

Merlin

and the other falcons

Rich Stallcup



SUDDENLY the mudflat explodes and shorebirds rocket into flight going every which way. Huge flocks of sandpipers are wheeling and winding, flashing white then dark. Willets, godwits and curlews are screaming, terns lose their graceful composure, herons and egrets cock an eye to the sky, close their necks, and freeze. A Scrub Jay in the border thicket goes still as stone. An attack is in the works, and the target is known only to Merlin.

From somewhere a 150-mile-per-hour bullet with claws is on the way, focused on a single soul amongst the chaos. As pictured here, the victim will be a sandpiper. Merlin easily catches the flock and cuts a wake through it, emerging, this time, with a meal. The crease in the flocks rounds out.

A couple of feathers drift and rock slowly back to earth and before they land, Merlin is feasting two miles away, perched with its kill on an open Douglas fir branch. Waders settle back to nervous feeding and quiet roost. Merlin will be back on the next low tide.

Merlins don't hover. There isn't time. Unlike Kestrels, it isn't part of their style. The world of Merlin is quick and intense. In flight, Kestrels often hover and flow around like overgrown swallows, but Merlins beat at the air like they are always late and trying to catch up.

Series '74 Harley Davidson motorcycles had an option called the suicide clutch that did not engage gradually. You were either at idle, or ripping along: nothing in between. That, too, is the way of the Merlin. . . they do not engage gradually. In the Scilly Isles where hundreds of British birders go in October to look for rarities, this standard dialogue has evolved. If the question is, "Was that a Merlin?", the answer is "Yes, because if it were a Kestrel, it would still be here."

Timing: Merlin is a scarce bird throughout its holarctic range. Isn't this a surprise for what might be the world's most efficient winged predator?

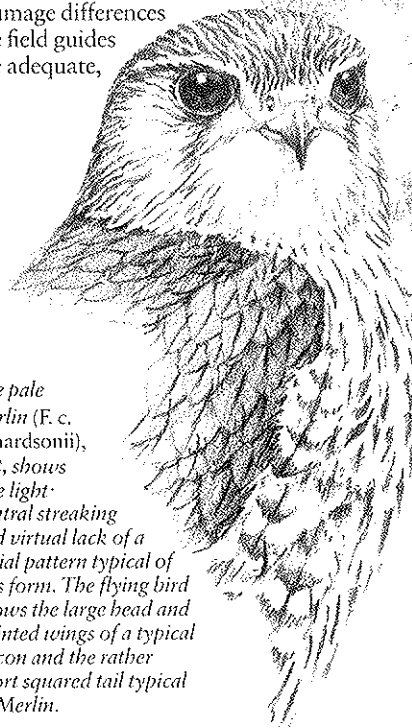
Here in California, Merlin is a winter bird (though a pair or two may nest in Siskiyou or Modoc counties), but it will be a good day if you see even one. On the winter range Merlin needs a lot of space, and other species of raptors, especially other Merlins, are physically excluded.

Habitat: Merlins aren't much for following rules or staying within the cage of definition.

From mid-September through mid-April, one of them might be found anywhere, in any habitat. Although some individuals maintain distinct foraging territories at coastal, valley, or Great Basin localities, other are nomads and follow food sources — crossbills moving with the cone-nut crop, thrushes at berry outbreaks, or waxwings and solitaires ranging through juniper forests. Merlins have been seen chasing Red Phalaropes ten miles offshore, warblers at Furnace Creek in Death Valley, and Rosy Finches at 12,000 feet along the Sierran crest. Merlins are small-bird-harvesters and may occur wherever there are any ripe to pick.

Identification: Compared to *American Kestrel*, Merlins are bigger-headed and have relatively shorter wings that are broader at the base. The tail of Merlin is shorter and clearly squared (not rounded) at the tip. As said above, the two are behaviorally very different. While Kestrels drift, slide, and hover, Merlins always seem late for some distant appointment and break the speed limit to keep it. For plumage differences the field guides are adequate,

The pale Merlin (F. c. richardsonii), left, shows the light-ventral streaking and virtual lack of a facial pattern typical of this form. The flying bird shows the large head and pointed wings of a typical falcon and the rather short squared tail typical of Merlin.



but many Merlins can be (and should be) identified to sub-species (see below).

Compared to *Peregrine* and *Prairie Falcon*, Merlin is smaller (though a small Peregrine versus a large Merlin could be a hard call) and has shorter wings and a shorter tail. Most Peregrines here are very dark on the upperparts, and the dramatic facial pattern is easily discerned, even at a distance. Prairie Falcons are always light sandy brown above, and all individuals have blackish axillaries or "wing-pits" that contrast with the otherwise white underparts.

Perhaps the bird most often mistaken for Merlin is the immature *Sharp-shinned Hawk*. Both are small hawks with squared tails and heavily streaked breasts. Though



Sharp-shinneds have "rounded" wingtips and Merlins have

"pointed" wing tips, Sharp-

shinned's wings can appear pointed, especially if it is diving or hurrying downwind. Good distinctions may be Merlin's much larger head, mounted on a thick neck, and its cleaving flight performed with aggressive intent. Sharp-shinned Hawk has a small head pressed against the leading edge of the wings (yes, in the middle) without much neck. Flight-at-ease is typical accipitrine — flap-flap flap-glide — but may appear wilder when the bird is clipping along downslope. Merlins have dark irises, Sharp-shinneds, yellow.

Subspecies of Merlin: Three distinct Merlin subspecies occur in North America, and all are represented in California during migration and in winter. Many individuals can be identified to subspecies in the field; others

DRAWINGS BY KEITH HANSEN



A dark Merlin (perhaps *F. c. suckleyi*) cuts a crease in a flock of sandpipers.

may not. Please try to do this (carefully), and report your findings to the regional editors of *American Birds*. Our understanding of local avifauna and your enjoyment of birding may be heightened.

The "taiga" Merlin (*Falco columbarius columbarius*) is probably the most common race found in California. It is intermediate in color tone between the next two and, like the others, males, females, and immatures are distinct. This type may be more difficult to identify with certainty than the very light and very dark races.

The "prairie" Merlin (*F. c. richardsonii*) is very pale (gray or tan) on the upperparts with light ventral streaking, and the "black" Merlin (*F. c. suckleyi*) is blackish or dark chocolate brown above with dense, black streaking below.

Merlins are special. Their scarcity, unpredictability, and mystique make them one of the most striking players in the wilderness of wonder. Be like the sandpiper and, while in the winter field, watch constantly for the imminent, flashing presence of this feathered prince.

Farallon Patrol Log

SUMMER is the time when juvenile Common Murres learn to feed in our near-shore waters, and humpback whales visit the Gulf of the Farallones for a feast of *Euphausiids*. It is also a season of frequent passages from the mainland to the island by the faithful skippers of the Oceanic Society San Francisco Bay Chapter's Farallon Patrol. PRBO is most grateful for this support, essential to our Farallon Island research program.

June 18	DICK HONEY	<i>Wind Dancer</i>
July 2	TOM CHARKINS	<i>Kumbaya</i>

July 8	DAVE PLANT	<i>Rampage</i>
July 16	RALPH NOBLES	<i>Starbuck</i>
July 30	STUART STEVENS	<i>Taku III</i>
August 6	TOM CHARKINS	<i>Kumbaya</i>
August 14	JIM HECHT	<i>Shalom</i>
August 18	DAVE PLANT	<i>Rampage</i>
August 21	THE WHALE CENTER	<i>Salty Lady</i>
August 28	HENRY CORNING	<i>Insight</i>
September 3	MARY BUCKMAN	<i>Shantung</i>
September 7	DICK HONEY	<i>Wind Dancer</i>
September 10	RALPH NOBLES	<i>Starbuck</i>