

Merlin -- Documentation

In the afternoon of New Year's Day my 12-year old daughter Wendy and I were hiking and birdwatching in the farmyard just a little bit east of our home in Sioux Center. As we approached a small woodlot, we saw a Kestrel-like bird fly from the fields into a tree at the edge of the woodlot. The pointed wings clearly indicated that it was a small falcon. When I focused in with my 8x40 binoculars, I saw at once that the bird was not a Kestrel but a Merlin. The bird was about the size of a Kestrel, but lacked the bold facial markings, exhibited no rufous on back or tail, showed vertically streaked underparts, and its tail was barred. Its brownish color indicated that it was a female, sufficiently light to suggest a form of the richardsonii race. It was a partly cloudy day, and the light was excellent. After careful identification of the bird, I hurried home to call Tina Van Dyke (no relation), while Wendy remained to keep an eye on the bird. By the time Tina arrived, the bird had left, flown towards town. After some diligent searching -- and some luck -- we located the bird once more. It had landed in a tree in a backyard closer in towards town. The brownish color, barred tail, lack of rufous and head markings were observed by Tina as well (Tina, too, is a careful observer who places strong emphasis on accurate identification). We observed the bird for some three to four minutes, until it left its perch and disappeared.

I am quite familiar with the Merlin. I generally observe two or three Merlins per year in our area (hence I wonder whether continued documentation for this area is justified). Last fall I submitted documentation for this species (a bird seen on September 17 just west of Sioux Center). I have also seen Merlins in California and in Alberta.

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