FALCO ÆSALON, Linn.

FALCO ÆSALON, *Gmel.*

Merlin.

Accipiter lithofalco, Briss. Orn., tom. i. p. 349.

——— *æsalon*, Briss. *ibid.*, p. 382.

Falco lithofalco, Gmel. edit. of Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 278.

——— *æsalon*, Gmel. *ibid.*, p. 284.

——— *sibiricus*, Shaw, Gen. Zool., vol. vii. p. 207.

——— *cæsius*, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutsch. Vögelk., tom. i. p. 60.

——— *subæsalon*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 60.

Æsalon lithofalco, Kaup, Ueb. Falk. Mus. Senck., p. 258.

Hypotriorchis æsalon, Gray and Mitch. Gen. of Birds, vol. i. p. 20, *Hypotriorchis*, sp. 10.

THE persecution to which the Falconidæ have of late years been unrelentingly subjected has reduced the numbers of the various species to a par; but, if there be any difference in this respect, perhaps the Merlin is more frequently seen than any other of them, with the exception of the Kestrel and the Sparrow-Hawk. Not that the individuals are more numerous than in former years, but that its secluded habits, the wild situations it affects, and its power of rapid flight have tended to its preservation, and enabled the Merlin to hold its own, while the other Hawks have fallen victims to the traps and destroying devices of the keeper. The destruction of so many of the Raptorial birds is, in my opinion, greatly to be regretted; for without them the smaller birds are not under that salutary check necessary for the balance of nature. It must not be understood that I am advocating the wholesale slaughter of the little birds; neither do I wish to assert that man should not exercise his judgment on this point, and take upon himself the office the Raptorial birds were designed to perform: if his measures be tempered with mercy, no great harm will be done. As a proof that we are wrong in extirpating the predatory animals, I may state that one consequence of the persecution to which the Weasel has been subjected is the increase of the destructive Norway rat to such an extent that on some estates it has become a positive pest. A better animal for freeing the wheat-rick of rats and mice cannot be found than the Weasel: what folly then to utterly extirpate an animal whose only offence is that of now and then causing the death of a hare or young pheasant, and that only when the destructive rabbits, rats, and mice do not afford opportunities for its peculiar mode of sustenance!

Unlike the Hobby, whose habits lead it to frequent woodland districts, or the Peregrine, which gives preference to rocks and trees in the neighbourhood of water, the Merlin affects the open moor and the fell; and the more wild and desolate the district, the greater is its charm for this bold little Falcon. In such situations it breeds and nurtures its young, making its nest (if a few crossed stalks of ling can so be called) generally on the bare ground, often by the side of a stone or bunch of heath. Here, on the bleak hill-side, the white nestling first sees the light; here, far away from the haunts of man, do the parents sally forth to keep their charge supplied with fresh-killed Titlarks, Linnets, or any other small species that may catch the eyes of these vigilant birds. The romantic hills of Wales, the Peak and other wild districts of Derbyshire and the neighbouring counties, the stony moorlands of Yorkshire, Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Durham, the Cheviots, the Grampians, the savage hills of Ross-shire and Sutherland, and all similar districts in Ireland are the summer resorts of the Merlin. In winter both old and young leave these wild retreats for the more genial climate of the lowlands. It is then that we see him in the more cultivated districts; it is then that the little birds of the hedge-row and the stubble-field—the Greenfinch, the Bunting, and the Lark—have their numbers lessened by the sudden dash of the Merlin; it is then that the flock of Starlings, so busily engaged in searching for grubs in the grass-field, is stealthily approached, and scattered, terror-stricken, by his successful raid upon one of its members. Silly indeed does the Merlin sweep close to the ground, with noiseless wing, toward the flock he has espied from some neighbouring tree; to the sea-shore, where the Dunlin and the Stint trip over the bare shingle, or patter over the oozy mud, the Merlin also pays a foraging visit. To say that it is more numerous in one part of England than another would not be consistent with truth; for, although nowhere abundant, it is found during winter in every quarter, from the Scilly Islands to Northumberland, whence it retires in summer to the uplands, and particularly to the northern counties of Scotland, the Orkneys, and Shetland. Its range also extends to Iceland. In America it is replaced by the nearly allied, but yet perfectly distinct, *Falco columbarius*. In Norway, Sweden, and Finland it is numerous in summer, and even far beyond, within the arctic circle. On the continent of Europe it is a bird of the wilder part of the various countries, as it also is of Algeria and many other portions of North Africa. Mr. Jerdon states that it is a very rare visitor to the north part of Western India,

whither it resorts in the cold season from Siberia and the high plains of Central Asia; and Mr. Swinhoe states that he has seen specimens from Peking, Amoy, and Foochow, in China.

Much difference occurs in the size and colouring of the sexes: Latham states that the male weighs five, and the female nine ounces. The former is distinguished by the blue colouring of the upper surface and the broad band at the extremity of the tail, while the latter is usually browner, transversely rayed with a darker colour on the back, and the tail is crossed with distinct bars of pale buff; in some very old individuals of this sex a wash of blue, similar to that of the male, is found to occur on the back and rump. The young differ from the adults in being more suffused with reddish brown, particularly the stræ down the breast. The strength of the female corresponding with her greater size, she is said to attack much larger birds than her mate, and, if pressed by hunger, to strike down a Partridge or a Pigeon.

The Merlin is frequently employed in the sport of Falconry, and is flown at the Lark, the Thrush, and the Blackbird—in former times, however, rather for the amusement of the lady than of her lord, whose pride was in his well-trained Falcon and Tiercel. “A gentleman, residing at Moyallen (county of Down),” says Mr. Thompson, “who has Merlins trained for the chase, frequently flies them at tame pigeons, which they kill well. Mr. W. Sinclair has remarked to me that, when living prey was given to his Merlins, they instantaneously extinguished life, whether or not they at the same time began feeding; while, under similar circumstances, the Peregrine Falcon has retained a bird in his grasp for some time, putting an end to its existence only when urged by hunger, though, like the Merlin, when it did commence, the most vital part was invariably first ‘entered upon.’ His Sparrow-Hawks, it need hardly be added, began feeding indiscriminately on any part of the living objects offered them.”

Although I did not succeed in finding the nest of the Merlin when I visited the Dovrefjeld, I am certain that the bird was then engaged in feeding its young; for the old birds passed and repassed certain parts of the moor with a degree of regularity that attracted my attention; and as I sat on a stone watching them, I observed that they always took the same direction coming and going from the scrubby parts of the country to the hill-side. The kind of food they carried home I was unable to ascertain; probably small birds. I did not perceive that they ever attacked the Fieldfare or the Redwing, although these were plentiful in the immediate neighbourhood.

Mr. Alfred Newton, writing of the series of Merlin's eggs contained in the ‘*Ootheca Wolleyana*,’ states that it is “selected from about two hundred trustworthy specimens, more than three-fourths of which have been simultaneously compared in forming it. As it stands, it may therefore be held a fair representation of what the eggs of this species are really like. There are not many specimens in it which, taken singly, could be pronounced, from their appearance alone, to be certainly Merlins’; but, taken as a whole, a purple tint is seen to be prevalent, which is not discernible in the series of Kestrels’ eggs lying in the same drawer, while the average size of these latter is also greater. It will be seen that the Merlin is also one of those birds of prey which are not constant in the choice of a locality for their nests, sometimes breeding (as in the British Islands is, I believe, its usual habit) on the ground, at others in trees.” It also appears from the same work, that in Northern Lapland Mr. Wolley found the Merlin not unfrequently using the old nests of the Rough-legged Buzzard, which are built in high trees, for its own purposes.

Speaking of the Merlin, as seen by him in the Quickiock district, between 400 and 500 miles north of the Dovrefjeld, Mr. Wheelwright says it was the common Hawk, and must have been one of the early spring migrants; for he shot a female on the 19th of April. “It was impossible to walk on the fells without meeting this bold and pretty Hawk, which I have even seen chasing the Ptarmigan. I never found the nest here anywhere but on the ground, either on a bare cliff or in the heather, always on tolerably high fells. The earliest taken was on June the 9th. When first laid, the eggs have a beautiful violet-red tinge, with reddish-brown spots; this, however, soon fades, and they become of a reddish-brown hue, with dirty-brown spots. The Laps say that it sometimes builds in trees. The eggs appear to vary in number from four to six; and so much do they resemble those of the Kestrel, though generally a trifle smaller, that the two mingled together could never be accurately separated, unless each egg had been numbered.”

“During flight,” says Macgillivray, “this species sweeps along at no great height, glides over the fields, shoots by the edge of the wood, examines the thorn fence, and sometimes alights on a tree or wall, as if to survey the ground. Although it may occasionally pounce on a partridge, it usually preys on smaller birds, such as larks, thrushes, chaffinches, sandpipers, snipes, and plovers.”

The Plate represents a male and a female, with their four young of a few days old, of the size of life.

Gould, John. 1873. "Merlin, Falco æsalon [Pl. 19]." *The birds of Great Britain* 1, –.
<https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323799>.

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