



*A female Merlin stares back. Photo by Greg Smith*

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# The Merlin in Winter

Kicking off the December 2023 newsletter, I wrote a column entitled, *Polly Want a Pigeon*. In it Michigan's four species of falcons (from smallest to largest: American Kestrel, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon and Gyrfalcon) are highlighted, as well as where and at what time of the year you are apt to see them. If you missed it or would like to refresh the content prior to reading on (recommended), here it is: <http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Dec23.pdf>.

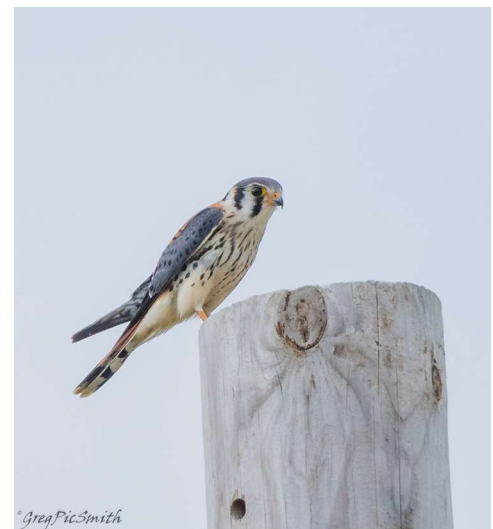
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I'll never take a Merlin for granted. As a startup birder in my early teens I had only known this rare, little bird of prey from images in field guides. It would take a trip to northern California in the early 80s with my new wife, Carol, before I would set binoculars on the first Merlin of my lifetime. I wouldn't spot one in Michigan until the mid-90s.

The Merlin (known as the Pigeon Hawk back then) suffered steep declines in the 50s and 60s due to rampant production and usage of DDT. Our nation's symbol, the Bald Eagle, and the 'fastest bird on the planet,' the Peregrine Falcon, became the popular 'poster birds' for the movement to ban these chemicals. However, the Merlin's own decline flew under the radar of public-consciousness. Since then it has managed to make its own remarkable comeback despite little assistance - much less, acknowledgement - from humans.

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For comparison's sake, some discussion is in order regarding the similarly-sized, more common American Kestrel, with which it may be confused. The Kestrel is about the size of a Mourning Dove, only barely smaller than the Merlin, and is the most likely to be seen of the four Michigan falcon species.



*A male American Kestrel atop a roadside powerline pole. Photo by Greg Smith.*

Throughout the fall, Kestrels that breed in northern Michigan and Canada drift southward in search of ‘vole-ier’ pastures. Thus, overwintering populations in the southern half of the Lower Peninsula are substantially more robust than populations that breed here, so it is not too difficult to spot one in the winter. There may be no easier, more efficient way than paying attention through the windshield of your moving vehicle to open perches - commonly powerline poles and wires - above overgrown grassy roadsides.

Somewhat parallel to Kestrel seasonal movements, Merlins that breed Up North drift southward over roughly the same circannual time frame, but they are responding to the movement of songbirds - their preferred prey - that vacate the northern breeding range in search of seedy sustenance. A Merlin may settle in a chosen locale in a southerly county of the state where there is also an abundance of *non-migrant* winter granivores like Chickadees, Titmice, Nuthatches, Cardinals, Mourning Doves and House Sparrows.



*A Merlin in flight exudes power and grace.  
Photo by Greg Smith.*

In stature a Merlin may come in only a smidge taller than an American Kestrel, but viewing this falcon either perched or in action leaves little doubt; more muscle is packed under its contour feathers, and the comparatively powerful wing strokes confirm it. A quote I used in the December 2023 column from author Pete Dunne in his book, *Hawks in Flight*, bears repeating here: ‘A Merlin is to a Kestrel what a Harley-Davidson is to a scooter.’

The difference in musculature makes sense in relation to the prey items each species prefers. In the winter a Kestrel relies chiefly on small mammals, the acquisition of which doesn’t seem to require much in the way of strength or speed: spot an unsuspecting Meadow Vole foraging in the overgrowth below, then drop from the perch with talons extended. By contrast, the chiseled features of a Merlin are necessarily in keeping with its penchant for chasing down songbirds. The pursuit and capture certainly makes for more dramatic viewing – *if you can keep your eyes on it through the entire process.*



*A Merlin will dine unruffled over a gawking audience. Photo by Greg Smith.*

It may be easier to see an American Kestrel at this latitude in the winter than a Merlin, but this is one shy and ‘flighty’ falcon. It will not tolerate your approach on foot. A better bet is to spot one on a roadside powerline as you pass in a vehicle, but even in this circumstance it is easily spooked. For instance, if you drive past one at a steady speed it will likely stay put, but if you dare pull to the shoulder with the intent to view it longer... gone. In fact, merely slowing down as you pass many individuals incites them to take wing.

By contrast, the perched Merlin simply just doesn’t care. It will rest, preen and even feed on the feathery carcass of a recent victim atop its elevated perch and permit as prolonged a gander from below as you please, save a quick glance over its shoulder every now and then should you decide to saunter more closely. Any birder with a good pair of binoculars - or better yet, a spotting scope - is in for a treat. If a perched Kestrel embodies a nature photographer’s exasperation, a perched Merlin is a wet dream.

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I participate annually in the local Christmas Bird Count that happens on the Saturday closest to the middle of December each year. The daylight hours are spent identifying and tallying every bird I encounter. Potter Park happens to be within my assigned area.

Over the past ten or so years I had found that an overwintering Merlin liked to take up residence along the river trail that runs directly between the zoo's sprawling parking lot and the bank of the Red Cedar. The abundance of songbird prey combined with ample open air space and a plethora of elevated perching sites was obviously very attractive to this little raptor. On count days I most often would spot one in the morning hours perched appropriately among the topmost skeletal limbs of one of the tall oaks that punctuate the length of the lot.

Birds have this habit of not staying put, however, and, like magic, a Merlin can appear or disappear from sight in an instant. Hence, a scan across the crowns of the oaks may yield no Merlin at one particular moment, then reveal an individual in plain sight against the sky's backdrop the very next.

On the count day morning a few years back I traversed the river trail in Potter Park counting birds while regularly turning to scan the oak tops. A dozen such passes yielded no Merlin. I felt nearly positive one must be in the area as in the other recent Decembers; my timing was just out of sync. However, I was obligated to continue westward in my count area if I were to finish before dusk.



*The treetops in Potter Park Zoo's parking lot are a winter staple for Merlin sightings.*

*Photo by Greg Smith.*

By about 4:30pm I had made it to the west end of the area near Waverly Road. When I turned to drive home I decided to swing by Potter Park in the waning, overcast light to check the treetops; one last hope of adding Merlin to the count list.

I returned to an unanticipated set of circumstances. The parking lot, virtually devoid of cars when I had birded there in the morning, was now teeming with traffic. Parking spots were filling rapidly and winter-bundled people of all ages were exiting cars and heading in scattered groups toward the zoo entrance. The annual holiday 'Wonderland of Lights' was about to begin. I rolled slowly through the masses with the sole intent of reaching the exit drive and getting out of there.

My vehicle passed under one particular tree in the lot that had been severely truncated from past chainsaw activity - no doubt, necessary due to storm damage to the tree. A slight movement caught my eye through the windshield; on a horizontal limb near the top, no more than twenty feet over this congested mix of cars and humanity - a Merlin! The bird seemed completely unperturbed by the ground-bound tumult. Its focus, instead, was wholly directed toward the object in its grasp - a freshly-caught songbird. I spotted an open parking spot, swung in, and in a matter of seconds popped out with binoculars poised.

Standing inside the open door on the driver's side I faced the Merlin over the car's roof, propped my elbows on it to steady my view through the lenses, and absorbed an amazingly intimate view of the little falcon as it dined. From this vantage and in the steadily dimming overcast light, however, I was unable to discern the species it had captured.

When I lifted my eyes from the oculars, I found curious glances directed my way within the small groups that walked by the car - a lone man displaying a behavior quite literally out-of-step with what everyone else was doing. Some briefly glanced up and over a shoulder, attempting to locate the source of my attention. No one seemed to notice the bird nor asked me what I was looking at.

I watched the falcon through the lenses again as it alternately plucked breast feathers then pulled and swallowed little dark morsels of flesh. Small, wispy, contour feathers billowed free from the victim's body. Some adhered to the edges of the falcon's beak. Intermittently, it scratched them free with a talon or shook its head vigorously to dislodge them. The tiny feathers, like snowflakes, floated down among the cars and humans below, but again, no one appeared to notice.

The irony of the moment struck me as I entered the car to leave. A *wild* raptor in the process of consuming freshly-captured *wild* prey was passed-by unconsciously by those seeking to view *caged* raptors instead. If they were lucky they might get to see one being fed a lab-raised dead rodent by the zoo staff.

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I teach on Michigan wildlife topics at Montessori Children's House in Lansing on Mondays. One day about five winters ago I drove a route homeward that took me down Michigan Avenue eastward past the back side of Sexton High School. There, atop a powerline pole along the street next to the parking lot behind the school a Merlin dined on a smaller bird in its grasp. I pulled into the lot and maneuvered the vehicle almost directly under the falcon then lowered the window to watch it.

Since this first encounter I've seen a Merlin in this area dozens of times - only over the winter months - from one year to the next. An expansive courtyard with a few large trees is hemmed on three sides by the multi-storied, pale-bricked building. The bare limbs atop a large sycamore provide a favored perching spot where I most often have seen the bird.

The surrounding habitat structure behind the school acts as an ideal winter home range from a Merlin POV. The asphalt parking lot separates the courtyard from the school's football stadium. To the stadium's south and north, respectively, are the open expanses of St. Joseph Park and nearly sixty acres of fenced-in, overgrown field that used to be the site of GM's Fisher Body plant.



*The courtyard behind Sexton High School. The Merlin is perched in this photo on the uppermost right-pointing limb of the taller sycamore tree.*

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Just last week Jan Heminger and Carolyn Malmstrom, (who participate in such Nature Discovery outings often) joined me for a few hours of birding in the Lansing area, despite especially overcast conditions. Both Merlin sites were on the itinerary.

As we birded along the river at Potter Park we would sporadically and expectantly pivot our gazes toward the tops of the oaks then scan them for a telltale falcon silhouette. Perseverance paid off, as it often does. Definitely not there a just few minutes earlier, the next look up revealed the Merlin calmly consuming a songbird that it had dispatched then transported to a high perch in full view behind us.

We drove to Sexton High School with no other birding purpose than to see if this particular Merlin would pay us the honor of a view, as well. The second the car turned on to Michigan Avenue, at a distance of some thousand feet I could see the school courtyard, the sycamore tree and... a definite 'bump' on a horizontal branch near its apex.

We pulled into the lot a short distance from the tree. I took my spotting scope and tripod out of the back hatch. We took turns viewing a healthy female as she serenely rested and digested - despite the gawking hominids below - after a dining experience that we probably just missed. She ruffled her feathers and began to preen. The accompanying photos, while far from great in quality, still manage to convey the miniature majesty.



*With a cell phone through the spotting scope: The Sexton High School Merlin fans its tail while stretching and preening (left). Resting while surveying its winter domain (right).*

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An overwintering Merlin may show up in almost any neighborhood - town or country - as long as there is suitable air space, high exposed perches, and small, ready-to-chase bird prey available. Individuals develop quite strong fidelity to chosen winter ranges. They also have a special affinity to ‘favorite’ elevated perches to which they return to rest and preen repeatedly; easy to notice and easy to view for anyone possessing the awareness and the impetus to keep an eye peeled. I’ve shared accounts of two individuals occupying winter hunting territories here, but there are surely a number of other Merlins currently residing in the greater Lansing area; one probably quite close to where you live.

Would you like to arrange a local winter birding outing for yourself, or your own small group of family, friends or students? We have spare binoculars as well as the spotting scope. Just contact us to make an appointment on a weekday or weekend morning.

- Jim McGrath



## **Michigan Snakes Alive**

*comes to UM-Dearborn*

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**10am to 11:30am**

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**Suggested Minimum  
Donation: \$5/person/hr**



The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and individual families are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor or outdoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” The unique, in-person, hands-on experiences here are unrivaled at any other nature center or zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.



*A Red Squirrel skull. Check out our huge display of MI mammal skulls.*


Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles” - all ten species native to our state! Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

Handle any or all of Michigan’s three species of garter snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble up worms and tadpoles. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – the largest in the state!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Identify birds at the feeders. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Ask about arranging a special evening visit. Weather-permitting we can step outside and attempt to attract a wild screech-owl with recordings.

Contact us for additional information or to make an appointment most any day.



*At the start of 2025 we wish to extend our sincere gratitude to those who value our mission. A special thank you to these most recent donors...*

*Sandy Carey  
Grand River Bait & Tackle  
Jan Heminger  
Judy & Allen Marr  
Sandra Mobley  
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Greg Smith  
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Steven Ulrey  
Gene & Ann Wasserman*

*A Bald Eagle perches over the Red Cedar River at Potter Park in Lansing.*

## ***An Unsettling Onset of 2025***

The content of the column below is unsettling enough, but we love the closing statement from *The Guardian*'s US editor, Betsy Reed. Responsible journalism is under attack and needs citizen support now more than ever.

[https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/oct/15/finland-emissions-target-forests-peatlands-sinks-absorbing-carbon-aoe?utm\\_campaign=weekly-planet&utm\\_content=20250107&utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&ctg=6050e55c4953a53f1483d5b5](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/oct/15/finland-emissions-target-forests-peatlands-sinks-absorbing-carbon-aoe?utm_campaign=weekly-planet&utm_content=20250107&utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&ctg=6050e55c4953a53f1483d5b5)

It is appropriate for more than one reason that the American Flag be flown at half-mast. Thank you and rest in peace, Jimmy Carter - a *true* President, American, Humanitarian, Environmentalist.

[https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/opinion/jan-6-jimmy-carter.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20241230&instance\\_id=143443&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=97652655&segment\\_id=186896&user\\_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/opinion/jan-6-jimmy-carter.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20241230&instance_id=143443&nl=the-morning&regi_id=97652655&segment_id=186896&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e)

Speaking of true Americans, here is a recent newsletter from political historian, Heather Cox Richardson. We highly recommend her *Letters from an American*. Consider subscribing. It is free.

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=rm&ogbl#inbox/FMfcgzQZSZFVtkfMJpKNTzpHmjJxDvSB>

-JM

*The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” -Al Gore*

*I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg*

*The personal actions that cut climate pollution fast are to go flight-, car-, and meat-free. Start with the one that feels most feasible for you; if you can’t totally go without, aim to cut your consumption today at least in half. – Kimberly Nicholas, Under the Sky We Make*

*What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? –Robin Wall Kimmerer*



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