

APPARENT FIRST RECORD OF PREDATION ON BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER BY "BLACK MERLIN"

Michael I. Preston
64 Whiteram Hill N.E.
Calgary, Alberta T1Y 5T2

Abstract — An immature or female Merlin of the "Black" race was observed capturing and consuming a Black-bellied Plover near Ladner, B.C. Apparently a first record for this race, this plover species is an unusually large prey item for the Merlin.

Key words: "Black" Merlin, Black-bellied Plover, British Columbia, *Falco columbarius suckleyi*, Ladner, *Pluvialis squatarola*, predator-prey interactions.

The Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) is a small falcon that breeds throughout the northern forests and prairies of North America and northern Eurasia (Palmer 1988; Sodhi *et al.* 1993). Three subspecies are recognized currently in North America (Palmer 1988; Sodhi *et al.* 1993). The "Black" Merlin (*F. c. suckleyi*) breeds in the "Pacific Northwest" from Alaska south to Washington (Sodhi *et al.* 1993), in British Columbia primarily (but not exclusively) along the coast and on offshore islands (Campbell *et al.* 1990). It is primarily non-migratory or a short-distance migrant, concentrating in winter along the Pacific coast from the southern British Columbia coast to northern California (Beebe 1974; Campbell *et al.* 1990; Sodhi *et al.* 1993).

Merlins have been reported to take a wide variety of prey, ranging from large insects to small mammals (Sherrod 1978; Palmer 1988; Johnsgard 1990; Sodhi *et al.* 1993). Merlins usually take small to medium-sized birds as prey, generally those weighing less than 50 g. (Sodhi *et al.* 1993). These typically include Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) and Chestnut-collared Longspurs (*Calcarius ornatus*) in prairie areas (e.g. Hodson 1978), Bohemian Waxwings (*Bombycilla garrulus*) and House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) in urban areas (e.g. Oliphant and McTaggart 1977; James and Smith 1987; Warkentin and Oliphant 1990; Sodhi *et al.* 1991), and a mixture of open area and forest species in areas of mixed habitat (e.g. Laing 1985). In wetland areas, Merlins prey primarily on small shorebirds (100 g. or less), such as Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*), Western Sandpiper (*C. mauri*) and Dunlin (*C. alpina*) (e.g. Page and Whitacre 1975; Boyce 1985; Dekker 1988).

Although several studies have analyzed the hunting behaviour and food of the Merlin, little has been published on prey of the subspecies *F. c. suckleyi*. Most studies are from out of the range of this subspecies. Beebe's (1974) account of food habits of Merlins in British Columbia does not distinguish food of different subspecies. Bent (1938) summarized its food and foraging behaviour as being similar to those of other races, specifically mentioning only Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and Vaux's Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) as food items. Merlins observed hunting and catching Dunlin in Washington included individuals of this race

(Buchanan *et al.* 1988, 1991). The purpose of this note is to document a successful attack on a Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) by a Black Merlin.

On 8 January 1995, I observed a female or immature Merlin capture and consume a winter-plumaged Black-bellied Plover near Ladner, British Columbia. The Merlin was observed seizing the plover on the wing only a few seconds after the plover had taken flight. The plover was taken without apparent difficulty and was carried about 300 m. to the top of a telephone pole (Figure 1) at a nearby boat and fishing pier. Consumption had already begun, with several feathers removed and torn flesh exposed by the time that I had walked over to the site (about 2 minutes). The Merlin continued to eat the prey for about 10 additional minutes before apparently being scared off by an approaching truck. The Merlin flew out of sight with the remainder of the prey. I collected feathers from the remains to confirm my identification of the plover.

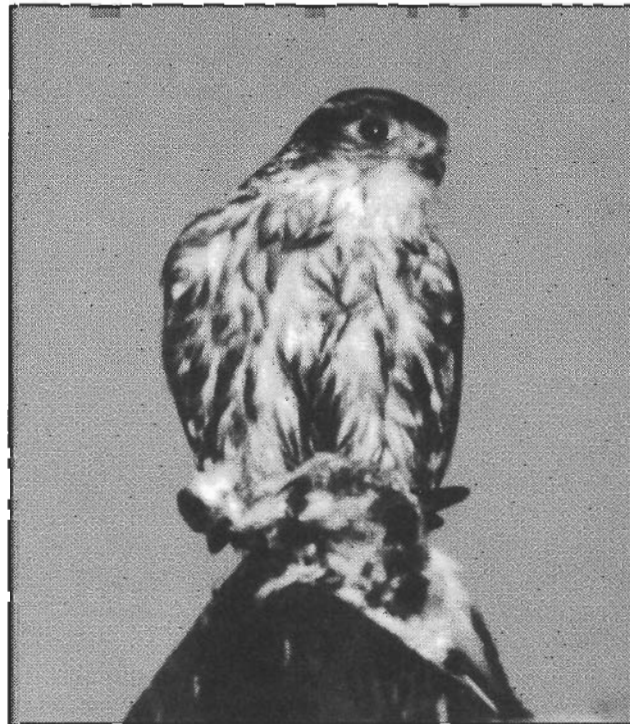


Figure 1: Black Merlin on telephone pole with prey, Ladner, B.C. 8 January 1995.

The Black-bellied Plover is common in winter along the southwestern coast of British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1990; Paulson 1993), although in smaller numbers than Dunlin (Campbell *et al.* 1990; Paulson 1993), a frequent prey item of Merlin wintering in nearby Washington (Buchanan *et al.* 1988). The significance of my observation is that the Black-bellied Plover is an unusually large prey species for Merlins. Black-bellied Plovers in the Pacific Northwest average about 210 g. in body mass (Paulson 1993), exceeding that of most male (150-215 g.) and approximately equalling that of female (187-255 g.) Merlins in British Columbia (Beebe 1974). This is about four times the mass of species preyed upon frequently, and few records exist of successful captures by Merlins of shorebirds larger than 70 g. Paulson (1995) did not include the Merlin among known predators of Black-bellied Plover, although Taverner (1926) stated without details that Merlins seem "particularly fond" of Black-bellied Plover. Page and Whitacre (1975) reported that a Merlin in California frequently "grabbed at" Black-bellied Plover and other large birds without actually striking them. Perhaps Taverner observed similar behaviour. Buchanan (1989) reported that in Washington, Black-bellied Plovers show initial alarm when Merlins arrive, but soon habituate to their presence.

Merlins have also been observed chasing dowitchers (*Limnodromus* sp.) (Lahrman 1994) and such other species of 100 g. or larger as Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*), ptarmigan (*Lagopus* sp.), Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*), Common Snipe, and American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) have been reported among prey items (Sherrod 1978; Laing 1985; Palmer 1988). Although predation on such large species is rare, frequent harassment of them by Merlins, such as observed by Page and Whitacre (1979) and reported by Beebe (1974) may result in occasional opportunities for predation when a prey item is injured, distracted or otherwise momentarily unwary.

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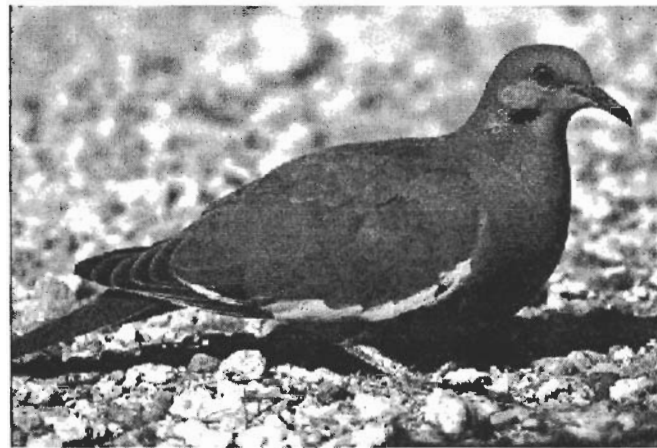
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Two Southern Visitors

see Bird Records Committee Report which follows



Photograph 1: White-winged Dove.

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Photograph 2: Great Crested Flycatcher.

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