

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

THE NEWCOMERS IN TOWN: MERLINS

By Clive E. Goodwin

It's April 17, and this spring has already yielded ten Merlin sightings in Cobourg. On April 1 Ken Niles saw an 'aggressively vocal' Merlin in Victoria Park, and one further east on the 10th. Then I had two harbour records in March with another in April, all just west of the Park. To the north end of town John Geale had a bird in early April, and Audrey Wilson reported one not far away in Union Cemetery. Finally, on April 7 a pair was engaged in a noisy courtship flight over the factories at the east end of Lucas Point, and five days later I came across a male [a tiercel, in falcon terminology] sitting quietly in a dead birch. It watched me approach, and finally flew west a hundred yards or so and perched again. This process was then repeated, but as I came closer for the third time it flew out and down over the lake, and then returned eastwards out of sight. This rather ambiguous behaviour, together with the other sightings, suggests there could be at least two, and perhaps as many as three territorial Merlins around town!

None of this is really new, of course. We had breeding confirmed in Victoria Park in 2007, and birds have been present in these three locations in past, with suspicions of breeding in all of them. Port Hope is even further ahead in the nesting Merlin count, with breeding first confirmed in 2004, and birds annually since; while elsewhere the birds first nested in Presqu'ile in 2003, and other sightings have been scattered around the County. There are sure to be more Merlin reports yet to come from these other places, so we may be headed for a record-high spring count.

While this spring's early flurry of sightings is maybe not surprising given the number of records in recent years, it's only relatively recently that Merlins have become more than an uncommon spring and [mainly] fall migrant. Formerly, their appearances in our urban areas were only when the towns happened to coincide with their migration routes in spring and fall, usually along the Lake Ontario shorelines. My own image of a Merlin in the past was of a kind of pint-sized Peregrine Falcon, always in a tearing hurry to get somewhere else! Presqu'ile in fall has probably always been a local – and exciting – exception to this, as the birds there will perch somewhere along the beach line, and periodically dash out to terrorize the shorebird flocks. The consistency of this pattern is reflected in our 1176 records, with 53% between August 31 and October 31, and almost as many [49%] from Presqu'ile.

In contrast, the breeding season of May through July only accounts for some 8% of all records. In earlier days, even as recently as the 1985 Breeding Bird Atlas, the Merlin was mainly a bird of the taiga and the coniferous forests of the north, and an uncommon one at that. So when did all this change, and why?

In fact, over their huge range Merlins will nest in a variety of habitats. In Britain they are mainly birds of the moors, often nesting on the ground and hunting the pipits and larks

that populate these open places. There's speculation that birds in our far north may also nest on the ground, and aeries in tree holes and on cliff ledges have been reported. Still, in North America in general the species seems to favour forested areas adjacent to open country for nesting, using conifers for the nests themselves, which are often in the old nests of crows and other birds.

As to when urban nesting first occurred, there's considerable ambiguity. Some of the earlier records, for example, in Thunder Bay in 1941 and Ottawa in 1936, may technically have been in the cities, but the descriptions of the nesting habitat suggest that the birds may have chosen a site [typically in a large park] that was sufficiently out-of-town to allow hunting in immediately adjacent rural areas rather than in the town itself. But nests were recorded in Saskatoon and Edmonton in the 1960s, and expanded from these cities to other communities across the prairies. Urban nesting there has apparently very successful, with House Sparrows in particular as favorite targets.

However – and it's a very significant 'however' – the story so far neglects one key element. In the 1960's the wholesale use of DDT and other pesticides led to a collapse of many raptor populations, due mainly to eggshell thinning, which in turn resulted in nest failure. Perhaps the hardest hit was the Peregrine Falcon – I can recall that at one point the species seemed almost gone – but Merlins declined seriously as well. Between 1961 and 1976 we have only one or two birds recorded annually, and recovery was still not thought to be complete by the time of the first Breeding Bird Atlas. Without this catastrophic decline we probably would have had Merlins nesting here much earlier.

The bird's actual expansion is quite strikingly shown by comparing the two Breeding Bird Atlases, which fortunately bracketed much of the recovery. In 1985 southern Ontario showed a thin scattering of territorial Merlins on sites north from Algonquin Park and Manitoulin Island [much of the area defined as the Southern Shield in the latest Atlas]. To the south and west of this there were a few on the Bruce Peninsula and the northern Niagara Escarpment, and six or seven elsewhere. There were none in Northumberland.

By 2005 birds were well distributed across the Southern Shield, and there were a good number of sites recorded from squares south of there and on the Bruce Peninsula. The probability of the species being found in a square with reasonable coverage rose from 6.5% for the Southern Shield to 42.1%, and in the adjacent Lake Simcoe- Rideau region, which includes Northumberland, from 4.3% to 17.9%. In Northumberland itself we had birds recorded in six squares, with the nestings at Presqu'ile and Port Hope confirmed.

What emerges from all this is that the expansion into the towns is simply part of the general expansion of the Merlin's range, following the introduction of controls on pesticides. It is a true expansion, as it would seem that formerly Merlins were birds of forest edges, but in a sense they are indeed reclaiming lost territory. Fothergill shot a Merlin in August of 1820, and he described the species then as "common". Much later, Taverner, writing in 1922, says it is "nowhere a common bird" and its range is "south to

the borders of cultivated land in eastern Canada”. In Fothergill’s day Northumberland would indeed be forested, but by the 1920’s most of that forest would be gone.

Apparently both the agricultural landscape and urban areas were unsuitable for Merlins in the 1920s. We can only guess at the explanation for this. It was too early for pesticides to be in the picture, but all raptors were probably more likely to suffer persecution in those days. Then as now, however, the American Kestrel was the falcon of agricultural landscapes, and at that time it was a very common bird. Perhaps some combination of these factors acted to exclude the Merlin.

Today the kestrel is seriously declining, probably as a result of dramatic declines in the invertebrate prey that forms the major part of its diet, only some 9% of which is birds. Merlins prey primarily on small birds, although like all raptors they are opportunists, and will readily hunt dragonflies where available. So conditions today might give more scope for a small open country hawk than there was previously. As for the occupation of towns, there has been speculation that the success of urban Merlins on the prairies was because there were both more small birds and more tall conifers for nests in the towns. The difference is less dramatic here, but our towns have both small birds and suitable mature conifers aplenty, so we might find that the Merlin will do equally well here.

It turns out that we cannot really answer the ‘why the expansion’ question at all, but we do have front-row seats to watch the developing story of Merlins as newcomers to our communities.