

Birds of the Mar Menor

I have often looked up and seen birds of prey soaring above me but have had very little success in identifying them, as they often fly very high and just look black against the bright sky.

This week I am going to write about two of the most common birds of prey seen in the area, the Kestrel and the Marsh Harrier. I will give tips on how to identify them and tell you which other birds you could mistake them for.

Kestrels are one of the smallest birds of prey, just the size of a pigeon, but with longer wings. The easiest way to identify them is to spot them while they are hovering, almost stationary, about 10-20m from the ground looking for prey. When they are in this position they hold a very distinctive posture, as seen in the picture. They will often be seen hovering near a road especially where it is adjacent to open rough ground. Once they spot their prey they will dive down to catch it. They can also be spotted sitting on telegraph posts and wires looking out for their next meal.



Kestrels often use nests made by other birds e.g. a crow's nest, or they make use of old buildings or holes in trees. They normally feed on small mammals, lizards and small birds. They are sensitive to UV light and use this to detect their prey as the urine of some rodents reflects UV. Kestrels may be mistaken as sparrow-hawks; however these are more common near woodland.

The Marsh Harrier is a much larger bird with a huge wingspan of over 1 metre. It often hunts over reed-beds, but may also be seen over open ground especially flat pasture. It flies low over the area which it is hunting so that it can spot its prey and take it by surprise. As it flies it holds its long wings in a shallow "V" shape. Marsh Harriers also perch on bushes or trees to look for food. When soaring they may be mistaken as a Buzzard or Black Kite (I will look at these two birds next month). The Marsh Harrier breeds in dense reed-beds so it is well suited to the Mar Menor. They feed on small mammals, frogs and birds.



Both birds are resident in the Mar Menor all year round, however, we see them more from October—April, as some birds migrate north during the summer.

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