

ABOUT THE COVER: MERLIN

A fearsome predator of small birds, a hunting Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) flies with powerful, rapid wingbeats that make this small falcon look bigger and more robust than it really is. The old name of "Pigeon Hawk" is thought by some to reflect a favored prey, but current interpretation suggests that this name derives from a similarity between the flight of this hawk and that of doves. The Merlin is a small, dark falcon that is dimorphic in size, with females averaging a third larger than males. It is distinguished from the somewhat smaller American Kestrel by the lack of rufous on the back and tail, and by its contrasting dark-and-light banded tail. Merlins are smaller than Peregrine Falcons and fly with faster wingbeats. Three subspecies are recognized in North America: the largely sedentary "Black" Merlin (*F. c. suckleyi*) of the Pacific Northwest, the pale "Prairie" Merlin (*F. c. richardsonii*) of the prairie states and provinces, and the widely distributed "Taiga" Merlin (*F. c. columbarius*), which is the subspecies that migrates through the New England states.

The Merlin's breeding range extends from Alaska across most of Canada, south to the U.S. border and into Maine, Michigan, and Oregon. They also breed throughout the boreal zone of Europe and Asia. Most Merlin populations are migratory; in North America, the species winters from the western half of the U.S. south through Central America as far south as Ecuador. Others winter along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts and in the Caribbean, while sedentary populations occur from Alaska south to Washington, and in the prairie states. Merlins migrate through Massachusetts in late April and early May, with males preceding females to their breeding grounds. They are considered an uncommon to fairly common migrant in Massachusetts; migration is largely (though by no means exclusively) coastal, with as many as twenty reported in a single day from Plum Island. They migrate back through Massachusetts from mid-September to mid-October, with a few Merlins overwintering on Cape Cod and the Islands.

Merlins are seasonally monogamous, produce a single brood, and may return to the same nesting territory and have the same mate in successive years. They nest in open woodlands, grasslands, and bogs; in the boreal zone, they prefer wet, open taiga. Their *Ki-Ki-Kee* calls serve both territorial and courtship functions, with males' calls higher-pitched and more rapid than females'. They also utter a variety of *chips* and *churrrs*. Their courtship and territorial flights are spectacular — rolls, dives, swoops, and flutter flights in circular and figure-8 patterns. Males pass food to females, often in midair exchanges.

Merlins occasionally nest on cliffs, on the ground, or in tree hollows, but usually use old crow or hawk nests in either deciduous or coniferous trees. The usual clutch is four or five whitish to brownish eggs, mottled with shades of rufous. During the one-month incubation period, the female does most of the

incubating while the male does the hunting and brings food to the female. After the eggs hatch, the male provides food which the female feeds to the chicks. The young fledge in about a month, and for another month the adults continue to feed them. During nesting, the male often perches on a high branch with a commanding view and attacks any other Merlins or potential nest predators that happen to wander into his territory.

Merlins eat mostly small and medium-sized birds, but will take bats, reptiles, and small mammals opportunistically. Merlins in urban areas or near grain elevators tend to specialize in House Sparrows. Waxwings and Horned Larks are favored prey in winter, and often spectacular ascending aerial flights — “ringing flights” — occur when these prey try to escape the pursuing Merlin. They take most prey on the wing, and may hunt by flying close to the ground to avoid detection. They cast pellets, and may cache prey.

Merlins are preyed upon by Peregrine Falcons, Great-horned Owls, and accipiters. Colliding with towers is a major cause of mortality. They suffered from egg-shell thinning during the DDT era. More recently, habitat alteration, particularly the removal of trees at prairie potholes, has had a negative impact on local populations, but this has been largely offset by increased numbers nesting in urban areas. Populations are thought to be stable or increasing in most areas of North America, although declining counts of Merlins at Cape May suggest problems in the northeast.

Despite their relatively small size, Merlins have, since the Middle Ages, been a favorite with many falconers, including Catherine the Great and Mary Queen of Scots, and some are still flown in North America. Most people, however, prefer them as wild birds, and look forward to the spring and fall migration when the chance of seeing one of these magnificent little falcons is greatest.

— William E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Barry Van Dusen, a wildlife artist and illustrator based in Princeton, Massachusetts, frequently contributes his insightful bird drawings to *Bird Observer*. Some of Barry's art will be appearing in a two-person show, titled “A Passion for Birds,” at Massachusetts Audubon's South Shore Regional Center in Marshfield, Massachusetts, beginning on May 5, 2000. James Coe will be the other artist featured. For more information, call the Center at (781) 837-9400. Beginning in March 2000 and continuing through November, the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, Scotland, will be showing a range of the work Barry began in the fall of 1997 as part of “Project Tiger.” In addition to preparing work for a variety of upcoming juried shows, Barry has been working on illustrations to be used with the “Birdsong Identifier,” a new product designed to facilitate the identification of bird songs in the field.