

A Merlin's Tale

Perhaps the most famous Merlin is the wizard associated with King Arthur's court. Others might connect Merlin with a high-end bike company. There exists, however, another Merlin, which few of us have seen or heard. This bird is a small falcon and close cousin to the better known Peregrine.

In the United States Merlins are widely distributed but nowhere common. In New England, during the summer months they are most frequently found in the conifer forests of Maine. My wife and I have been fortunate to see these birds up close for the past three summers at Spencer Pond, near Moosehead Lake in Northern Maine. When we arrived there this past August, two chicks had just fledged and left the nest.

Merlins fledge 25 to 30 days after hatching, and though they are adult in size at that time, they are neither skilled nor completely independent. Our Merlins were not people-shy. We saw them 20 or more times a day, frequently at close range when perched on a dead tree. One dying birch tree near our cabin became a point of contention for the Merlins, Pileated Woodpeckers (which had recently fledged three chicks) and a dozen or more Bluejays. Each group took turns trying to force another group from the prime perching spots. The Merlins did not always hold their own.

The Merlin (*Falco columbarius*), or Pigeon Hawk, is about 10 to 13 inches in length and has a wingspan of 24 to 26 inches. The males have steel blue or gray coloration on their backs; the females and immatures are mostly brown. The undersides of Merlins are white streaked with brown. Like all falcons, they are compact, fast flyers, attaining speeds of 100 m.p.h. They have narrow, longish tails with sharply pointed wings, unlike the broad and rounded wings of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks. Females are larger than males.

Merlins are northern breeders who prefer to use abandoned crow or magpie nests rather than building their own. They are also birds of the edge and do not like the deep forest. Like other raptors, Merlins are birds of prey that feed on small birds, insects, and small mammals. Within several days of our arrival the Jays gave up the competition for perch space in the birch tree, possibly because at least two had been killed not 30 yards from our cabin, caught unaware by Merlins.

One of the hunting techniques of the Merlin is to mimic the behavior and flight patterns of slower, less threatening birds to catch their prey off guard. One morning we saw an immature Merlin and an adult Pileated in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. The birds were perched within two feet of one another. Neither bird wanted to give ground. After a seemingly eternal moment, the Merlin aggressively lunged and pecked at the Pileated and the latter flew off.

Like all falcons, Merlins have a short, sharp hooked bill, which they use to bite through and break the neck (thus cutting the spinal cord) of their prey. In another nearby confrontation, a Merlin roused a Kingfisher from the dead tree they were sharing. While the Merlin had incredible speed, the Kingfisher acrobatically outflew the Merlin and escaped. Or perhaps the Merlin was simply not hungry enough to seriously pursue his prey. In any event, witnessing their maneuverings was like seeing a fighter scene from Stars Wars.

Our Merlin's tale is just one of the numerous nature adventures we experienced at Spencer Pond this year. We were reminded that while nature does not provide us with guarantees or promises,

it does hold out the hope we'll be rewarded from time to time with sights, sounds and experiences which restore the soul and lift the spirit.

by Dietrich Schlobohm