

# Merlins uncovered



Juvenile Merlin and, inset, Damian Carroll searching for Merlin signs in east Galway. Photo: Neil O'Reilly (inset by John Lusby)



**John Lusby** has the latest on Ireland's most elusive falcon.

**M**erlin surveying can elicit all the emotions birdwatching has to offer, from exhilarating highs to soul-destroying lows, except usually it is only the latter:

If appropriate to label a bird as crafty, then this perfectly describes our smallest falcon. A long day in the remote uplands searching for this elusive raptor typically ends in exhaustion, with wet feet, damper spirits and riddled with midge bites, but without so much as a glimpse of a Merlin.

Such memories are short-lived, however; if foolhardy persistence is eventually rewarded

with the sight of a Merlin. Frustration quickly turns to privileged admiration in those rare moments when the true character of this predator is witnessed, with incredible agility on the wing in relentless pursuit of its quarry, or ferociously defending its nest from much larger assailants. Brimming with attitude, this diminutive raptor commands respect.

The same traits which make Merlin so intriguing and elusive also mean they fly beneath the radar when it comes to prioritising research and conservation resources. Like the forgotten child, Merlin is generally overlooked in favour of less challenging birds of prey.

## Conservation status

Most assessments of the status of Irish Merlin typically employ the term 'unknown data.' There has been no national census of Merlin. Monitoring of discrete populations has provided some information on nesting ecology and short-term regional trends, but in the absence of a systematic survey and targeted monitoring a robust population estimate and overview of its status and conservation requirements is lacking.

Breeding range declines of 8% and 49% over the past 20 and 40 years respectively, recorded by the bird atlases, have been the primary source for categorising Merlin as an Amber-listed bird of conservation concern in Ireland. However, such multi-species surveys are not likely to provide an accurate representation of Merlin status and trends.

As an Annex I species in the EU Birds Directive, six Special Protection Areas (SPAs) have been identified where Merlin is a 'Special Conservation Interest.' However, the importance of the SPA network for Merlin and how SPAs are performing is not known.

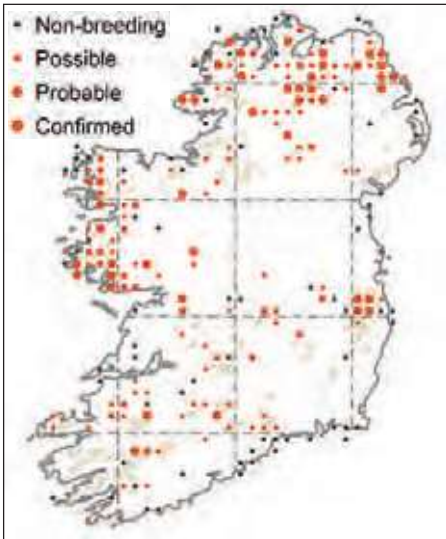
To develop an appropriate management strategy for Merlin it is first necessary to gain an insight to their status and the factors which impact on the breeding population, all of which remain knowledge gaps in Ireland.

## Conservation concerns

Merlins have a widespread but sporadic distribution across upland habitats in Ireland. As with a range of other upland birds, the land-use changes and intensification of



Merlin brood in tree nest on lake island in Connemara. Photo: John Lusby



Merlin breeding distribution as recorded in the Bird Atlas survey (2008-11). **Source:** BTO

agriculture – which have altered upland areas over recent decades – are likely to have had an impact on breeding Merlin.

As an open-country predator which specialises in hunting open-country birds, Merlin may be especially vulnerable to the loss or degradation of suitable open habitats. Alongside a substantial reduction in heather cover, widespread afforestation in the Irish uplands has given rise to concerns for Merlin populations. The relationship between Merlin and commercial forestry plantations is complex, however, as plantation forests can provide opportunities for nesting while also limiting the availability and suitability of habitats for foraging.

In Ireland, afforestation has progressed at one of the fastest rates in Europe and has been primarily concentrated in upland areas. As a result, Merlins are now likely to occur predominantly in forested landscapes, and key to an effective conservation strategy will be understanding the impacts of afforestation as



**Merlin (female).**  
**Photo:** Dermot Breen



**Merlin tree nest in Connemara.**  
**Photo:** Dario Fernández-Bellon.

well as forest management activities on Merlin populations.

## Survey and monitoring

A range of tactics can be employed to locate breeding Merlin. One of the best survey methods is searching for Merlin signs as opposed to sightings.

Although Merlin will take moths and dragonflies, their main prey is small birds such as Meadow Pipits and Skylarks, which are generally caught after high-speed, drawn-out and exhaustive 'tail-chases'. After a successful capture, Merlins take their prey to a prominent look-out such as a boulder or hummock where prey will be plucked before being consumed or delivered to the nest to feed voracious chicks. Investigating potential plucking perches can reveal evidence of recent kills and indicate the presence of Merlin.

However, a pilot survey showed that the effectiveness of this technique can vary, as extensive searches of known breeding territories revealed little or no signs of Merlin.

It was hoped that the pilot survey undertaken by BirdWatch Ireland and NPWS in 2010 would be a precursor to a national census. However, contrasting assessments of Merlin occupancy and breeding status in the same areas by different teams of experienced surveyors highlighted that a national census could not be carried out in the same manner as for Hen Harrier and Peregrine, which involved a large volunteer network.

In recent years monitoring efforts have focused on Connemara (under licence from NPWS). Here, Merlins nest on densely wooded islands on the many lakes scattered throughout the vast areas of bog. Covered in oak, yew, holly and rowan, together with

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