

Let's create great things with tech

Get to know us

twoday

Support the Guardian

Fund independent journalism with \$5 per month

Support us



Country diary Birds

Country diary: An all-white hen harrier, ghosting along the cliffs

Laxey Bay, Isle of Man: These raptors do well here, thanks to a lack of persecution. And this one is so remarkable I can hardly believe my eyes



A ghostly leucistic hen harrier in flight. Photograph: Peter Christian

David Bellamy

Sat 2 Sep 2023 05:30 BST



10

It's not every day that I see something that I'll remember for the rest of my life. My sister and niece are over on holiday, and during an amble along the coast we witnessed what will perhaps be the greatest ornithological sighting I will ever make from home: a ghostly all-white hen harrier.

To see any hen harrier is a sight to behold, even here on the Isle of Man where we boast some 38 pairs - surely the highest breeding density across all of Britain and Ireland. On a summer walk in the Manx hills I would be amazed not to see one. But down along the rocky coast by our home I rarely see them. To be precise (being among the peculiar type who keeps notes of such things), I have only seen a hen harrier from home three times before, despite them breeding only a stone's throw away.

All three of us saw the leucistic (unpigmented) bird - a reassuring fact when you can't quite believe your eyes. It flew slowly along the cliffs in deadly, unnerving silence. Where were the crowds with their long lenses? Aghast, we enjoyed this private yet all-too-brief encounter until the bird flew out of view over Laxey, a village of some 1,800 residents, of whom I bet not a single one noticed. How can something so conspicuous be so rarely reported on such a small island?



Scheme to protect hen harriers in England a waste of money, says wildlife group

Read more

I have counted hundreds of harriers coming in to roost at nightfall over many a dreary winter's day, a two-hour-long task that makes you question your sanity. Earlier this summer, after induction into the ornithological inner sanctum, I spent many late evenings monitoring their nests on the Manx hills, an area that BirdLife International has deemed to be of global significance for this species. Yet despite this, I had never seen a leucistic one.

Gratified, we continued our bumble almost as if the moment had never happened. My young niece lives in Yorkshire, so - regrettably - this was her first hen harrier sighting. She should see them breeding on the moor up behind her house, but it lies empty, largely due to the existence of driven grouse moors; these harriers are Britain's most persecuted raptor. Thankfully here on our little island they find refuge among our serene, heather-clad hills, far from the danger of the moors that are just discernible across the sea on a summer's day.

Country diary is on Twitter at @gdncountrydiary

Topics: Birds / Country diary Rural affairs / Animals / Wildlife / features



Reuse this content

Most viewed

Original reporting and incisive analysis, direct from the Guardian every morning

Sign up for our email

- About us Help Complaints & corrections SecureDrop Work for us Privacy settings Privacy policy Cookie policy Terms & conditions Contact us

- All topics All writers Modern Slavery Act Digital newspaper archive Facebook YouTube Instagram LinkedIn Twitter Newsletters

- Advertise with us Guardian Labs Search jobs Patrons