

MORE ON THE ROOSTING HABITS OF AN URBAN MERLIN

E. OTTO HOHN, 11511 - 78 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta. T6G 0N4

The illustrated note which I prepared on this subject omitted an observation at variance with the hawk's usual behaviour.¹ On 5 January 1986, at 4:03 p.m. a Merlin arrived from the east in hot pursuit of a waxwing which dodged among the spruce of a park (mentioned in the earlier note) and evidently escaped capture, since the hawk was found perched without prey on a spruce branch about 2 m above the ground. It flushed from this well-hidden perch to settle in a nearby deciduous tree, remaining there several minutes until the author left the area. Might it have remained in this spruce to roost, 2 hours before sunset instead of its normally much later entry into the roost?

On 16 September 1986 a Merlin (the same bird?) was first seen by another observer on the roof which had been a routine pre-roosting perch the preceding winter. This particular roosting area was not used between mid-May and mid-September 1986. Between 16 September 1986 and 8 January 1987 the hawk was observed there by two observers on 30 evenings and one morning. During this period it showed some deviations from its previously reported habits. On 19 October at 10 minutes after sunset it made an unsuccessful stoop from a pine 50 m from its usual roost at a Red Squirrel on the ground. It then flew to the TV aerial and 18 minutes later dropped behind the roof and out of view.

During the winter of 1986-1987 the TV aerial was its favorite waiting perch rather than the pre-roosting perches used in the preceding winter. Only on three occasions was it seen to enter the

"double spruce" which had been a regular roosting spot during the previous winter but it may have been reaching the spruce from behind the building where it was not visible from my observation post.

During an attempted morning observation on 21 December the hawk was not seen during the period 29 minutes before sunrise, but on the morning of 24 December it was on the antenna at 18 minutes before sunrise, preening and once stretching wing. At 13 minutes before sunrise it flew toward the river bank.

A stuffed (or model) small rodent dragged across an open space is often attacked by an owl perched in the vicinity. On 18 December I performed a similar experiment using a stuffed Red-backed Vole, while the hawk was watched from the end of a roof 10 m distant. The bait moved forward in a most life-like way up and over the uneven snow for about 10 minutes, until the line became detached. The hawk did not reach the bait; the maneuver was not repeated. Occasionally one or more magpies perched close to the hawk, in the pre-roosting phase. They never showed overt gestures of attack toward the hawk but if they perched too close they would fly to another of its traditional pre-roosting perches.

This series of observations shows that the hawk's arrival in the roosting area was 3 minutes after sunset on an overcast evening but 11, 13 and 19 minutes before sunset on three sunny evenings. There was thus some evidence that it a

its pre-roosting perch somewhat earlier on overcast than on sunny evenings. One of seven drops to the roost in overcast weather ranged from 9 to 20 minutes after sunset, with an average of 15 minutes, while on eight sunny evenings the corresponding times ranged from 10 to 33 minutes with an average of 25 minutes, i.e. somewhat earlier on overcast than on sunny evenings. These data are contrary to the suggestion in an earlier report that the brightness of an evening sky has a moderate delay-effect on the time (relative to sunset) of entry into the roost.¹

The seasonal effect on arrival time is suggested by the observation that the Merlin arrived in the roosting area on September 14 minutes *before* sunset on a dull evening, i.e., much earlier than the early October to early January periods reported above.

Waiting periods between arrival in the roosting area and entry into the roost in October were 15 and 10 minutes on

two overcast days, and 8 and 9 minutes on two sunny evenings, i.e. they were longer on overcast than on sunny evenings. The earlier note stated that during the pre-roost wait the hawk spent only a fraction of this time preening.¹ This second series of observations during this phase confirm that during the last part of the waiting period the Merlin was almost always immobile. However, tail movements, rotations of the head 45° from, and back to resting position, stretching one wing, preening, reaching over the preen gland area with the beak and on mild evenings, fluffing out of the breast plumage, were not infrequent during the earlier part of the waiting periods. Once it defecated immediately before dropping off the perch and, white smears below its traditional perches but hardly any below the roosting tree, showed that defecation was a fairly frequent activity during the pre-roosting period.

¹ HOHN, O. 1986. Roosting habits of an urban Merlin. *Blue Jay* 44(3):194-196.



Figure 1. A female Richardson's Merlin

J. Poulson