

Documentation of unusual sight record

Merlin - 1

Wilson farm, N.E. Mills County

13 September 1982

Description: First seen high in sky. A hawk, ~~at~~ size of a Kestrel or of one of the large Kestrels we see during migration. Wings pointed, tail long +, when fanned, rounded. Tail banded light + dark like an accipiter tail. Later I saw it briefly when it was very low. Breast heavily streaked (brown?). As it turned, it seemed uniformly gray across wings + back.

Behavior: Its behavior was even more interesting than the question of its identity. It flew above the treetops in a flock of swallows. From time to time a swallow would seem to dive on it, + then too, the falcon would grab something + hold it in its claws, parachute on spread wings + tail, + lower its head + bring feet forward to eat the thing it held. At first I thought it was getting swallows, but swallows are very maneuverable. Then I realized it was getting something smaller. There were large butterflies up there, and apparently that's the food. As the falcon ate, wings would spiral to earth like leaves. The only large butterflies near the ground were Monarchs, but if that's what the falcon was getting, it wasn't disturbed by the taste. For he'd get one ~~off~~ after another.

Falcon, swallows, + butterflies slowly drifted off to the south.

Similar species: When it was parachuting, the bird fanned its wings enough it resembled an accipiter, but when it flew the wings were obviously pointed, + the bird's rowing wingbeats were like a falcon's. Size limits the question to: Kestrel or Merlin? The tail banding + uniformly gray upper parts (the latter seen only briefly) make it a Merlin. I've never seen anything behave like that.

Factors influencing the identification: East + SE of me at about 9:30 am against a bright overcast sky. 8.5x binoculars. Distance 200+ yards (my husband's estimate.) No books used, but earlier in the Fall I'd discovered that Merlins are the same size as many Kestrels, so I'd decided to look for them. After the birds disappeared off south, ~~they~~ a falcon, I assumed the same one, flew back north, low. I saw it against a background of trees, + got the only idea of color I got. The birds nearly flew over me, turned, + flew off east. I'd never knowingly seen a Merlin before. Saw the bird 5 minutes or so.

Documentation written 24 Nov. From notes written the same day as the sighting but probably not immediately.

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