

Short communication

Merlin *Falco columbarius* preys and feeds offshore

Fulvio Fraticelli^{1*}, Federica Franco, Simone Martinelli¹, Sergio Muratore¹, Nicola Larroux², Alessandro Pavese³

Abstract - This short report describes two cases of predation carried out by Merlin *Falco columbarius* in open sea, highlighting the ability of this species to feed during active migration.

Keywords. *Falco columbarius*, Merlin, predation, migration, sea.

Riassunto - Lo smeriglio *Falco columbarius* preda e si nutre in mare aperto.

Sono descritti due casi di predazione in mare aperto effettuati dallo smeriglio *Falco columbarius*; si evidenzia così la capacità di questa specie di nutrirsi durante la migrazione attiva.

Parole chiave: *Falco columbarius*, smeriglio, predazione, migrazione, mare.

Merlin *Falco columbarius* is considered an uncommon, but regular, migratory and winter visitor in our country (Brichetti & Fracasso, 2020). The migration strategies of this species are poorly understood; it is not regularly observed in the migration hot spots of birds of prey, but it is reported its ability to fly across wide stretches of sea, even greater than 100 km (Panuccio *et al.*, 2021). Observations of predation in stopover during migration, also on small islands, are known for this species (Aborn, 1994). Merlin regularly crosses the Mediterranean Sea, although not in large numbers, flying over Malta (Fenech, 2010) and rarely reaching Libya (Isenmann *et al.*, 2016), Tunisia (Isenmann *et al.*, 2005) and Algeria (Isenmann & Moali, 2000). An individual ringed in May in Capo Bon

(Tunisia) was reported along the Tuscan coast in October of the following year (Brichetti & Fracasso, 2020). There are also numerous reports on small Italian islands (Tuscan, Pontino and Ponziano Archipelagos, Tremiti Islands, Pelagie Islands, Pantelleria, Ustica; Ornitho.it consulted on 24-10-2022).

On September 28, 2021, at 09:56 am, at 16 km from the Island of Gorgona and 25 km from the closest point on the Tuscan coastline (Livorno, 43°20'54.8"N 10°04'27.1"E) some of us (AP, NL) observed a young individual of Merlin approaching the ferry headed to the Island of Capraia. Between its claws it had an indeterminate passerine that was being plucked with its beak. During the observation, which lasted about three minutes, the individual tried to land at least once on the top portion of the ferry, but then gave up, probably due to the movement of the radar and the close presence of passengers. Hence, the individual moved away towards East, remaining low on the sea.

On October 14, 2022, at 11:08 am, about 30 km off Civitavecchia (Rome, 42°01'15.0"N 11°24'53.7"E), some of us (FF, FF, SM, SM) observed a young individual of Merlin flying about 5-6 m above the sea surface and coming from the North-West. Firstly, moving away a few hundred meters from our boat, it made a large turn, rose to about 10 m, and flew over the boat plucking with his beak an indeterminate passerine held in his claws. In the meanwhile, three indeterminate passerines passed over in the North-East direction, at about 150 m of altitude. Then, it apparently turned its flight towards the land.

Many bird species use boats they encounter along their migration routes as stopover (Sarà *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, we can hypothesize they may play an attractive role on raptors migrating across the sea. Indeed, it is known a case of predation carried out by a Merlin on passerines resting on a boat in the Black Sea (Stanciu *et al.*, 2017). However, in both of our observations there were no boats in the vicinity other than those of the observers. The two observations here reported highlight how it is possible for this species to find trophic resources, which help to maintain adequate metabolic levels, even when crossing stretches of sea, regardless of the potentially attractive role played by boats. Desorbo *et al.* (2015) hypothesize that Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* migrating along Atlantic coasts have greater ease in capturing a prey flying over the sea. Similarly, we suggest that sea could facili-

¹ Stazione Romana Osservazione e Protezione Uccelli, Piazza Margana 40, 00186 Roma, Italia.

² G.I.O. - Gruppo Insubrico di Ornitologia, c/o Civico Museo Insubrico di Storia Naturale di Clivio e Induno Olona, Via A. Manzoni 21, 21050 Clivio (Varese), Italia.

³ G.N.M. - Gruppo Naturalistico Mantovano, Italia.

* Corresponding author: f_fraticelli@hotmail.com

© 2023 Fulvio Fraticelli, Federica Franco, Simone Martinelli, Sergio Muratore, Nicola Larroux, Alessandro Pavese

Received for publication: 14 November 2022

Accepted for publication: 13 February 2023

Online publication: 20 June 2023

tate Merlin preying activity. Furthermore, the two observations cited in this note might highlight a regular rather than occasional behavior of this species, previously undetected because of the combined effects of low densities of Merlins and the independency from ship support.

REFERENCES

- Aborn D. A., 1994 – Correlation between raptor and song-bird numbers at a migratory stopover site. *Wilson Bulletin*, 106 (1): 150-154.
- Brichetti P. & Fracasso G., 2020 – The birds of Italy. 2. Pteroclididae - Locustellidae. *Edizioni Belvedere*, Latina.
- Desorbo C. R., Gray R. B., Tash J., Gray C. E., Williams K. A. & Riordan D., 2015 – Offshore migration of Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) along the Atlantic Flyway. In: Wildlife densities and habitat use across temporal and spatial scales on the Mid-Atlantic outer continental shelf: final report to the Department of Energy EERE Wind & Water Power Technologies Office. Williams K. A., Connelly E. E., Johnson S. M. & Stenhouse I. J. (eds.). Award Number: DE-EE0005362. Report BRI 2015-11. *Biodiversity Research Institute*, Portland, Maine.
- Fenech N., 2010 – A complete guide to the birds of Malta. *Midsea Books*, Valletta.
- Isenmann P. & Moali A., 2000 – Oiseaux d'Algerie. *Société d'Études Ornithologiques de France*, Paris.
- Isenmann P., Gaultier T., El Hili A., Azafzaf H., Diensi H. & Smat M., 2005 – Oiseaux de Tunisie. *Société d'Études Ornithologiques de France*, Paris.
- Isenmann P., Hering J., Brehme S., Essghaier M., Etyeb K., Bourass E. & Azaafzaf H., 2016 – Oiseaux de Libye. *Société d'Études Ornithologiques de France*, Paris.
- Panuccio M., Mellone U. & Agostini N., 2021 – Migration Strategies of Birds of Prey in Western Palearctic. *CRC Press*, Boca Raton.
- Sarà M., Firmamento R., Cangemi G., Pagano L., Genovese M., Romeo T. & Greco S., 2022 – Welcome aboard: are birds migrating across the Mediterranean Sea using ships as stopovers during adverse weather conditions? *Ibis*, 165 (1): 328-339. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/ibi.13103>>
- Stanciu C.-R., Zaharia R., Chișamera G.-B., Cobzaru I., Gavril V.-D., Popescu-Mirceni R.-V. & Murariu D., 2017 – Aspects regarding raptors migration over the Black Sea. *Travaux du Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle «Grigore Antipa»*, 60 (2): 517-536.