

DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

What species? Merlin (Falco columbarius) How many? oneLocation? George Wyth State Park, Black Hawk County, Iowa near Cedar Falls, Ia.Type of habitat? Mature riverbottom timber on one side of river and golf course on otherWhen? date(s): Dec. 16, 1984 time: 8:35 A.M. to 8:38 A.M.Who? your name and address: Robert K. Myers, 1236 Sylvia Ave., Waterloo, Iowa 50701others with you: noneothers before or after you: none that I know of

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

My attention was first drawn to the bird when I investigated three crows scolding something on the opposite side of the river from me. When I got to the river's edge I saw three crows and what I first thought was a rock dove flying rapidly toward my side of the river only slightly downstream from me. Binoculars quickly revealed the "pigeon" to be a small falcon chasing the crows. When the crows reached my side of the river, the falcon doubled back across the river and landed on a broken branch in the top of a big old cottenwood which borders the Cedar Falls Golf Course almost straight across the river from me. I then used a 25X spotting scope to observe the bird. The falcon shape (fairly long pointed wings and narrow somewhat shorter tail) was easily noted in flight. The bird was basically darker brown above and light brown below with heavy dark streaking on the breast. This would indicate a female and possibly the "columbarius" sub-sp. I could not note any obvious stripes or mustache markings of the sides of the bird's head. I could see a dark terminal band on the tail with a thinner lighter band above it. No other tail bands were seen but the angle of the bird and other branches interfered. The dark brown dorsal side had no other markings. The falcon was approx. the size of a rock dove but not as heavy in the body. The flight was swift and direct with rapid wing beats. The bird then swooped down and flew off just barely above the golf course grass. I went to the nearest bridge and then to the golf course but could not relocate the bird.

I mentioned the bird's somewhat shorter tail because it^{was} definitely not long and accipiter like. Although the guides don't show it, I think kestrels^{2/so} show a longer tail than merlins.

Similar species and how eliminated: Kestrel would show rusty color on back, wings and tail. Kestrel would have darker more prominent facial markings. The overall color of a kestrel would not be as dark as this bird was. A sharp-shinned hawk would have shorter more rounded wings and a much longer tail than this bird had.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? NO

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment: Distance varied from approx. 75 yd. to 120 yd. (eye est.) 7x35 B&L binocs and Bushnell 25X scope were used. Lighting conditions changed rapidly that day but at times it was bright overcast and allowed good viewing. Bird was not in shadows.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: I have seen quite a few merlins but never this late in the year. I am very familiar with kestrels and sharp-shinned hawks

References and persons consulted before writing description: I checked Birds of North America (National Geographic Society) for info on sub-sp.

How long before field notes made? that day this form completed? one day