

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

MERLIN

Falco columbarius

Family: FALCONIDAE
B128

Order: FALCONIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Uncommon winter migrant from September to May. Seldom found in heavily wooded areas, or open deserts. Frequents coastlines, open grasslands, savannahs, woodlands, lakes, wetlands, edges, and early successional stages. Ranges from annual grasslands to ponderosa pine and montane hardwood-conifer habitats. Occurs in most of the western half of the state below 1500 m (3900 ft). A rare winter migrant in the Mojave Desert; a few records from the Channel Islands. Numbers have declined markedly in California in recent decades.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Feeds primarily on small birds; also small mammals and insects. Frequents shorelines in winter and catches shorebirds. Searches while flying at low level; attacks with a short dive, or dash from above. Captures prey on ground or in air, after direct pursuit. Young may rely upon insects while developing predatory skills.

Cover: Dense tree stands close to bodies of water are needed for cover. Uses a wide variety of habitats.

Reproduction: Does not breed in California. Breeds in Alaska and Canada. Typically modifies existing corvid or hawk nest consisting of an open platform of sticks in a tree, usually a conifer (Warkentin and James 1988, Sieg and Becker 1990). Occasionally nests in cavities, cliffs, in a deserted building, or on ground (Craighead and Craighead 1956, Brown and Amadon 1968).

Water: Usually nests close to water.

Pattern: Frequents open habitats at low elevation near water and tree stands. Favors coastlines, lakeshores, wetlands.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Winters in California from September to May. Wanders in search of abundant prey. Some individuals migrate as far as South America in winter.

Home Range: During winter, mean home range size of adults was observed to be 196 ha in Saskatoon (Warkentin and Oliphant 1990).

Territory: Apparently do not defend feeding territories (Becker and Sieg 1987, Warkentin and Oliphant 1990, Sodhi and Oliphant 1992). Feeding home range tend to overlap.

Intraspecifically aggressive while nesting.

Reproduction: Clutch of 4-5 eggs laid from late May into June. Incubates 28-32 days, and chicks fledge at about 24 days (Trimble 1972).

Niche: Because feeds mostly on birds, numbers probably have been reduced by pesticides. Potential avian predators are driven away as soon as they enter the territory; particularly intolerant of accipiters (Fox 1964, Bent 1938, Oliphant 1974).

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