

Merlin *Falco columbarius*

STATUS

Scarce breeder on western uplands of Plan area.

**Annex I of the Birds Directive (EEC1979),
Appendix II of the Bern Convention,
Appendix II of the Bonn Convention,
UK Steering Group Report long list (1995),
National Red list (RSPB 1996),
Protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife
& Countryside Act 1981.**



WHAT IS THE MERLIN ?

The merlin is the smallest of the native falcons; the blue/ grey male and brown female are characteristic members of the moorland fauna in the summer. Merlin feed on small birds such as skylark and meadow pipit but despite the high numbers of their prey species on grassy moorlands, choose to nest on heather moors. Merlin winter on low ground and coastal areas both in the UK and mainland Europe.

WHERE IS IT FOUND IN THE UK ?

Merlin are found throughout the uplands of the UK although their strongholds are in North Wales, the North Pennines and the Highlands of Scotland. Merlin preferentially occupy upland heather moorland habitats, especially managed grouse moors where the heather burning regimes and predator control are favourable to this predominantly ground-nesting species.

In areas of the UK where heather moorland has been lost to afforestation, such as Wales and Northumberland, merlin may occupy tree nests in conifers although they still hunt primarily on open ground. In most of its range across northern Europe merlin is a bird of forest margins interspersed with open ground although it does nest in trees.

WHY IS THE MERLIN OF CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE?

Merlin suffered serious declines in population from the 1950s due to a combination of organochlorine pesticides, persecution and habitat destruction, reaching a national low of only 550 pairs. The population had increased to around 1300 pairs by 1994 but was probably still less than its peak, owing to loss of habitat.

THE MERLIN IN THE DURHAM AREA

HOW HEALTHY IS THE LOCAL MERLIN POPULATION ?

The national survey in 1993-1994 estimated the merlin population of northern England to be 130-145 pairs. Durham holds a minor but significant proportion of this number.

HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW ABOUT MERLIN IN THE DURHAM AREA ?

The population distribution and dynamics of the merlin in the local area are known in some detail as a result of an annual study, which has continued for more than fifteen years.

WHERE HAS THE MERLIN BEEN FOUND IN THE DURHAM AREA ?

All major blocks of upland heather moorland in Durham hold merlin in varying densities; some areas are especially productive. Ringing recoveries show strong site fidelity in most nesting pairs.

THE MERLIN IS AT RISK FROM:

Loss of heather moorland through overgrazing and inappropriate burning.

Egg collection – merlin eggs are still sought after by egg collectors and this suppresses local breeding success.

Disturbance – merlin preferentially choose sites with limited levels of disturbances from humans and dogs.

THE MERLIN BENEFITS FROM:

Active management of heather moorland for commercial grouse shooting.

A lack of disturbance around the nest sites.

IMPORTANT HABITATS FOR MERLIN:

<i>Upland heathland and blanket bog</i>	*
<i>Upland acid grassland</i>	*

OTHER SPECIES ACTION PLANS COVERING ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE MERLIN:

<i>Hen harrier</i>	*
<i>Golden plover</i>	*
<i>Curlew</i>	*
<i>Lapwing</i>	*

N.B. ** indicates action plan produced in 1998.
* indicates action plan produced in 2000.

MERLIN AND THE LAW:

The merlin is protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) as amended. Merlin is listed on Annex I of the EC Birds Directive (EEC1979), Appendix II of the Bern Convention and Appendix II of the Bonn Convention.

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TARGETS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF MERLIN IN THE DURHAM AREA:

DATE

Target 1 *Maintain the current range and population density of merlin.* ONGOING

Target 2 *Accurately monitor the breeding populations - with an annual monitoring programme.* ONGOING

Target 3 *Extend the species range on to 5 presently unoccupied moorland areas and, by these means, increase the local population.* 2008

MERLIN ACTIONS

ACTION	DATE	POSSIBLE PARTNERS	MEETS TARGET NO.
<u>SPECIES PROTECTION AND MANAGEMENT</u>			
1. Develop a new strategy to combat and deter egg collectors	2004	RSPB, WLOs, DUBSG, DBC	1, 2
<u>SITE MANAGEMENT</u>			
2. Develop and publicise best practice guidelines for heather moor management for merlin.	2005	MKA, CLA	1, 3
<u>RESEARCH AND MONITORING</u>			
3. Continue detailed monitoring of breeding merlin.	ONGOING	DUBSG, RSPB, EN	1, 2
<u>ADVISORY</u>			
4. Provide advice to landowners on positive management for merlin.	ONGOING	RSPB, DUBSG, DBAP	1, 2, 3
<u>COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICITY</u>			
5. Use merlin as part of a moorland education programme.	2004	RSPB, DUBSG, DWT, NPP	1, 2