

Merlin

The merlin (*Falco columbarius*), Britain's smallest falcon, breeds on moorland and in winter can be seen causing panic among waders and waterfowl



This dashing little falcon is the smallest in the UK, and is usually seen flying fast, with rapid wingbeats, close to the ground over heather moorland.

The tiny male, which is a three-quarters the size of the female and little bigger than a blackbird, is blue grey above with dark primaries, the tail has a dark terminal band. It has a rusty chest and belly with darker streaks. The female is a fairly uniform grey-brown above and creamy below with brown spots and streaks, the tail has a series of regular bars.

Length: 25-30cm; wingspan: 50-62cm

Status in UK

1,330 pairs, increasing; AMBER listed; resident

Population trends

In the early 19th century the merlin was widespread throughout suitable moorland habitat in Scotland, Ireland, Northern England and Wales. However increased persecution over the next 100 years caused a widespread decline.

Unlike other raptors no recovery occurred in the early 20th century, probably due to a combination of factors. These included habitat loss, reduction in moorland management for grouse, which also benefited its small bird prey, and increased disturbance from walkers.

In the 1950s it was hit by persistent pesticides picked up in its lowland wintering areas. An increase in tree nesting, particularly a move into conifer plantations, and an improvement in breeding success linked to the withdrawal of persistent agricultural chemicals have resulted in a recent increase. The population has doubled since the 1980s.



Habitat and distribution

Merlins mainly breed on the upland moorlands in Scotland, the north of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, a few pairs still remain on the south-west moors. It moves to coastal areas and wetlands in the lowlands in the winter.

Breeding

They usually nest on the ground, but sometimes old crows' nests in scrub or trees on the moorland fringe are used. They have recently begun to nest in the edges of conifer plantations.

Feeding

Merlins feed mainly on small birds, such as pipits and larks, taken in flight or on the ground.