

An Observation of 'Richardson's' Merlin in Ontario

by
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On 28 February 1986 MaryLou Chomyshyn discovered a sitting Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) at the Blue Heron Picnic Area within Point Pelee National Park, Essex Co., Ontario. She summoned additional observers who were also able to view the bird. Although this Merlin was described as looking 'odd' (Tom Hince, pers. comm.), a subspecific determination of the bird was not considered at the time.

What was almost certainly the same Merlin was observed nine days later, on 9 March 1986, in the barren 'Onion Fields' north of the Park (approximately 5 km from the original observation point) by the author and Keith J. Burk. The bird was perched almost at the top of a small isolated tree adjacent to one of the area's gravel roads. In our car we were able to approach the bird very closely—to within approximately 10 m. After about a minute's observation (using binoculars) the bird became noticeably restless and eventually flew south over the fields, not to be seen again. When first seen we immediately noticed the unusual colour pattern of the bird; our later-recorded description matched the characteristics given for an

adult male of the subspecies *Falco columbarius richardsonii*, otherwise known as 'Richardson's' Merlin (Bent 1938: 86-89; Taverner 1940: 147-148). The unlikely possibility exists that our bird was an extreme aberrant of the normally-occurring eastern race *F.c. columbarius*, but for such a hypothetical bird to match *richardsonii* so closely seems very remote.

Description

Some of the features that identified the bird simply as a Merlin include the following: the bird was about the size of an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) but in build was proportionately more stocky. The longish and square-ended tail was dark with numerous narrow white bands. The wings were clearly pointed. The thin eye ring was bright orange and the small strongly-hooked bill was orange-based and blue-tipped. The legs were bright yellow. In flight the bird flew barely inches above the ground at a remarkable speed—'like a bullet.'

The following observed features were inconsistent with the typical eastern subspecies *columbarius*: The upperparts (wings and mantle) were totally very pale blue-grey,

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much paler than the dark slate-blue of eastern birds. The pale head consisted of a light-cream ground colour with limited light brown streaking; lacking was the heavy streaking, dark 'moustache' mark and suggestion of a dark or darkish cap typical of eastern birds. The underparts showed an intricate pattern of pale rufous-brown and white, less dense than eastern birds. (The above differences were further reinforced when I observed a typical male Merlin perched at close range on 4 April 1986, also at Point Pelee).

Range and Status of the Subspecies

This is apparently the first record of the 'Richardson's' Merlin in Ontario. Neither James *et al.* (1976) nor Godfrey (1986) mention the subspecies for Ontario. Furthermore, a check of Merlin specimens in the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (courtesy of Ross D. James) and the National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa (Bruce M. Di Labio) revealed no Ontario specimen of *richardsonii*.

Richardson's' Merlin is the breeding subspecies of prairies and the aspen parkland belt from southern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan and extreme southwestern Manitoba south to northern Montana and North Dakota (A.O.U. 1957: 121; Godfrey 1966: 103). The normal wintering range extends from Wyoming and South Dakota south to northern Mexico and Texas (A.O.U. 1957; Oberholser 1974: 260). Extraliminally the subspecies has been recorded west to southern British Columbia and east to Iowa,

Illinois and Missouri (A.O.U. 1957). More recently in Iowa (Dinsmore *et al.* 1984: 111-112), Richardson's and eastern Merlins are thought to occur as migrants in possibly equal numbers, but it is noted that most Iowa observers do not attempt to separate the two subspecies.

The Point Pelee bird is considered a winter visitor since winter conditions prevailed prior to, and during, the period when the bird was present, and also because the earliest valid date for a spring migrant in the Point Pelee area is 20 March (in 1979; Wormington 1979: 7), fully 20 days after the initial observation date of the *richardsonii* individual. Furthermore, the prolonged stay of the bird is inconsistent with what would be expected for a spring migrant.

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Notes

Eurasian Jackdaw: New to Ontario

At 1200 h on 13 April 1985, I was driving east on Victoria Street, south of Highway 401, between Oshawa and Whitby, Durham R.M. The CN Railway tracks run just south of this road, and on top of one of the hydro poles beside the tracks I noticed as a silhouette against the sun what I assumed to be a small raptor, perched, pecking at something held in its claws. The bird looked too large for an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) and too small for an American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). Out of interest I swung south on Thickson Road, under the railway bridge, to be able to see the bird with the sun behind me. I think I actually laughed aloud at the absurdity of finding that it was a Eurasian Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*), a bird with which I am very familiar from visits to southern England.

The bird was obviously a crow, but a small, grey and black one. The body plumage was glossy black, as was the crown of the

head, but the nape and cheek were silvery grey. The overall impression was of a neat, trim bird without the rather shaggy plumage of many American Crows. I watched the bird somewhat nostalgically for a few minutes until it flew off westward with a quick, almost hurried, wingbeat and a couple of familiar, high-pitched "kyow kyow"s. I attempted to follow the bird by road but traffic was too dense to keep up with it. It rested briefly on wires further down the railway line but was then lost to view.

I did not make notes on the Eurasian Jackdaw's plumage and characteristics at the time of this sighting because its identity was so obvious to me, and also because at the time I assumed that it was an escaped cage-bird. We are well trained in the Toronto area to accept, regretfully, that most records of unusual corvids (e.g., Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica*)) rarely refer to wild birds. Knowing that in many countries in Europe