

Merlin  
3 Jun 1990  
Chickasaw Co., IA  
R. Cecil  
IBL 60:103, 62:22

1

Record Number: 90-09  
Classification: NA

## DOCUMENTATION

Robert Cecil

## REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 60:103  
Records Committee: IBL 62:22

VOTE: 4 A-D, 3 NA

A-D: Acceptable this is one species that should not require documentation, only details need be supplied.

NA: Sounds tempting but I am reluctant to say there can be no reasonable doubt about a brief look at a "brown" bird.

NA: Merlins appear to becoming more common in the area lately, and this date is not extremely later than normal migration dates. It may be that my own shortcomings prejudice me in this regard, but I am reluctant to accept a sighting of a bird seen for a few seconds from a moving vehicle with no optics. The fact that the observer later (how much later--few minutes, same day, next day?) say American Kestrels in the vicinity also causes me to be skeptical. I am reluctant to turn down a regular species seen by a competent observer but the details given are too sketchy to convince me that this bird was seen well enough to identify.

A-D: Good description by one of Iowa's top birders.

NA: Although I think female Merlin is possible I don't think one field mark, the shade of brown, is sufficient in a 5sec view to be sure beyond reasonable doubt.

A-D: With a falcon type flight, long pointed wings and falcon shape along with brown back and wings eliminate any other species. The date is an unusual date for this species but description is beyond reasonable doubt.

A-D: Adequate description of a Merlin and good comparison with coloration of Kestrel. Five seconds may be the usual amount of viewing time for a Merlin!

RESULT OF 2ND REVIEW: 4 A-D; 3 NA

A-D: I think the document was acceptable. Kestrels can be identified at interstate speed why not merlins? As for one of Iowa's top birders this statement brings up many, many questions.

N-A: Details lacking; a good possibility but perhaps the view was just too brief.

N-A: A certain male birding friend of mine who is no longer on the records committee has indicated to me that he feels it is an UNREASONABLE doubt for me to judge others by MY limited birding skills, but... Besides the unfavorable viewing conditions (moving vehicle, no optics), my doubts center around the following. Flight style is a good differentiating characteristic for Merlin but the description "somewhat less swift and powerful" is weak. Kestrels can have direct and swift flight at times. The bird was identified as a falcon by shape. Shape in a rapidly moving raptor can sometimes be deceptive. The observer himself states

he didn't have time to note any field marks besides brown color. This probably was a Merlin but I cannot be 95% sure from the written details.

A-D: I appreciate some of the NA's concerns but contend that, despite the brevity of the sighting, this bird was seen and described in sufficient detail to make its identification as a Merlin beyond reasonable doubt. Significantly, none of the NA voters suggested an alternative identification. As astutely pointed out by the last voter, many Merlins are seen for five seconds or less, yet are correctly identified. Also, I submit that a fast flying bird traveling parallel to a moving car probably affords a better view than one flying past a stationary observer. This bird was seen well, but briefly.

NA: View too brief and therefore not detailed enough to be beyond reasonable doubt.

A-D: More was given in the documentation than the fact that this was a brief look at a "brown" bird. American Kestrels were also eliminated by the documenter, and more than one field mark was given in the documentation. I think there is enough information given here to make this record beyond reasonable doubt and should be accepted.

A-D: I feel this is adequate. More time of observation would have been desired, of course. It was seen by a good Iowa birder.



DOCUMENTATION FORM  
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

90-09

What species? Merlin (female) How many? 1

Location? S.W. Chickasaw Co.

Type of Habitat? Fence row in row-cropped ag. land

When? date(s): June 3, 1990 time: 3:45 PM to

Who? your name and address: Robert Cecil 1315 41st St. Des Moines, IA 50311

Others with you: Non-birders only

Others before or after you: None

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, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Noted small raptor flying rapidly along fence row perhaps 50' from road and parallel to my car. Noted long, pointed wings and shape characteristic of a falcon. The only field marks noted was the dark brown, about chocolate brown, back and wings. All I saw was brown - if there was a banded tail or other features, I didn't have time to notice.

The bird was approximately the size of a Kestrel, or perhaps a little larger. I went back to look for the bird, but found only two Kestrels. Both were distinct from the subject bird in that they both showed conspicuous rufous on back. While their size was approximately the same, their flight was somewhat less swift and powerful than the subject bird.

No other field marks seen.

Based upon the pictures in NGS, I would guess the bird was of the columbarius race.

Total viewing time, perhaps five seconds.

Based upon habitat in area, it did not appear to be appropriate nesting habitat. Too bad.

Similar species; how eliminated: No other small falcon has uniform dark brown back and upper wing surface. It was much too small to be a female Peregrine.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? NA

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment. No optics used. Sky cloudy, but otherwise, viewing conditions good.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Have seen lots of Kestrels. Have seen several Peregrines and Merlins in Iowa. Have seen several Prairies in western U.S.

References and persons consulted before writing description: Checked NGS after sighting in attempt to identify this bird to race.

How long before field notes made? 2 hours this form completed? 18 hours.

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).