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Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus* the first record for Peninsular Malaysia

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At High Pines, Fraser's Hill, Pahang (altitude 1,320 m) on 2 April 1999 at 18h30, a very pale, adult male harrier *Circus* was seen flying from south to north and passed directly overhead. The bird was obviously on migration and flew with strong regular wing beats displaying a buoyant flight. When first seen it was a considerable distance away but, as the gap decreased, it became clear that this was a very pale bird of prey. The immediate reaction was that this was a small, lightly built harrier with an elegant shape, narrow wings and a long tail. When passing directly overhead at about an altitude of 70 m the yellow legs and black central primaries could be clearly seen. Apart from that, the underparts were very pale, appearing uniformly white, with the exception of very fine barring on the underwing. There was no contrast between the head and throat and the rest of the underbody. As the setting sun was low on the horizon and the weather was bright and clear the light conditions were perfect for observation. The bird was flying with its primaries spread which showed the black central primary feathers to advantage. The little that was seen of the upperwing showed a uniform pale grey with black central primaries. The bird had a dark eye and a pale bill. While still overhead it was independently identified by both observers as a male Pallid Harrier.

Harriers known to overwinter in Peninsular Malaysia are:-

1. Eastern Marsh Harrier *C. aeruginosus spilonotus*, which is the largest and most common species (Wells 1999). This harrier has broader wings and a more protruding head than the other species. The adult male has a broad black mask, a black-streaked breast, and a grey tail, while the underwing shows rufous bars on the secondaries and black-barred primaries on white underparts.
2. Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus* which is a vagrant (Wells 1999). The adult male has a grey head and upper breast, proportionally wider wings with 'dipped in ink' wingtips, a dark trailing edge to the underwing,

and a grey undertail. These features contrast with the rest of the white underparts and underwing.

3. Pied Harrier *C. melanoleucos* is less common than the Eastern Marsh Harrier and the adult male has a black head, upper breast, and wingtips.

All of these birds are familiar to the observers and none of them matches the description of the bird that we saw.

The Pallid Harrier is a long distance migrant and the majority of birds winter in the Indian subcontinent and Myanmar (Burma), and Ethiopian Africa (Cramp 1980). As a winter visitor to Burma it is not uncommon in the plains of southern Burma, and has also been recorded from the southern Shan States and Arakan, where it is common and arrives in November (Smythies 1986). The only other record from South-East Asia is an old record from east Tonkin, Vietnam (Robson 2000). Geographically, it is at least as likely to occur in Peninsular Malaysia as Hen Harrier (Wells 1999). The peak of the return spring migration is from mid-March to mid-April and consists largely of single birds (Cramp 1980). Although the appearance of this species is unexpected, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that it is by no means inconceivable.

Our thanks to Peter Kennerley who made valuable comments to an earlier draft of this paper and to Ed Hagen, Sonnie Wing, and Ng Bee Choo of "Nature's Niche" for access to their reference books.

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