

The Merlin



The MERLIN (FALCO COLUMBARIUS) previously known as PIGEON Hawk. Since the bird is also present in Europe, the U.S. American Ornithologist Union (AOU) adopted their title for U.S. birds.

The Merlin is a small and very fast member of the falcon family that is found in wide-open space and open woods. It is an aerialist that captures birds and insects in mid air by a level sprint finishing with sharp and abrupt turns. There are three populations which differ in overall color--the Pacific (black), the Taiga, and the Prairie. Our populations are the Taiga; however, I have seen the Prairie form in Lincoln County and West Spokane County--all in open farmland country.

The Merlin usually selects the extreme tops of dead trees and/or the top crowns of pine or fir trees as resting platforms. As stated, it is EXTREMELY fast and can overtake a flying bird which has a vast head start. (I think they can reach nearly 60 MPH in a very short time!) (Maybe even more...)

The Merlin breeds in the boreal forests of Alaska, Canada all the way to Newfoundland. It is suspected that breeding does occur in Washington in the northern forests; however, nothing has been confirmed. (That applies to the Taiga form.)

In the Spokane area, the Taiga Merlin is a regular winter visitor from October into March or early April. I have seen this falcon in the Palisades during winter for decades-usually at the top of a dead snag.

Normally, one does not see Merlins darting through pine forests since it is a bird of altitude. The raptors that "dart" through the forests are the Accipiter--the Sharp-shinned Hawk, the Cooper's Hawk and the Northern Goshawk.

All three are present in the Canyon and Palisades during winter. (The Goshawk being the rarer.) They are attracted to backyard feeding operations. These raptors have long tails and short, rounded wings that allow them to operate in tight corners. These are the ones that can twist and turn rapidly around obstacles like trees, shrubs, buildings, etc. Their regular flight pattern is a series of rapid wing beats with gliding sails mixed in. They are hunters at low levels most of the time (below tree level). They do use the open top snags for perching however, they also rest within the interior branches of trees and shrubs.

The Cooper's is a breeding bird in the Canyon. All three species are present during the winter period.

In general terms, both the Merlin and the Sharp-shinned are around Robin size-10" (The Sharpie is about 11") Wingspan is around 24/23"

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