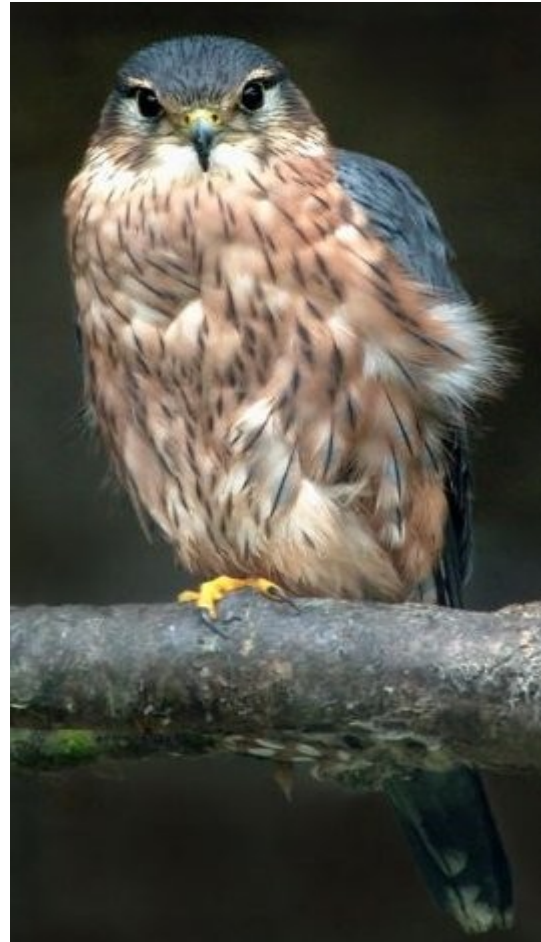


Merlin **(*Falco columbarius*)**



Photos By <http://www.bobperryonline.co.uk/27328.html>

Physical Description:

Male merlins have slaty blue, purplish, or dark umber-brown upper parts, streaked with black from the crown to shoulders and back. The tail is barred by dark umber-brown or blackish bands and is tipped in white. The underparts are cream to a rich buff with heavy longitudinally streaks of dark umber-brown or black coloration, except for the throat which is an unmarked white. The sides of the head are buff with fine darker streakings. The forehead and line above the eye is white. The beak is bluish horn; the cere and feet are chromo yellow; the claws are black; and the iris is deep brown.

Females and young are similar to males in their markings, but differ from males in coloration. The upperparts are dark brown. The neck is streaked with lighter brown and the tail is banded in yellow bars with a white tip.

Falco columbarius bendirei (Bendire's merlins): Lighter in the upper parts than *Falco columbarius columbarius*. The tail is black with three white bars.

Falco columbarius columbarius (American merlins): (see description of *Falco columbarius*). In males, the cere and feet turn reddish with age.

Falco columbarius richardsoni (Richardson's merlins): Lighter overall coloration and the tail is marked by five dark and six white bands.

Falco columbarius suckleyi (Black pigeon hawks): Darker in overall coloration than *Falco columbarius columbarius*. The throat of males is streaked with black markings, while the lower body parts are brownish-black with chestnut and white markings. The lower parts of young males and females are heavily marked with dusky coloration and the spotting is either faint or absent from the wings.

Identification:

Length: 12 inches Wingspan: 23 inches

- Short, dark, hooked beak
- Small, long-tailed hawk
- Long, pointed wings, broad at the base
- Thin, pale black mustache mark
- Underwings checkered with black and white
- Juveniles and immature females like adult female
- Three distinct races occur in North America

Taiga Merlin (F. c. *columbarius*)

- Breeds in northern Canadian boreal forests from Newfoundland to Alaska and winters in the southern United States; migrants occur frequently along both coasts but are rare inland
- Flight feathers dark above
- Faint dark mustache mark

Adult male:

- Dark blue-gray back, paler than *suckleyi* but darker than *richardsoni*
- Dark tail has wide, complete, blue-gray bands

Adult female

- Dark, brownish back
- Brown tail has narrow, complete buffy bands

Prairie Merlin (F. c. *richardsonii*)

- Breeder and resident in prairies of south-central Canada and the upper Midwest of the United States with some moving south to New Mexico
- Large spots on flight feathers visible from above
- Lacks mustache mark

Adult male:

- Pale supercilium
- Pale brown cheeks
- Pale blue-gray back
- Blue gray tail with narrow black bands

Adult female:

- Pale supercilium
- Pale brown cheeks
- Pale brown back
- Complete white bands on brown tail

Black Merlin (F.c.*suckleyi*)

- Resident in upper Pacific Coast forests from British Colombia to Alaska, occasionally straying to New Mexico in winter
- Very dark back, wings and head
- Dark mustache mark
- Flight feathers dark above

Adult male:

- Blue-gray cast seen in good light
- Black tail with incomplete blue-gray bands

Adult female:

- Dark tail with very faint tail bands

Hunting Strategies:

The merlin preys mainly on small birds of the ground and low vegetation: larks, swallows, finches and an occasional ptarmigan. Some small mammals (no larger than a small rabbit), lizards, snakes, insects, and in North America, dragonflies, also make up a portion of the merlin's diet. The relative proportions of the food are about 80% birds, 5% mammals and 15% insects.

Habitat and Range:

These small falcons favor open country, preferring moors, seashores, sand dunes, marshlands, steppes and deserts. *Falco columbarius* rarely lives in the forested areas, but will frequently breed in coniferous forests of the Northern Hemisphere.

Reproduction:

Males arrive to the breeding area before the females, usually returning to the same general area year after year. Nesting pairs don't necessarily use the same actual site each year. In open country and grassland, nests are generally scrapes located in dense vegetation. In regions of sand dunes, dune grasses may be used to create a nest. Even in wooded areas, nests may be scrapes, but empty crow nests are preferred. During the nesting period, *Falco columbarius* become highly aggressive towards other raptors and crows in the area. This aggressive behavior towards other predatory birds is beneficial to other woodland song and ground birds in the nesting range; since *Falco columbarius* hunts only in open country, thereby leaving the woodland birds relatively free from predators during the mating season. Normally the nest contains four to six eggs measuring 1.5 x 1.22 inches. The eggs are laid at two-day intervals. The coloration of the round oval eggs are variations of light buff white almost obscured by a regular pattern of rich chestnut-brown, purple and chocolate blotchings.

The eggs are laid in early April to early May in the southern ranges and in late May through June in the North. The female is the main incubator, although the male does share in the duties. The incubation period lasts 25-32 days. At the end of the incubation period, the eggs hatch in intervals.

Quills appear on the young after fourteen days, and by eighteen days the down is almost completely covered with feathers, except in the head region. Flight is achieved at 25-30 days after hatching.

Upon leaving the nest, the young remain nearby for several weeks until they are mature enough to migrate southward. Within a week's time of leaving the nest, the young are capable of distance flights, and at two weeks' time, they begin to catch insects. By six weeks the young are skilled in catching small birds, and shortly afterwards, they migrate southward from the breeding area. The success rate among the the young is exceptionally high, often three birds per nest survive to continue breeding.

Falco columbarius: Breeds throughout northern Europe, Asia and North America.

Falco columbarius bendirei: Breeds in northwestern Alaska to northern Saskatchewan and into northern California.

Falco columbarius columbarius: Breeds in eastern Canada to the eastern border of the Great Plains and southwards into Nova Scotia and northern Michigan.

Falco columbarius richardsoni: Breeding range is located in the Great Plains from southern Alberta and Saskatchewan to northern Montana and North Dakota.

Falco columbarius suckleyi: Breeding occurs only in western British Columbia and perhaps on Vancouver Island.

Lifespan / Longevity:

7 years.

Behavior:

Falco columbarius is not a social bird except in the mating season. During this period, the male and female share duties in raising the young. During incubation, the female remains on the nest while the male does the hunting. Rarely does the male visit the nest, often leaving the prey nearby for the female to retrieve. When the young are older, both male and female share hunting duties. Once the young leave for good, presumably the male and female return to their solitary life style. Flight (similiar to the flight of the swallow) is fast with steady wingbeats, often skimming in a low zigzagging pattern over the ground. Falco columbarius seldom soars. The call is a series of sharp "ki-ki-ki-ki-kee."