

Merlin

Falco columbarius

Merlins are small, fierce falcons that use surprise attacks to bring down small songbirds and shorebirds. They are powerful fliers, but you can tell them from larger falcons by their rapid wingbeats and overall dark tones. Medieval falconers called them “lady hawks,” and noblewomen used them to hunt Sky Larks. Merlin populations have largely recovered from twentieth-century declines, thanks to a ban on the pesticide DDT and their ability to adapt to life around towns and cities.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Merlins are small falcons with a powerful build that is broader and stockier than the slightly smaller American Kestrel. Merlins have sharply pointed wings, a broad chest, and a medium length tail.

Color Pattern

Merlins are generally dark and streaky, though their coloration varies geographically and by gender. Adult male Merlins are slaty gray to dark gray; females and immatures are browner. The chest is usually heavily streaked and the underwings are dark. The dark tail has narrow white bands, and the face often lacks a prominent malar or “mustache” stripe.

Behavior

Merlins are fierce, energetic predators that patrol shorelines and open areas looking for their prey of small birds (and sometimes dragonflies). They fly powerfully, with quick wingbeats, pausing to glide only rarely. They also spend long periods perched in open areas, scanning for prey.

Habitat

Merlins nest in forested openings, edges, and along rivers across northern North America. They have also begun nesting in towns and cities. During migration and winter, be on the lookout for Merlins in open forests, grasslands, and especially coastal areas with flocks of small songbirds or shorebirds.

Cool Facts

- Merlin pairs have been seen teaming up to hunt large flocks of waxwings: one Merlin flushes the flock by attacking from below; the other comes in moments later to take advantage of the confusion.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 9.4 - 11.8 inches
- Wingspan - 20.9 - 26.8 inches
- Weight - 5.6 - 8.5 ounces

