

Short Notes: Monumental Merlins North and South

Merlins in a Northern Ohio Cemetery

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Once again this winter I kept watch on up to five merlins at Calvary Cemetery in Cleveland. The first (merlin 1) was observed on 22 October 2003. This male was found perched on the top branches of the same oak tree last year's female used for her pre-roost tree, in the Cemetery's Section 85. He roosted a few nights on the east side of the cemetery. Could it be last year's bird? One evening I drove in to find



Merlin 4, present at Calvary Cemetery in Cleveland 10 Jan-28 Feb 2004. Photograph by Lou Gardella.

On 29 October, I briefly observed a brown merlin. After relocating it preening in the Section 85 preroost tree, I determined that this was the female from last year (merlin 2). She used this tree nearly every day throughout the winter. Because of my work schedule, I was unable to observe the merlins in the evenings except on the weekends. Merlin 2 and merlin 4 (see below) were observed during the day.

On 10 January 2004, another merlin (merlin 3) was observed. Smaller than the female, it was grayish in color. I determined this bird was an immature male. It was observed for only two days. 25 January brought a new merlin (merlin 4), an immature/female. It showed had two distinctive light spots on the secondaries, and was present through 28 February.

On 23 February, I observed another merlin in Section 64. This bird (merlin 5) was an adult male. It was present until 8 March 2004.

On 23 March 2004, merlin 1 was in his pre-roost tree. Merlin 2 was in Section 74; I stopped to observe her, and she flew to roost. I went back to merlin 1 and watched him go to his roost tree at 6:52 p.m.

This was the last night I saw them. The 24th was dark, dreary, and rainy. I was not able to get into the cemetery this evening: security had closed the gates early. On 25 March, I found that a male American Kestrel had replaced the merlin. 🦅



Merlin 4, at Calvary Cemetery in Cleveland. Note the upperparts markings that distinguished it from Merlin 2. Photo by Lou Gardella 27 February 2004.

Merlins in a Southern Ohio Cemetery

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The wintering merlins of Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati returned, perking up the cold, bleak days of this winter. After an exciting merlin-filled 2001-02 winter, the cold days of 2002-03 produced only a one-day sighting of one falcon.

The first of this winter, a male, was reported on 6 December 2003 at the Cemetery. A brown bird (a female or immature male) showed up on 24 December, perching in the general vicinity of the male. Four days later, a second brown bird was observed in another part of the cemetery. For those who studied the bird regularly, this was obviously a different bird, with lighter streaking on the breast. As in previous years, the most reliable time to view these birds was between 5 and 6 pm,

when the merlins were perched at the top of trees near their roost area. Their choice of roost trees was conifers, but did not always involve the same tree. If you took your eye off them for a second or two, it was easy to miss them zooming into their roost. All the merlins I observed roosted low in the trees. I watched one spring off its perch, flying low to the ground and inches from a person standing near its roost in a conifer. The entire show lasted seconds, and the person never knew the bird had flown into the tree right beside him.

A second male was observed on 18 January, bringing the total to four merlins for the winter at the Spring Grove. This male was bluer with black wings, black head, and minimal peachy coloring on the belly and legs. I watched this bird go to roost a foot or so off the road in plain view, low near the trunk of a sweetgum.

We don't know exactly when the merlins departed for the north. The last reported sighting for a brown bird was on 11 February 2004. My last view of the cemetery merlins was on 18 February, in an area where they normally were not seen. It was only a fleeting glimpse of a merlin streaking out of a heavily wooded area. The merlins' winter was over at Spring Grove. 🍀



Horned larks were good photographic subjects in Muskingum Co. during February 2004.
Photo by Robert Royse.

Annals of Pelagic Birding in Ohio: Thick-billed Murre

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In the winter of '96-7 a driving storm from the Labrador coast caught up a considerable number of these multitudinous sea-fowl and swept them far inland. When the storm had spent its fury the Murres were found promiscuously stranded in the lakes and water-ways, or wandering about dazed and helpless in the fields of Ohio, Indiana, and neighboring states. Many specimens were taken by the hand and others shot at scattered localities; and the village oracles were sorely put to it to tell what this strange fowl might be. The first published record for Ohio was of the one taken by Rev. J.M. Keck, of Mentor, on December 19th, 1896. A score of others have since come to light, all taken at about the same time or a few days later. This memorable inundation by Brünnich Murres was general throughout the Eastern States and records were made as far south as South Carolina.

---William L. Dawson, *The Birds of Ohio* (1903)

The thick-billed murre (*Uria lomvia*) is a circumpolar Arctic breeder. Its southernmost colony in eastern North America is a small remnant one in the



A thick-billed murre mount from the OSU Museum, #14007. Collected 20 mi from Sandusky, 19 Dec. 1896. (E.C. Moseley)

Gulf of St. Lawrence, but after centuries of depredations by humans most murres nest, often in staggering numbers, on remote cliffs far to the north. These populations winter at sea in the icy western Atlantic, with a few regularly seen as far south as Long Island.

This sleek, foot-and-a-half long black and white alcid is a salt-water bird, its diet mostly small fish. It is well suited to cold temperatures and the violent storms of northern latitudes. Its winter range and habitats in eastern North America fairly closely resemble those of the dovekie *Alle alle*, which has never been confirmed in Ohio, yet the thick-billed murre has dozens of records for the state. How this came to be is a curious tale.

Beginning in 1890, numerous reports emerged of unprecedented

¹ Probably 18 December---see Jones 1902b.