

THE SPORT OF HAWKING.

V.—The American Merlin and Kestrel.

THE American merlin or pigeon hawk (*Falco columbarius*, Linnaeus) is found throughout the North American continent and also on the northern borders of South America. It closely resembles in form and habits the European merlin—the lady's hawk when falconry was at its brightest—but is somewhat larger, and stronger and bolder than that species. The female pigeon hawk measures about 13in. in length, the male about 11in.; the female from tip to tip of her expanded wings from 26 to 27in. This is a very beautiful species. The coloration varies somewhat with age; in the adult male the entire upper parts are of a bluish slate color, every feather being lined longitudinally with black; forehead and throat white; under parts yellowish white, the feathers being lined longitudinally with brownish black; tail barred with black and tipped with white. Younger individuals are less brightly marked, the upper part being mostly dusky brown in color. The merlin is a true falcon, though a little one, and, for its size, is hardly exceeded in courage, power and dash by the noble peregrine, the type of the genus and of daring courage. It is not very rare as a spring and autumn visitor in the New England States, and is frequently found in most of the Middle States.

For food the pigeon hawk mostly depends on the smaller birds; grackles (crow blackbirds), red-winged starlings, robins and wild doves and pigeons forming the greater part of its bill of fare. It has been known to kill the active and muscular California partridge and also the still larger "willow grouse" (*Lagopus albus*). Several of our woodpeckers, even the strong and agile flicker, also frequently fall victims to the insatiable appetite of this bold little marauder.

The merlin has the true falcon flight, flapping rapidly like a pigeon; it has perhaps more tendency to soar than the other falcons. The stoop of this species has but little force or grandeur, and is more like the stern chase of the true hawks than the arrow-like dash of the peregrine or lanier.

The pigeon hawk seldom breeds south of the 44th parallel in the Eastern States, certainly never in Massachusetts or southern New York. The nest is generally built in a thick foliaged tree at no great height from the ground. This species has also been occasionally known to build upon high cliffs. The nest is composed of sticks, grass and moss, and is as rough as the domicile of the hawks in general, being often hardly a nest at all. Like all the true falcons the American merlin is brave and reckless in the defense of its nest. The European species—which builds upon the ground—will often feign to be injured, and flutter along the ground away from the nest to try and lead off an intruder. The eggs number from four to six. They measure 1½ inches in length. The ground color is light reddish buff, which is clouded with deep chocolate and reddish brown blotches. They are very rare in those most useless and senseless of collections, "cabinets of birds' eggs," and are in much demand among collectors. In Europe the merlin is used for the taking of larks, blackbirds and pigeons, and is remarkable for its docility and tameness, and the ease with which it can be trained. It is certain that a strong female of the American species would take quail and the Western partridge brilliantly, and a fast one would kill woodcock and snipe. Both females and tiercels would kill wood doves and tame and wild pigeons most successfully. It is probable that a cast or pair of powerful pigeon hawks could even take grouse, and they would give grand sport with bluejays.

The taming, training and use in the field of merlins are conducted on exactly the same principles as the education of the peregrine and gyrfalcon, with the difference that the smaller falcon is always trained to come to the wrist when called as well as to the lure, while the large falcons are frequently trained to come to the lure only, and are hence called "hawks of the lure." The merlin cannot be taught to "wait on" satisfactorily, and is therefore always flown "out of the hood;" but Freeman narrates that so tame does this little hawk become that his birds frequently perch on his head while he tramps the fields for game, and are off as soon as a bird rises. If game "puts in" the trained falcon will either desert it entirely or perch near where the quarry was seen to enter. Merlins must be "served" with the utmost promptness when disappointed in a dash after prey, as they quickly become discouraged, and will give up hard flights at once if the quarry has been lost several times in succession. Whenever possible a captive bird of the species they are pursuing should always be ready to be thrown to the hawks when they fail to capture the wild quarry, during the first few weeks they are hunted. The hood for the pigeon hawk must be very soft and light; the birds must be thoroughly broken to it, but it is very seldom worn, the hawks becoming so tame as to even sit quietly upon the wrist while being carried unhooded. The jesses must also be of the lightest and softest leather, and this small falcon is not able to carry a swivel, and but one very light small bell when flown at game. Merlins cannot be "sharp set" like laniers and gyrfal-

cons, or they rapidly get out of condition; ordinarily they must be fed at least twice a day, being given only a very light meal without castings the morning before they are flown. Indeed this little hawk must be regularly and plentifully fed if you wish it to live in captivity.

One advantage the merlin has over the large falcons in the field is that in using it no "field" is required, the falconer and a friend or two being able to do all the "serving" and beating and "taking up" on foot.

Pigeon hawks require plenty of fresh birds and the freshest of beefsteak to keep them in condition; field mice and rats also make excellent occasional diet. The general treatment of merlins is the same as that proper for the peregrine, but the lady's hawk must be very carefully protected from wet and requires the shelter of a room throughout the winter in the latitude of New York.

The smallest of the American falcons is the sparrow hawk or American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), the total length of this species being only from 11 to 12in., the tail is 1in. long and the wings measure from 21 to 23in. across from tip to tip. The following is the coloration of the adult: Frontal band and throat white, head and neck marked with black spots and bars, the top of the head and upper parts light cinnamon, under parts light cinnamon, or almost white, marked with spots of black, tail tipped with white and barred with a broad band of black.

of me, and would have captured it had not a charge of "dust shot" knocked out a handful of his feathers and forcibly reminded him of important business in another place, which he immediately left me to attend to.

The sparrow hawk builds no nest for itself but takes possession of an old woodpecker's hole or other tree hollow, or more rarely of a deserted crow's nest. The eggs number from four to six, and are dark cream-colored variously marked with spots of brown. They are nearly spherical in shape, and measure 1½in. in extreme length.

This species breeds much later in the year than our other hawks. In Maine the eggs are laid early in June. The young birds are covered with white down when first hatched, through which the feathers soon appear.

The sparrow hawk is easily tamed when taken as an eyas, and has often been kept at hawk as a pet; but the kestrel is useless to the sportsman, not being able to take any adult game bird, unless we except reed and rail birds. This species is, however, a good hawk for the falconer to practice on, and is easily captured by a small bow net baited with a live sparrow. Even haggards soon become docile in captivity, and may be kept at hawk provided with bewits and tiny bells.

All falcons moult once a year and this is a most trying and dangerous period to the trained bird in captivity. Eyases moult much more

quickly and easily than haggards, and for this reason are often preferred to the latter. As soon as a hawk fairly begins to moult he must be no longer flown at game, or on any account allowed to become "sharp set." Feed the bird generously twice a day if a peregrine or gyrfalcon, and three times daily if a lanier or pigeon hawk, and allow him to become as fat as possible—which greatly shortens the period of moulting. If carefully watched and protected from wind and rain falcons may be moulted on their ordinary blocks in the open air or under their shed; a somewhat better plan, however, is to leave them at liberty in a well sanded room, in which there are no points or edges against which they might injure their new and tender feathers. Feed from the hand and lure throughout the moult and exercise the hawks daily by compelling them to fly repeatedly across the room to your wrist or the lure for food. The food and general care of the hawk during the period of moulting is exactly the same as when he was in full plumage and flying at game. After moulting is completed and the new feathers fully developed and strong, the falcon will have to be rebroken to the hood—which he has half forgotten, as the cap is never worn during the moult—and will require re-"entering" at quarry. The lure, whistle and call of course he has not been permitted to forget, both being constantly used during feeding time. The trained bird must also constantly see dogs and strangers, and horses also whenever practicable. The hawk must be re-entered at game precisely as at first, and a week or two after the completion of the moult should be flying at prey as well as ever; of course, however, the reentering will be a much shorter and less tedious process than when the falcon was first trained.

The falconers of a century or two ago wrote whole columns on the treatment of the diseases of hawks, but it has been our experience that the American falcons, if properly fed, exercised and cared for, are exceedingly healthy, and our knowl-

edge of hawk physic is therefore limited. Should a hawk fracture its leg, carefully set the bone and apply a neatly fitted stocking of soft flannel, and then bandage with a strip of muslin which has been dipped in strong starch water or rubbed on dry plaster of Paris and then dipped in water just before applying. The starch or plaster when dry will immobilize the limb, and in three or four weeks the bone will be united as strongly as ever. Fractures of the wing bones are mostly incurable in a falcon used for hunting; the wing will almost always be lame even if the bones can be made to unite. Should such an accident occur, the kindest treatment is to put the poor bird out of its pain with a charge of heavy shot fired at close range.

When prolonged wet weather or other cause has prevented tame hawks from having proper exercise their excreta frequently become tough and caked, instead of being moist and full; the birds are then much benefited by a dose of from 2 to 4grs. of rhubarb, to be repeated if necessary. It may be given wrapped up in a small piece of meat. All other medicines given to falcons are at best only an experiment. Plenty of small gravel stones must always be strewn round the flocks of falcons, which the birds occasionally swallow and appear to relish.

For parasites in the feathers (bird lice) and in the nares (*acariæ*), tobacco water carefully used, kerosene or dilute carbolic acid (ten grains of pure crystals of the acid in an ounce of glycerine) are useful. Of course these poisonous agents must be used with the greatest circumspection or the hawk may be killed along with the vermin. Of the numerous inflammatory diseases to which European tame hawks are subject we have no knowledge, and the treatment for them recommended in works on falconry is frequently worse than useless, and often absurd. Care, careful feeding, attention to the bath, cleanliness, etc., and plenty of exercise, are the only rational methods of preventing and curing the diseases of hawks.



WOMAN'S TENDER HEART.

Tender-Hearted Young Lady: "OH! YOU CRUEL, HEARTLESS LITTLE WRETCH! TO ROB THOSE POOR BIRDS OF THEIR EGGS!"

Wicked Little Boy: "HONH! THAT'S THE OLD ONE 'AT YOU'VE GOT ON YER BONNET. GUESS she WON'T CARE."

Many specimens are barred on the back with transverse stripes of black, and the young are generally barred freely with brownish-black.

This handsome little hawk is, according to Jordan, found abundantly throughout the United States. In northern New England it is common and I have found it not rare in all the Middle States, and in Maryland even near midsummer. It breeds along the northern borders of the United States and comes southward in winter.

The mode of flight, as well as many of the habits of the sparrow hawk, closely resembles that of the European kestrel. Flying irregularly, it hovers a moment over a particular spot and then shoots off in another direction in search of prey. Its power of flight is trifling compared with the dash of the great falcons, and it has the hawk-like habit of taking stand in a tree to wait for quarry. Jays have a particular antipathy for this little falcon and lose no opportunity to mob one whenever found. Wilson states that in revenge the hawk often makes a meal off one of his persecutors, but I think it at least doubtful if this hawk can capture and hold the active and cunning "crow." Another authority states that the sparrow hawk occasionally preys upon even the thrasher (*Harporhynchus rufus*), which rather more than equals it in size. I have certainly never seen this falcon kill any bird larger than a red-winged starling. The American, like the European kestrel, is of real service to the farmer, from destroying many field mice and grasshoppers which constitute its principal food. It also feeds upon small birds, lizards and small snakes, and occasionally bears off a downy chick from the barnyard. This species is as bold as any hawk that flies, and very rapid in its short pounces after prey; it not infrequently happens that it dashes down and snatches a coveted specimen of finch or warbler from before the very gun of the naturalist. On one occasion one of these birds plunged after a red-headed woodpecker I had just shot, and which fell within 15ft.

Falcons, although not by nature affectionate, often show much attachment for their masters, and even when gorged with food will bate hard from their blocks to get to him if he walks near where they are tied, and are not content until permitted to leap upon his wrist to have their breasts stroked. Eyases when lost in the field frequently return home by themselves, and lost hawks have even flown of their own accord to the falconer asleep on the ground hours or days after they have been lost. Eyases have come to lure and call after having been at

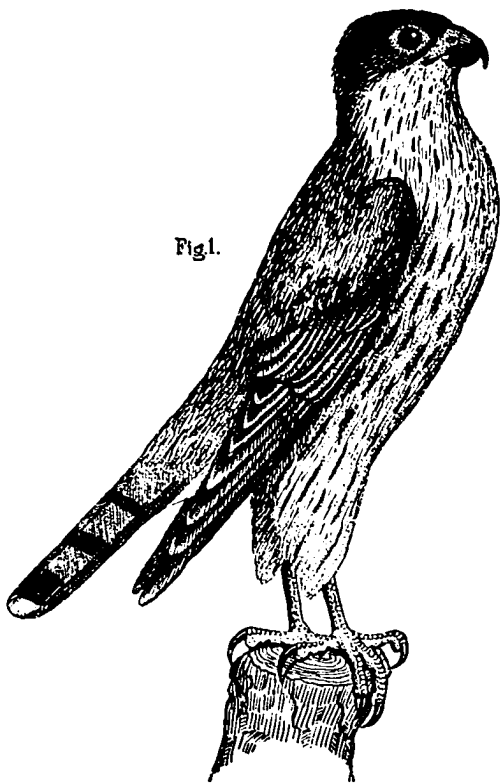


Fig 1.

liberty for above two weeks, and haggards have been retaken on game after nearly a week of recovered freedom.

Even apart from the stirring sport of hawking, the beautiful and striking appearance of the gallant birds upon the blocks on the falconer's lawn or standing upon his wrist will amply repay one for the trouble the hawks give, and there is a charm about possessing, training and hunting falcons which belongs to no other sport.

Now that game is everywhere becoming rare, it is most ardently to be wished that some less murderous means

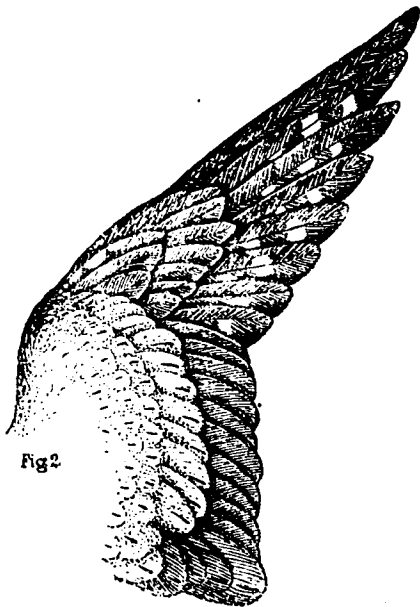


Fig 2

than hound and gun be brought into the field for the capture of game that will at the same time yield sport of a high order, and that means we have in a most spirit-stirring form in the keen-eyed "greyhounds of the air," the members of the genus *Falco*.

Fig. 1 is a portrait of an adult American merlin in full plumage. The attitude represented—the wings tightly closed and the head and breast feathers slightly raised—is one frequently assumed by all the falcons.

Fig. 2 is a drawing of the wing of the European merlin (*Falco tinnunculus*), and shows the peculiar form of the wing and its exceedingly close resemblance to that of our species—the pigeon hawk.

R. W. SEISS.

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