

Merlin *Falco columbarius*

The Merlin is a rare winter visitor to San Diego County, seen most often in grassland, though it occurs occasionally in any habitat except dense woodland. Because it feeds largely on small birds, the Merlin may be attracted to any place where small birds flock, including mudflats and cattle pens. In the 1990s the number of Merlins wintering in San Diego County increased noticeably.

Winter: Wintering Merlins occur in all regions of San Diego County, though they are more frequent in the coastal lowland and less frequent in the Anza–Borrego Desert. The variation in their abundance from year to year is only moderate: the number per observer-hour each winter from 1997 to 2002 varied by up to 25% from the mean for the whole five years. Normally the species is seen singly; our maximum count per atlas square per day was three, southwest of Ramona (L14) 17 January 1999 (F. Sproul) and in the north Borrego Valley (E24)

20 December 1998 (P. R. Pryde). On San Diego County Christmas bird counts the maximum is nine on the San Diego count 19 December 1998, though some of these counts still occasionally miss the species. As an order-of-magnitude estimate of the number of Merlins wintering in the county annually I suggest 100 (more pass through in migration).

Migration: The Merlin occurs in San Diego County mainly from October to March. Extreme dates are 23 August (1980, Tijuana River valley, AB 35:226, 1981) and 26 April (1998; San Elijo Lagoon, L7, C. G. Edwards; Otay Mesa, V14, S. D. Cameron; 2001, Point Loma, S7, P. A. Ginsburg).

From mid September to late October a few Merlins can be seen moving south along Point Loma every year. Unlike the hawks of the genus *Buteo*, Merlins do not hesitate when they reach the tip of the point, instead speeding south over the ocean, even when fog prevents them from seeing North Island (G. McCaskie).

Conservation: Early in the 20th century the Merlin was “common” according to Willett (1912), and “rather common” according to Stephens (1919a). By the 1960s, however, it was rare, probably because of the same effects of DDT contamination that affected the larger birds of prey (Lincer 1975). From 1961 to 1980 San Diego Christmas bird counts averaged only 0.55 per year. A trend toward recovery did not become clear until the 1990s. From 1997 to 2002 the average on the San Diego Christmas bird count was 6.3. Similarly, the Escondido count went from an average of 1.3 from 1986 to 1994 to an average of 3.3 from 1997 to 2002.

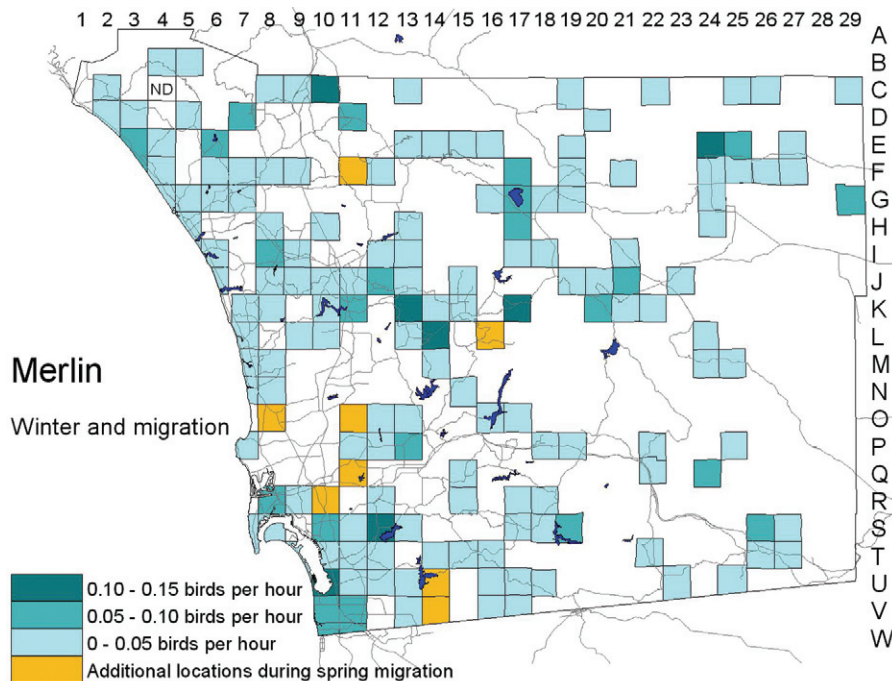
Taxonomy: All three North American subspecies of the Merlin are known from San Diego County. By far the most frequent is the medium-dark *F. c. columbarius*



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Linnaeus, 1758, which breeds almost across the continent in boreal forests. All data above apply to it.

The Prairie or Richardson’s Merlin, *F. c. richardsoni* Ridgway, 1871, breeds on the northern Great Plains and is strikingly paler than nominate *columbarius*. It is casual as far west as San Diego County, with two sight records (Sweetwater Reservoir, S12, 5 February 1977, J. L. Dunn; Tijuana River valley, V10, 5 November 1977, P. Unitt) and five specimens: San Diego 10 January 1900 (Huey 1926b, SDNHM 360), Witch Creek (J18) 9 February 1904 (FMNH 1904), “about the end of September” 1915 (Grey 1925, SDNHM, mounted), Mission Valley (R9/Q10) 9 April 1925 (Bishop 1905, FMNH 157064), and Eichenlaub Ranch near Barrett Lake (S18) 23 September 2001 (SDNHM 50625).



Perhaps as a result of general population increase, the Black Merlin of the Pacific Northwest, *F. c. suckleyi* Ridgway, 1873, has begun appearing in San Diego County. The first was one at Lake Henshaw (G17) 6 October 1982 (R. E. Webster, AB 37:224, 1983); subsequent sightings have been at Whelan Lake (G6) 22 December 1987 (G. McCaskie, AB 42:321, 1988), Tijuana River valley (V11) 18 October 1991 and 13 December 1999 (G. McCaskie, AB 46:148, 1992, NAB 54:221, 2000), O’Neill Lake (E6) 20 February 2000 (L. J. Hargrove, P. Unitt), and probably in Moosa Canyon (F9) 3 December 1998 (“extremely dark,” E. C. Hall). There is also one specimen, from the North Park area of San Diego (R9) 9 March 1997 (SDNHM 49941).