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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Merlin

Falco columbarius



Photo by Greg (Creative Commons, Wikimedia)

By Jennifer Chow.

The term “merlin” does not merely conjure up images of magic and myth, but it also conjures images of a small falcon. The merlin (*Falco columbarius*) is a small bird of prey or raptor.

The merlin can also be referred to as a “merlin falcon” and used to be known as the pigeon hawk. Falcons are a type of bird-of-prey known for fast and agile flight. Merlins are found throughout the northern hemisphere.

Characteristics

Merlins are about the size of a pigeon and slightly bigger than an American kestrel. They average 24–33 cm (9.4–13.0 in) long with a 50–73 cm (20–29 in) wingspan, with the females often being bigger than the males. They are compact and weigh a bit more than other falcons of similar size with males weighing

NWPS Headquarters

720-1190 Melville Street
Vancouver, BC V6E 3W1

NWPS Vancouver Islandt Vancouver 604.568.9160

PO Box 39058
RPO James Bay
Victoria, BC V8V 4X8

t Victoria 778.967.3379

e info@northwestwildlife.com

w www.northwestwildlife.com

about 165 g (5.8 oz) and females weighing about 230 g (8.1 oz). There is much variation among the range and subspecies, however.

Female and male merlins are coloured differently and colouring varies fairly widely depending on subspecies and range. In general, merlins follow Gloger's rule, in that merlins that live in more northern, dry areas tend to be lighter and those are in more south, more humid areas tend to be darker in colour

The male has a dark-coloured (near black to silver grey, depending on subspecies) back and wings. Females and young birds are browner in colour on the back and wing. They all have a buff underside with black to reddish brown streaking on the chest.

Unlike many other raptors, the merlin's face usually has no stripe.

Juvenile merlins of either sex are coloured similarly to female merlins. As chicks, their down feathers are buff with a white belly.

As a small falcon, there are a few birds that merlins can be confused with. Merlins can look similar to the American kestrel but kestrels are slightly plumper and are a bit lighter in colour and have facial stripes. They can also look similar to a sharp-skinned hawk but the hawk has a longer tail with slightly different body shape and patterning. They can also be confused with juvenile and fledging peregrine falcons but fledging peregrines are bigger and have a dark stripe on their cheek.

Life Cycle

In BC, the eggs are present in the nest during the period from mid-April 17 to July and the young are in the nest from May-August.

Merlins become sexually mature and start breeding at about 1-3 years. The male does flying displays in the air to attract a mate then delivers food and shows the female a suitable nesting site. They usually will stay together for the breeding season but do not mate for life. Merlins don't build their own nests, rather they reuse old nests of other birds (such as crow, magpie or hawk).

The female lays 2-5 eggs and they hatch at the same time after 28-32 days. The young stay in the nest for 25-30 days, both partners gather food but it's the female that does most of the feeding. After that period, they leave the nest, learning to fly and other skills as they stay close to the nest for another 50-60 days.

After this, the young will leave their parents and be on their own, as they are mostly solitary. They may or may not disperse out.

A life cycle chart can be found here, prepared by the Merlin Falcon Association.
<http://merlinfalconfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Merlin-life-cycle-copy.jpg> .

Habitat

Merlins live in openings in forests, along rivers, open country, and a wide variety of generally open habitat. During migration, merlins can also be spotted along grasslands and coastal areas. More recently, they can also live in and nest in more urban areas. During winter, they prefer open areas with scattered trees including parks and orchards.

In North America, merlins generally spend the summer in Canada and winter in the southern United States, Central America and the tip of South America.

Merlins also live throughout Europe, Asia and Northern Africa.

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Although there are some populations that don't migrate, the majority of merlins do, nesting in their summer grounds which tend to be further north and migrating south in the fall, after breeding season.

There are several subspecies of merlins based on geographic locales and these are:

The prairie merlin (*Falco columbarius richardsonii*) lives in the northern plains from Alberta to Wyoming and is lightest in colour. It is also known as Richardson's [merlin].

The taiga merlin (*Falco columbarius columbarius*) is also known as tundra or boreal merlin. They live in northern forests in Canada and USA, east of the Rocky Mountains and also tend to be lighter in colour.

The coastal-forest merlin (*Falco columbarius suckleyi*) is also known as the black merlin and lives on the west coast of North America, including British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest in the United States. They are the darkest coloured of all merlins. In BC, the coast-forest merlin is the most common throughout most of BC and tends not to migrate, though some individuals may migrate to California. The taiga merlin breeds in northeastern BC. Prairie merlins are rarely in BC and aren't known to breed in BC.

Behaviour

Merlins are adept flyers and can manoeuvre very well. Merlins hunt mostly small birds, attacking them in mid-air, usually with a swift turns and chases but they don't dive in the air that much. They often perch from height and then hunt down their prey when they spot it. They eat mostly shorebirds and songbirds. They sometimes hunt flying insects and occasionally hunt small mammals. As merlins are falcons, they attack their prey with their beaks as well as their talons.

The most distinctive call for a merlin is a chittering, high pitched *kee-kee-kee* sound. Males make a higher pitched call than females. Merlins use other vocalizations for various other things such as to defend food sources or to show agitation.

Merlins are mostly solitary. They come together to breed and raise their young. Once their young leave the nest, they usually go back to their solitary lifestyle.

Threats

Merlins are listed as "least concern". However, the **Merlin Falcon Foundation** has noted that sightings of western coastal merlins do not seem as common as other bird of prey species.

For adult birds, larger species of bird of prey may be potential predators such as golden eagles, goshawks and great horned owls. Mammals such as raccoons, bears and foxes can also eat their eggs and young.

Pesticides such as DDT are a major threat to merlins. As near the top of the food chain, merlins are negatively impacted by pesticides and herbicides that travel up the food chain.

Habitat destruction, especially in the breeding areas of the merlin is also a concern.

What We Can Do To Help

- Help conserve parkland and merlin breeding areas (parkland, old fields, forests),
- During breeding time in breeding areas, conserve nesting areas. Leave old crow and hawk nests alone – although the original species may not re-use it, merlins may re-use it

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- Conserve waterways and keep them clean, Merlins often live near waterways and prey on shorebirds which are reliant on the ecosystem of those areas.
- Avoid using harmful pesticides or herbicides which will make its way up the food chain to raptors like the merlin.

The banning of the pesticide DDT (which led to thinned eggshells and greater mortality) has helped merlins and other birds, although there may be some lasting effects...

Other Interesting Facts

The origin of the name merlin didn't come from the Arthurian legend wizard. It originates old French species name, esmerillon and likely from the Dutch, merlijn to merlin.

Merlins are sometimes used in falconry, which is hunting with a trained, captive raptor.

Where & When to view the animal.

Merlins can sometimes be spotted throughout the Lower Mainland and are found throughout BC. However, sightings are not overly common. The best place to see merlins in the lower mainland is perhaps the Reifel Bird Sanctuary in Ladner.

In Southern BC and into the Pacific Northwest (USA), merlins are present year-round and may not migrate. Merlins are found in all areas of British Columbia.

The Orphan Wildlife Rehabilitation Society (OWL) in Delta, BC houses a captive merlin as an education animal.

Bibliography

British Columbia. *Guidelines for Raptor Conservation during Urban and Rural Land Development in British Columbia 2013*. 2013. Information on many raptors in BC, including conservation plans and web cam use. http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/documents/bmp/raptor_conservation_guidelines_2013.pdf

Merlin Falcon Foundation. Provides a good overview of merlins in the Pacific Northwest (Washington state). Also in the process of a long-term (25 years+) research study on the coastal forest merlin with some focus on education.

<http://merlinfalconfoundation.org/>

Merlin at OWL (Orphaned Wildlife Rehabilitation Society)
<http://www.owlcanada.org/meet-birds/bird-species/falcons/>

Basic Profiles

"Merlin" *The Cornell Lab of Ornithology* <http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/id.aspx?spp=Merlin>

"Merlin." *Audubon*. <http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/merlin>

"Merlin." *BirdWeb*.. <http://birdweb.org/birdweb/bird/merlin>

"Merlin" *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Merlin_\(bird\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Merlin_(bird))

"Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) in Explore Raptors: Facts, Habitat, Diet. *The Peregrine Fund*
<http://www.peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/Merlin>

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