

**MERLIN CATCHES LAPLAND LONGSPUR:
WHAT IS SO RARE AS
RARITY CAPTURES RARITY?**

Michael Pitzrick

38 Deer Haven Drive, Ithaca NY 14850

Vivian Pitzrick

5162 Amity Lake Road, Belmont NY 14813

Hunched against the steady drizzle on 13 April 1996, we found a startling number of about 150 Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) as they whirled from one spot to another over a large, freshly top-dressed field on Davis Hill in Ward Township, northeast of Scio, Allegany County, New York. Since 1969, observers have previously reported this species in this county only 13 times, with the maximum being ten individuals in February 1985 (*Allegany County Bird Club News* 1969-1996). At about noon, the longspurs dropped to the ground to feed busily less than six meters away. Some males already sported beautiful, full breeding plumage and others were in various stages of change from winter.

Suddenly the flock exploded as a small raptor slashed through it. The hawk pivoted, fanning its tail briefly, revealing three dark bands which contrasted sharply with the dark blue of its unmarked back. It then quartered away, with impressive speed and powerful, deliberate wing beats, not pausing to glide, but coming to an abrupt stop on a leafless tree limb approximately 275 meters across the field. Surprisingly, it had succeeded in its agile and effortless attack and was feeding on one of the longspurs.

After some discussion, we determined that the jay sized raptor was a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*). We eliminated the American Kestrel that has a reddish back and tail, as well as the Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks, that fly in a flap-glide-flap pattern and have rounded rather than the pointed wings of this falcon. Also, unlike the sharpie, the under tail coverts were buff, not white. Although expected along the lake plains where it is regularly reported, except in winter or summer, Merlin are seldom recorded in Allegany County, the maxima being five on 23 September 1964 and four in April 1968 (*Allegany County Bird Club News* 1964-1996). They were reported here in spring in 1965, '66, '68 '83, '90, and '96, and in fall in 1964, '85, '87, and '89, but none was reported in the years 1969-1982, a decade and a half. DDT was banned in the United States in 1972 (Nitz 1990). Perhaps the Merlin is finally recovering. The absence of reports during 1991-1995 is unexplained.

During our study at the scene of this unusual Merlin - longspur interaction, we used a 20-power Bausch and Lomb spotting scope and several field guides.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We wish to thank Doris Burton, Belmont, New York, for her research of records through 1978 on reports of these species during the earlier years.

LITERATURE CITED

Nitz OW. 1990. DDT. In: *The Encyclopedia Americana, International Edition*. Danbury, CT: Grolier. 8:557.
