

# Predation by a Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* on Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* nests

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This note reports a case of predation by an adult female Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* on three nests of Yellow-legged Gulls *Larus michahellis* at the Ebro Delta. The predation was observed on 4 April 2002 on one of the dykes that separate the saltpan-heaters of La Trinitat (Punta de la Banya). In this area the Yellow-legged Gull nests in small densities among glasswort tummocks. The Marsh Harrier was observed for forty minutes, covering a distance of some 700 m and landing three times; at each landing point a Yellow-legged Gull nest was found. The first and third nests each contained one egg that had been predated by the Marsh Harrier. Both eggs were in the beginning of embryo development. The second nest contained two eggs that had not been predated, although one of them was cracked. Six Yellow-legged Gulls tried to repel the Marsh Harrier attacks, but the raptor successfully managed to predate two of the three nests it found during this short period.

Key words: Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*, Yellow-legged Gull, *Larus michahellis*, egg predation, Ebro Delta, Spain.

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The diet of Marsh Harriers *Circus aeruginosus* has been described as very varied, including hunted prey, carrion, and eggs of other birds (Shipper 1973, Cramp & Simmons 1980, González 1991, Clarke 1995). It has been documented that predation on eggs of waterbirds is very extensive in several European populations of the Marsh Harrier (several references in Shipper 1973 and Cramp & Simmons 1980) but otherwise information about this type of prey is scarce (González 1991). On the other hand, most of the studies that have been carried out to date correspond to the breeding season (Shipper 1973, González 1991, Mañosa *et al.* 2000) and, less often, to the wintering season (Shipper 1973, Clarke *et al.* 1993), whereas the information available from both migration periods is particularly scanty. This note describes

the predation of Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis* nests by an adult female Marsh Harrier during spring migration at the Ebro Delta. In this wetland zone, the Marsh Harrier disappeared as a breeding species in 1986 (Martínez Vilalta 1993-1994). However, a significant wintering population has persisted (Estrada *et al.* 1995), and the species is common during migration.

The observation was made from a vehicle on 4 April 2002 at one of the heaters of the La Trinitat saltpans, in the Punta de la Banya. In this area, Yellow-legged Gulls breed sparsely within stands of glasswort *Sarcocornia perennis* and *Arthrocnemum* sp., which grow on the dykes that separate the heaters or on the small islets inside them. Between 17:20 and 18:00 hours the female Marsh Harrier was observed overflying

the dykes of the salt pans, while up to six Yellow-legged Gulls mobbed her. In order to respond to the attacks, the Marsh Harrier turned upside-down in the air with the talons facing upwards several times. During the 40 minutes of the observation, the harrier stood three times on the ground within an area of about 700 m, and it was subsequently found that in the area of each of these points there was a gull's nest. At the first of them, the harrier stood for eight minutes and preyed upon the single egg in the nest; at the second, it stayed for six minutes and did not prey upon either of the eggs in the nest, although one of them was slightly damaged; at the third nest, the harrier stayed for fifteen minutes and preyed upon the only egg in the nest. While the female harrier was at the nests, up to three Yellow-legged Gulls persistently mobbed her, although they only prevented the harrier from preying on the second nest. In both cases in which the harrier was able to eat the eggs, they were in the initial phase of development.

In spite of the fact that gulls typically show aggressive behaviour against potential predators of their nests (Cramp & Simmons 1983, Burger & Gochfeld 1996), in the case described here, with low nest density, their attacks were not intense enough to prevent the female Marsh Harrier from preying on two of the three nests she found.

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### Resum

#### **Predació de nius de Gavià Argentat de Potes Grogues *Larus michahellis* per part de l'Arpella *Circus aeruginosus***

Es descriu la predació que va realitzar una femella adulta d'Arpella *Circus aeruginosus* en tres nius de

Gavià Argentat de Potes Grogues *Larus michahellis* al delta de l'Ebre. L'observació es va fer el 4 d'abril de 2002 en un dels diques que separen dos escalfadors de les Salines de la Trinitat, a la punta de la Banya. En aquesta zona els gavians nidifiquen de manera dispersa entre els matolls de salicornia. Durant quaranta minuts d'observació l'Arpella va recórrer una distància de 700 metres i va baixar tres cops a terra. En cada lloc on va baixar es va localitzar un niu de gavià. Tant el primer niu com el tercer contenien un ou cadascun i van ser predats per l'Arpella. Tots dos ous es trobaven en la fase inicial de desenvolupament de l'embrió. El segon niu contenia dos ous, però no van ser predats, tot i que un d'ells va resultar esquerdat. Malgrat que fins a sis gavians van intentar repel·lir l'acció de l'Arpella, aquesta va pregar amb èxit dos dels tres nius que va localitzar en aquest breu període de temps.

### Resumen

#### **Depredación de nidos de Gaviota Patiamarilla *Larus michahellis* por Aguilucho Lagunero *Circus aeruginosus***

Se describe la depredación que realizó una hembra adulta de Aguilucho Lagunero *Circus aeruginosus* en tres nidos de Gaviota Patiamarilla *Larus michahellis* en el delta de l'Ebre. La observación se hizo el 4 de abril de 2002 en uno de los diques que separan dos calentadores de las salinas de la Trinitat, en la punta de la Banya. En esta zona las gaviotas nidifican de manera dispersa entre las matas de salicornia. Durante cuarenta minutos de observación el Aguilucho Lagunero recorrió una distancia de 700 metros y bajó tres veces a tierra. En cada lugar donde bajó se localizó un nido de Gaviota Patiamarilla. Tanto el primer nido como el tercero contenían un huevo cada uno y fueron depredados por el Aguilucho. Los dos huevos se encontraban en la fase inicial de desarrollo del embrión. El segundo nido contenía dos huevos, pero no fueron depredados, aunque uno de ellos resultó dañado. A pesar de que las gaviotas intentaron repeler la acción, el Aguilucho depredó con éxito dos de los tres nidos que localizó en este breve periodo de tiempo.

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