

Castlebanny Hen Harrier Survey June 2020

Tony Nagle, September 2020

Introduction

The purpose of this survey was to establish if Hen Harriers were breeding at Castlebanny based on a report of a female and a possible male Hen Harrier in the southeast of the range in May 2020 (Map 1). The survey took place over two days in June as Hen Harrier nest-visiting activity increases dramatically in this month and allows for easier breeding confirmation. The first day was focussed on suitable nesting habitat (pre-thicket, re-stock conifer plantation) in the area of the original report and surveying on the second day was focussed on suitable nesting habitat in the southwest and northwest of the range. The locations of the VPs used for the survey are shown on Map 1.

Day 1 (12/06/20)

VP: S601-291 (West of Ballymackillagill)

Habitat: Pre-thicket plantation on both sides of the track.

Start: 10:15 Finish: 13:30

No Hen Harriers were seen. A single Buzzard, two Buzzards together and a single Sparrowhawk were the only notable sightings.

VP: S602-282 (Southwest of Ballymackillagill)

Habitat: Large area of clearfell on both sides of the track. Much of this was unplanted but the exact area where the Hen Harriers were reported had been planted within the past two years but the majority of the trees had suffered damage by a disease or insect. There was evidence of widespread herbicide use (dead vegetation).

Start: 13:45 Finish: 17:00

No Hen Harriers were seen. Two separate sightings of single Buzzards and several sightings of single Lesser Black-backed Gulls were the only notable findings.

Roving survey around the wider area north to Glenpipe.

Start: 17:15 Finish: 18:15

Very little suitable Hen Harrier nesting habitat apart from a few small areas of willow scrub.

No Hen Harriers were seen.

Day 2 (23/06/20)

VP: S582-296 (Derrylacky)

Habitat: Large area of second rotation young plantation 1-2m with widespread patches of willow scrub.

Start: 10:40 Finish: 13:40

No Hen Harriers were seen. Several sightings of Buzzard and Kestrel and a single Sparrowhawk.

VP: S588-294 (Derrylacky)

Habitat: Pre-thicket Sitka Spruce and Eucalyptus plantation.

Start: 13:49 Finish: 14:49

No Hen Harriers were seen. A single Buzzard was recorded.

VP: S573-329 (Castlebanny)

Habitat: A large area of clearfell and young plantation with patches of willow scrub.

Start: 15:05 Finish: 16:30

No Hen Harriers were seen. Two sightings of a single Buzzard and one sighting of two Buzzards soaring together. One Sparrowhawk was also seen here.

VP: S600-296 (West of Glenpipe)

Habitat: A large area of pre-thicket plantation forest.

Start: 17:05 Finish: 17:35

Low cloud obscured view of higher ground. No Hen Harriers or other raptors seen.

VP: S580-323 (Southeast of Castlebanny)

Habitat: Two small sections of young plantation (>2m).

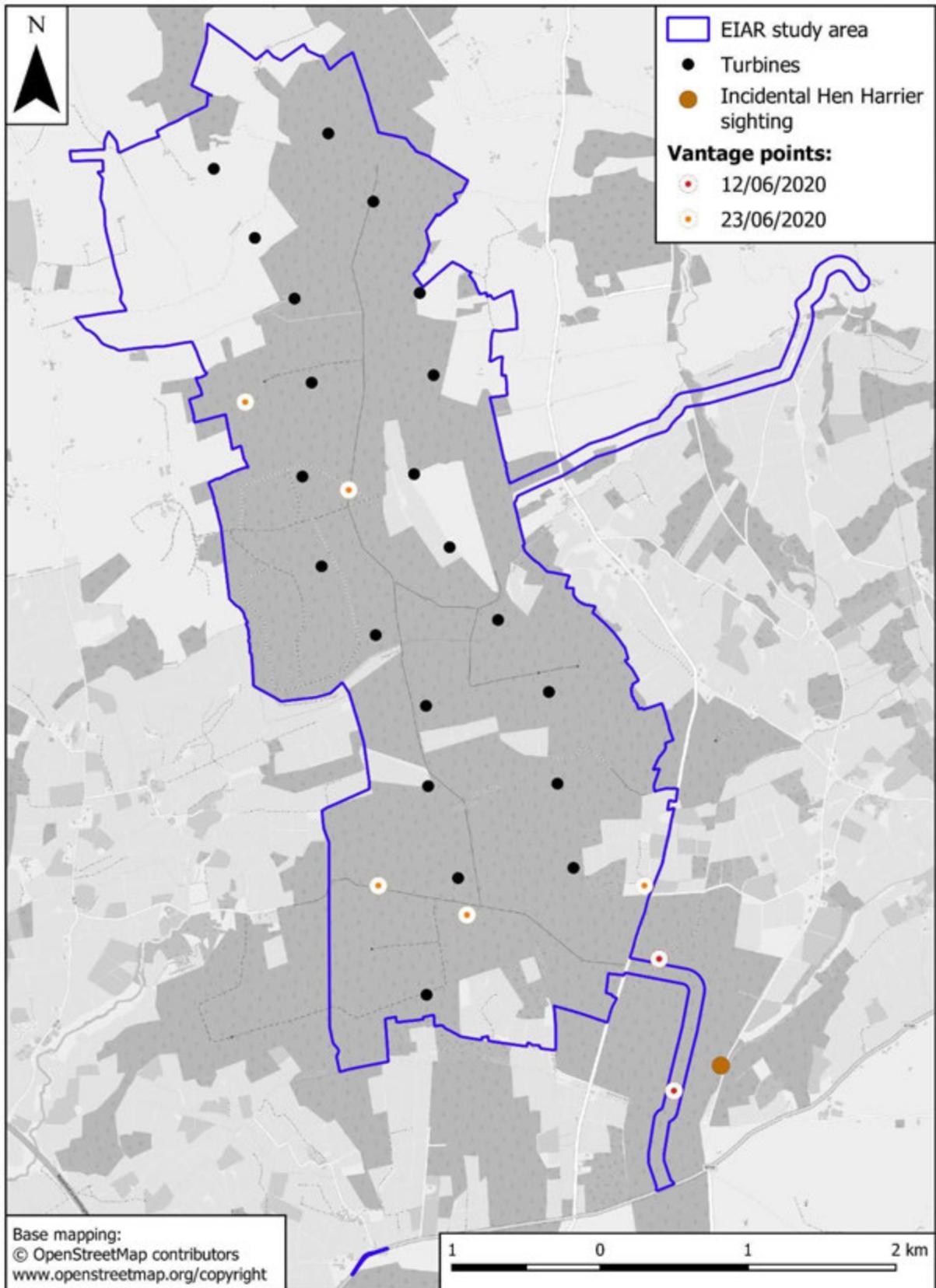
Start: 17:55 Finish: 18:50

Visibility was good in this part of the range but no Hen Harriers or other raptors seen.

Conclusion

This survey was timed to coincide with the optimal period of Hen Harrier breeding activity as both of the parent birds would normally be engaged in hunting and provisioning young at this time (mid to late June), thereby substantially increasing the chances of locating an

active nest or, at the very least, seeing an adult bird carrying prey which would in itself be a strong indication that breeding was taking place. The fact that not a single Hen Harrier (of either sex) was seen on both of these survey days indicates that breeding in the areas surveyed (chosen because they contained the most suitable Hen Harrier nesting habitat in the entire range) was extremely unlikely.



Map 1: Location of incidental Hen Harrier sighting in May 2020, and of vantage points used for the Hen Harrier survey.