

Articles

Bird Identification Series:

Identification of Pied Harrier and Eastern Marsh Harrier in Malaysia

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Introduction

Harriers are diurnal raptors that utilise a characteristic method of hunting using slow flight in search of prey, consisting mainly rodents and small birds. They are slender and have long wings and tails, with long, bare legs and owl-like facial masks. Harriers in north-eastern Asia leave their breeding areas when autumn sets in and the weather gets colder. They migrate south to warmer areas in South-east Asia and beyond where they 'winter' and feed before making the return journey in spring.

Harriers in Malaysia

In Malaysia, harriers can be distinguished from other raptors by their characteristic flight, habitat use and temporal distribution. Harriers have a low hunting flight, alternating between slow wing beats and short glides with wings held in a shallow 'V', showing 5 'fingers'. They habitually circle back and forth, searching the ground for prey, and occasionally drop to the ground to capture one. Harriers are found mostly in rice fields, with its abundance of rodents, their main prey, and less often, in grasslands, wetlands and scrub. Harriers begin arriving in September and remain until April/May of the following year. They winter mainly in the lowlands of west Peninsular Malaysia although small numbers visit the east coast states, Sabah and Sarawak.

Identification of Harriers

Harrier identification need good views of diagnostic field marks. Harriers are sexually dimorphic with adult females browner compared to adult males which are usually a combination of grey, black and white. Immatures usually resemble adult females and juveniles are darker. Juvenile harriers take several years to obtain full adult plumage, making it challenging to identify birds in transitional plumage. Males are not difficult to identify but more care is needed for females and immatures.

Four species of harriers have been recorded in Malaysia and abundance is one of the clues to their identification. Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus* and Pied Harrier *C. melanoleucos* are common in Malaysia whilst the Western (Eurasian) Marsh Harrier *C. aeruginosus* and Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus* are very rare. When encountering harriers in Malaysia, the likelihood is one of the two commoner species. As such, this article will focus on the first two species.

The first step in harrier identification is to determine the age class of the bird and then use a combination of characteristics to identify the species. These characteristics include body structure, facial markings, body streaking and pattern of underwing and tail. Eastern Marsh Harrier has robust body, slightly protruding head and broad wings with rounded tips. In comparison, Pied Harrier is smaller, with less protruding head, and has narrower wings with pointed tips.

Pied Harrier

Pied Harrier appears light-bodied, with smallish head and bill. The perched male is distinctive with black head, neck, back, median wing coverts, primaries and upper breast contrasting with greyish-white lesser coverts, wings and tail, and white underparts and thighs (Plate 1). In flight, the black head, back, median coverts and outer primaries contrast strongly with the mainly white upper wing, rump and tail (Plate 1). This contrasting black and white plumage of male Pied Harrier helps with its identification even from a great distance.



Plate 1: Male Pied Harrier perched (left) and in flight

The perched female shows whitish head, neck and underparts, boldly streaked brown, grading to buffy-white on belly, thighs and undertail coverts. The face is brownish with a border of darker brown feathers ringed by whitish spots forming a distinctive facial disc. The upperpart has dark brown mantle and wings with whitish shoulder patches, grey edged coverts and secondaries, white rump, and grey tail with dark bands (Plate 2).



Plate 2: Female Pied Harrier perched

In flight, the female has pale underwing coverts, boldly streaked brown and pale greyish-brown flight feathers with thin, indistinct black barring on primaries, tipped dark, and more pronounced barring on secondaries, broadest on the trailing edge (Plate 3). Upperside shows prominent broad, pale patches on the forewings, white rump and grey upper tail with 4-5 thin, brown bands, darkest on the subterminal (Plate 3).



Plate 3: Female Pied Harrier in flight

The juvenile Pied Harrier is fairly easy to identify by its overall rich brown plumage, pale crescents over the eyes (Plate 4) and pale primaries contrasting with darker secondaries. The underwings show dark secondaries with indistinct barring and greyish primaries with blackish barring (Plate 4). The upperside shows a broad white rump and brownish tail with darker bands (Plate 4). Pied Harrier juvenile can be differentiated from juvenile Eastern Marsh Harrier by being darker brown overall with no cream patches on the head and breast.

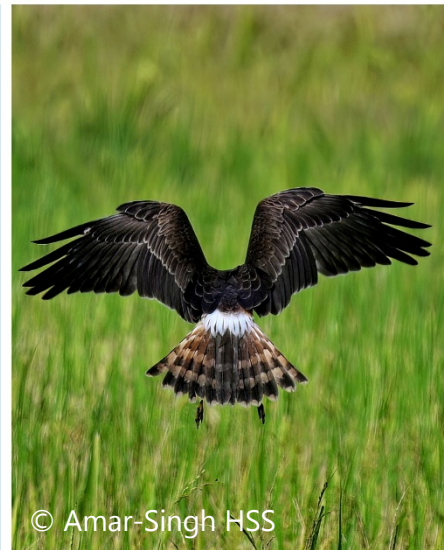


Plate 4: Juvenile Pied Harrier perched (left) and in flight

Eastern Marsh Harrier

Eastern Marsh Harrier appears larger and bulkier than Pied Harrier, with a more protruding head and long, broad wings with more rounded tips. The perched male has dark face and variable dark grey to black streaks on whitish head, neck and upper breast, grading to white on lower breast to belly, thighs and undertail coverts. The mantle, back and median coverts are blackish, with white fringes, and greyish secondaries and tail (Plate 5).



Plate 5: Male Eastern Marsh Harrier perched

In flight, underside shows whitish upper breast, heavily streaked black, and white belly to vent; pale underwings with black outer primaries and mainly greyish secondaries, sometimes with black spots near the tips. Upperwings have narrow white leading edges, blackish coverts and mantle, boldly edged white; grey inner flight feathers, with indistinct blackish smudges, and black outer primaries (sometimes barred black); mainly plain, greyish uppertail, and small, white rump (Plate 6). Some males have completely black heads and mantle and appear like male Pied Harrier but the black parts of the body are never as clean-cut as in that species.



Plate 6: Male Eastern Marsh Harrier in flight

Immature male can appear similar to female Pied Harrier as both have white rump and shoulders, greyish primary coverts, flight feathers and tail. However, the immature male Eastern Marsh Harrier is larger, with broader wings and has thinner and less complete barring on flight feathers and tail. In addition, on immature male Eastern Marsh Harrier, there is less brown on grey parts and the streaking below is less rufous and not so extensive.

The female Eastern Marsh Harrier is mainly rufous-brown with buff streaked head, neck and breast; greyish-buff shoulder patch; brown underparts and thighs have broad, diffuse rufous streaking (Plate 7).



Plate 7: Female Eastern Marsh Harrier perched

In flight, shows buffy breast, belly and underwing coverts, heavily streaked and spotted brown; greyish flight feathers with blackish barring and broad trailing edge, with barring more distinct on secondaries and less so on primaries, latter with pale base and dark tips (Plate 8); upperparts show rufous brown back and greater coverts, with buff fringes and buffy shoulders, heavily streaked rufous; greyish flight feathers with dark brown barring and primary tips, and broad trailing edge; brownish-grey tail with thin bands, broadest on the sub-terminal, and whitish uppertail coverts with sparse rufous spots (Plate 8).



Plate 8: Female Eastern Marsh Harrier in flight

Juvenile Eastern Marsh Harriers are dark brown with cream breast band (sometimes extending to neck and mantle) and variable cream patches on the head and streaks on the mantle and lesser coverts (Plate 9).



Plate 9: Juvenile Eastern Marsh Harrier perched

In flight, dark brown underwing and coverts, variably streaked creamy-white; pale base to outer primaries and dark brown primary tips; upperparts dark brown with indistinct, whitish rump and brown tail with buff bands (Fig. 21 & 22). From juvenile Pied Harrier by larger size and bulkier shape, no white crescents around eye, less conspicuous white rump and less obvious barring on tail.



Plate 9: Juvenile Eastern Marsh Harrier in flight

Conclusion

The aim of this series is to highlight the crucial differences between similar pairs or groups of species so that we can improve our bird identification skills. Hopefully, the result will be greater confidence and accuracy in identifying what we see. If you have other species pairs or groups you would like to see featured, please contact the Editor.

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