

Wintering Hen Harriers

Isle of Purbeck

2021 / 22

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Ringtail / Immature Hen Harrier – Poole harbour
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1. Introduction

The Isle of Purbeck (or also known as just Purbeck) is a peninsular in Dorset on England's southern coast, which is surrounded by water on 3 sides – The English Channel, Poole Harbour and the River Frome running along its northern border.

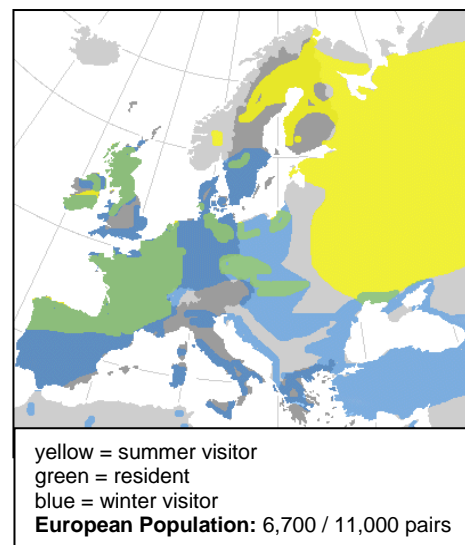


Purbeck Heath NNR & Poole Harbour viewed from Creech Hill ©Garry Hayman

Purbeck is one of the richest places for wildlife in the UK, with many areas being designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Ramsar sites. In February 2020, further recognition of its importance was given with the declaration of the new Purbeck Heaths National Nature Reserve (NNR) thanks to its unique mix of open coast, natural harbour, lowland heath, chalk and limestone habitats covering 3,331 hectares. It links together three existing NNRs of Hartland Moor, Stoborough Heath and Studland & Godlingston Heath, to create the UK's first new 'super' National Nature Reserve.

The graceful Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) is a large raptor that generally lives in open areas with low vegetation. In the UK, during the breeding season and summer months, they are found on the upland heather moorlands of Wales, Northern England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. However in winter, they move to low-lying farmland, heath land, coastal marshes and fenland such as Purbeck.

Adult Male Hen Harriers are a pale grey colour on top and white underneath with black wing tips; females and immature birds are brown with a white rump and a long, barred tail which give them the name 'Ringtail'. Both males and females have a disc of feathers around their eyes / face which gives them an owl-like appearance.



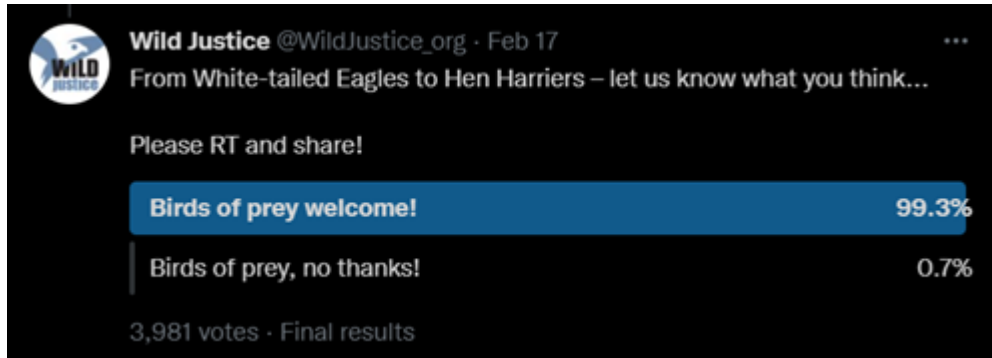
Sadly, the Hen Harrier is one of the most persecuted birds of prey in the UK, particularly on or near grouse moors. Hen Harriers were abundant throughout the UK at the turn of the 19th century but, unfortunately, were driven to near extinction by the end of it. There was a slight positive increase in the population during the two World Wars but this soon reversed when rural life returned to normal. For this reason, the Hen Harrier is strictly protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife & Countryside Protection Act 1981 and also included on the Red List of UK birds of conservation concern. Whilst classified globally as “least concern” by the IUCN, in the UK however it is very much a different story where there has been a 20% decrease in population in the last 20 years.

Astonishingly in 2017, there were just three successful Hen Harrier nests in the whole of England. Whilst there are collaborative initiatives such as the Raptor Watch and Operation Artemis, established in 2004, which specifically address Hen Harrier crime and are supported by a range of countryside groups, persecution of Hen Harriers and other raptors continues to be of major concern. Most people now recognise the need to protect the UK’s raptor population and many landowners, raptor workers, conservation organisations work tirelessly to provide the conditions for the population to recover. But there is still a lot of work to do in educating people and changing their mindset on raptor persecution. A prime example being the conversation I (GH) had with an elderly dog walker (DW) I met on the 14th March this year at 5.50am when completing my roost watch:

- (DW) *Oh, what have we here then? You won't get many photos in this light, son.*
- (GH) *Good Morning, it's not a camera sir but a telescope.*
- (DW) *What you looking for?*
- (GH) *Raptors.*
- (DW) *What?*
- (GH) *Birds of prey.*
- (DW) *Oh, those bloody things should all be shot. They are the reason we have no song birds left.*
- (GH) *It's not the birds of prey that are the problem, we are, humans.*
- (DW) *Hmm, I have changed my slug pellets though. No idea why they want to re-introduce them anyway. They've been extinct for 200 years. So what makes you think they will survive now? I remember when there were only 2 Peregrine Falcons along this coast. But now they are every-bloody -where. They even put up boxes for the bloody things.*
- (GH) *As I said, we are the problem not the birds. Unfortunately, not much survives the bullet or poisoning.*
- (DW) *Huh! [And he walked off with his dog.]*

This type of narrow-minded attitude is also not helped when those we vote into government add fuel to the fire with scaremongering opinions about the risk of White-tailed Eagle reintroduction to people’s pets and farmers’ sheep - like the recent comments by Chris Loder (MP for West Dorset) following the mysterious death of two translocated sea eagles when the MP questioned Dorset police rural crime unit spending resources on investigating this potential crime.

Fortunately, his views were not shared by the nearly 4,000 people who responded to a Twitter poll carried out by Wild Justice @WildJustice_org where the overwhelming majority (97.3%) welcome birds of prey. The tiny minority (0.3%) saying 'no thanks' to birds of prey represented less than 30 people.



2. General observations about the roosting habitat

"In common with many other raptor species Hen Harriers roost communally during the winter months. Monitoring a roost site allows a relatively accurate picture of a local population to be built up although this should not necessarily be taken as definitive evidence since some birds are more nomadic than others and can change their overnight preference regularly, both within a specific roost area (say a local heath) or a more general, larger geographical area (say Poole Harbour or Purbeck). Thus, because roost numbers are liable to ebb and flow, care must always be taken to try to identify specific individuals according to plumage variation and/or (importantly) repetitive roost behaviour over a period of time.

There are several historical Hen Harrier roost sites in the vicinity of Poole Harbour and there are others scattered around the adjacent Isle of Purbeck with settling habitats as diverse as wet bog, dry heather, reed bed and rank scrub. Added to these are various satellite sites occasionally used by one or more birds away from the favoured roost areas, e.g., by passage birds unfamiliar with the terrain."



Example of a Purbeck winter roost habitat - a mix of Molinia Grass & Soft Rush on wet boggy ground
© Garry Hayman

3. Historical data

What in recent years has been the most frequently occupied winter roost site within the Poole Harbour complex has been monitored intensively since 2009 with daily visits at dawn and/or dusk. The numbers in the following table are largely drawn from those records.

HEN HARRIER NUMBERS IN POOLE HARBOUR BY MONTH (2009-2020)

	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Jan		4	5	4	4	6	5	5	4	5	3	2	2
Feb		3	5	3	3	6	6	4	6	6	1	2	2
Mar		1			4	2	5	2	4	8	2	2	2
Apr			1		2		2	3	2	3			
May		1			1			1	1				
Aug										1	1		
Sep		1	1	1		1					1		
Oct	1	2		2	2	3	3	4	6	4	1	3	
Nov	1	3	3	2	3	5	4	4	3	2	3	3	
Dec	3	5	3	5	4	5	3	2	4	2	3	3	

The table shows that there appears to be a slight decrease in mid-winter numbers over very recent years although it should be said that fluctuations have always occurred and the most recent 2021/22 winter redressed the decline somewhat. (Hadrill, P. (2022), Historical HH Harbour Data [email])

4. Observations winter 2021/2022

4.1. Period of observation

This winter, I have been monitoring one specific roosting area within Purbeck on a daily basis together with my birding companion Peter Hadrill. Peter has been monitoring Poole Harbour roosts for over 30 years; initially periodically but then intensively from 2009. I started on a daily basis from early November 2021 and periodically before then. The data is a collective of sightings from both Peter and myself, as there were a number of occasions that only one of us was able to watch the roost. The 26th March 2022 was the last date a Hen Harrier was seen leaving the observed winter roost site.



Adult male - Purbeck
© Garry Hayman

4.2 Birds observed

The first confirmed Isle of Purbeck Hen Harrier sighting this winter / autumn was spotted on 14th October, a juvenile male Ringtail over the Lower Frome Valley. Although there was a potential sighting of a Hen Harrier over Wytch Channel on the 23rd September by OTBT Birder (@birderOtbt – Twitter). It was not until the morning of 24th October that the first roosting Hen Harrier was recorded.

This winter we have seen about 8 or 9 different Hen Harriers at the observed roost. A long-staying adult female, which was distinguished by her roosting habits; a female with a golden patch on her nape; a 2021 juvenile male A1Z that was born & ringed in Northumberland; a juvenile male with very pale shoulders and another adult female with a ragged tail. However, the Hen Harrier that most captivated my interest was an adult male, which I first saw from the Middlebere



Juv male A1Z - Slepe Moor 25th Feb ©Mark Wright

hide on the 31st October hunting over Slepe Moor and which then flew down the Channel. He pretty much was seen entering or leaving the roost every day up until 31st Dec, but then just periodically in 2022. We are sure it was the same Hen throughout due to his behaviour. And whilst we did regularly see him at the roost site, his daytime sightings were very infrequent and a bit of a mystery. We suspect he probably spent most of the day hunting around the MOD ranges, which would explain the few sightings. The last sighting of the male was on Sunday 5th March, when he left the roost at 06.36 and flew west.

Long-staying wintering adult males are relatively rare in Purbeck with the last overwinter adult male recorded between 16th November 2017 and 27th March 2018. It is not unusual to see a winter roosting male, as there are generally sightings each year. But these are normally short-staying birds for a week or so. Mid February 2018 was a particular good month with 3 male roosting together for a few nights. But there was just something about this male that pulled the strings of my heart and have to admit that it was due to his presence that I started intensively watching this Purbeck roost sight.

The Hen Harriers would generally depart the roost 10 minutes before sunrise and come into roost 10 – 15 minutes after sunset. It was through monitoring the pre- and post-roost periods that individual birds could be recognised, which was how we arrived at a total of up to 9 different Hen Harriers roosting over the winter. The highest single count involved 4 birds on 17th December 2021 (3 ringtails and the male); whilst there were also 12 days when 3 birds were seen arriving at or leaving the site.



Adult Male - Purbeck ©Mark Wright

There were some truly memorable roost watches, like on the 25th October when my wife and I arrived at our view point at 15.50 and within 5 minutes the Ringtail turned up and flew around for 2-3 minutes over the roost site, potentially looking for the male but then disappeared behind the hill for a moment. Then, the male came in at 16.23 and went straight into roost. However, after about a minute up he came again and was quickly joined by the Ringtail. Despite the fading light they then put on a fantastic aerobatic display interacting for 10 minutes; he was twisting, tumbling and even flying upside down at one point. With the light virtually gone, they both went down together at 16.35 within 3m of each other.

Another was on New Year's Eve 2021 when at 3.55pm a Ringtail came in over the heath and was flying towards the roost site but looked agitated and rightly so, as a Goshawk all of a sudden flew in. There was a swift encounter between the Ringtail and Goshawk when out of nowhere another Ringtail came in and started harassing the Goshawk. With two against one the Goshawk swiftly departed south East towards the forest. The 2 Ringtails continued to fly around and at times quite high, clearly still agitated from the Goshawk. They then disappeared North West over the Heath.

As if nothing had happened, the male drifted in at 4.20pm and flew around a bit. He initially dropped down at 4.25pm but was quickly kicked out again by one of the Ringtails, who then dropped into the spot he was occupying. The male finally went into roost at 4.29pm but there was no further sign of the other Ringtail.

It has been a really good winter for the Harbour Marsh Harriers, too. Generally, Poole Harbour has 7 – 10 wintering Marsh Harriers and a record high of a definite 15, possibly 16 in 2015. However, during the period of really cold weather in early December we counted an astonishing 21 Marsh Harriers out of the winter roost. Whilst this may not seem many when compared to East Anglia, it is a significant number for Poole Harbour.

Away from the monitored roost site throughout the winter there have been regular Hen Harriers sightings during the day around different areas of the Purbeck Heaths, moors, salt marshes, reed beds and slightly further afield North Poole Harbour & Wareham Forest - in particular Middlebere Channel / Slepe Moor, Hartland Moor, RSPB Arne, Swineham, River Frome & River Piddle flood plains, Wareham Channel, Lytchett Bay, Winspit and St. Aldhems Head. It was at Middlebere / Slepe Moor where A1Z, the juvenile male ringtail, was photographed and identified. Thus, demonstrating the importance of ringing, in that it not only helps with identification of an individual, but also helps to learn about dispersal / migration, how long they live and where the nest or winter roost is.

4.3. Disturbance

Unfortunately there were three main sources of disturbance noted:

- 1) Recreational users
- 2) Bird watchers and photographers
- 3) Deer

The roost site has a series of footpaths and way-marked trails with very close proximity to the actual roosts, which are well used by dog walkers, runners, walkers and mountain bikers. Some disturbance was seen when Hen harriers would be disturbed unintentionally from pre-roosting areas by approaching recreational users using the network of footpaths. The Hen Harriers in this instance would just move to another pre-roost spot. This was only an issue if they stopped for some reason or if there was a dog not under close control. If the walker, cyclist or dog walker carried on without stopping more often than not the Hen Harriers would just keep an eye on them. Fortunately, neither Peter nor I actually witnessed any Hen Harriers being flushed from a roost, but clearly the potential for this to happen exists when people walk off the marked paths.

Deer numbers, in particular Sika Deer, are on the increase on the Isle of Purbeck with herds of over 70 being counted at the roost site. I can recall at least a couple of occasions when deer have actually trampled through a roost and flushed a Hen Harrier. I also suspect that the reason a Hen Harrier might have changed roost position or site overnight was due to the disturbance from deer. Whilst I do not have any evidence of this, the deer are clearly a nuisance and remain a concern in such large herds.

The third witnessed form of disturbance was from fellow bird watchers and photographers. The majority of these did observe the Hen harriers from a distance. However, as is always the case, it is a few inconsiderate individuals that for some reason need to get as close as possible with little respect for the welfare of the very bird they have come to see or photograph. There were at least 3 occasions when we watched an incoming Hen Harrier either flushed from its pre-roost, spooked by sudden movement or taking evasive action by changing its flight line when coming into roost. In particular I remember an incident when a photographer was within 30m of the roost. Whilst he was initially hidden from our view, he was obviously visible to the Hen Harrier. As previously mentioned the Hen Harrier is strictly protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife & Countryside Protection Act 1981 and also included on the Red List of UK birds of conservation concern. This makes the disturbance by these selfish people even more puzzling as they should know better.

5. Discussion: The Southern Hen Harrier Reintroduction Project

The Southern Hen Harrier Reintroduction Project in Wiltshire is being co-ordinated by Natural England on behalf of Defra (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs) and follows a lengthy battle to save this bird from extinction in the north of England. In January 2016, Defra released an action plan setting out what will be done to increase hen harrier populations in England. The action plan was developed by the Defra-led Upland Stakeholder Forum hen harrier sub-group. The sub-group was made up of representatives from Defra, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Moorland Association, National Gamekeepers Organisation, National Parks UK, Natural England and the RSPB. As part of that plan action 5 was Southern reintroduction, which was based on an unpublished

scoping project (dated 2012) called 'The Feasibility of Translocating Hen Harriers to Southern England, and Prioritisation of Potential Translocation Sites and Strategies'.



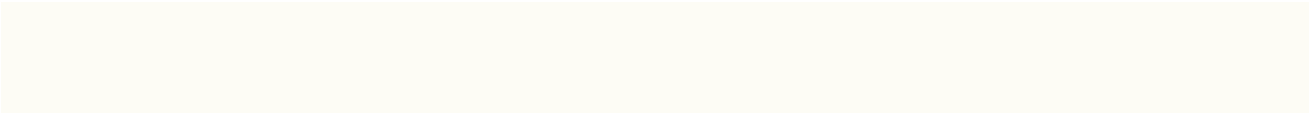
Ringtail - Purbeck ©Garry Hayman

Within the scoping project potential release site considered were: Dartmoor, Exmoor, Dorset Heaths and Wiltshire on Salisbury Plain. The Purbeck Heaths, along with The Dorset Down / Cranbourne Chase were assessed as potential release sites. However, in the executive summary of the feasibility study says that the Dorset heath sites were considered generally unsuitable for release due to the high conservation value of the extant communities, intensive pressure from tourism, exposed nesting habitat, and limited potential for population spread from the site of release. It

goes on to say that releases into Wiltshire may be more favourable for birds sourced from France or Spain since these birds commonly breed in arable habitats.

Thus, Wiltshire was decided upon as being the location for the southern hen harrier reintroduction project, in particular a site on Salisbury Plain. Over five years the project aims to reintroduce up to 20 birds a year from donor sites in Spain and France, where arable habitats are similar to those in southern England. This will be the first year that birds will be reintroduced but as Natural England recognises the birds are very vulnerable to natural hazards and so it will take a while to ensure that a healthy population is established. For this reason the project remains controversial and not everyone agrees that this is a good idea. The RSPB and Wild Justice for instance, are opposed to the scheme, and will not support the reintroduction project in Wiltshire. Natural England recognises that this project is not an easy option because the birds are notoriously poor survivors in their first year with natural mortality affecting about seven out of every ten birds. However, they have carried out extensive feasibility studies in order to do everything possible to save these majestic birds from extinction, especially as the hen harrier is one of our top avian predators and they form an important part of our eco-system.

It will be interesting to see what effect, if any, the Southern England Hen Harrier Reintroduction Project has on our own winter population and if one day there will be breeding Hen Harriers in Purbeck?



6. Acknowledgements and Reference:

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I would like to sincerely thank Peter Hadrill for his help, support and contribution in completing this report. Also thank you for his companionship in some very cold bleak wintery conditions and putting up the many questions I would constantly bombard him with to broaden my own knowledge on Hen & Marsh Harriers. Together we shared some very memorable moments of watching these magnificent birds.

Thank you also to Mark Wright for the kind use of his photos within the report.

I appreciate help, support and information from Paul Morton and the Birds of Poole Harbour team.

And most importantly, a massive thank you to my lovely wife Sandra & son Tom for their patience, support and understanding. Especially when our daily schedules would evolve around the Hen Harriers' timings. Sorry for waking you up on Christmas day at 6.30am. But there's no rest for the wicked, which must make me quite evil!

6. Appendix: Daily Counts

Oct-21	Grey male		Ringtail	
	AM	PM	AM	PM
1st				
2nd				
3rd				
4th				
5th				
6th				
7th				
8th				
9th				
10th				
11th				
12th				
13th				
14th				
15th				
16th				
17th				
18th				
19th				
20th				
21st				
22nd				
23rd				
24th			1	
25th			1	
26th			1	
27th			1	1
28th			1	
29th	1	1	1	1
30th				
31st				

Nov-21	Grey male		Ringtail	
	AM	PM	AM	PM
1st				
2nd				
3rd				
4th				
5th		1		
6th		1		1
7th	1	1	1	1
8th	1			
9th	1			
10th		1		
11th	1			
12th				
13th	1			
14th				
15th	1		1	1
16th		1		
17th		1		1
18th	1			
19th	1			
20th			1	
21st				
22nd			1	1
23rd	1	1		
24th	1		1	1
25th			1	1
26th				
27th				
28th	1	1	1	
29th		1		
30th	1	1		

Dec-21	Grey male		Ringtail	
	AM	PM	AM	PM
1st	1	1	1	
2nd	1		1	
3rd		1		1
4th	1	1	1	
5th	1	1	1	1
6th	1	1	1	1
7th		1		2
8th	1	1	1	
9th				
10th	1	1	1	2
11th	1		1	
12th	1		1	
13th	1		1	
14th	1	1	1	2
15th	1	1	1	2
16th	1	1	1	1
17th	1	1	1	3
18th				
19th		1		1
20th	1	1	1	
21st	1	1		
22nd	1	1		1
23rd	1		1	
24th	1	1	1	
25th	1		2	
26th	1	1	2	2
27th				
28th	1	1	1	1
29th		1		1
30th	1	1	1	2
31st	1	1	2	2

Jan-22	Grey male		Ringtail	
	AM	PM	AM	PM
1st				2
2nd				1
3rd			1	1
4th			1	2
5th			2	2
6th				
7th				2
8th				
9th			1	1
10th				1
11th	1		2	
12th				1
13th			2	
14th			1	
15th			1	1
16th				1
17th			1	
18th				
19th		1	1	
20th		1		1
21st		1	1	1
22nd				
23rd		1		1
24th	1	1	1	1
25th		1		1
26th		1		1
27th				1
28th			1	1
29th			1	
30th				1
31st		1	1	1

Feb-22	Grey male		Ringtail	
	AM	PM	AM	PM
1st	1		1	1
2nd			1	1
3rd		1	1	1
4th		1		1
5th	1		1	
6th	1		1	1
7th			2	1
8th			1	2
9th			2	1
10th			1	1
11th			1	1
12th			1	1
13th			1	1
14th			2	
15th			1	
16th			1	2
17th				1
18th			2	
19th				
20th				
21st				
22nd			1	
23rd			1	
24th			1	
25th			2	
26th			2	
27th				
28th				

Mar-22	Grey male		Ringtail	
	AM	PM	AM	PM
1st			1	
2nd			1	
3rd				1
4th		1	1	
5th	1		2	
6th	1		2	
7th			1	2
8th			1	1
9th			1	1
10th			1	1
11th			1	1
12th			2	2
13th			2	2
14th			3	2
15th				
16th			1	1
17th			1	
18th			1	
19th			1	
20th				1
21st				1
22nd			1	
23rd				1
24th			1	
25th				
26th				
27th				
28th				
29th				
30th				
31st				