

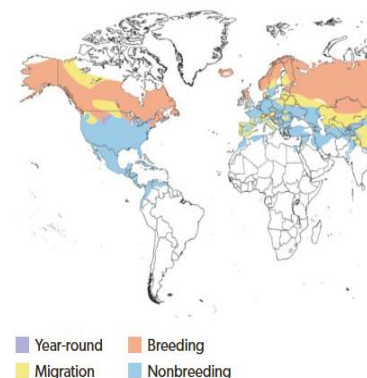
Merlin



Male

Female

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



Range, Habitat, Conservation Status

- **Range:** Found mainly across the northern hemisphere (map incomplete). 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.
- **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. Adapting to more urban and suburban settings in particular US eastern cities and towns.
- **Conservation Status:** Least Concern (populations stable)

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:** Bigger than a blue jay with sharply long pointed wings, broad chest, and long square tail. When the bird is perched, wing tips almost meet the tips of the tail. Tail is banded with thin faded white lines. Brown streaking on the chest and belly. Females and males differ in coloration and size. Males are smaller and have bluish to silvery gray backs with buffy colored breasts and flanks and heavy black-red-brown streaking. Females have grayish to dark brown backs and buffy white with brownish spots on their undersides. Coloration may also vary based on geographic location with three different sup-species. (Taiga Merlin, Prairie Merlin and Pacific Merlin). Juveniles resemble adult females.

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 grab and go 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 Merlin's worldwide with 3 of those subspecies found in North America.

Importance

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

Threats and Conservation measures

Conservation status is of least concern and numbers have rebounded following declines from DDT pesticide exposure in 1970s. While numbers are stable, threats include decline in prey availability (mainly birds) and mortalities due to collisions with cars, airplanes and electric pylons are common. To address backyard bird decline, visitors can convert their yard into a bird-friendly habitat by providing water (bird bath), shelter (bird boxes) and habitat (native plants). Many airports have conservation programs to manage and minimize collisions with raptors while conservation centers are working with utility companies to retrofit existing power poles by installing insulating covers, installing perch shields and adding safe artificial nesting platforms. To prevent car collisions, ask visitors to refrain from throwing food out car windows as this attracts prey such as rodents to the side of the road (<https://carolinaraptorcenter.org/raptor-hospital/>).

Sources

- <https://peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/falcons/merlin>
- <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Merlin/overview>
- https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Falco_columbarius/
- Tallamy, Douglas W. *Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard*. Timber Press, 2020.
- Washburn, B.E., 2018. Human-raptor conflicts in urban settings. In *Urban raptors: ecology and conservation of birds of prey in cities* (pp. 214-228). Washington, DC: Island Press/Center for Resource Economics.