

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)

Field Marks:

- length: 10 in; wingspan: 24 in
- dark brown, gray, and black markings over a buffy tan undercoat
- poorly defined malar stripes under the eyes
- banded tail and heavily streaked breast
- commonly referred to as the Pigeon Hawk



Breeding Range:

Merlins breed in the northernmost regions of North America including Canada and Alaska. They also breed in Britain, Scandinavia, Finland, Iceland, Siberia, and north central Russia.

Wintering Range:

Merlins winter in most of the United States west of Louisiana and along the southern and eastern coastlines. They also winter in Europe, Iceland, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, India, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Habitat Preferences:

They prefer open or semi-open areas due to the high abundance of prey there. Merlins take advantage of borderlands between open plains and wooded areas, and live in small groves of deciduous trees if prey is abundant. Three different subspecies exist, and they all have specific preferences in habitat selection.

Nesting:

Merlins use abandoned crow, raven, hawk, or magpie nests, and rarely build new nests. Merlins make few if any modifications to the old nest, and often nest directly on top of the previous substrate. Unlike other falcons, Merlins rarely nest in cavities or on cliff faces, and rarely reuse the same nest for two consecutive years. The male defends alternate nests well into the incubation season. Egg laying begins April-May, and an average of five eggs are laid per clutch. Eggs are incubated for 30 days, and young remain in the nest for 29-31 days. Young are dependant on their parents for 1-4 weeks after fledging.

Feeding:

Merlins usually prey on small to medium-sized birds, and take insects on the wing. Very few mammals are taken, although they frequently hunt bats at cave entrances. Most hunting is done by aerial attacks on flying birds, although they occasionally hunt perched birds.

Conservation Status:

Merlins are not currently listed as endangered or threatened, but they are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Habitat loss is the main threat to Merlins in North America. This has caused regional extinction in parts of the mid-west, and a steady decline in populations throughout their range. Agricultural practices on the Great Plains have reduced possible nesting sites and foraging habitat. Recently, Merlin populations have moved to urban areas to take advantage of the increasing numbers of songbirds at backyard feeders.