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ORNITHOLOGY

A summary of the breeding of Pallid Harrier in France and Europe

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Male Pallid Harrier, The Camargue, December 2018 (© Frédéric Veyrunes)

Every spring, the ornithological and naturalist association GON coordinates a network for surveying and monitoring nesting harrier pairs in the vast cereal plains of Nord and Pas-de-Calais. This monitoring is also carried out in a large part of France where areas favourable to the nesting of these birds of prey remain, and hundreds of people have been participating in it every year for more than 40 years (Millon 2022). It is within this framework that breeding pairs of Pallid Harrier (*Circus macrourus*) have been detected in France since 2020, preceded since the late 1990s by a gradual increase in migratory flows in France (Liger *et al.* 2008), cases of summering with occasional reproductive behaviour towards Montagu's Harrier (Réglade *et al.* 2022), and then, from the mid-2000s onwards, the wintering of single individuals (Réglade *et al.* 2015). New breeding cases was therefore expected in France, especially since the first ones recorded in Western Europe came from the Netherlands from 2017 onwards. This article aims to summarise the (still rare) breeding cases of Pallid Harrier in France and to take stock of the situation in Europe.

Pair of adult Pallid Harrier, Pas-de-Calais, May 2023 (© F. Bertrand/GON)

The breeding of Pallid Harrier in France

History of known nesting cases

In spring **2020**, a territorial pair of Pallid Harrier was recorded in Pas-de-Calais, northern France, providing the first case of contemporary nesting of the species in France (Cavitte & Boutrouille 2021). At the same time, in Champagne, another male actively participated in the rearing of young Montagu's Harriers, without any major conflicts with the breeding pair, a situation already reported elsewhere in Western Europe before 2020 (Roux 2021).

Pallid Harrier, adult female, Pas-de-Calais, June 2023 (© P. Anscutte/GON)

Pallid Harrier, adult male, Pas-de-Calais, June 2023 (© P. Anscutte/GON)

In **2022**, in the Aube department, a mixed nesting between a male Montagu's Harrier and a hybrid female Pallid × Montagu's Harrier was discovered, producing four second-generation hybrid young (A. Millon, pers. comm.).

In **2023**, a pair of Pallid Harrier successfully nested again in Pas-de-Calais, rearing five young (Boutilleux *et al.* 2024a).

In **2024**, two pairs Pallid Harrier nested in France : one raised four young in Pas-de-Calais, while the other, settled in Somme (20 m from the border with Pas-de-Calais!), failed in its attempt, the nest having fallen victim to a predator just before protective measures were put in place… (Boutilleux *et al.* 2024b, Boutilleux *et al.* 2025). In addition, at least three other males were seen displaying in the area at the beginning of the season, but none of them nested and all three eventually disappeared during the season (F. Bertrand, pers. comm.).

In **2025**, the fifth breeding case of a pure pair Pallid Harrier was recorded in Deux-Sèvres, resulting in one young fledging (Boizot & Bienvenut 2025), and in Indre-et-Loire, a male Pallid Harrier mated with a female Montagu's Harrier raised three young with a Montagu's Harrier phenotype and no apparent signs of hybridisation. Through its antagonistic behaviour, the Pallid Harrier had driven away the male Montagu's, but clearly after the latter had ensured his offspring (B. Griard, pers. comm.). It should also be noted that an adult male Pallid Harrier was once again present (from 8 to 19 April) in the Pas-de-Calais area, where the species had bred in 2020 and 2024. It was displaying and appeared to be settled, raising hopes of further breeding in this area, where a possible female Pallid Harrier had also been observed. However, fate decided otherwise: the male's body was discovered a few days later near the wind turbine that had killed him, a few hundred metres from the location of the 2024 nest. This was the male that had bred that year and had been ringed, along with his four young.

Since 2020, a total of 14 pure Pallid Harrier have been reared in France, i.e. an average of 3.5 young per successful brood (n = 4) ; this figure is very close to that recorded in the species native breeding range (3.93 ± 1.75 young ; Terraube *et al.* 2008).

Specifications of French breeding sites

The nesting sites are located in the heart of vast agricultural plateaus, dominated by large cereal crops, where hen harriers, Montagu's harriers and marsh harriers also nest. All the nests were located in wheat fields on these relatively flat lands.

Wheat field where the second breeding case of Pallid Harrier in France was recorded, Pas-de-Calais, June 2023 (© B. Boutilleux/GON)

Origin of birds breeding in France

To date, it has not been possible to ascertain the origin of the individuals breeding in France, nor to determine whether any of them have nested more than once in France. The male of the 2023 pair was ringed on its left leg, but unfortunately none of the photographs allowed the metal ring to be read, making it impossible to determine its origin. However, several hypotheses have been put forward :

- it could be the only one of the four young birds born in 2020 that was ringed (Cavitte & Boutrouille 2021) ; indeed, it was a male and the plumage of the 2023 bird corresponds well to that of a 4-year-old individual;
- it is possible that it is a young bird born and ringed elsewhere in Europe (notably in the Netherlands or Finland), which lost its coloured ring (B. Koks, pers. comm.) ;
- this male could also have been captured and ringed during migration at one of the European ringing stations (B. Koks, pers. comm.).

Young Pallid Harriers exercising their wings on the protective cage covering their nest, Pas-de-Calais, June 2024 (© C. Boutrouille/GON)

From 2024 onwards, a specific Darvic ring colour has been assigned to Pallid Harriers born in France (white letters on a blue background), which will at least make it possible to determine the origin of the birds in the event of partial ring reading. That same year, thanks to the intervention of a small delegation from the Harrier Study and Protection Group GEPB equipped with the necessary authorisations, the adult male and the four young birds from the Pas-de-Calais brood were fitted with these rings. In 2025, the adult pair from Deux-Sèvres and their young were also marked with this type of ring.

Diet of the species in France

In 2024, an inventory of prey was carried out, either by identifying them in the birds' talons or in the remains collected from the nest and in the pellets. Of a total of 71 prey items, 59.1% were mammals : approximately two-thirds were voles (*Microtus* sp.) and one-third were lagomorphs, mainly brown hares, as well as one common shrew (*Crocidura leucodon*) and one European mole (*Talpa europaea*). The remaining 40.9% were birds, more than two-thirds of which were Galliformes and the rest Passeriformes, mainly Eurasian Skylark and Corn Bunting ; the raptor's menu also included a domestic Rock Dove and an egg, apparently from Galliformes, brought back by the male.

Thus, after the expected predominance of voles (40.8%), this species being highly specialised in hunting these rodents (Terraube *et al.* 2011), Galliformes (25.4%) constitute a significant part of the species' diet, followed by Lagomorphs (15.5%) and passerines (12.7%). It should be noted, however, that unfavourable weather conditions in 2024 visibly reduced rodent populations, forcing harriers to switch to other prey, such as lagomorphs and galliformes. We also noticed that adults did not hunt near the nest, but systematically disappeared from the observers' field of vision and returned to the nest a few moments later with one or more prey items.

Pallid Harrier, male having captured a vole, Marne, June 2020 (© Patrick Roux)

Distribution and trends of Pallid Harrier populations

Before the 2000s, the historical breeding range (fig. 1) of Pallid Harrier mainly covered Central Asia, from the Black Sea to Mongolia (Cramp & Simmons 1980, del Hoyo *et al.* 1994, Orta *et al.* 2020). The main population centres are in southern Russia and northern Kazakhstan, which are home to around 80% of the global population (Cramp & Simmons *op. cit.*, del Hoyo *et al. op. cit.*, BirdLife International 2024). Small populations used to breed in Azerbaijan, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine, but recent data indicate that they have almost disappeared (Galushin *et al.* 2003, Terraube 2020). Since the early 1990s, the species' range has expanded north-westwards. Pallid Harrier now breeds annually in Finland and neighbouring Russian territories (Forsman 2017, Orta *et al.* 2020) and, very occasionally, in Western Europe, as was recently the case in the Netherlands, Spain, the Czech Republic and France (Koks & Vellinga 2017, Mougeot & Jubete Tazo 2019, Studecký 2021, Cavitte & Boutrouille 2021).

The species breeds mainly in semi-desert areas and steppes, where its preferred habitats are wet grasslands near rivers, marshes or lakes (Galushin *et al.* 2003). Nesting in agricultural areas is also very common (Terraube *et al.* 2008), at least when the area is not intensively farmed. It should be noted that part of the population also nests in clearings in the boreal taiga and in the tundra (Kuznetsov 1994, Orta *et al.* 2020).

Pallid Harrier is a strict, long-distance migrant, wintering mainly in sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent (del Hoyo *et al.* 1994, Terraube *et al.* 2012, Orta *et al.* 2020), but rare cases of wintering are now regularly noted in Western Europe (Réglade *et al.* 2015). Although migration takes place over a wide front (Galushin *et al.* 2003), several routes are emerging: Central Asia, Persia/Arabian Peninsula, the Caspian Sea/Middle East region and the central Mediterranean (Panuccio & Agostini 2006). However, since the mid-2000s, the increase in the number of individuals observed migrating in France seems to indicate that a new, more westerly route passing through France and Spain is being used. This migratory phenomenon coincides with the emergence of the small Fennoscandian breeding population, at least until 2020, with very significant interannual fluctuations in the number of pairs detected (Liger 2022, Réglade *et al.* 2022).

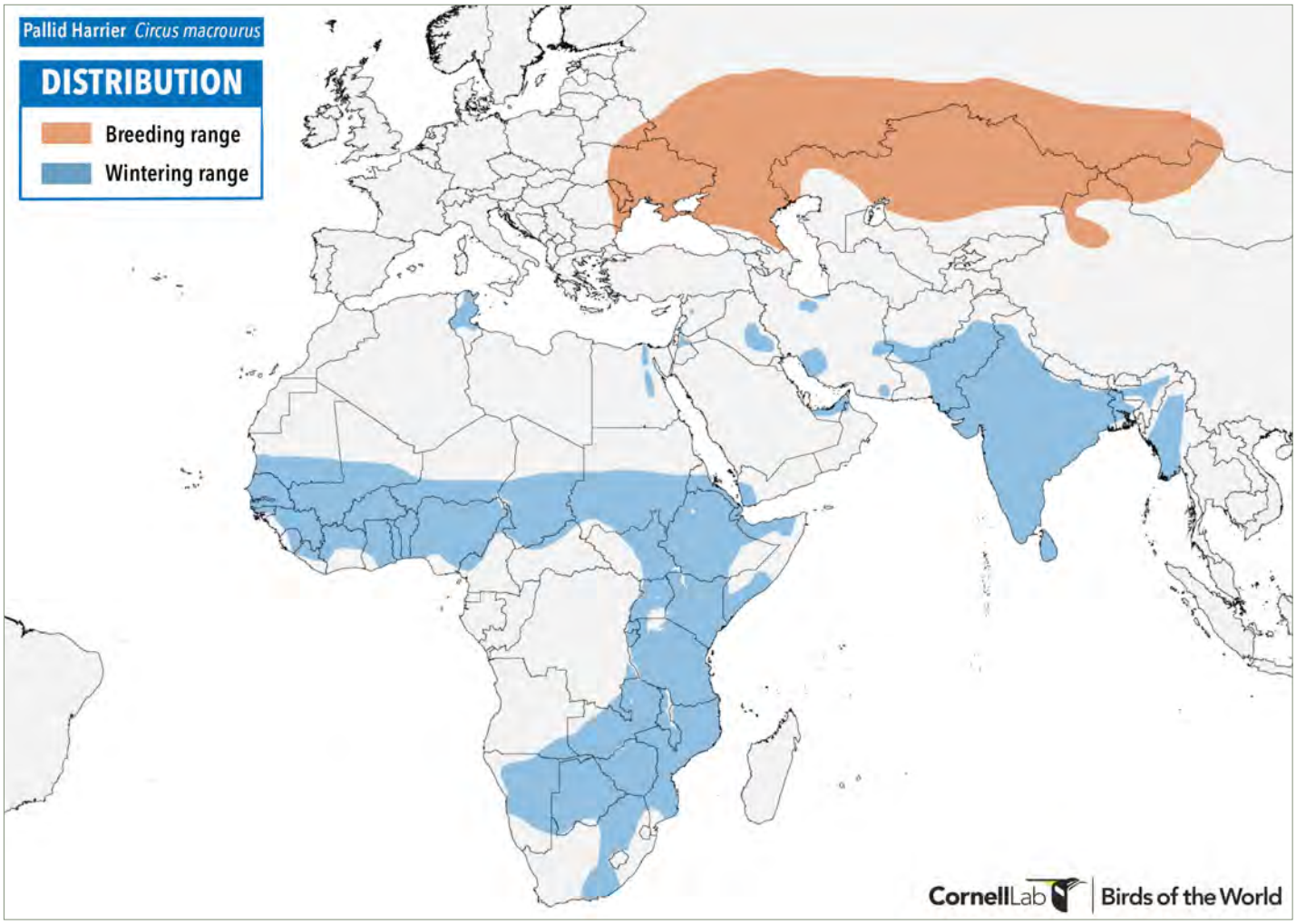

fig. 1. Breeding (red) and wintering range (blue) of Pallid Harrier (Source: *Birds of the World*)

The species is considered «Near Threatened» (NT), but with a moderate decline, globally (BirdLife International 2021a) and «Least Concern» (LC) at the European level (BirdLife International 2021b). However, assessing global trends for this species is difficult due to the wide range of local fluctuations, which are themselves linked to interannual variations in vole densities. In 2002, the global population was estimated at 9,000-15,000 pairs (Galushin *et al.* 2003), including 1,000 to 2,200 in Europe (BirdLife International 2021b), for which a decline of up to 30% was noted between 1970 and 1990 (Tucker & Heath 1994). This decline, which continues today, is linked to the conversion of steppe land to cultivated land and the intensification of associated agricultural practices (Bragin 1999, Galushin *et al.* 2003, Terraube *et al.* 2008). In its wintering areas, the degradation and loss of wet grasslands is thought to be highly detrimental to the species (Limiñana *et al.* 2015, Ganesh & Prashanth 2018). Pallid Harrier is also one of the species regularly targeted by illegal shooting in Central Europe and the Caucasus region during its migration, where nearly 10% of European birds may be killed each year (Corso & Cardelli 2004, Brochet *et al.* 2019).

Breeding cases of Pallid Harrier in Europe after 2020

As the status of Pallid Harrier in Western and Northern Europe prior to 2020 (figs. 2 and 3) has been described in detail in the article on the first contemporary nesting in France (see Cavitte & Boutrouille 2021), we will only analyse recent years here (fig. 3).

fig. 2. Breeding cases of Pallid Harrier in Europe before 2010

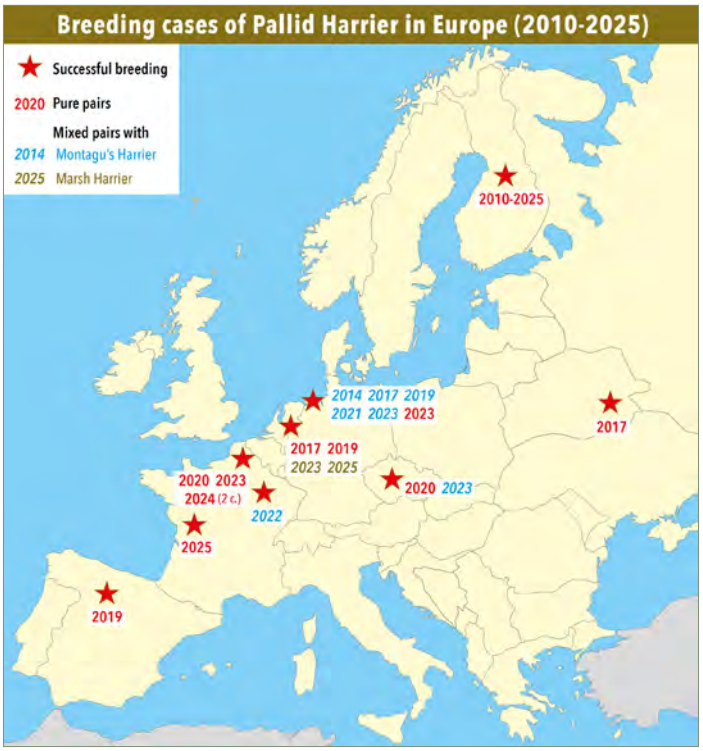

fig. 3. Breeding cases of Pallid Harrier in Europe since 2010

In **Finland**, where Pallid Harrier is breeding irregularly since 1993 and annually since 2010 (Henry 2018, Friberg & Corell 2020), with a maximum of 16 pairs recorded in 2018 (Réglade *et al.* 2022), 2023 and 2024 appear to have been the worst years since the species became established. Many individuals arrived in Finland in the spring of 2024, but none appear to have stayed to breed, probably due to a drastic lack of food resources. Indeed, it seems that voles were only abundant in the far north of Lapland that year, and even then unevenly. Ari-Pekka Auvinen (pers. comm.) writes, « *The summer of 2023 was the first since 2012 when I did not even try to look for a nest* » and « *A young Hen Harrier was nevertheless observed migrating in early August 2024 on the west coast of Finland, which could mean that it was born somewhere in the region.* » In 2025, two pairs may have bred around Liminka Bay, but the nests were not found despite searches ; nevertheless at least one young bird was observed nearby, suggesting that it came from one of these nests.

In the **Netherlands**, there have been no new pure breeding pairs since 2019 (Koks & Vellinga 2017, Lawicki & van den Berg 2019), but ringed birds (young Pallid Harriers born in 2017 and 2019 had been fitted with Darvic rings) have been observed, as well as cases of mixed breeding (A. Schlaich, pers. comm.). In 2022, a male appeared to form a trio with a pair of Western Marsh Harriers (B. Koks, pers. comm., Ubels & Bijlsma 2023). In 2023, the same male appeared to be active again, still with a pair of Western Marsh Harriers, and successfully raised four hybrid young to fledging. A new attempt was made in 2024, but it failed (B. Koks, pers. comm.). In 2025, a new hybridisation took place in the Groningen area, where three young hybrids fledged (R. Ubels *in litt.*, via Dutch Birding).

In the **Czech Republic**, the species also bred in 2020 (Studecký 2021), raising three young (one male and two females), which were fitted with GPS tags. In 2022, the male, after being seen migrating in April at Pointe de Grave (Gironde) and then in Vendée, returned to Charente-Maritime, where it remained until early August (Y. Meuraillon, pers. comm.). In addition, a mixed pair male Montagu's × female Pallid Harrier was observed in central Bohemia in mid-July 2023, raising three young hybrids, which were fitted with GPS tags (J. Studecký, pers. comm.).

In **Germany**, a pair Pallid Harrier also bred in East Frisia in 2023 (von Graefe & Uhlenkott *in prep.*). The female, fitted with a Darvic ring, was one of the young born in the Netherlands ! In addition, hybrid broods have also been observed in this region. In 2014, a female Pallid mated with a male Montagu's Harrier, successfully raising hybrid young to fledging. Also in the same region, in 2017, a male Montagu's × Pallid Harrier hybrid (presumed to be one of the young birds from 2014) attempted to breed with a female Montagu's Harrier. The same individual attempted to nest again in 2019 (with two females), in 2020 (unsuccessful)

Pallid Harrier, male with a vole in its talons, Marne, June 2020 (© Patrick Roux)

and in 2021 and 2023 with Montagu's Harrier females. There have therefore been five consecutive breeding seasons leading to the fledging of 12 second-generation hybrids from a male Montagu's x Pallid Harrier hybrid with a female Montagu's Harrier (von Graefe & Uhlenkott in prep.). In 2025, however, for the first time since 2020, no Pallid Harrier were reported in Bavaria, possibly due to the lowest vole numbers observed since 2006 (Ralf Krüger *in litt.*).

In the **United Kingdom**, after the first spring visit of a male to Lancashire in 2017, unsuccessful breeding attempts by a male Pallid Harrier with female Hen Harriers were observed in 2021 in Ireland (Jones 2022).

In **Hungary**, in 2023, a male Pallid Harrier began building nests and displaying alone. In 2025, an adult male was observed in the same location for several days (Zoli Turny, *in litt.*).

In **Belarus**, a juvenile with some flight feathers not yet fully grown was photographed near Krugi, Magiliou, on 15 July 2017, probably constituting the first case of breeding of the species in the country since 1916 (Ławicki & van den Berg 2017, Studecký 2021).

In **Spain**, after the first breeding case observed in 2019 (Mougeot & Jubete 2019), and with the exception of a male displaying in the Palencia region in spring 2024, no new cases of breeding have been detected (B. Arroyo pers. comm.).

Conclusion

The new Breeding cases of Pallid Harrier in France are part of a trend towards the north-western expansion of the species' range, which began in the early 2000s with an increase in migratory data, a rise in wintering cases in several countries, and longer spring stays with reproductive behaviour (Ollé *et al.* 2015, Réglade *et al.* 2015, 2022, Henry 2018).

However, it should be noted that this boom in Western Europe, giving many Western European ornithologists the impression of an increase rather than a decline, seems to be due to a change in distribution and a loss of breeders in Eastern Europe (fig. 4) rather than a genuine expansion that would have prompted a surplus of these nomadic harriers to colonise suitable habitats in the west and north (Henry 2018, Réglade *et al.* 2022).

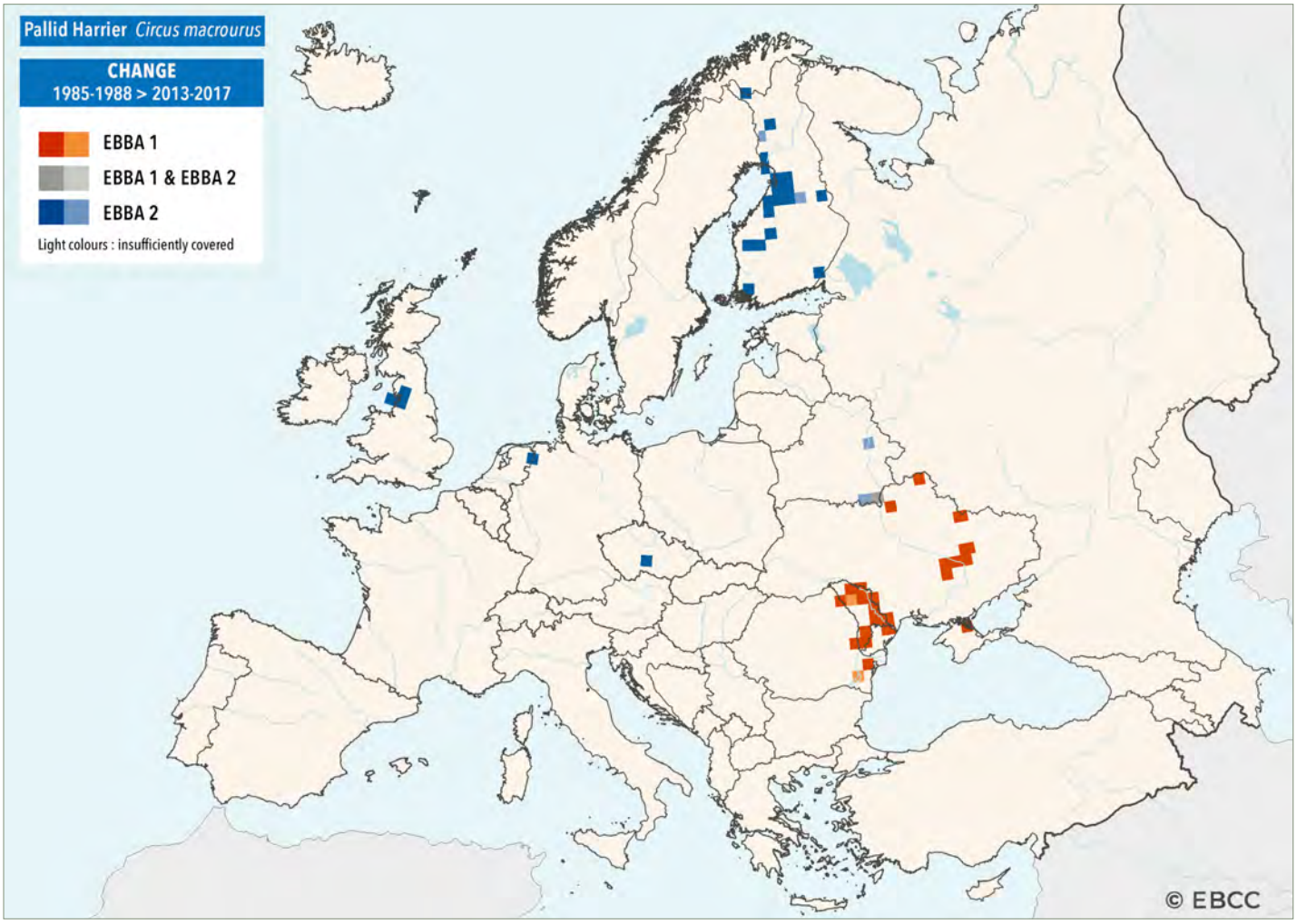

fig. 4. Changes in the distribution of Pallid Harrier in Europe between the first (1985–1988) and second European atlas (2013–2017). The points shown in Great Britain relate only to 'possible' nesting cases. (Source: *European Birds Census Council*)

Obviously, the highly fragmented and man-altered landscapes of Western Europe will have certain consequences on the trends and sustainability of the settlement of these new breeders (Réglade *et al.* 2022), similar to the recurring problems encountered by other harrier species in agricultural plains (Thiollay & Bretagnolle 2004, Issa & Muller 2015, Beaudoin *et al.* 2019, Millon 2022). This recent change, which demonstrates the adaptability of thPallid Harrier, represents at least some hope for its short-term future, but perhaps not necessarily for its long-term security (Réglade *et al.* 2022). In any case, it is highly likely that other breeding cases of Pallid Harrier will be detected in Western Europe, and undoubtedly also in France, in the coming years.

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Editor's note: An article detailing each French nesting case has been published in *Le Héron* 56-1 (2025), the GON journal, and can be consulted on *ResearchGate* (search for the Boutilleux *et al.* 2025 reference above).