

# A sad end for a rare migrant bird

**Adrian Skerrett**

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Harriers are magnificent birds, resembling small eagles. Their aerial majesty is celebrated in the name of the Harrier Jump Jet, the only truly successful plane capable of vertical take-off and landing conceived for use in limited space including on aircraft carriers. The largest member of the family with the broadest wings is the Marsh Harrier. It lives in marshland and dense reed beds where it feeds on fish, lizards, amphibians and so on. Birds breed across Eurasia and migrate south to Africa to avoid the harsh northern winter.

On Saturday February 6, I was surprised and excited to find a Marsh Harrier at a small wetland surrounded by industrial development at Providence. This is only the fourth time it has been recorded in Seychelles. The first record was way back in 1888, one shot by the collector JJ Lister and the specimen now held at the UK Natural History Museum. It would be another 90 years before the bird would be recorded in the islands again, when Jeff Watson reported seeing one on Frégate in 1978. Then in 1994, one was seen on Mahé near Victoria.

I reported the bird to several local birdwatchers and at least two of these, Catherina Onezia and Joel Souyave were able to see it. I was also able to show it to a visiting American diplomat, himself a keen birdwatcher and he was delighted to see such a majestic rarity. Sadly, we were probably the last birdwatchers to see it.

On February 11, I received a visit from Ronley Fanchette of environment who brought with him the corpse of a Marsh Harrier, almost certainly this same bird. It had been shot. In 2015, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un executed his Defence Chief by firing an anti-aircraft gun at him. I imagine that the unfortunate man (who had committed the heinous crime of falling asleep in Kim's presence) looked something like this poor bird.

The Marsh Harrier declined in numbers until the late 20th century due to persecution, habitat destruction and excessive pesticide use. In UK by 1971, a single breeding pair was left. It is now a protected species in many countries and numbers are rising again. Threats in Europe have been largely averted. Over 200 pairs are now present in UK and in Ireland (where it became extinct in 1917) it has recently bred again. It still faces threats, including the shooting of birds migrating through the Mediterranean region in countries such as Malta. It is unfortunate too that half the birds that have ever been recorded in Seychelles have also been shot.

Marsh Harrier remains on an amber list, meaning it is not immediately threatened but it is one to watch. Like other birds of prey it is still listed by CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. It is very sad that in conservation-minded Seychelles it should have been killed by people who did not know what it was. If you see a bird you don't recognise, then don't assume it must be some sort of threat. Report it to me or to Seychelles Bird Records Committee at [sbrsecretary@gmail.com](mailto:sbrsecretary@gmail.com).