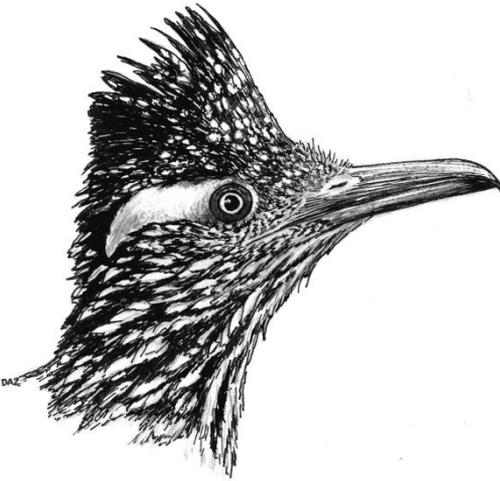


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THE NEW MEXICO ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY, INC.

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“PRAIRIE” MERLIN CAPTURES A EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE IN NORTHERN NEW MEXICO

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Abstract—On 24 November 2010 in Pajarito Village located in extreme northwestern Santa Fe County, New Mexico, I discovered a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) standing on the ground clutching a live Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) in its talons. As I quickly approached the two birds, the falcon flushed straight up into the air and then very soon dropped the collared-dove—which I immediately rescued and later released essentially unharmed that same day. This episode has since triggered an investigation on my part into such questions as: What kinds of raptors have been reported as preying on these introduced doves in North America? Are Merlins known to be able to kill and carry away the whole carcasses of birds the size or larger than these doves on this continent? What kinds of birds have Merlins been reported to pursue, kill, and consume as food in New Mexico? This paper will attempt to answer these and some related questions, as well as describing in detail this episode, other variously related ones involving raptors, and my observations of some additional sources of injury and mortality in the Eurasian Collared-Dove population of the Pajarito Village area.

On walking outside into the yard of Ellen Nora Cavanaugh’s and my home in Pajarito Village, Santa Fe County, New Mexico at 10:45 a.m. on 24 November 2010, I discovered a brown-plumaged Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) standing on the ground as it also clutched a live Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) in the talons of one of its feet. I rapidly moved toward the two birds, which immediately led the falcon to flush straight up into the air with the by-then wing-flapping and otherwise-struggling dove still in its grasp. However, the latter bird very soon fell to the earth, from which I quickly retrieved and held it cradled in my hands with both wings folded along its sides. Meanwhile, the Merlin had flown about 15 m to the north and lit some 3-4 m above the ground in the lower branches of the distal portion of a dense Siberian elm (*Ulmus pumila*) tree. From that perch, the raptor watched me increasingly uneasily as I approached to within 5 m of it, and while I still held the alert but largely unmoving dove in my hands. By then I could readily discern (i.e., even without my usual and almost ever-present 8 X 36 binocular) that the Merlin had the paler-brown upperparts and ventral streaking that are characteristic of females and immature males of the so-called “prairie” or *richardsonii* subspecies of this falcon. After a few more moments, the raptor flew approximately 30 m further north to alight upon a low electrical-transmission line slung over an open field—where it more calmly perched for several seconds while periodically looking in my direction, as well as elsewhere apparently in search of other prey.

At this latter point, I turned and carried the collared-dove that was still cradled in my hands into our opened garage, from which I had previously planned to drive to Santa Fe in order to attend to some errands there. The bird continued to be alert yet generally quiet, as I examined it for any signs of wounds, feather damage, broken bones, and/or other evidence of injury from either the Merlin's attack or other possible sources. The only obvious such evidence was in the form of a few small smears and scattered droplets of blood on its plumage, and so I gently placed the dove on the paper-covered bottom of an ample-sized plastic bucket. This vessel I next covered with a sturdy board and placed on the floor in a dark corner of the garage, the doors of which I securely closed on leaving in my car for the city. When I returned home about 2 p.m., I took the bucket containing the dove outside the garage, placed it on the ground, and quickly lifted the lid. The bird immediately exploded into the air, and then strongly flew away to rapidly disappear from my sight—apparently none the worse from its having been captured by said Merlin.

In Romagosa's (2002: Behavior; Predation; Kinds of Predators) account on the wild populations of Eurasian Collared-Doves that now inhabit North America, she reported instances of avian predation upon the adults and young of this species there only by the Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), Cooper's Hawk (*A. cooperi*), and Short-tailed Hawk (*Buteo brachyurus*). In addition, she indicated that the unspecified "remains" of this dove had been found in the burrow of a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) in Florida. However, based on what I have read about the Merlin's predatory habits, abilities, and temperament as well as its extensive and varied prey base on this continent (e.g., Palmer 1988: 309-314; Sodhi et al. 2005: Food Habits), it comes as no surprise to me that these falcons would at least occasionally attempt and indeed sometimes succeed in capturing, killing, and consuming Eurasian Collared-Doves as food. This would also quite certainly be the case with several other North American raptor taxa (e.g., the larger falcons in the genus *Falco*) whenever such opportunities might arise. In fact, I found single sets of the plucked feathers of these doves in our yard on 2 November 2006 and 27 August 2008, including many or most of the major flight feathers (i.e., the rectrices and remiges). In this regard, I should point out that plucking is the typical means of defeathering avian carcasses by birds of prey, whereas mammalian predators tend to do so by biting, chewing, and/or tearing off at least some of the larger plumes--thus leaving them damaged, versus their remaining mainly intact in the former instances. Incidentally, I later deposited these two collections of feathers in the specimen holdings of the bird division at the University of New Mexico Museum of Southwestern Biology (respectively as MSB 25617 and 28707), where any DNA that might still be adhering to them could some day be analyzed to reveal what species of raptor(s) had plucked and perhaps even killed these doves.

Given my failure to actually witness the event, I do not know whether the Eurasian Collared-Dove that was captured by a Merlin at Pajarito Village on 24 November 2010 was: (A) a free-flying and otherwise able-bodied individual that this falcon fairly and squarely pursued and finally caught; or (B) the unlucky victim of a window collision that almost served it up as a free lunch for that raptor! In this latter respect, let me

emphasize the point that not all of the Eurasian Collared-Doves that have been killed, plucked, and presumably consumed by raptors at Pajarito Village have necessarily been first pursued and then captured as fully able-bodied birds by those avian predators. The fact is that these doves (and a wide array of other kinds of birds) periodically collide with the many and varied windows of our home, among which a relatively few such individuals are killed or soon die as a result (e.g., a collared-dove that so succumbed here on 31 July 2010, and which is now preserved as MSB study skin number 30520). As a consequence, these collisions can and do produce occasional avian carcasses for foraging predators or scavengers to retrieve and feed upon (or for us to save for scientific purposes).

On the other hand, the above-described collisions also and far more frequently result in downed, stunned, or otherwise incapacitated living birds falling to the ground beneath our windows, where they can and do provide rather easy meals for the wide variety of carnivorous animals that live here in Pajarito Village--including an amphibian and multiple kinds of snakes, birds, and mammals. In fact, some of the locally wintering and migrant Sharp-shinned and more rarely Cooper's hawks have at times become notably adept at exploiting this latter food source. Indeed, we have on several occasions gotten the distinct impression that certain adult "Sharpies" were purposely flushing birds from our feeders into these windows as a learned harvesting technique!. Of course, those hawks need to remain alert to this foraging method's most obvious pitfall, which some of them occasionally fail to do--and thus they end hitting and sometimes killing themselves on those very same panes of glass.

The only previously-published New Mexico record that I have discovered to date of an apparent Merlin attempting to capture a Eurasian Collared-Dove is John W. Shipman's sighting of a bird of prey thought by him to be this species "seen chasing collared-doves at Socorro [in Socorro County] on 4 Jun[e 2005]" (Williams and Howe 2007:38). If his identification of that raptor were indeed correct, it would constitute a very late-spring/early-summer occurrence for this falcon in the state--where the vast majority of the more credible reports of these birds are from August into April (e.g., Stahlecker 2010:420-421). In fact, all but one of the 90 museum specimens of Merlins that I have so far recorded from New Mexico were obtained between 16 September and 22 April, with the only exception being one that was "found dead in [the] street" in Rio Rancho, Sandoval County on 21 May 2008 (MSB 28572). Incidentally, it is my suspicion that both that specimen and the few May-June sightings of this species in New Mexico most likely represented sick, injured, or otherwise-afflicted birds that were unable to migrate northward in the spring, or possibly ones that had previously been held captive before escaping or being released back into the wild by humans (e.g., rehabilitators and falconers). Consequently, I am not prepared to accept any such records as a "natural" occurrence of this falcon in the state without my first examining a convincing body of evidence in support of a contrary assessment of its status there.

I have recently discovered another instance in which a Merlin has been documented in possession of a Eurasian Collared-Dove apparently in North America (i.e., at www.fredmiranda.com/forum/topic/1206865/0#1500431). This involved a

photographically-confirmed record of what appears to be a rather dark, adult female falcon (i.e., as based on my analysis of its plumage plus an estimated wing chord of about 221 mm), which is shown standing on the ground with an inert and thus seemingly lifeless, yet-fresh carcass of a Eurasian Collared-Dove. I was unable to ascertain either the full name or exact address of the person who posted this color photograph, plus another one solely of the falcon by itself. However, next to these pictures were the words “edited on Apr 21, 2013 at 04:14 PM,” while nearby was the information that the photographer had initially registered on this website in 2004 from Parksville, British Columbia. This locality is on southeastern Vancouver Island, in which region the darker-plumaged Merlin subspecies *F. c. suckleyi* breeds and is largely resident (Sodhi et al. 2005: Systematics, Subspecies). Accompanying these two photographs are the following comments apparently from the individual that posted them: “[I’m] pretty sure I have the correct ID on the Merlin. I believe that the victim was a Eurasian-collared [sic] Dove. I should mention that the dove was too heavy for the Merlin to fly off with it. It could fly maybe 20-40 feet with it, but would then have to land and see what I would do.”

I am quite intrigued by the implications of the last two comments by the person who posted these above-discussed photographs—i.e., to the effect that the pictured Merlin had flown “maybe 20-40 feet” before “hav[ing] to land” while carrying a Eurasian Collared-Dove that “was too heavy for the [raptor] to fly off with.” I gather that the photographer made those observations as he or she had variously flushed and followed the so-encumbered falcon until it finally stood still long enough for him or her to take these two pictures of it with and without its prey on a plot of grassy ground. As for the observer’s interesting contention that this dove “was too heavy for the Merlin to fly away with,” this soon led me to assess its potential validity by initially comparing the body weights of these two species of birds. In the case of the Eurasian Collared-Dove, I first consulted Romagosa’s (2012: Measurements, Mass, Table 1) account of this taxon primarily in North America—from which she only lists the weights of four individuals from Florida. To these values I was able to add a like number from New Mexico (MSB specimen data), and that when combined with her data yielded an average of 175.5 g (range 165-188 g) for the total sample of eight males and non-laying females from these two states. Unfortunately, the only weight that I was able to find for an adult female *suckleyi* Merlin is one of 221 g from northwestern British Columbia (University of California Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, MVZ 44737). This yields a ratio of 79.4% when divided into the preceding average of 175.5 g for the eight Eurasian Collared-Doves from the population in North America. Among other things, this means that an adult female Merlin weighing 221 g would be attempting to carry away with a 175.5 g prey item that it outweighs by only 45.5 g (or 20.6%), which might well help explain why the photographed falcon flew “maybe 20-40 feet” before “hav[ing] to land.”

I strongly suspect that it was an immature male prairie or *richardsonii* Merlin that I flushed with a live Eurasian Collared-Dove in Pajarito Village on 24 November 2010, given that this falcon only lifted the latter bird about a meter or so before dropping it

to the ground and flying away. According to Sodhi et al. (2005: Measurements), 22 winter males of this Merlin subspecies from Saskatchewan averaged 185.3 g (no variance given)--versus 166.9 g (standard deviation 11.1 g) for 46 breeding birds from there. Consequently, an average one of those wintering falcons would have outweighed a 175.5 g Eurasian Collared-Dove by only 9.8 g or just 5.6%. By contrast, the preceding authors list the winter and breeding weights of 18 and 25 female Merlins of this race from Saskatchewan as 257.8 g (no S.D.) and 255.5 g (17.1 g), respectively. This means that the average female falcon from these two respective seasons would outweigh such a dove by 82.3 and 80 g, or 46.9 and 45.6%.

I have not been able to find any solid information concerning the Merlin's abilities to lift and fly away with prey of different sizes in North America, albeit there are some anecdotal observations to this effect that do not warrant my mentioning here. On the other hand, authorities such as Palmer (1988:309-314) and Sodhi et al. (2005: Food Habits) are in agreement that the main prey species of this falcon on that continent are small to medium-sized birds with body weights ranging up to around 100 g. However, Palmer (op. cit.:313) also noted that larger avian taxa have been regularly taken by these raptors at least in some situations--such as the remains of 18 Mourning Doves (*Zenaidura macroura*) found at the nest of a breeding pair of presumed *richardsonii* in Idaho, and the unspecified numbers of Black-bellied Plovers (*Pluvialis squatarola*) that were captured by Merlins of the nominate subspecies (i.e., *F. c. columbarius*) in western Canada. According to Otis et al. (2008: Measurements, Mass), adults of the western subspecies of this dove (*Z. m. marginella*) weighed 86 to 143 g--with males averaging 116 g, and females 108 g. The plovers are about twice as large, with Dunning (1984:8) listing the average weight of 60 of them from Alaska as 220 + 24.4 g (range 191-263). In addition, Palmer (ibid.) states that "the Merlin will attack birds that are impossibly large for it to capture," with the largest species that it is known to have killed by this falcon having been a Willow Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*)--in Alaskan samples of which 498 males averaged 601 ± 26.5 g and 326 females 516 ± 18.2 g (Dunning op. cit.:7). I would assume that the Merlin that killed such a grouse must have largely fed on it at the kill site, given the latter bird's extreme weight--which may be the case as well with some or most of this raptor's other heavier prey items. Among the latter would likely be adult Rock Pigeons with weights of 494-616 g (Dunning op. cit.:12)--although I suspect that a majority of those that Warren (1890:139) reported being taken by two of these falcons were likely young in or near nests, given that they were killed at an apparent dovecote in West Chester, Pennsylvania (also see Warkentin and Oliphant 1988 for another such example apparently in Canada).

Finally, we still have a lot to learn about the diet of the Merlins that migrate through and winter in New Mexico--where in addition to the Eurasian Collared-Dove discussed in this paper, the only other specific records that I have discovered to date of its prey in this state are of single individuals taken by one of these falcons of a Gambel's Quail (*Callipepla gambelii*); as reported in Hubbard et al. (1970:3); a Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*) based on a photograph published in Stahlecker (2010:424); and a Red-winged

Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) as indicated by an annotation of the label of a Cincinnati Natural History Museum Merlin skin (CNHM 27748).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to sincerely thank Ellen Nora Cavanaugh for her companionship, support, and participation in our daily censuses and other studies of the birds and their habitats in the Pajarito Village area and the adjacent Rio Grande Valley of northwestern Santa Fe County, New Mexico--which investigations we began in earnest during the summer of 1997, and have of course included Merlins, Eurasian Collared-Doves, and other known and potential prey of this falcon and other raptors. I also appreciate the help of Allan Poole of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in my attempts to get the most reliable weight data possible for western Mourning Doves. I am grateful as well to the many people who have submitted bird records to the New Mexico Ornithological Society (and other purveyors of this type of information) since this organization was founded in 1962--for those efforts have created an extensive, detailed, and ever-expanding database from which we have been better able to learn, monitor, and periodically summarize the status of the New Mexico's avifauna than at any time since people began to systematically study it during the mid-19th century. Finally, I appreciate the comments provided to me on an earlier draft of this manuscript by three anonymous reviewers and Janet Bair as the editor of the *NMOS Bulletin*, which have improved the published version of the paper.

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**AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION'S LUDLOW GRISCOM
AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTIONS IN REGIONAL
ORNITHOLOGY AWARD**
DALE ZIMMERMAN

New Mexico Ornithological Society's 2007 Florence M. Bailey Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, Dr. Dale Zimmerman will be honored with the American Birding Association's 2015 Ludlow Griscom Award for Outstanding Contributions to Ornithology. Dr. Zimmerman is an emeritus professor of biology at Western New Mexico University. Zimmerman has been a dedicated member of the NMOS, providing over 50 years of service to the New Mexico Ornithological Society in many ways including a significant body of work chronicling bird distributions of various species in the state of New Mexico. Dr. Zimmerman's contributions to the field of ornithology extend beyond the borders of New Mexico; he has made major contributions to ornithological knowledge in Mexico, East Africa, and New Guinea.

The American Birding Association's Ludlow Griscom Award of Outstanding Contributions in Regional Ornithology is given to individuals who have dramatically advanced the state of ornithological knowledge for a particular region. Dr. Zimmerman joins the likes of Roger Tory Peterson (1990), Olin Sewall Pettingill Jr. (1981), Chandler Robbins (1984), Kenn Kaufman (1992), Peter Pyle (2001) and many other notable ornithologists who have received the American Birding Association's Ludlow Griscom Award.

**NEW MEXICO ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY
FINANCIAL STATEMENT FOR 2014**

Balance as of 12/31/14:	
2011 Account Balance	\$35,856.55
Petty Cash	32.29
Total	\$35,888.84

Net Transactions from 1/1/14 through 12/31/14:	
Dues	2,150.00
NM Bird Finding Guide Sales	404.00
NM Field Checklist Sales	54.27
Annual Meeting	644.73
Donations and Deposits	-5,700.00
Postage and Shipping	-963.00
Miscellaneous	39.76
Grants	-1000.00
Printing	-1694.00
Database/Bird Finding Guide	-500.00
Storage Unit Rent	0.00
Interest	5.89
<i>Total Transactions</i>	\$-6,558.35

Total 2014 beginning balance plus transactions	\$29,330.49
--	-------------

Balance as of 12/31/14	
Checking Account Balance	5830.7
Savings Account Balance	23,467.50
Petty Cash Balance	32.29
Undeposited Checks	0
12/31/2014 balance	\$29,330.49

Petty cash income and disbursements (\$0.00 and \$(0.00)) are included in the income and expense categories above.

El Truinfo net ('12&'14) - 38,300-35,000=3,300

Zimmerman print sales: 300.00

Date: 2 February, 2015

Submitted by: Jerry R. Oldenettel, Treasurer

NMOS 53RD ANNUAL MEETING - APRIL 11, 2015 ROSWELL, NM

This year's annual meeting will include a keynote address from Dr. Warren Conway of Texas Tech University entitled "Snowy plovers and associated nesting habitats in the Southern High Plains: trends and conservation concerns." Last but certainly not least, Dale Zimmerman will be honored with the ABA's 2015 Ludlow Griscom Award for Outstanding Contributions to Ornithology. Meeting and registration details are available on the NMOS website.

* * *

PROPOSED CHANGES TO NMOS BYLAWS

The business portion of the NMOS annual meeting will include a vote on proposed changes to the NMOS bylaws. Full text of the proposed changes is listed on the NMOS website.

* * *

NMOS BULLETIN PUBLICATION STANDARDS - UPDATED

The New Mexico Ornithologists Society publishes the *NMOS Bulletin*. We are interested in publishing original scholarly contributions to field ornithology from both professionals and amateurs. Studies done within New Mexico are of highest interest for publication. If you are interested in publishing in the NMOS Bulletin, please read our updated guidelines and standards for publication which can be found on our website.

MEMBERSHIP DUES REMINDER

Please take the opportunity now to pay your 2015 NMOS membership dues. To pay for membership, please download the membership form from our website (www.nmbirds.org), fill out, and mail to the following address, providing a check made out to "NMOS". Not sure if your membership needs renewing? Check the date of your membership printed in the address field of the most recent NMOS Bulletin/Field Notes mailing. Thank you!

New Mexico Ornithological Society
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NEW MEXICO ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

— *Founded 1962* —

The New Mexico Ornithological Society was organized to gather and disseminate accurate information concerning the bird life of New Mexico; to promote interest in and appreciation of the value of birds, both aesthetic and economic, to further effective conservation of the state's avifauna; to facilitate opportunity for acquaintance and fellowship among those interested in birds and nature; and to issue publications as a means of furthering these ends.

Membership and Subscriptions: Membership in the New Mexico Ornithological Society is open to anyone with an interest in birds. Memberships are for a calendar year and annual dues are payable 1 January. Dues are: Regular Membership \$20; Family \$30; Student \$10; Supporting \$50; Life \$500. Address for the New Mexico Ornithological Society: Post Office Box 3068, Albuquerque, NM 87190-3068.

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NMOS members are encouraged to submit articles and news. Articles received are subject to review and editing. Published articles are noted in major abstracting services. Please submit articles in double-spaced electronic format, such as a Microsoft Word document, by e-mail to the Editor (see inside front cover). Refer to recent issues of the *Bulletin* for examples of style. News items may be submitted to the Editor by way of e-mail.

www.nmbirds.org

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