

MERLIN NESTING IN SOUTHERN MANITOBA

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The Merlin (formerly known as the Common Hawk) is one of our smaller falcons and, in flight, can be distinguished from the American Kestrel (Pied-billed Grebe Hawk) by the broad contrast-bands on its tail. There are four species in Canada, and this falcon in its present form, can be found "at some point of the year over practically all of the North American continent, except in the treeless Arctic region."¹ It occurs all over Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.¹ In the British Isles it is known as "the ladies' falcon."²

The first successful nesting of Merlin in Manitoba was in 1988. This paper provides an account of Merlins nesting in Manitoba and lists nest records for southern Manitoba since 1955.

Winnipeg Records

Wolfgang Koes reported two nestings of Merlins in old crow nests in northeast Winnipeg, not far from the Assiniboine River. One nest was found in 1987 and the other in 1988 in the same neighborhood. These nests were both in tall trees in fairly open areas. The nesting was not confirmed successful, however, in both instances the male and female were seen wintering together.

David Hatch saw a male Merlin in Winnipeg in spring 1988 in the southwest part of the city, near a clump of trees in which there were two old crow nests.⁷ He also reported in November 1988 that a St. Vital resident had a Merlin "spending the winter nights in a blue spruce in his yard."⁸

The writer first observed Merlins on July 13 when a pair flew above the

treetops close to Assiniboine Park and approximately 0.5 km from the river. Their loud screaming calls of "kik-kik-kik" were like those given when a human comes near the nest.⁴

Many calls were heard in this area on July 13. One of two Merlins perched in a spruce 10.5 m from the ground was a fledged young. The nest was located on July 15 at 1005 h. The smaller adult (the male) uttering loud calls, flew swiftly to a high branch of a tree and perched momentarily, with a mouse dangling from its beak. It then flew to the nest, 10.5 m up in a spruce in a neighboring yard. During the brooding period hunting is done by the male alone. The male feeds his mate, but "the young are fed by the female who leaves her station and takes the prey from the male, not at the nest, but generally at or near one of the neighborhood perching places."¹⁰

This nest appeared to be an old American Crow nest, as is often the case.³ Built close to the trunk of the tree, it was constructed of fine twigs, pieces of fine bark, and rootlets.

With this particular nesting, the size of the clutch could not be determined; only two fledged young were observed.

In the nesting area on July 18 an adult and one young were seen perched on top of a 2.4-m high chain-link fence. For several minutes they remained motionless and silent, unlike the previous day when they were heard calling for 15 minutes, even when they were approached within 4.5 m. Both birds then took off and began hunting; darting swiftly in pursuit of a Cliff Swallow and

then an American Robin, but to no avail. (On 12 July, however, Robert Nero had found the remains of a Cliff Swallow on a lawn near the nest site.) It appeared as though the adult was giving training lessons to the young because both Merlins came down on the park lawn twice; no noticeable prey was captured. The birds finally flew back in the direction of the nest site. At no time during all observations did a young bird beg for food, as is the case with many passerine fledglings.

On 20 July at 1000 h loud calls were heard, but no Merlins could be seen. However, at 1115 h an adult flew swiftly over the open area of the park in the direction of the nest site. On 22 July at 0930 h a two-man team television crew from station CKND met Robert Nero and the writer near the nest site. The Merlins had not been seen for 2 days but, at 1025 h loud calls were heard and the birds returned to the nest area. Two perched atop tall trees and remained there for at least 15 minutes silent and motionless. The production of the T.V. crew was broadcast twice the same day on prime time T.V. news.

The next morning and evening one Merlin was heard and seen flying about. On 24 July from 1055 to 1116 h the male, with its usual noisy calls, flew to the top of a tall tree, not far from the nest site, with a House Sparrow dangling from its beak. In 5 minutes all the feathers were plucked; they floated down to the street. Some fine down was eaten when the flesh was plucked. The bird gorged itself on the innards. In 16 minutes the entire sparrow was demolished, except the legs and feet. Fox states "apparently the plucking is done immediately at the site of the kill or at the nearest convenient perch."⁴ During this time the female called and flew to another tree about 23 m. distant.

Merlins eat mainly small birds, as House Sparrows, as well as ro and insects; they have also been pursuing and attacking birds as la Common Flickers and magpies.^{13 14}

Although Merlins frequently stay winter, depending on density of population, no further sightings of Merlins at this site were made after August.^{11 13}

During the past few years there has been a considerable increase in sightings in Winnipeg. Merlins frequently abandoned crow nests so it is possible that this could lead to their increase in Winnipeg in the years ahead, as was the case in Saskatoon.^{9 12}

Other Manitoba Records

On 26 July 1988 the writer was directed by loud calls to a Merlin at a site at Whyteford, on Lake Winnipeg, 64 km n of Winnipeg. This nest was 10.5 m from the ground in a spruce tree what appeared to be an old crow nest. Cottagers were upset because the Merlins were taking many small songbirds as well as young Purple Martins. Only two appeared to be only two fledged Merlins. This was the writer's first record of a Merlin at Whyteford despite 10 years of birding in that area.

In other areas of southern Manitoba Merlins have nested successfully for many years (see Table 1). All of the records recorded in Prairie Nest Record Scheme were high in spruce trees in park-like areas. Nesting attempts by the Merlin have been observed at Pinawa, Whitemouth and Victoria Beach over the past few years (R. pers. comm.)

Ken de Smet indicates that "primary studies on the status of Merlins in southern Manitoba commenced in 1988. Playback of taped calls was used to locate nesting pairs, primarily

1. NESTING RECORDS OF MERLINS IN SOUTHERN MANITOBA FROM PRAIRIE NEST RECORDS CARD SCHEME.

Location	Habitat	Date	Observer
east of Aweme	spruce woods	5 May 1955	Stuart Criddle
east of Stonewall	cemetery	5 July 1983	Ken Gardner
(# instances)	city	1962 - 1977	Mamie McCowan
	fair grounds	1978-1982	Mamie McCowan
	Brandon Hills cemetery	1978-1982	Mamie McCowan
	Dept. of Agric. grounds	9 July 1982	Cal Cuthbert

ded cemeteries. Productivity was greater than expected and several addled eggs were collected. Populations appear to be expanding in the Aspen and, with nesting pairs in Brandon, Dauphin, Winnipeg, Dauphin and a number of smaller communities" (K. de pers. comm.).

Acknowledgements

Appreciation is expressed to Robert [unclear] for his constructive criticism of an earlier draft of this paper; to Herbert [unclear] and who provided access to the observation cards of Prairie Nest Records Scheme and other papers; to De Smet and to Rudolf Koes for important unpublished information on nest sites.

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⁶ HARRISON, H.H. 1975. A field guide to birds' nests in the United States east of the Mississippi River. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. 257 pp.

⁷ HATCH D.R.M. 1988. Chickadee Notes, *Winnipeg Free Press* 12 March.

⁸ HATCH D.R.M. 1988. Chickadee Notes, *Winnipeg Free Press* 26 November.

⁹ HOUSTON, C.S. 1981. History of Richardson's Merlin in Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 39(1):30-37.

¹⁰ LAWRENCE, L. DE K. 1949. Notes on nesting Pigeon Hawks at Pimisi Bay, Ontario. *Wilson Bull.* 61:15-35.

¹¹ McCOWAN, M. 1978. Merlins wintering and breeding at Brandon, Manitoba. *Blue Jay* 36(1):39.

¹² OLIPHANT, L.W. 1974. Merlins — the Saskatoon falcons. *Blue Jay* 32(3):140-147.

¹³ OLIPHANT, L.W. and S. McTAGGART. 1977. Prey utilized by urban Merlins. *Can. Field-Nat.* 91:190-192.

¹⁴ UDVARDY, M.D.F. 1977. Audubon Society field guide to North American birds. Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y. 855 pp.

¹⁵ YOUNG, A.G. 1981. Observations of the Merlin from Unity, Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 39(1):38-40.