

MERLIN CHASES PASSERINES FLUSHED BY NORTHERN HARRIER

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On 27 October 2009, 25 km east of Chugwater, Platte County, Wyoming, I spotted a male Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) approximately 900 m away hunting at a height of 1–2 m over a pasture. As it flew, the harrier frequently flushed passerine birds, which it did not pursue. After approximately 30 seconds, the harrier suddenly turned 180° and flew east at a faster rate of speed. I then noticed a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) that had come in from the west and was now close to the harrier. The Merlin began following approximately 5–10 m behind the harrier and using it as a beater, chasing the passerines being flushed by the larger raptor, which had resumed its slower hunting speed.

I watched the two raptors for approximately 3–4 minutes, during which time the birds were at least 600 m away from me. The Merlin followed the harrier for most of that time and chased, but did not catch, passerines flushed by the harrier approximately 6–9 times. On two occasions the Merlin chased a flushed passerine up to about 10–15 m above ground level but did not catch it and resumed following the harrier. Another time the Merlin raced back and forth several times along a low area for approximately 15 seconds in pursuit of a passerine, then turned away and caught up with the harrier again and continued to follow it. After 3–4 minutes the Northern Harrier flew out of my view, followed by the Merlin. The harrier had, since the time I first noticed the Merlin, flown approximately 1.25 km, including two sharp changes of direction. During that time I did not observe the Merlin behave aggressively toward the harrier. Similarly, other than possibly its initial 180° turn at the beginning of my observation, I did not observe the harrier respond to the Merlin.

Similar behavior between these species has been reported, though not from mainland North America. In the Bahamas, Van Tyne and Mayfield (1952) saw a Merlin following a harrier in a fashion similar to that I describe on three dates, but they did not note that the Merlin(s) chased flushed prey. Dickson (1984) reported seeing the behavior eight times in Ireland with these two species, and also recorded that two other observers had seen it an unspecified number of times. Watson (1977) reported seeing it on one occasion in England. Cudworth and Massingham (1986) noted one instance of a somewhat similar interaction in England, and also noted that the harrier did not react to the Merlin's presence. No prey captures by the Merlin were reported for any of these observations in the British Isles, but Kenyon (1942) reported several Merlins following a train in Mexico and capturing passerines that were flushed by the train.

The harrier's active hunting style, slow flight, and habit of continually flushing passerines seems to present a situation favorable for hunting for a quick, opportunistic Merlin. Harriers that I have watched in Wyoming invariably flush passerines as they fly low over a field, but they do not pursue the flushed birds—they ignore them and instead attack prey still on the ground (also see Cudworth and Massingham 1986). And with the Merlin trailing the harrier, the latter would encounter potential prey first. The harrier, then, appears to be unaffected by the tailgating Merlin, which suggests a commensal relationship if the Merlin is in fact successful at obtaining prey by this strategy.

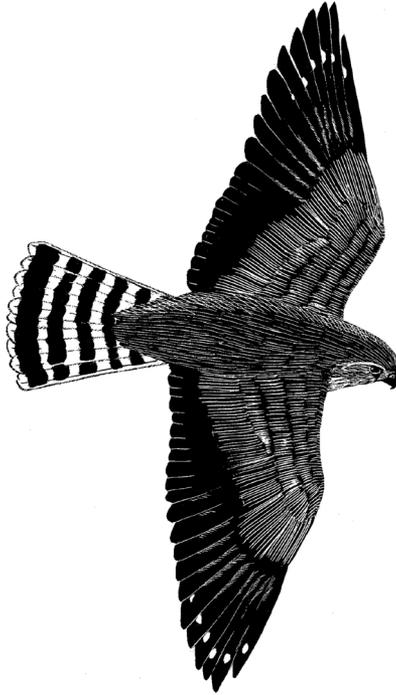
Lawrence Semo, Paul Swiby, and Doug Faulkner made several suggestions to improve the manuscript.

NOTES

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Merlin

Sketch by George C. West