

Teachers Notes

What do you think would make an ideal hen harrier habitat?

Hen harriers nest in stands of old, deep heather, usually over 30cm long. Their main diet consists of small birds and mammals such as meadow pipits and field voles, though they will occasionally take larger prey such as young rabbits and red grouse. As voles and meadow pipits nest in long grass, hen harriers have been shown to prefer a grass-heather mix in their wider habitat, though they will travel up to 6-7 km from their nest when hunting. Hen harriers can be sensitive to disturbance early in the breeding season, so an ideal nest site would not be too close to footpaths or walking routes.

What challenges might hen harriers face by building their nest on the ground?

All birds that nest on the ground are more at risk from predators such as foxes, stoats and weasels than those that nest higher up in trees and bushes. That is why hen harriers choose long, dense heather to hide their nests in. By nesting on the ground, their eggs may also be at risk of being trampled by people, dogs, mountain bikes or 4x4s using the hillside. That is why it is so important for people to stick to designated paths and to keep dogs on a lead during the breeding season.

Do ground nesting birds in other habitats have the same challenges?

All ground nesting birds are at risk from trampling and predators, however some lowland birds and those nesting near the water may also be at risk of flooding if there's a lot of rain or a high tide. Swans often have this problem. Birds that nest in the open, like lapwing, don't have the long vegetation for shelter and their eggs and chicks can be more at risk from exposure to harsh weather conditions.

Why do you think hen harriers nest on the ground rather than somewhere high up?

Simple – there isn't anywhere high-up for them to nest! Moorland is naturally rich in wildlife and food for hen harriers but trees and bushes are generally confined to the moorland edge. To take advantage of all moorland has to offer, hen harriers have evolved to live right in the middle of it all, which means nesting on the ground.

How are hen harriers adapted to their moorland habitat?

The female hen harrier is a dark mottled brown colour, which keeps her camouflaged while she's on the nest. Male hen harriers are the same colour as the female for the first year of their life for the same reason, and don't develop their characteristic grey plumage until their second year. The female stays on the nest all the time until the chicks are a few weeks old and big enough to hide in the heather next to the nest – then she helps the male with finding food. By passing food to the female in mid-air, rather than bringing it straight to the nest, the brightly coloured male avoids drawing attention to the nest location. Hen harriers have very long legs with sharp talons for reaching deep into the long vegetation to grab voles, and forward-facing eyes to give them good depth-perception.



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Can you think of any other animals that are adapted to live on the moorland?

Red grouse are only found on heather moorland. They eat short, young heather and nest in the old, long heather. Other moorland animals include adder, curlew, field vole, and meadow pipit.

Could you invent your own moorland creature? What would it look like?

Think about colour, size and shape. Where does it live? What does it eat? If it's a bird, what shape is its bill? Does it need long legs for walking over the heather, or short legs for scurrying under it?