

# First documented record of Marsh Harrier for the West Indies and the New World

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### Field encounters

On 11 November 2002, an unidentified medium-sized raptor was discovered by the junior author (LM) and Guy Belair at Grand Cul-de-Sac Marin, Guadeloupe, French West Indies. Eighteen National Parks rangers from France observed the bird too, but none of them was sure of its identity. One ranger proposed that it might possibly be a kite (genus *Milvus*), but from the description, the senior author (AL) suspected that it might be a hawk (genus *Buteo*), as there have been records of at least two *Buteo* species on Guadeloupe in the past. The next day, AL searched for the bird but could not locate it.

On 28 November, what LM believed to be the same bird reappeared at the same place and was also seen the following two days. On 29 November, it was videotaped by LM, and a more complete description was obtained. Based on LM's description, AL suspected that the bird might be a Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*, a species with which he was very familiar in France, and the suspicion was confirmed on viewing the videotape. AL tried again to locate the bird but in vain. The bird reappeared on 11 December, and AL con-

tinued searching and finally found the bird on 14 December, confirming that it was without doubt a Marsh Harrier, at that point on the basis of field-guide illustrations. That day, AL succeeded in taking 10 color photographs, five of which have been deposited at VIREO in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (accession numbers v06/49/001, v06/49/002, v06/49/003, v06/49/004, and v06/49/005), and three of which appear here (Figures 1–3). It was observed on 12 days between 14 December 2002 and 19 January 2003, and the last dates of observation were 29 January, 13 February, 17 March, and 5 and 14 April 2003.

### Description

The bird was overall an even chocolate brown, with the crown, the center and sides of the throat, and the inner fore edge of the wing creamy buff-white. The ochre color of crown and throat was divided by a broad line through the eye, widest posteriorly. All of these characters are clearly visible in AL's photographs. The plumage is that of a juvenile, possibly a female; the uniformity and freshness of plumage also support ageing as a juvenile (Beaman and Madge 1998, Forsman 1999). Allan Keith and William S. Clark examined several of

the photographs, and Clark cited the "classic shape, rufous upper tail coverts, and face pattern of pale crown and throat with a wide, dark eyeline between" as confirmation of the bird's identity.

The combination of features in this distinctive plumage of *Circus a. aeruginosus* is sufficient to rule out superficially similar plumages of Australasian Marsh Harrier (*C. approximans*) and African Marsh Harrier (*C. ranivorus*), as well as the *spilonotus* subspecies of Marsh Harrier (Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001), sometimes accorded status as a full species, Eastern Marsh Harrier (Amadon 1978). When the nominate form is considered a distinct species in itself, the name "Western Marsh Harrier" is sometimes applied (e.g., Beaman 1994).

### Discussion

Several species of Western Palearctic migrants that winter in Africa are known to have occurred as vagrants to the Western Hemisphere. Migrants following along the west coast of Africa presumably occasionally get caught in strong easterly trade winds and are carried across the Atlantic to arrive in northeastern South America, in Florida, or in the Lesser Antilles, sometimes resting or riding for



Figure 1. Marsh Harrier, *Circus a. aeruginosus*, at Grand Cul-de-Sac Marin, Guadeloupe, French West Indies 14 December 2002. Note the creamy-buff cap and throat and otherwise mostly chocolate-brown plumage. Photograph by Anthony Levesque.





Figures 2–3. Two views of the Guadeloupe Marsh Harrier in flight 14 December 2002. The species is relatively heavy of build and wide-winged compared to other harrier species, thus the impressions, from certain angles, of an Old World kite (*Milvus*) or even a *Buteo*. Photographs by Anthony Levesque.

some distances on oceangoing vessels. The occurrence on Guadeloupe of Alpine Swift (*Apus melba*; Feldmann and Pavis 1995) and Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*; Levesque and Jaffard 2002) are probably attributable to such phenomena, and Ebels (2002) and Mazar Barnett and Kirwan (2002) cite many other examples for the Antilles. The Marsh Harrier observed in Guadeloupe is probably more likely to have originated in Europe than in Africa, as part of the European population migrates as far as the southern Sahara (Génsbøl 1999).

#### Status of the species in the New World

Although not included in the main list of the American Ornithologists' Union's *Check-list of North American Birds* (1998), Marsh Harrier is included in the Appendix (A.O.U. 2000), based on a 4 December 1994 report of a juvenile nominate-race Marsh Harrier from Chin-

coteague, Virginia, USA (Shedd et al. 1998; Clark and Wheeler 2001). Excellent field drawings were made and photographs of poor quality were taken of this individual, and the report has been accepted provisionally by that state's bird records committee in its Category 2 (Kain 1998). The Guadeloupe record is thus the first satisfactorily documented report of this species in the New World. It is conceivable that this individual could move north in the spring, perhaps to mainland North America. A record of the species 14–25 January 2004 at Laguna Cartagena, Puerto Rico was confirmed as this article went to press.

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