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Thunder Bay's Nesting Merlins

by

N.G. Escott

In Ontario, the nominate subspecies of the Merlin (*Falco c. columbarius*) breeds throughout the Boreal and Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Forest Regions, although actual documented nesting records are scarce (Peck and James 1983; Oliphant 1985). This species occasionally selects old American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) or Common Raven (*C. corax*) nests near the tops of spruce (*Picea* spp.) and pine (*Pinus* spp.) trees, usually near water (Johnson 1982).

While generally considered to be an uncommon inhabitant of the boreal forest, and associated with uninhabited wilderness areas, the Merlin is both common, and urbanized, in the city of Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay District, Ontario.

Merlins have nested in Thunder Bay (known as the twin cities of Fort William and Port Arthur prior to 1970) for at least four decades. In an address to the Minnesota Ornithological Union in Duluth on 21 May 1949, Fort William's Dr. A.E. Allin (1949) stated: "Pigeon

Hawks [Merlins] are often common—one year we located 4 pair; another year a pair occupied a crow's nest in a City park and 4 eggs were laid. In 1944 they were probably again nearby for I could imitate a mouse on a late summer afternoon and bring them to my bedroom window. . . ." Dr. Allin also found a nest in 1962 and parents with young in 1963 and 1964, all in Fort William (*Thunder Bay Field Naturalists Newsletter*, Vols. 16-18; 1962-64).

The Merlins that nested in the city occasionally overwintered also. Prior to 1960, single Merlins were recorded on the Christmas Bird Counts of 1942, 1955, and 1959. Since 1960, at least one Merlin has been seen on the Count or during the count period every year except four, and two were counted in 1965, 1973, 1978, and 1985 (*TBFN Newsletter* and *American Birds*, various years).

Nesting Merlins are most easily found in April and May during their noisy courtship, and in July when the young fledge and stay

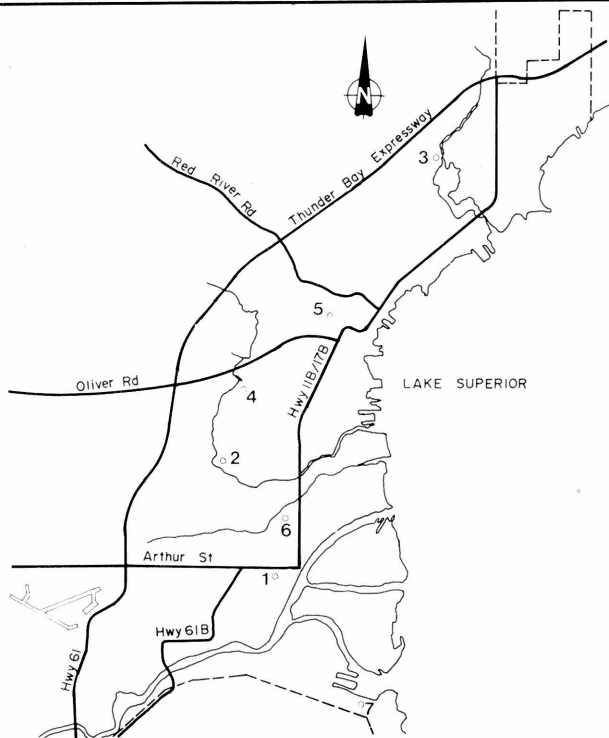


Figure 1: Merlin nesting sites in the city of Thunder Bay, Ontario, in 1986. See text for description of locations.

close to the nest in a noisy family group. In July 1986 we made a brief survey of known and suspected Merlin nesting sites within urban Thunder Bay (that part of the city between Lake Superior and Highway 11/17), and found four definite and three possible nesting territories (Figure 1). These known or suspected breeding locations are discussed below:

1. *Vickers Park area.* This pair nested at the top of a blue spruce (*Picea pungens*) in a backyard (Figure 2); four fledged young appeared in mid-July. They initially perched on neighbouring houses, but soon moved two blocks to the six-storey high McKellar

Hospital, where they would sit on rooftop antennas calling to each other and taking test flights. Three birds were seen on the 27 July survey, two of them on the hospital roof, the third on the nest tree.

2. *Confederation College.* Courting Merlins were heard in April in front of the College's main entrance, and on 27 July a family group of five birds was present at this same location, huddled together in the rain on branches of a dead birch tree. These birds were remarkably tame, having grown up with students walking below them every day (Figures 3 and 4).

3. *Boulevard Lake.* A pair of Merlins was seen courting on the south side of the lake on 9 April,



Figure 2: Nest tree of the Vickers Park pair. The Merlins nested near the top of the taller of the two spruce trees in this urban backyard. Photo by Bill Climie.

and on 28 July a family group of four was found at the west end of the lake, perched on dead snags and the tops of spruce trees.

4. *Lakehead University.* Merlins were seen here regularly during the summer of 1986, sometimes carrying food. On our survey, a single bird was seen on 29 July, on the roof of an adjacent apartment building.

5. *Mariday Park.* Merlins were known to nest in this residential area in 1984 and 1985. Although Merlins were heard calling in mid-July, we did not see any birds here on our late July survey. Two birds, however, were observed here on a spruce tree on 1 August.

6. *Dease Park.* Merlins nested at this location in 1985. On 27 July we found one Merlin perched on a telephone wire one block from the park.

7. *Abitibi Mill.* A pair of Merlins was seen in the vicinity of this paper mill on 7 May, and single birds were subsequently observed at this locality on numerous occasions. Although this site was not included in our late July survey, we visited the area on 3 and 4 August and found one immature Merlin on each occasion.

Thunder Bay is not the only North American city in which nesting Merlins have become established. They have been studied extensively in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan since the discovery of the first nest in 1963 (Houston 1981). Since then, their numbers have been steadily increasing, with 16 nesting pairs recorded by 1982 (Oliphant and Haug 1985). Edmonton, Alberta has also supported a breeding population

of Merlins since the 1960s; a 1978 census revealed the presence of 8 pairs (Smith 1978). Both of these populations involve the prairie race of the Merlin (*F. c. richardsonii*). The majority of Merlin breeding records in North America refer to this subspecies (Oliphant 1985).

Why Merlins have been so successful in breeding in the urban environment of Thunder Bay is not fully known, but is likely due, in large part, to prey availability. In Saskatoon, Oliphant and Haug (1985) found that Merlins fed extensively on House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), a situation which apparently also prevails in Thunder Bay.

The taiga (boreal forest) Merlin, nominate *columbarius*, also nests in the vicinity of smaller towns and settlements in northwestern Ontario, such as Atikokan, Rainy River District (Elder, pers. comm.,

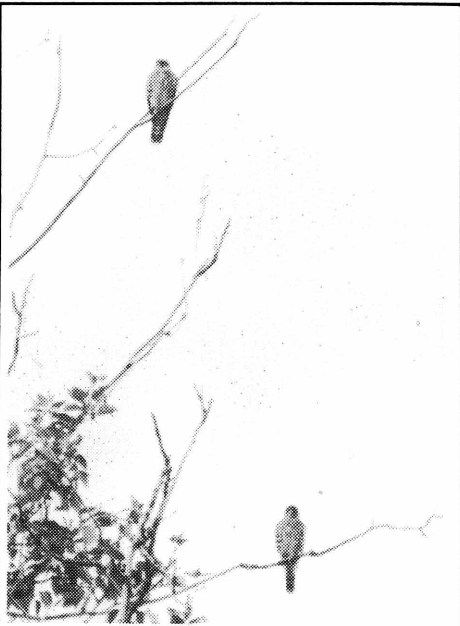


Figure 4: Two juvenile Merlins, Confederation College, 3 August 1986. Photo by Derek Parkinson.



Figure 3: Juvenile Merlin, Confederation College, 3 August 1986. Photo by Derek Parkinson.

1986), Marathon, Thunder Bay District (Escott 1977), and, for the first time in 1986, Silver Islet, Thunder Bay District. In these areas, the population density appears to be lower than in Thunder Bay, and more typical of the densities found in the traditional breeding areas of uninhabited boreal forest.

In summary, this paper summarizes the history of the Merlin in Thunder Bay, and provides an initial count of breeding pairs which can be used for future comparison. The "citicification" of the Merlin in Thunder Bay parallels, and may actually have antedated, a similar phenomenon that has been well documented in Saskatoon and Edmonton.

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Are Red-eyed and Philadelphia Vireos Always Interspecifically Territorial?

by

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After an extensive study of Philadelphia Vireos (*Vireo philadelphicus*) and Red-eyed Vireos (*V. olivaceus*) near Englehart, in Timiskaming District, Ontario, Rice (1978c) presented evidence that the two species used essentially identical habitat and would even occupy the same territorial area in successive years. But, he also provided clear

evidence that the two species maintained mutually exclusive territories in any particular year (Rice 1978a). Experimental and observational findings indicated that neither species was at a disadvantage in territorial disputes, so that despite size differences, each could exist adjacent to the other without overlapping territories. However, we made casual

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