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## Short Note: Wintering Merlins in Cuyahoga County

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In preparation for the 2002-2003 Ohio Winter Bird Survey, I would occasionally stop at Calvary Cemetery and nearby sandpit ponds, east of Cleveland's Miles Avenue and along the border with Garfield Heights in Cuyahoga County, checking for new arrivals. As I scouted the area in December, the birds seemed not as numerous as in the past. The cemetery was not very exciting, but that was soon to change.

On 11 December 2002, while driving the perimeter as usual, I observed a falcon. Thinking it was the American kestrel I had observed on other occasions, I turned the car around for a better view. Then ahead I noticed what seemed to be another falcon. I got out to make sure I was seeing two birds, not the same one that might have moved. There they were: two merlins *Falco columbarius*, a brown female/immature and a gray male! I was not to observe two merlins at once here again until 6 January 2003, the beginning of an almost daily winter merlin survey.

On 30 December at 5:04 pm, I observed the gray bird fly from what I had identified as the pre-roost tree (PRT) to the roost tree for the night. This was a very exciting evening, but was it to be a one-time event? The answer was no. Every night the gray bird resorted to this same tree, except for evenings when the local Cooper's hawks were around hunting.

On 6 January 2003, I observed the gray merlin chasing another, a brown one. The next day I observed the gray bird in his PRT (a pine) and the brown bird in a deciduous tree in Section 85 that later became her PRT.

The gray bird, the "restroom merlin," as he came to be called because his roost tree stood beside the cemetery's brick restrooms building, was observed each night except 10 February, when Cleveland experienced a sudden, severe snowstorm that came in from Lake Erie, producing whiteout conditions with 45-mph winds. I suspect that gray bird got caught out hunting and chose an emergency roost. I did leave early that night, so he may have come in later.

The next day I drove around the cemetery and saw no merlins. I headed back to the restroom area and there on top of the utility pole just outside the cemetery was the gray bird, eating a house sparrow! I had observed the merlins eating on only two occasions. This was also the day I observed a third merlin, also a brown female/immature. Not a routine visitor, this third bird showed up at the cemetery perhaps only three times a week.

On 23 February, after a weekend away birding, I made the usual drive around, looking for the merlins. To my astonishment, the gray bird's PRT had been cut down! I couldn't believe it! I continued driving around and finally found the gray bird in a tree above the roadway south of the former PRT. After a few days, he settled in another pine.

On 4 March, I noticed a change in the merlins' behavior. Both were changing pre-roost trees, and the brown bird was occasionally taking flights around in the northeast corner of the cemetery. The gray bird did not go to the usual roost tree this evening, instead flying in to a big oak. While I was trying to photograph him in the tree, the brown bird flew in. The brown bird was startled by a couple of camera flashes, and flew off.

The next significant event came on 6 March. The gray bird was in the PRT and the brown bird was roosting in the east side of Section 91. After driving around looking for other merlins, I returned to find the brown bird in the gray bird's PRT. Every few minutes, she would make a bowing motion and spread her tail feathers; then the gray bird would follow with the same type of bowing movement. Every other time they engaged in this behavior, the brown bird would give five or six chirping calls. This went on for 10 or 15 minutes. Finally, the brown bird flew off to her normal PRT. Had I observed courtship display?



Lou Gardella was able to chronicle and photograph the merlins that spent the winter and early spring in Cuyahoga County's Calvary Cemetery. This one was photographed on 4 March 2003.

On 18 March, while the gray bird and the brown bird were at their now-shared PRT, I observed yet another brown merlin, distinguishable from the others seen theretofore. This brought the total to four different merlins using the cemetery this winter.

The merlins became increasingly restless, straying more and more from the patterns they had been following for so many weeks. They were jumping from one PRT to another and taking flights around the cemetery, sometimes going far out but always flying right back. Was it time to go north, or even to nest?

The evening of 20 March brought a new development. I drove into the cemetery at the usual time and did not see any merlins. After a while, I went to look for the screech-owl that had been roosting in Section 11 on the west side of the cemetery. Taking the perimeter, I found no screech-owls, though I did locate the gray merlin. I returned to the east side, and there was the brown bird at the PRT. When I went back to check on the gray bird, he flew off and disappeared. Where did he go? Returning to the PRT, I found the brown bird had gone to roost. I suspect the gray bird had also.

On 25 March, I arrived later than usual and found the gray bird at his pine PRT. It was pouring rain but he perched there as if it were sunny and warm. It had been the brown bird's habit to sit in the PRT until well after dark. Now the gray bird was staying out later. The brown bird did not show that night or any night thereafter. She had apparently gone north. The last time I observed her was on 24 March at 6:28 pm.

On 31 March the day was cold. We had partly sunny skies, snow flurries, and a temperature of 34°F. I made my way over to the Cemetery at 6:30 pm. The gray bird was in the pine PRT as usual. I sat watching him, wondering what day would be the last I would see this magnificent creature. His coloring had changed over the winter. The blue-gray of his feathers had deepened, as had the yellow-orange in his feet and legs. He was indifferent to my presence, unlike his brown counterpart who had never been quite at ease with people walking around under the PRT. He had allowed me to photograph him in his roost tree from a very short distance. He had given me a winter of excitement. While others were huddled in their houses, we were outside. I sometimes wondered why the merlins would sit in the top of the trees on the coldest, windiest days, when they could have easily flown to the roost tree out of the wind. I could tell which side of the tree he would use just by observing the flag. He always chose the side of the trunk away from the wind. At 7:00 pm the gray bird flew to the roost tree, about seven feet up in the Scotch pine he had used since I first laid eyes on him. After a few minutes, I walked closer to watch him, knowing my days with him were numbered. I knew it was going to happen sooner or later...the end of the winter merlin survey was close.

The first day of April brought south winds. He too must have gone north. 🦅