



Juvenile Merlin preening remnant patches of down at nest site near Saranac Lake, Franklin Co., New York, 29 July 1992. Photograph by Mary Colhoun.

FIRST RECORD OF MERLIN NESTING IN NEW YORK STATE

WRIGHT MONTGOMERY

The Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) is a regular visitor to New York State as it passes through to and from its normal nesting grounds, generally across Canada north to the tree line. There has been no confirmed breeding record of Merlin in New York State, although, according to Merriam (1881), the bird is "rather rare, but doubtless breeds." Eaton (1914:102) notes unsubstantiated reports of Adirondack nesting between 1891 and 1905, and Saunders (1929:459) concludes that Merlin probably breed rarely in the State but that an "authentic record of its breeding in the State of New York is still lacking." In Ontario it is generally thought to be more common in the north and "uncommon to rare in both areas," according to Weir (1987). Weir (1987) shows only two nearby confirmed nestings at the same general latitude of northern New York, the first approximately two hundred miles due west, and the second on the southern tip of Georgian Bay. It may be inferred that, while still considered in difficulty, the Merlin is again becoming a comparatively frequent breeder in Michigan (Brewer, 1991). To the east, the southernmost known nestings are in northern Maine. Given this background, it is understandable that a report of possible nesting of Merlin in the Saranac Lake area in mid June by this relatively inexperienced birder was greeted with a high degree of skepticism.

On 11 June 1991, I saw from a great distance a pair of raptors which appeared to be tumbling; later events would suggest exchanging food. Several days later, friends mentioned that they had had a noisy bird in the vicinity of their camp, perching on lakeside treetops since ice out on 3 May. My non-birding friends had concluded it was a kingbird and asked if perhaps I would like to take a look. On 14 June, the bird presented itself, as predicted. After viewing it at some length and then seeing the bird's falcon-shaped wings, a rather rudimentary run through of field marks and size led to the conclusion that I was looking at an out-of-season Merlin. Further, my friends pointed out a somewhat dubious looking nest (spilling fiberglass insulation material!) which had recently been active. At this point I had to leave for my Connecticut home and reported my "find" to a nearby very knowledgeable birder.

On my return to the Adirondacks over the 4 July weekend, New York City birders Dick and Leslie Gershon visiting the area came up with a 99% confirmation after seeing one bird perching and later in hot pursuit of a Yellow-rumped Warbler. On 5 July I finally saw a pair of birds, and on the 7 July I was able to get the cautious friend, whom I had first contacted on 14 June, to visit the site. I was then at least able to obtain his guarded acknowledgement of its existence. A group of four accomplished birders saw the birds on 8 July, and on 12 July, Lewis and Sheila Rosenberg, other New York City birders with a local camp, saw a bird fly into a nest from their position in a boat on the lake. They observed nestlings near the top of a 75 foot spruce, only about 50 feet away from what might now be presumed to be a false nest. A new group of birders, including Frank Nicoletti, was able to identify three downy nestlings together with adult birds, which were considered to be the expected tiaga race of Merlin (Fig. 1). Observers, many of whom filed NYSARC reports, included John Brown, Dewey and Jean Clark, Greenleaf Chase, Richard and Leslie Gershon, Robert Hagar, Selma Isil, Elsbeth Johnson, Robert and Charlotte Ladwig, Ted Mack, Frank Nicoletti, John M. C. Peterson, Lewis and Sheila Rosenberg, Grant Simmons, and Langdon Stevenson.

The nest tree was located about 4 feet from the main entrance to a large camp, which by then was fully occupied. No amount of slamming doors, barking dogs, or motor boats had any perceptible effect on the nesting pair or their young. I was able to photograph the male eating a kill on a tree branch with a 500 mm lens only some 20 feet over a short pathway between the main building and the boathouses, Eaton's early comment of "retiring habits during nesting season" to the contrary.

On 18 July, following a day of heavy rain, the down disappeared and the young birds fledged several days later. They departed the area about 12 August, after providing days of entertainment to campers with their aerobatics while distressing many others with their predawn cries! At one point, all five birds were seen in a line peeling off fighter-plane fashion after an agitated Great Blue Heron, which disappeared rapidly across the lake.

John M. C. Peterson noted that he and Jerry Rosenband had reported seeing a male Merlin in Essex County on 4 Aug. 1977, and

another sighting by Paul Matrey was reported in Newcomb on 4 May 1972. While these are perhaps early or late migration sightings, after his visit, Frank Nicoletti recalled that he had seen a young Merlin barely capable of sustained flight on Cascade Mountain in the summer of 1985.

It appears that there have been at least occasional nestings of Merlin at this latitude in the Adirondacks for many years. There are certainly more birders today, but Mike Peterson's thought is that a nest would likely have been found earlier had it not been for our obvious preoccupation with the Great Depression and World War II, followed by the depredations of DDT. Given the Merlin's recognized nest site fidelity, it is hoped that these birds will be seen nesting in the area in the coming year.

Acknowledgements

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[Photographs of the nest site submitted by John M. C. Peterson were unsatisfactory for reproduction; they have been deposited with the NYSARC - The Editor]