

## **Merlin. The Falcon**

By Martin Hagne

No, not the 6<sup>th</sup> century magician... nor the 70's Rolls-Royce car... and no, not the famed British fighter plane engine from WWII... although very powerful, sleek, and can fly... the Merlin, *falco columbarius*, is our second smallest falcon in the US and Canada. They weigh in at less than a soda can, and have a wingspan from 15.5 to 29.5 inches, the female being larger than males (as in most raptors). There are two subspecies, the Taiga, which is darker, and the Richardson, which is lighter in color.

Merlin, the bird, are now on their way north to summer and breed mostly in Canada and Alaska. They spend the summer generally in open to semi-open habitats with some scattered trees for nest sites, often near forested edges or lakes and other open water. There, they use the open space to hunt. Merlin are a most awesome flyer, and fly as with a purpose...always fast and powerful. They don't mess around, and often keep a leisurely cruising speed of 30mph, and much higher while hunting! Whether they are actually in a hurry or not... they seem to be.

We never see many here, but they do winter in small numbers in Texas, often using grasslands and sometimes coastal marshes to hunt. We also see them in migration as they head further south to winter, or going back to their northern breeding grounds. They can winter as far south as the northern parts of South America.

Their main diet are other small birds, and often they target the most populous species at a site. They hunt at high speeds and grab birds in mid air flight. They don't fly from high and stoop like the Peregrine Falcon do, but often from down below and chase the bird up until it tires out. Or they just plain smash into their prey horizontally in full speed. Either way, they are expert hunters. They will also take large insects, bats emerging from bat colonies, and evens small mammals when possible.

Recently we had the privilege to see a Merlin up close here at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. A falconer brought a bird in that was about to be released. She brought it here first so that it could be banded. Our banders Robert and Kay Lookingbill banded the Merlin's leg with a small metal band that has a specific number. The band doesn't hurt the bird and the specific number can help us keep track of the bird like a social security number. This can help us find out where it may go, how long it lives, etc.

The Merlin may be a "small" raptor, but it was fierce! What a majestic bird they are! I hope you get the privilege of seeing one grace your skies here, maybe next winter, or this spring while its heading north!

If you would like to support our bird conservation work, join us at our fundraiser event Brew on the Bayou on March 25<sup>th</sup> from 5PM to 9PM at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory headquarters, 299

Hwy 332 W, Lake Jackson. Come out and sample beer and wine from local breweries, watch a live raptor show, and much more! Visit [www.GCBO.org](http://www.GCBO.org) for more info.