

Merlin

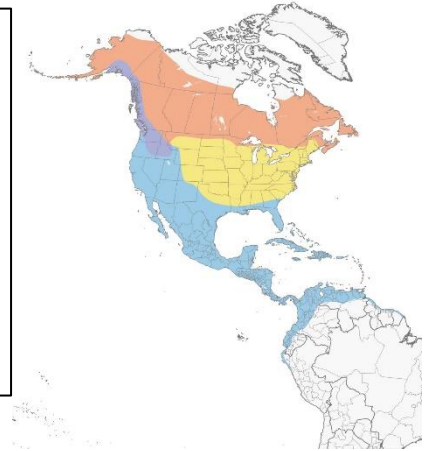


Male

Female

Classification

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Aves
Order: Falconiformes
Family: Falconidae
Genus: *Falco*
Species: *columbarius*



Range, Habitat, Conservation Status

- **Range:** Found in many regions of the world. In North America from northwestern Alaska east through most of Canada to Newfoundland, and south to the northern United States during the breeding season. The northern Eurasian population can be found from Scandinavia to Siberia, south to the British Isles, and east to northern China. Map only shows the area they inhabit in the Americas.
- **Habitat:** Favor open country, such as grasslands, marshlands, sand dunes, seashores, steppes, and deserts. Rarely live in forested areas but may breed in coniferous forests.
- **Conservation Status:** Least Concern

Physical Characteristics

- **Body Length:** 9.4 to 11.8 inches (24-30 cm)
- **Wingspan:** 20.9 to 26.8 inches (53-68 cm)
- **Weight:** 0.3 to 0.5 pounds (160-240 g)
- **Lifespan:** The oldest known individual in the wild was almost 12 years old.
- **Identifying Traits:** Sharply pointed wings, broad chest, and medium length tail. Females and males differ in coloration. Males have bluish to silvery gray backs with buff-colored breasts and flanks and heavy black-red-brown streaking. Females and juveniles have grayish to dark brown backs and buff white with brownish spots on their undersides. Coloration may also vary based on geographic location.

Behaviors

- **Feeding:** Small to medium sized birds, such as larks, pigeons, house sparrows, sandpipers, and pipits. Also eat bats, insects, reptiles and small rodents. Typically catch birds in midair during high-speed attacks.
- **Breeding:** In open and semi-open areas. Monogamous during the breeding season, but 80% find new mates from year to year. When courting, perform spectacular flight displays, including bursts of strong, level flight while rocking side to side in the air, deep U-shaped dives, and slow, fluttering flights in a circle or figure-eight near to a perched mate. Both sexes claim their territory by soaring high in the air near their nest. Males also make a slow landing next to their mate, keeping their legs outstretched, bowing the head, and fanning the tail. Males may bring food for the female. On the map, blue is nonbreeding, red is breeding, and purple represents year round.
- **Nesting:** Use old stick nests previously built by hawks, crows, and magpies. May also nest on cliff ledges, scrapes on the ground, and tree cavities. Lay 3 to 6 rusty brown eggs with brown markings.
- **Migration:** In the Western Hemisphere, they migrate south to the United States or head to sunny Caribbean islands, such as Cuba, the Bahamas or Hispaniola, or go further south into Central America and South America. In the Eastern Hemisphere, they travel throughout Europe and some head to southeast Asia, including India, and northern Africa, including Tunisia. Yellow on the map represents migration.
- **Call:** Shrill, chattering call that lasts up to 4 seconds. Used in courtship and aggressive situations. Also make a short chip note in courtship displays and as a contact call. The male is higher pitched than the female.

Fun Facts!

- The name "Merlin" comes from *esmerillon*, the old French name for the species. Merlins used to be called "pigeon hawks" because in flight they look somewhat pigeon-like. Their species name, *columbarius*, is also a reference to pigeons.
- Although only a little bit larger than the American Kestrel, the Merlin is much heavier and considerably larger looking.
- Merlin pairs have been observed teaming up to hunt large flocks of waxwings. One individual flushes out the flock by attacking from below while the other takes advantage of the ensuing confusion.
- Like other falcons, the Merlin is a strong and maneuverable flier. A typical flight speed is 30 miles per hour but can be faster during chases.



- There are 9 recognized subspecies of Merlins worldwide with 3 of those subspecies found in North America.

Importance

- Merlins prey on agricultural insect pests, such as grasshoppers and crickets. They are also an important predator in the food chain.

Sources

- <https://peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/falcons/merlin>
- <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Merlin/overview>
- https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Falco_columbarius/