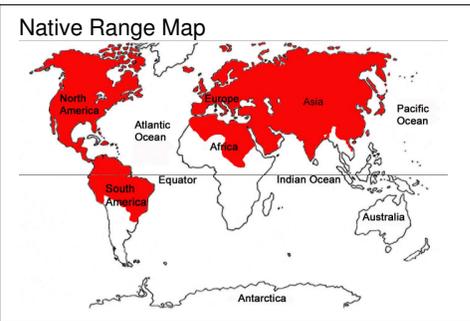


# Merlin



Photo courtesy of Tony Wisneski



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

## Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The merlin is found throughout many parts of the world. There are 10 subspecies worldwide, 3 of which occur in North America. *Falco columbarius* breeds across Canada southward to very northern United States and across northern Eurasia. It winters from southern Canada to mid South America and across Eurasia, into Africa. This subspecies favors open country, moors, seashores, sand dunes, marshlands, steppes, and deserts. It rarely lives in forested areas, but will breed in the coniferous forests of the Northern Hemisphere.
- **Exhibit Location:** Pole barn; used for demonstrations on zoo grounds

## Characteristics

- Length: 10-14 inches; Wingspan: 24-26 inches; Weight: up to 0.5 lbs. Females are approximately 10% larger and 30% heavier than males.
- The merlin is a jay-sized falcon, stockier than an American Kestrel.
- Adult males have a bluish-gray back and wings and black tails with 2-5 highly contrasting narrow bands. The under parts are cream-colored with heavy, dark streaking. Females and juveniles have dark brown backs and wings, dark brown tails with thin, buff-colored bands, and buff-colored under parts that are heavily streaked. Merlins lack the facial stripes of most other falcons.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** 7-10 years; **In Captivity** 7 years

## Behaviors

- Merlins are solitary birds (like to live alone) except during the breeding season.
- The species is a direct and deliberate flyer that flaps with short, powerful, piston-like wingbeats.
- Hunting peaks in the early morning and the late afternoon. Merlins use surprise when hunting from concealed perches and when flying rapidly below the canopy trying to flush prey out into the open.
- They can be very aggressive towards other raptors during the nesting period. Since they hunt in open country, this leaves the woodland birds relatively free of predators during the mating season.
- They cache, or store, any extra food on branches or nearby empty nests both in winter and in the breeding season.
- Their call is a series of sharp “ki-ki-ki-ki-kee”.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** crickets, superworms

## Reproduction

- Merlins reach sexual maturity at 2 years of age.
- Merlins do not build their own nests. Instead, they use abandoned nests of other birds or they nest in tree cavities, on the ground or on cliffs. Pairs begin to bond 1-2 months prior to egg-laying and remain monogamous throughout the breeding season. Courtship rituals involve various aerial displays, food sharing, and nest displays.
- Females lay a clutch of 4-6 eggs, with incubation lasting between 25-32 days. The female does most of the incubating, while the male brings food to her. The young fledge 25-35 days after hatching and remain dependent upon their parents for up to 6 weeks thereafter.
- Success rate is extremely high, with 3 birds per nest surviving to breed.

## Diet

- **In the Wild:** small birds (such as larks, swallows, finches), small mammals (no larger than a small rabbit), bats, lizards, snakes, amphibians, insects
- **At the Zoo:** mice

## Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES:** not listed
- Considered threatened in the state of Michigan, the merlin is widely distributed, but uncommon throughout its entire range.
- In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the use of pesticides including those with DDT, affected the quality of the merlins' eggs, making the shells thin and easily breakable. Since the ban on DDT in 1972, merlins have increased their numbers.
- Some areas have seen a decline in the merlin population because of habitat loss and human disturbance.

## Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The merlin was once known as the "pigeon hawk," because it somewhat resembles a pigeon in flight.
- In autumn, females precede males on the migration. In spring, the males precede the females.
- Extremely intelligent and very fast, merlins are prized in the sport of falconry.
- During medieval times, the merlin was considered the "ladies falcon" in falconry.
- A male merlin is called a "Jack".

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