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FIRST RECORDS OF THE "PRAIRIE" MERLIN (*Falco columbarius richardsonii*) IN FLORIDA

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Of the nine subspecies of the Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) that are known worldwide, three occur in North America: the widespread, nominate "Taiga" Merlin (*F. c. columbarius*) breeding from Alaska and Washington east to Newfoundland and Maine; the "Prairie" Merlin (*F. c. richardsonii*) breeding from Alberta and Idaho east to Manitoba and Minnesota; and the "Black" Merlin (*F. c. suckleyi*) restricted to the Pacific Northwest, breeding from Alaska south to Washington (Warkentin et al. 2005, Dunn and Alderfer 2017). The "Black" Merlin is largely resident, with some individuals wintering south to California and New Mexico. In contrast, the other two North American subspecies are highly migratory. "Taiga" Merlins winter across much of the United States, including Florida, south through Central America and the West Indies to northern South America. "Prairie" Merlins winter in the center of the continent south to Central America (Warkentin et al. 2005, Dunn and Alderfer 2017). The occurrence of the "Prairie" Merlin in Florida was not known to Howell (1932) or Stevenson and Anderson (1994) and has not been reported in the published literature subsequently (e.g., Greenlaw et al. 2014). In this note, we document the first two records of the "Prairie" Merlin subspecies in Florida, both obtained from checklists submitted to eBird (Sullivan et al. 2009).

Methods

Photographs uploaded to eBird checklists are archived in the Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, New York. We examined every Merlin photograph from Florida that was archived in the Macaulay Library through 23 September 2020, a total of 2,422 images of approximately 1,617 individuals. To determine how many Merlins could be identified conclusively to subspecies, AL examined 2,045 images on 12–13 December 2019, and BP examined 254 images on 28 March 2020 and 123 images on 24 September 2020. Field marks used to separate "Prairie" Merlins from "Taiga" Merlins or their intergrades included a plain face with an indistinct "moustache" or "sideburn," rufous streaking on white underparts, and the underside of the tail marked with well-defined black and white bands (Clark and Wheeler 2001; Figs. 1–2). Male "Prairie" Merlins have a light gray-blue mantle (often with thin, black shaft-streaks) that is paler than that of male "Taiga" Merlins. Adult female "Prairie" Merlins have a pale, nearly sand-colored mantle, often with light-tan edging to most feathers (Clark and Wheeler 2001).

Results

Of the 2,422 images of Merlins from Florida that were archived in the Macaulay Library through 23 September 2020, greater than 99.9% represented single individuals;

two images showed two individuals each. Three photographs, of two individuals, represented "Prairie" Merlins, and both were adult males (Figs. 1–2). Both records were from the central peninsula, one along the Gulf of Mexico and one inland:

One male photographed at Honeymoon Island State Park, Dunedin, Pinellas County, Florida, on 16 April 2018 (Hoffman 2018; Fig. 1); and

One male photographed at Nichols Pond, west of Oxford, Sumter County, Florida, on 5 December 2019 (Richard 2019; Fig. 2).

We found several other candidates for "Prairie" Merlins in the Macaulay Library from Florida but chose to exclude them because the photographs were not conclusive to subspecies. Almost all other Merlin images from Florida represent the "Taiga" subspecies. Several other individuals that cannot be assigned to a particular subspecies may represent "Taiga" × "Prairie" intergrades. Not surprisingly, given their restricted range along the Pacific coast and their mostly sedentary habits, no Merlin photographed in Florida showed characters of the "Black" subspecies.

Photographs of 10 purported Merlins taken in Florida and archived in the Macaulay

Figure 1. Adult male "Prairie" Merlin (*Falco columbarius richardsonii*) at Honeymoon Island State Park, Dunedin, Pinellas County, Florida, on 16 April 2018. This individual furnishes the first definitive record of *richardsonii* for Florida. Photograph by Jennifer Hoffman.

Figure 2. Adult male "Prairie" Merlin at Nichols Pond, Sumter County, Florida, on 5 December 2019—note the dragonfly prey. This individual furnishes the second definitive record for Florida. Photograph by Douglas Richard.

Library represented other species: two Sharp-shinned Hawks (*Accipiter striatus*), three Red-shouldered Hawks (*Buteo lineatus*), one Broad-winged Hawk (*B. platypterus*), and four American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*). We reported these misidentifications to eBird reviewers to allow the identifications to be corrected.

Discussion

Due to the propensity for Merlins to perch on tall, bare branches and to allow close approach, assessing plumages from most of the images in the Macaulay Library was not difficult and could be done with confidence. The very recent occurrence of "Prairie" Merlins in Florida, with single records in 2018 and 2019, when none was known previously (e.g., Stevenson and Anderson 1994, Greenlaw et al. 2014), probably is the result of a great increase in *richardsonii* populations since the 1960s. This population increase is thought to be due to the banning of organochlorine pesticides such as dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) and reduced persecution from humans (Warkentin et al. 2005). The massive growth of eBird since its inception in 2002 is also responsible for the discovery of "Prairie" Merlins in Florida—both records initially were published at ebird.org. Through 23 September 2020, 1.64 million eBird checklists containing 1.03 million bird photographs have been submitted to eBird from Florida. We anticipate that records of "Prairie" Merlins in Florida will continue to increase, and

we encourage birders in the state to document their sightings with photographs posted to eBird or with reports sent to the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee.

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