

Merlin *Falco columbarius*



Folk Name: Blue Skimmer, Pigeon Hawk

Status: Migrant and Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

Habitat: Open country, fields, pastures

“To the naturalist there are few sights of more absorbing interest than to watch one of these noble falcons while pursuing a chosen victim. . . .The pigeon hawk, a size larger than the sparrow hawk, is equally swift, ferocious, and death dealing.”

—*Citizen-Times*, April 8, 1897

The Merlin is our “medium”-sized falcon. At 10 inches long, it is about an inch larger than a Kestrel and about 5 inches smaller than a Peregrine Falcon. Merlins are usually encountered in our region during migration, most often in the fall. They are infrequently found here during the winter months. There have been occasional reports of Merlins hunting birds at feeder stations, much like an accipiter. This falcon does not breed in the Carolinas.

Merlins have been reported on about 15 Christmas Bird Counts conducted in the region since the first was reported on the New London CBC in Stanly County in December 1959. They have been recorded on the Anson, Catawba, Charlotte, Chester, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Southern Lake Norman, and Spartanburg CBCs. They are considered a rarity or “write-in” species.

Merlins can be expected to show up in the region anytime from late August through April, with most seen in the months of September and October. We have a single report from the month of May and none from June or July. In Chester County during the late 1800s, Leverett Loomis recorded the “Blue Skimmer” as a “not very common” winter transient. The first published



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account in Mecklenburg County was a Merlin seen by Charles Moore on January 9, 1962. Paul Hart and Jack Greene watched one flying over Crowders Mountain in Gaston County on September 24, 1980. Charlie Wooten found one along the Wateree River in Kershaw County on September 11, 1983, and David Wright found one in northern York County on August 31, 1984. Bill Brokaw observed a Merlin flying along the Catawba River on December 26, 1987. Dick Brown examined a Merlin in hand after he found a dead bird at the Lake Norman dam on September 3, 1988. David Wright sighted a Merlin at the Wallace Dairy farm in eastern Mecklenburg County on September 28, 1989. A regional high count of three was reported in Alexander County on October 17, 1999. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there have been at least two dozen sightings of Merlins reported in counties throughout the Central Carolina region. Several of these sightings are supported by excellent photographs.