

Ireland's falcons

A beginner's guide to Ireland's birds



Kestrel (female) hovering. **Photo:** Richard T Mills

By Niall Hatch

There is something very special indeed about falcons. Masterful hunters, perfectly adapted to pursuing and catching prey, they also happen to be amongst our most beautiful and charismatic birds. Long thought to be related to other birds of prey, such as hawks, eagles, kites and harriers, recent genetic research has revealed that falcons represent an entirely separate evolutionary lineage, and that they are actually far more closely related to parrots and songbirds. They have a number of behavioural and structural differences that also set them apart from other raptors.

Kestrel: an expert at hovering

Many people will be familiar with the sight of these relatively small birds of prey hovering over fields and roadside verges, looking out for their favoured prey, which includes small mammals and lizards. They are true masters of hanging in the air; their heads fixed in one spot even as their wings flap rapidly and their bodies are buffeted by the wind. Other Irish birds of prey, such as Buzzards, may hover; but none is so accomplished at it nor makes it appear so effortless.



Kestrel (male)
Photo:
Dick Coombes

Males have a blue-grey hood and tail, which contrast with their spotted, reddish-brown back and instantly

set them apart from other regularly occurring Irish raptors. Females are more brown and barred overall, but still very distinctive. Sadly, although once a common sight across Ireland, problems such as overuse of rat poisons and agricultural intensification have hit this species hard. Numbers have fallen sharply, and, hard though it once would have been to believe, the Kestrel is now Red-listed here, meaning that it is seriously threatened. <https://birdwatchireland.ie/birds/kestrel>



Male Merlin with prey
Photo: Richard T Mills



Merlin (female). **Photo:** Piotr Rak

Merlin: small in stature, but not in ability

The Merlin may be Ireland's smallest bird of prey, but don't let its size fool you. It is an extremely skilled and powerful hunter of small birds, often dashing low over the ground at speed as it attempts to flush and then take down a Meadow Pipit, a Skylark or a finch. Traditionally associated with bogs and uplands, in winter they also like to hunt small waders, such as Dunlins, at coastal estuaries and mudflats.

The male's blue-grey upperparts and rusty chest-streaking might suggest a Sparrowhawk, but the flight feathers are much darker and the wingtips more pointed, in typical falcon style.

Females are browner and have barred tails, and, as is the case with most birds of prey, are also somewhat larger than the males.

Studies have shown that female Merlins are more likely to disperse to new areas outside the nesting season, whereas males show a tendency to stay in the breeding territory year-round. Unlike Kestrels, Merlins tend not to consume rodents, so they do not come into contact with rat poisons. Our breeding birds remain in Ireland all year, but in winter we receive an influx of migrant Merlins from Iceland, belonging to a different subspecies.

<https://birdwatchireland.ie/birds/merlin>

Hobby: a master of aerobatics

A rare though apparently increasing visitor to Ireland, the athletic and streamlined Hobby is a summer migrant to Europe which winters in Africa. It is about the same size as a Kestrel, though with longer, more swept-back and curving wings, which almost lend it the appearance of a large Swift. Supremely manoeuvrable in the air, it is capable of rapid aerial pursuit and breathtaking turns. This allows it to take fast-flying birds that many other raptors would struggle to catch, including Swallows and Swifts.

Fond though they are of birds, Hobbies also like to eat dragonflies and other insects, and can sometimes be seen hawking for these over marshes and reedbeds, characteristically bringing their feet forward to their beaks to consume them while still in flight. Adults look somewhat like sleeker Peregrine Falcons, though with conspicuous red 'trousers' and undertail feathers. Juveniles are duller and browner overall. Watch for this species during spring and autumn migration, especially around coastal wetlands. It may also be a potential Irish breeding colonist, as numbers increase.



Hobby
Photo: Ben Andrew (RSPB-images.com)



Hobby eating a dragonfly
Photo: Ben Andrew (RSPB-images.com)

Peregrine Falcon: a masterpiece of natural engineering

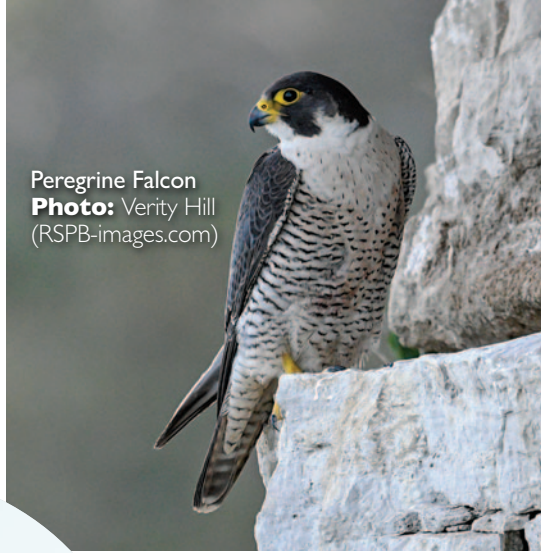
The fastest animal on the planet, built like a jet fighter and just as manoeuvrable, the majestic Peregrine Falcon is perhaps the ultimate predator. Their eyesight is amongst the keenest in the natural world, and they have the distinction of being the most widely distributed bird species on Earth, found on every continent except Antarctica.

They favour cliff ledges and even high buildings for nesting, but range widely in search of food. They have a very powerful and rapid flight, but it is their astonishing 'stoop' for which they are most renowned. They hunt other birds and, once a target has been spotted, they climb high above it, sometimes using the sun as a shield, then flap powerfully into a nosedive and plummet towards it. They can reach speeds well in excess of 300 km/h, giving their unsuspecting prey little chance: a true masterpiece of natural engineering.

Females are usually larger than males, but both sexes are very similar in appearance, being dark blue-grey above and dark-barred white below. They have distinctive dark patches extending below their eyes, contrasting with their white cheeks and giving them a hooded appearance. These 'moustachial stripes' are present to varying degrees on many falcon species, and are believed to reduce the sun's glare by preventing light from reflecting into their eyes.

The world almost lost its Peregrine Falcons forever, due to the ravages of a notorious pesticide called DDT, which entered their food chain. This chemical weakened the falcons' eggshells and meant that their eggs usually broke during laying or incubation. Thankfully this substance was banned in many countries, including Ireland, in the nick of time, and the species has slowly but surely recovered.

<https://birdwatchireland.ie/birds/peregrine>



Peregrine Falcon
Photo: Verity Hill
(RSPB-images.com)



Peregrine Falcon
Photo: Richard T Mills

Gyrfalcon: supreme aerial predator from the north

Another stunner, an encounter with this stately, powerful Arctic falcon is not soon forgotten. The largest member of the falcon family, roughly the size of a Buzzard, it is a very rare accidental visitor to Ireland from polar and sub-polar regions, where it is one of the supreme predators of tundra and coastal habitats. The species occurs in several different colour forms or 'phases', mainly ranging from brown to dark grey, though the gorgeous white morph from Greenland is the most frequently recorded in Ireland. They have a powerful, rapid, direct flight that instantly attracts attention, and they often inspire panic in flocks of other birds when they suddenly appear.



Gyrfalcon (white morph)
Photo: NorthernLight (Wikimedia Commons)



Red-footed Falcon (male) with vole
Photo: Andy Morffew

Red-footed Falcon: rare visitor from the east

For my money one of the most beautiful birds in Europe, the gorgeous Red-footed Falcon is a rare though reasonably regular accidental visitor to Ireland. Unusually for a bird of prey, this species often occurs in flocks, and indeed small groups have been seen together in Ireland on occasion, part of periodic influxes into western Europe from further east. They can hover much as Kestrels do to catch small mammals, and also hawk dragonflies in the manner of a Hobby.

The sexes look so dissimilar that one

might believe them to belong to different species. Males are a sleek dark grey overall, save for red 'trousers' and undertail feathers, as well as, bucking the typical falcon trend, red (not yellow) legs and white (not black) talons. Females are stunning birds, being orange on the chest and underparts, which are flecked with thin black streaks, and barred blue-grey above, with contrasting white cheeks and black moustachial stripes. Young birds look different again, with juveniles somewhat resembling young Hobbies and older sub-adults showing various combinations of dark grey, rufous and barred feathering.



Red-footed Falcon (female)
Photo: Andy Morffew



Lesser Kestrels, male (left) and female. Photo: Bernard Dupont

Lesser Kestrel: a very rare vagrant

The Lesser Kestrel closely resembles the Common Kestrel in appearance, though its lifestyle is quite different. A very rare vagrant to Ireland, with just two confirmed records (one from Shankill, Co Dublin in the winter of 1890-91, followed by one in November 2020, some 130 years later, in Kilkee, Co Clare). This highly migratory species nests colonially in towns and on cliffs in parts of southern Europe, Asia and North Africa. Males are less spotted above than Common Kestrels and have a blue-grey panel on the upperside of each wing. Another difference, shown by both sexes, is that they have white, not black, talons, as well as a unique trisyllabic call.

You can find more information about Ireland's bird species at <https://birdwatchireland.ie/irelands-birds-birdwatch-ireland>