dark brown upperparts, white underparts and a white head with a thick dark eye-stripe and yellow eyes. Its flight profile is a characteristic 'M'-shape made by bending its wings. The Osprey is a fish-specialist and rarely eats anything else and so is usually found near water, including freshwater inland rivers and lagoons as well as coastal estuaries and shorelines. It nests at the top of tall trees (often pines) and readily takes to artificial nest platforms. Such platforms are being erected in suitable habitat across Northern Ireland to encourage the passage birds to consider recolonising their former range. This species has been reintroduced elsewhere in the UK



Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Recently reintroduced to Northern Ireland; small breeding population; year-round resident.

Length: 60-66cm

Wingspan: 154-170cm

Weight: 750-1600g

A medium-sized raptor often mistaken for a Buzzard. Adult plumage is similar between the sexes, with a pale grey head, rufous upper and underparts with white patches on the underwings and a distinctive reddish and deeply-forked tail that is used like a rudder. Red Kites occupy a range of habitats and can often be seen over towns and villages and most often over open farmland. They have a varied diet that includes small birds, mammals, amphibians, carrion and invertebrates and can often be seen walking around fields 'worming'. They build nests in small woodlands and are well known for decorating their nests with items such as wool, paper, plastic and clothing which historically earned them the name, "Cloth Kite". Communal winter roosting is common. In 2010, County Down saw the first red kites to hatch in Northern Ireland in over 200 years. This small breeding population is extremely vulnerable to illegal poisoning.



Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Widespread year-round resident.

Length: 46-53cm

Wingspan: 115-137cm

Weight: 600-1350g

A medium-sized raptor, adult plumage is similar between the sexes and can be highly variable, ranging from very dark to very pale. Upperparts are mottled brown and underparts are generally paler with a variable amount of dark barring. The brownish tail shows a series of dark bands and usually a distinctive dark sub-terminal band. Pale patches on the underwing are often noticeable. Juveniles have similar plumage to the adults but with more pronounced streaking on the breast. Buzzards can be found in many habitats in the uplands and lowlands but typically in landscapes with small woodlands suitable for tree-nesting. They are generalist hunters with a cosmopolitan diet including birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates and especially scavenged carrion. Often seen perching on fences and posts by the roadside waiting for 'road-kill'.



Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Scarce summer visitor but probably under-recorded due to misidentification. No confirmed breeding records.

Length: 51-57cm

Wingspan: 115-136cm

Weight: 510-1050g

The plumage of this species is highly variable, and shows only slight differences between sexes. Generally the adults have a pale grey head (females may be browner) and the upperparts are generally uniform in colour, varying from creamy pale to light brown to rufous to dark brown to black. The underparts are pale with a variable amount of dark spotting, streaking, barring or a combination of these. Distinguished in flight from Common Buzzard by a small 'pigeon-like' head and a longer tail. A highly secretive bird that nests in lowland deciduous or mixed forest. A specialist insectivore that feeds mostly on the larvae and pupae of wasps, hornets and bumblebees. Also eats other insects and occasionally small mammals and reptiles. Arrives from Africa in May and leaves again in August or September.



Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Widespread visitor but breeding is probably under-recorded.

Length: 42-53cm

Wingspan: 115-139cm

Weight: 375-755g

The Marsh Harrier is the largest and darkest of the European harrier species and lacks the white rump seen on other harriers. Adult male plumage is similar to the male Hen Harrier but with a chestnut belly and chestnut upper wing coverts. Adult female plumage is uniformly dark brown with a creamy-yellow head crown and often a pale patch on the breast. Juveniles of both sexes have a similar plumage to the adult female. The Marsh Harrier is a generalist predator and its mostly aquatic diet includes small birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Its preferred habitat is lowland freshwater and brackish wetlands with extensive reedbeds and it nests on piles of reeds surrounded by dense marshy vegetation. Some individuals may migrate to Africa in September and October although there are sighting records of this species throughout the year in Northern Ireland.



Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Small breeding population; year-round resident. Listed as a Northern Ireland Priority Species.

Length: 41-51cm

Wingspan: 99-122cm

Weight: 290-600g

The adult male has grey upperparts and breast, contrasting with pale underparts and distinctive black wingtips. The adult female and juveniles of both sexes has brown upperparts and buffish-white underparts that are heavily streaked. All age groups and sexes have a prominent white rump. Hen harriers perform spectacular courtship flights called 'sky dancing' and males will often pair with two females in two separate nests, known as a polygynous mating system. This species can be found in the uplands during spring and summer where it breeds on open moorlands and in young forest plantations. It usually nests on the ground, although the rare phenomenon of tree-nesting has been recorded in Northern Ireland. In the winter it moves to open lowland areas and congregates at communal roosts. Its diet includes small birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Threats include overgrazing, wildfires, disturbance, peat extraction, afforestation, persecution and collisions or displacement at windfarms.



Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Scarce breeder but probably under-recorded. Year-round resident. Listed as a Northern Ireland Priority Species.

Length: 46-62cm

Wingspan: 96-115cm

Weight: 615-1450g

A relatively large raptor with a pronounced size difference between sexes. Adult plumage is blue-grey upperparts with pale underparts that are strongly barred. It has a distinctive white 'eyebrow' (supercilium) and orange-red eyes. Juveniles are browner and their underparts are vertically streaked rather than barred. For a large raptor the goshawk can be quite elusive and secretive and is rarely seen by the casual observer; probably a legacy from earlier persecution as this species is common in urban areas in some other countries. The goshawk requires large blocks of undisturbed forest where it builds a large stick nest. It is a surprisingly agile hunter and preys on medium-sized mammals and birds, especially wood pigeons, squirrels, crows, rooks and rabbits. Threats include persecution, disturbance and clear-felling



Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Widespread and common year-round resident.

Length: 28-37cm

Wingspan: 59-77cm

Weight: 117-350g.

Essentially a smaller version of the Goshawk with a pronounced size difference between sexes. Adult male plumage is dark blue-grey upperparts with rufous cheeks, creamy buffy underparts are heavily barred with rufous on the sides of the breast and on the flanks. The male lacks the white supercilium. The adult female has slate-dark brown upperparts and creamy buffy underparts which are heavily barred. No rufous markings but does have the white supercilium. Juveniles are also heavily barred, unlike the streaking seen on juvenile goshawks. The sparrowhawk is an exceptionally agile hunter, often using hedges, woodland rides and buildings as cover to launch surprise attacks on small birds. Commonly seen hunting in woodland, farmland with woods, larger parks and rural and urban gardens. Builds stick nests in wooded areas.



Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Widespread and common year-round resident.

Length: 37-47cm

Wingspan: 94-116cm

Weight: 580-1150g

The largest breeding falcon in Northern Ireland with a pronounced size difference between sexes. Adults have dark blue-grey upperparts (browner in females) and pale underparts with dark barring. The cere, eye ring and legs are yellow with a dark eye. Has prominent 'moustache' marking. Juveniles have brown upperparts and show heavy vertical streaking on underparts. This is a large, powerful falcon best known for its high speed vertical swoops to catch its prey which typically includes pigeons, shorebirds, ducks and other medium-sized birds, but will take a wide range of prey from goldcrests to geese. The peregrine is adaptable to many habitats from the uplands to the lowlands. Usually uses a scrape on a bare rocky ledge for nesting and readily takes to cliffs, quarries and even tall buildings for breeding. Known to sometimes use old crow nests in trees, but fairly infrequently.



Kestrel *Falco tinnuncu/us*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Widespread and common year-round resident.

Length: 29-38cm

Wingspan: 68-82cm

Weight: 127-280g

A small, relatively easy falcon to see in Northern Ireland. Adult male has a grey head and unbarred grey tail, rufous back and upper wings marked with dark diamond-shaped spots contrast with dark wingtips. Underparts are pale with bold spotting. A strong 'moustache' marking. Adult females lack the grey markings and the tail is finely barred. Commonly seen hovering with splayed tail hunting for small mammals, insects and occasionally small birds. Prey detection is aided by the kestrel's ability to see in ultraviolet light, so it can view urine trails left by small rodents moving through vegetation. Found in a variety of open habitats including farmland, moorland, coasts, wetlands, roadside verges and parks. Nests on cliffs, buidings and in forests using cavities, ledges or old crow nests. Readily takes to artificial nest boxes



Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Irregular summer visitor. Breeding is suspected but no nests found to date.

Length: 29-33cm

Wingspan: 74-83cm

Weight: 131-325g.

A small but powerful falcon, the Hobby is sometimes described as a 'mini Peregrine with red thighs'. Adult plumage is the same for both sexes, with slatey-grey upperparts, a thin white supercilium and strong 'moustache' markings with a prominent white throat and collar. The underparts are pale and heavily streaked apart from the thighs and under-tail feathers, which are strongly rufous. The Hobby is a summer visitor, arriving from Africa in April and May and leaving again in September and October. An exceptionally agile hunter, it preys predominantly on dragonflies and small birds such as swifts, martins and swallows, regularly catching its prey on the wing and consuming it in flight. The Hobby often utilises old crow nests for breeding. Typically a lowland species and commonly seen hunting around gravel pits and other wetlands where there is abundant prey.



Merlin *Falco columbarius*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Small breeding population; year-round resident.

Length: 25-31cm

Wingspan: 54-69cm

Weight: 150-245g.

The Merlin is the smallest falcon found breeding in Northern Ireland. Despite its small size, this is a powerful, feisty bird with short pointed wings and a dashing flight. Generally dark and streaky, the adult male is blue-grey while the adult female is browner. The chest of both sexes is heavily streaked and the underwings are dark. The dark tail has narrow white bands and the face often lacks the bold 'moustache' marks of other falcon species. This is primarily an upland breeder of heather moorland where its favoured prey is the meadow pipit and other small birds (including nestlings) and moths. Typically a ground-nesting species, although is known to also use old crow nests usually in coniferous forests. In the winter the Merlin typically moves to lower elevations including farmland and coastal regions where it preys on small wader species. Some individuals may migrate to mainland Europe in the winter.



Raven *Corvus corax*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Widespread and common year-round resident.

Length: 54-67cm

Wingspan: 115-130cm

Weight: 689-1625g

The raven is a passerine, not a bird of prey, but due to its ecological similarity it has been adopted as an 'honorary raptor'. This species is the largest passerine and is larger than a Common Buzzard. It is entirely black, including its plumage, legs, eyes and bill. In flight its thick bill and wedge-shaped tail are distinctive. An extremely intelligent bird, it has one of the widest known vocabularies of any bird species and its loud 'crank', knocking and clucking calls are distinctive. An omnivore and opportunistic feeder, its diet includes sheep and deer carrion, small-medium sized mammals, berries, eggs and human rubbish. The raven's nest is a deep wool-lined structure built on high cliffs, crags, ravines and trees and occasionally on man-made structures such as dams, derelict buildings and pylons. Young and non-territorial birds gather in large communal roosts throughout the year.



Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Widespread and common year-round resident.

Length: 31-37cm

Wingspan: 86-98cm

Weight: 210-430kg

A slender, medium-sized and cryptically marked tawny-brown owl with a rusty/buff facial disc, orange eyes and two prominent 'ear tufts' from which it derives its name. The tufts are not actually ears but the owl uses them (either flattened or erect) for non-vocal communication (e.g. to indicate a threat posture). The tufts are also used to aid concealment when the owl is roosting by breaking up the visible contour of the head. This owl is typically nocturnal and hunts over open ground such as lowland heaths and agricultural farmland, feeding predominantly on small mammals but will also take small birds, insects, frogs and snakes. It generally takes over an abandoned crow's nest for breeding, and favours conifer plantations close to open ground. It can also be found roosting in dense copses and thick hedgerows. Communal winter roosting is not uncommon.



Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Scarce breeder; winter visitors more common. Listed as a Northern Ireland Priority Species.

Length: 33-40cm

Wingspan: 95-105cm

Weight :206-475g

A medium-sized owl with mottled pale yellow-brown-buff white upper plumage with pale underparts that are heavily streaked. In certain light can look surprisingly whitish. Pale facial disc with distinct black patches around bright yellow eyes. Head is round with two tiny often concealed 'ear tufts' set near the centre of the forehead. A predominantly diurnal open-country species, it can be seen on upland moorland, young coniferous plantations, coastal marshes, and lowland rough grassland where it hunts for small mammals and birds, sometimes insects. This species has a spectacular courtship display including undulating flight with short bursts of wing-clapping. Communal winter roosting is not uncommon. As a ground-nester, this owl is particularly vulnerable to predators. Other threats include afforestation, peat extraction and drainage, over-grazing and fluctuating prey cycles.



Barn Owl *Tyto alba*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Small breeding population; Year-round resident. Listed as a Northern Ireland Priority Species.

Length: 33-39cm

Wingspan: 80-95cm

Weight: 250-480g

An instantly recognisable medium-sized owl with a pale heart-shaped face rimmed with a brown edge, dark eyes and a rounded head without ear tufts. Its underparts are pale to pure white with a few small dark teardrop-shaped spots on the chest (often more on females) and its upperparts are a pale buffy yellow-brown colour with dark grey markings. Often seen hunting at dawn or dusk with a characteristically buoyant flight, quartering low over rough grassland, along riverbanks, roadside verges, field margins and around farm buildings where it hunts for small mammals such as shrews, mice and rats. It is also known to eat frogs, bats, lizards, beetles and small birds. It nests inside mature hollow trees, in rock crevices, and in used and disused buildings, especially church steeples and barns. Readily takes to artificial nest boxes in the right habitat. Conservation threats include agricultural intensification, secondary poisoning from anticoagulant rodenticides, climate change (especially prolonged periods of inclement weather), loss of nest sites, road traffic collisions and drowning in farm water troughs.



Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*

Status in Northern Ireland:

Irregular winter visitor.

Length: 53-65cm

Wingspan: 125-150cm

Weight: 1.1-2.0kg

A large, strikingly white owl with a smooth, dome-shaped head, no ear tufts and piercing yellow eyes. The all-white plumage can show a great variation of black and brown spotting and bars on the upper and underparts. Females tend to be more heavily marked than males. Unlike most owls, this species is largely diurnal and hunts low over wide-open spaces such as moorland, coastal fields, sand dunes and lake shores looking for a diversity of prey ranging from small mammals and fish to ducks and geese. It will also feed on carrion. This is predominantly a bird of the Arctic tundra where it nests in a scrape on the ground but the bird moves south to overwinter. One pair bred in Glenveagh National Park, Co. Donegal in 2001, at the extreme edge of its Arctic breeding range, although the eggs failed to hatch.



Raptor Conservation in Northern Ireland

Many of Northern Ireland's raptors suffered severe population declines between the 17th and 20th centuries, with some species even becoming extinct. There were a variety of causes but persecution by humans was a significant factor.

Fortunately, attitudes have now changed and we understand that raptors are a vital part of Northern Ireland's biodiversity, that they are valuable indicators of the health of our environment, that they are an important part of our natural and cultural heritage and that they can bring huge economic benefits, especially from the tourism sector. Now with full legal protection, many species are making a comeback, some naturally, like the Buzzard and Marsh Harrier, and others with the help of formal reintroduction programmes, like the Red Kite. Others, like the Osprey, are receiving some assistance to establish breeding birds again, such as via the provision of nest platforms.

Nevertheless, some conservation threats remain including habitat loss or change, declining prey populations, windfarm collisions, climate change, and there is still some illegal persecution in some areas. Raptor conservation in Northern Ireland has come a long way since the 1900s but there is still much for us all to do to ensure these species not only survive, but can thrive in the 21st century.

Raptor Monitoring in Northern Ireland

Monitoring raptor populations is a vital aspect of conservation. Long-term monitoring allows us to keep track of population trends so policy makers and conservation managers are equipped to identify species that are at risk. It is crucial to understand a species' population status in order to address its specific conservation needs. This knowledge will help to prevent a repeat of past losses.

It is important raptor monitoring work is standardised and consistent across the country to ensure that data collected in one region are comparable with data collected from another region. Much of the monitoring work takes place during the birds' breeding season between March and August when fieldworkers visit nest sites to record information. Fieldworkers are specially licensed to work with protected raptor species to ensure minimal disturbance to the raptors during this sensitive period. Fieldworkers also undertake some surveys between September and February to identify important winter roost sites for some of our more vulnerable species such as the Hen Harrier and Red Kite.

Raptor monitoring is a skilled activity, learning to recognise the specific field signs of a particular raptor species that may not be apparent to a casual observer, such as identifying a species by sight and sound, nest structure and position, pellet identification, moulted feather identification, plucking post location and the tell-tale 'white splash' that indicates the presence of a raptor.

Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group



The Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group, founded in 1991, is a network of voluntary raptor fieldworkers who monitor and record the fortunes of birds of prey across Northern Ireland. Our members come from a variety of backgrounds and professions, all united by their commitment to the protection and conservation of Northern Ireland's raptors.

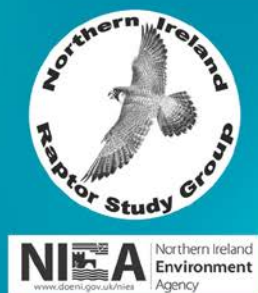
We collect information by visiting known raptor sites each year to check for occupancy and to record the status, distribution and breeding success of each species. We also visit previously un-surveyed areas to search for and to document new sites.

Our work isn't limited to monitoring; there are often opportunities to get involved with related research and conservation projects such as ringing, wing-tagging, satellite tagging, DNA studies, building nest platforms and installing nest boxes.

We promote and encourage the conservation of Northern Ireland raptors by working in partnership with many others including landowners, statutory agencies, industry, academic researchers, educators, raptor rehabilitators and non-governmental organisations.

We are always on the look-out for new volunteers to join our efforts. Experienced fieldworkers are very welcome as are complete novices, as full training is provided to ensure best practice. If you would like to get involved, we would love to hear from you: www.nirsg.com

For more information visit www.nirsg.com



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