Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

MERLIN Z92
(Falco columbarius)

Description
The merlin is the UK's smallest bird of prey. The male, traditionally known as a jack, is sometimes just 10 ½ inches (25cm) long and has an average weight of just 5 ½ ounces (160g). The male has a blue-grey back and orange-tinted underparts. The female is dark brown above and whitish spotted with brown below. The specimen in this box is a female.

However, whatever it lacks in size is more than made up for in speed and ferocity. Its wing beat tends to be rapid with occasional glides and wings held close to the body. Should the wings close completely during a stoop the merlin becomes a small missile and can down prey four times its weight, although the vast majority of its victims weigh around one ounce (28g). In winter the UK population increases as most of the Icelandic breeding birds migrate to our warmer climate. Although recovering from a population crash in the late twentieth century it is still a relatively rare falcon.

Merlins sometimes roost communally, returning to the same place for generations. One locality in East Anglia, containing up to eight birds, has been in regular occupation for more than a half-century.



Breeding
Upland heather moorland is the commonest breeding habitat, with some birds breeding in the edge of conifer plantations. Merlins nest on the ground in most of their range. In the UK this is usually in a shallow scrape on the floor. They have a preference for long heather and so are susceptible to over management, by burning. During the breeding season, merlins fearlessly assault any large bird that approaches the nest. Even golden eagles and ravens have been attacked.

Did you know ...
Spitfires were powered by a 'Merlin' engine.

Reading Borough Council

Heritage Lottery Fund

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

MERLIN
(Falco columbarius)

Z92

Vital Statistics

Eggs: 3-5
Incubation: 28-32 days
Fledging: 25-32 days
Maximum recorded lifespan: 12 years
Length: 25-30cm
Wingspan: 50-62cm
Weight: 125-234g (male); 164-300g (female)
UK breeding population: 1,330 pairs



A male merlin

UK Distribution



What does it sound like?

A shrill 'kek kek kek'

What does it eat?

This bird has a heavy dependence on skylarks and meadow pipits. Merlins are usually solitary hunters, but two have been observed hunting together. Repeated stoops were made, the birds diving alternately above a meadow pipit so that the quarry was under continuous attack.

Did you know ...

In the golden age of falconry, the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the merlin was considered a bird for a lady and was much valued by huntress monarchs such as Mary, Queen of Scots.