BIRD OF THE YEAR 2026 BLACK HARRIER

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a diamond in the rough

Imagine an iconic but vanishingly rare raptor species that never conforms to the norms; probably one of the best researched but least understood in South Africa. The Black Harrier flies under the radar, a species desperately needing to be recognised before it too blinks out as the Slender-billed Curlew did in 2025.

The Black Harrier is a mystery and a nomad, migrating hundreds of kilometres a day, across the subcontinent from plant-rich fynbos shrublands to the grassy highlands of Lesotho. Unlike all other South African raptors, it shows little fidelity to breeding sites year-in, year-out. And our research now reveals why: it evolved from another nomad, the Pallid Harrier of Eurasia, approximately 700 000 years ago. Like its pale progenitor, the Black Harrier moves rapidly across the landscape, searching out rodent-rich habitats, sampling across thousands of kilometres before settling for the right patch. That might be in renosterveld, coastal strandveld, montane fynbos, grassland in the Eastern Cape or a riparian river-line in the arid Richtersveld. When rains are unpredictable, they can bring sudden life to the Karoo or grasslands or deserts, and Black Harriers are programmed to breed there. Deserts? Yes, but we'll explore that later.

The Black Harrier is unique among African raptors in that it is occasionally polygynous – one male breeds with two females simultaneously – a trait shared with about six of the other 15 harrier species, although the Black Harrier shows relatively low levels in comparison. This may be a blessing, as the trait rarely favours secondary females but it may increase the fitness of the male trying his luck with the ladies.

But polygyny is no help when it comes to the three existential threats that the fewer than 1300 Black Harriers are now facing: habitat loss, fatalities at wind farms and climate change. In effect, the species is facing a green–green dilemma: the technology designed to limit greenhouse gases adds to the mortality of a species in peril due to habitat loss and climate change. State-of-the-art science (based on SABAP records) now shows that if wind facilities kill an additional three to five harriers per year, the species is predicted to go extinct in 75–100 years.

BirdLife South Africa's recent survey of 2444 bird fatalities from 32 operational wind farms indicates that this threshold has already been breached (3.8 Black Harriers per year). Thus, the science shows for the first time that Black Harriers are in severe danger of extinction. And when recent climate change modelling predicts that only 20 per cent of the species' suitable range will remain by 2080, extinction is even more likely – unless concerted and immediate action is taken. A lack of genetic diversity found in 2014 adds to the harrier's woes, with little room for manoeuvre in a rapidly changing environment.

As it is near-endemic, this stunning bird's future is entirely in South Africa's hands, and that means South Africans, from conservation organisations to government, have a massive responsibility.

Saving Black Harriers may seem a rather single-minded goal given the enormity of the biodiversity crisis. So why do we care? By conserving the fynbos and renosterveld remnants they prefer to breed in, many endemic plant species are ensured a future. By reducing wind farm deaths with clever mitigations, we can save many other species that suffer higher fatality rates. And by assessing the health of nestlings and adult harriers we can reveal hidden chemical dangers that may go unnoticed for other top predators that make a living in the agricultural matrix. Saving harriers has a host of spin-offs for other threatened species.

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