harriers in the HOANIB

TEXT **ROB SIMMONS & MARLEI MARTINS**

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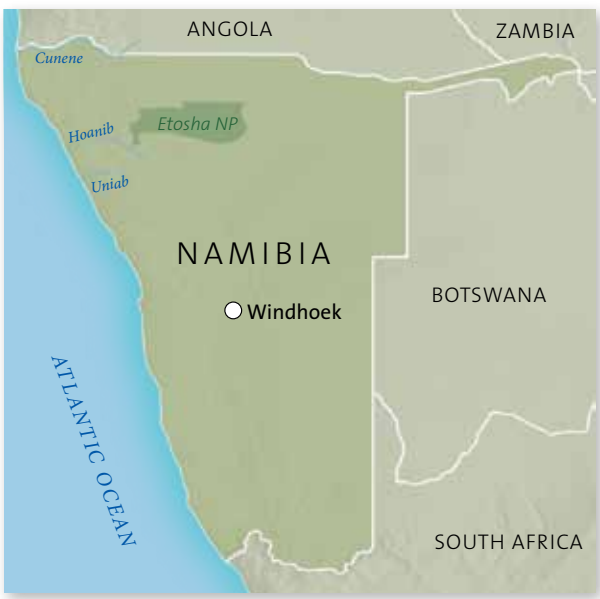
A juvenile Pallid Harrier foraging over the dunes in Namibia's Hoanib River.

As an endemic raptor facing many conservation problems, the Black Harrier requires consistent action to reverse population declines. Exploring new areas where it may breed is one course of such action and in the breeding season of 2015 we undertook surveys of the Hoanib River and Uniab River floodplains in north-western Namibia to determine whether this Endangered species breeds there. There had been persistent reports of juvenile and adult birds in the two floodplains and conditions there were ideal, with numerous rodents and suitable habitat, yet our survey revealed no Black Harriers. We did, however, record other rare harrier visitors: a Pallid in the Hoanib floodplain and two Montagu's in south–central Namibia. In all, a diverse raptor population of 12 species was logged in the Hoanib, which makes the floodplain an important conservation unit in Namibia's protected area network for raptors.

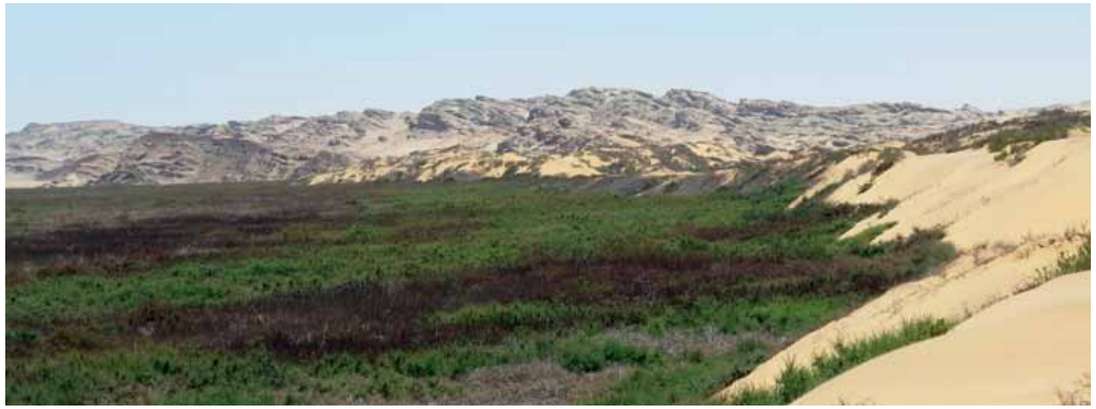


To say that the Black Harrier is facing a bleak future as southern Africa's rarest endemic raptor is an understatement. With a global population of about 1000 birds, it relies on an increasingly fragmented and degraded habitat and completely lacks any mitochondrial genetic variation, which means that it is likely to continue to decline across southern Africa. Consequently, the species has recently been reclassified as Endangered in both Namibia and South Africa, its global range.

Black Harriers are traditionally found from south-western South Africa and the Eastern Cape to scattered localities in the coastal areas of Namibia, as well as in Lesotho where they spend the summer. Breeding has only ever been confirmed in South Africa, yet rumours abound of possible breeding in north-western Namibia. The evidence was reviewed in the recently published Red Data book for Namibia (Simmons, Brown and Kemper 2015) and in a paper by Chris Brown and colleagues that summarises all nest records in Namibia.

The aim of our trip to north-western Namibia was to understand whether Black Harriers breed in the Hoanib River floodplain and, if so, to record their clutch and brood size and determine their diet by means of small cameras at the nest. Any nests found would have extended the species' known breeding range northward by more than 1000 kilometres.

We timed our visit to maximise the chances of there being chicks in the nest, judging by the breeding season of Black Harriers in the Northern Cape, the nearest confirmed breeding location. We used local knowledge provided by Flip Stander and Emsie Verwey, who spend a lot of time tracking lions and >



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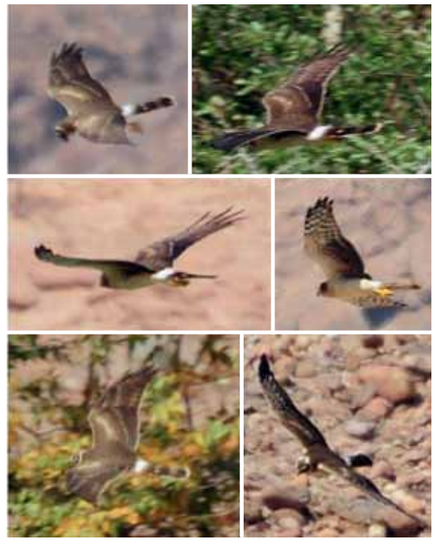

R. & S. CHRISTINGER

above *An immature Pallid Harrier photographed on the Cunene River in October 2015.*

top *The Namib sand sea blocks the westward passage of the Hoanib River, creating a lush floodplain for both predators and prey.*

ANOTHER SURPRISE WAS **THE OCCURRENCE OF A HARRIER SPECIES THAT IS EVEN LESS COMMON THAN THE BLACK HARRIER**. THE PRESENCE OF ... PALLID HARRIERS ... INDICATES THAT THIS SPECIES MAY BE MORE COMMON THAN THE SPARSE BIRD ATLAS DATA REVEAL

other predators around the floodplain and were happy to share their recent observations of all birds of prey.

The Hoanib is an ephemeral river that runs from the highlands west of Etosha National Park westwards to the coast through the hyper-arid Namib Desert in the Kaokoveld. Its journey is impeded in the west by the Namib sand sea, which stops most flood waters from flowing to the coast. Bushy salt-bush *Suaeda* sp. vegetation dominates the western part of the floodplain and provides cover for rodent populations, as well as potential nest cover for harriers. Upstream, the vegetation in the riverbed comprises mustard tree *Salvadora persica* bushes, some grasses and the mature ana trees *Faidherbia* (*Acacia*) *albida* that provide food, in the form of pods, for elephants and ungulates such as gemsbok and springbok.

We encountered 12 raptor species in the floodplain but no Black Harriers, even though there were good populations of rodents (primarily striped mice). One harrier that we did find, though, was a juvenile Pallid Harrier on migration from Eurasia. This very rare visitor was foraging at speed, with the wind, down the dry river channel and along associated *!nara* melon dune hummocks. Approximately 11 seconds of video footage enabled us to identify this difficult species, mainly on the presence of barring all the way along the underside of the outermost primaries (immature Montagu's Harrier lacks such extensive barring) and on the grouping of the three longest primaries, all of which were about the same length, whereas the outermost primary (10) was appreciably shorter. The combination of white collar and white cheek patch also distinguishes Pallid from juvenile Montagu's. It was less obvious on this bird, but still visible in some images captured on the video. The harrier was presumed to be female, judging from its large size.

Another Pallid Harrier was subsequently reported to us 250 kilometres north of the Hoanib on the perennial Cunene River in October, three weeks before our sighting. That bird, photographed several times by Ryan and Sarah Christinger at their camp, was older than ours – a sub-adult, as evidenced by the pale belly and flanks and paler brown plumage on the back.

Other raptors we saw at the Hoanib floodplain were Lanner Falcon, a breeding pair of Lappet-faced Vultures and Augur Buzzard, as well as Pale Chanting Goshawk, whose brown-plumaged immatures can be confused with young Black Harriers due to their similar size, white rump and flight pattern. Booted Eagles were occasionally seen soaring over the floodplain, as were Steppe Buzzards. An African Hawk Eagle – perched in a mature ana tree in the riverbed – was a surprise; the SABAP2 database records the species here, but its breeding status is not known.

Among other Red Data species seen were Secretarybird (a single bird observed foraging on the fringes of the eastern floodplain), the ubiquitous Rock Kestrel and Greater Kestrel (a pair hunting over the floodplain). To complete the suite of 12 raptors, a Barn Owl was heard at the Wilderness Safaris camp, approximately one kilometre south of the Hoanib River in the rocky hills along the riverbed.

We had one more notable sighting of a rare harrier species on our return journey along the B1 highway south of Windhoek, virtually colliding with a juvenile Montagu's Harrier that was migrating south over arid thornveld. We were even more surprised to see an adult male about 100 metres away, also heading south. The juvenile, like the juvenile Pallid Harrier we had seen at Hoanib, was identified by the underwing pattern, which lacked barring but did have dark tips to the primaries. Other distinguishing features were the differing lengths of the last four primaries and the large amount of white around the eye – the latter a characteristic of this species. The second grey bird was easily identified as an adult male Montagu's Harrier, a rare species in Namibia, although it is categorised there as being of Least Concern.

The fact that we saw no Black Harriers in the Hoanib floodplain in November 2015 was a surprise, given the ideal conditions. There was an abundance of mice following a flood, as well as a profusion of suitable nesting vegetation. Nevertheless, observations by Steve Braine of adults carrying food and the presence of young birds in previous years make us confident that the species will be found breeding there in the future. Photographic evidence would be the best means of confirming this.

left *A juvenile Montagu's Harrier migrating south down the B1 highway south of Windhoek in November 2015.*

below *Lanner Falcons were common in the Hoanib floodplain and may breed there.*

Another surprise was the occurrence of a harrier species that is even less common than the Black Harrier. The presence of at least two different Pallid Harriers (the juvenile along the Hoanib River and the sub-adult on the Cunene) indicates that this species may be more common than the sparse bird atlas data from the region reveal. The fact that a healthy raptor community persists in the Hoanib floodplain also suggests that this is an important area for biodiversity, given that raptors are a good indication of high biodiversity value.

This being the case, we commend the conservancy work undertaken by Wilderness Safaris, whose staff run the concession area and, by doing so, not only protect it, but also generate funds for local communities from tourist revenues. The presence of top predators such as lions, cheetahs and hyaenas corroborates the high biodiversity value of the area and confirms that it should continue to be conserved and researched. ◆

Wilderness Safaris' offer of accommodation and services to researchers in this remote area made our study possible and affordable and we thank them, as well as Emsie Verwey and Flip Stander for their help. We encourage other researchers to make use of these facilities and the expertise offered by the staff and fellow researchers. We also thank Ryan and Sarah Christinger for harrier information and photographs from their Cunene camp. This study was funded in part by grants from Golden Fleece Merino and the National Research Foundation.