

incubating while the male does the hunting and brings food to the female. After the eggs hatch, the male provides food which the female feeds to the chicks. The young fledge in about a month, and for another month the adults continue to feed them. During nesting, the male often perches on a high branch with a commanding view and attacks any other Merlins or potential nest predators that happen to wander into his territory.

Merlins eat mostly small and medium-sized birds, but will take bats, reptiles, and small mammals opportunistically. Merlins in urban areas or near grain elevators tend to specialize in House Sparrows. Waxwings and Horned Larks are favored prey in winter, and often spectacular ascending aerial flights — “ringing flights” — occur when these prey try to escape the pursuing Merlin. They take most prey on the wing, and may hunt by flying close to the ground to avoid detection. They cast pellets, and may cache prey.

Merlins are preyed upon by Peregrine Falcons, Great-horned Owls, and accipiters. Colliding with towers is a major cause of mortality. They suffered from egg-shell thinning during the DDT era. More recently, habitat alteration, particularly the removal of trees at prairie potholes, has had a negative impact on local populations, but this has been largely offset by increased numbers nesting in urban areas. Populations are thought to be stable or increasing in most areas of North America, although declining counts of Merlins at Cape May suggest problems in the northeast.

Despite their relatively small size, Merlins have, since the Middle Ages, been a favorite with many falconers, including Catherine the Great and Mary Queen of Scots, and some are still flown in North America. Most people, however, prefer them as wild birds, and look forward to the spring and fall migration when the chance of seeing one of these magnificent little falcons is greatest.

— William E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Barry Van Dusen, a wildlife artist and illustrator based in Princeton, Massachusetts, frequently contributes his insightful bird drawings to *Bird Observer*. Some of Barry's art will be appearing in a two-person show, titled “A Passion for Birds,” at Massachusetts Audubon's South Shore Regional Center in Marshfield, Massachusetts, beginning on May 5, 2000. James Coe will be the other artist featured. For more information, call the Center at (781) 837-9400. Beginning in March 2000 and continuing through November, the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, Scotland, will be showing a range of the work Barry began in the fall of 1997 as part of “Project Tiger.” In addition to preparing work for a variety of upcoming juried shows, Barry has been working on illustrations to be used with the “Birdsong Identifier,” a new product designed to facilitate the identification of bird songs in the field.