

MERLIN BREEDS IN BROOME COUNTY FIRST HISTORIC NESTING SOUTH OF THE ADIRONDACKS

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On the morning of 5 May 2003, with the goal of spotting some warblers in migration, Ruth and Arthur Levy, members of The Naturalists Club of Broome County, went to Spring Forest Cemetery. in the city of Binghamton about one-half mile from busy NYS Route 17. It covers approximately fifty quite heavily wooded acres, and many of the old trees, both deciduous and conifer, are from 75 ft. to 100 ft. tall.

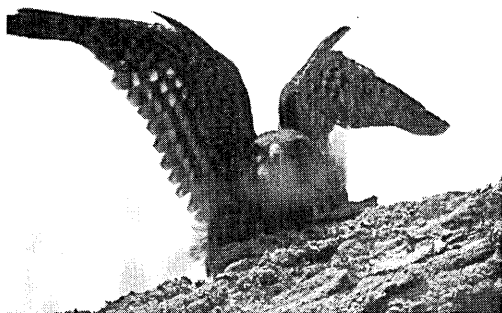
As the Levys searched the trees for warblers, Ruth called Art's attention to a small hawk perched in a tall dead oak. Looking at it through his binoculars Art made a tentative i.d. of "Merlin". However, a Merlin here at this time of year didn't fit the breeding locale parameters. Merlins (*Falco columbarius*) are found worldwide, breeding in northern forests, including the Adirondacks, but certainly not in central New York State. To be sure he was not off base, Art drove home picked up his telescope and rushed back to the cemetery. The hawk was still perched where it had been. With the improved view through the 'scope, Art felt confident of his original identification - that the bird was indeed a Merlin!.

Art then promptly called me and I immediately went over. Arriving, I saw two Merlins perched on the dead oak. The birds were calling to each other repeatedly and then copulated. Several members of our club again saw the pair the next day when Tom Tasber located the nest about 75 ft. up in a white pine tree, approximately 60 ft. from the "perching" tree. On 6 May, copulation was again observed by Peg Burnett and later that day the head of an adult, presumably the female, was seen above the edge of the nest.. The large substantial nest consisted of sticks, possibly a crow's nest previously, and was situated in a crotch of the north-leaning trunk of the white pine.

At this point, realizing the uniqueness of the situation, I decided to seek an expert opinion, and called Gerry Smith, whom I have known since his years as head counter at Derby Hill Hawkwatch. Gerry advised me that this was, indeed, an exciting development since to his knowledge this was the first possible nesting of a Merlin in an urban area in New York State. He recommended advising NYSDEC, which I then did. Frequent monitoring was begun by Dan Watkins, whose Breeding Bird Atlas block includes the cemetery.

Throughout May and June, one or both of the parent birds were observed by various members of The Naturalists Club, sometimes pursuing birds or flying in and out of the nest site, but because of the height of the nest and the deep bowl construction no definite confirmation of egg laying, or chick hatching, could be made. Then on 1 Jul, Art Levy spotted a fuzzy white chick in the nest, and on 2 Jul, a club group saw two chicks with the adult female in attendance. From their size and activity it was estimated they were two to three weeks old at this point.

On 8 Jul, Dan Watkins 'scoped four nestlings, all close to the same size, and observed the adult female feeding them. The same day John Baumlin with a digital camera and Swarovski telescope photographed two of the young perched



Juvenile Merlin - Broome County - Jul 2003
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in the nest. Many bird feathers now littered the ground under the "perching" tree, some appearing to be from chickadees, and a wing from a Cedar Waxwing. From here on, adults and young were seen by different observers on various days. On 11 Jul, one fledgling moved out of the nest to perch on branches above and below it. This behavior was seen with some of the fledglings on subsequent days, although on other trips to the cemetery no birds, either adult or fledgling, were seen.

Finally on 22 Jul, the day after a violent thunderstorm the evening before, I visited the site and saw four Merlins, two adults and two immatures, sitting high in the "perching" tree while a third immature flew about, vocalizing loudly. The storm had taken down two large deciduous trees but had not affected either one of the Merlin trees. The fourth fledgling was not definitely spotted. However, in a conversation with John Quain, the cemetery manager, he told me he had seen all six birds on 18 Jul and also had seen them all "a few days ago" at the corner of Mygatt and Prospect Streets (about an eighth of a mile from the nesting site). Other observers also reported spotting some of the Merlins here.

The adults and three immatures were again seen on 23 Jul, but in more distant trees. On 25 Jul, Dan Watkins observed the female and one immature moving among trees with the immature calling repeatedly - possibly a begging action. After that sightings started to become more unreliable with only two or one immatures being seen through 29 Jul. Presumably the family was roving farther afield in search of prey. When they will depart on migration is still to be determined at this writing and whether they will return next season to nest here again is an interesting possibility. The entire scenario has presented local birders with a wonderful and exciting event.

Editor's Note: All previous breeding in NYS has taken place in the Adirondacks with the first confirmed nesting occurring in Franklin Co. in 1992. Since then that county has been joined by Lewis, Herkimer, St. Lawrence, Clinton, and Essex as historic and current active nesting locales.



Fledgling Merlins - Broome County - Jul 2003
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