

## The Merlin

Merlins are birds of wide open spaces. They breed on moors and mountains (though sadly, none breed in Pembrokeshire), and spend the winter in lower-lying areas, often near saltmarshes and wet places. The only real chance we get of seeing them is in the winter at Marloes Mere or Dale Airfield or sometimes at the Deer Park. And then all you see is a small falcon dashing past at high speed, low down. When perched they can be very unobtrusive – a small hump on a fencepost a couple of hundred yards away is as good as it gets. I have to confess I have never seen a Merlin in Pembrokeshire – I think this is because my eyesight is just not good enough to pick up a greyish-brown bird flashing past against a greyish-brown background!



The male merlin has a grey back and rusty underparts while the female is brown on the back with streaked underparts. In flight the overall shape is that of a petite peregrine. They feed on small birds such as pipits and linnets which they catch during fast flight chases.

It is easy to confuse Merlins and Sparrowhawks and it is true that their overall plumage is not that different. If you get a good perched view then a Sparrowhawk has long thin yellow legs and distinctive yellow or orange glaring eyes. Sparrowhawks also have horizontal barring on the chest which the Merlin does not have. (However bear mind that if you are getting this good a view it is probably not a Merlin!) In flight the short broad wings of the Sparrowhawk are often obvious.

You will often read that Sparrowhawks are birds of woodland and Merlins of open area – while this is certainly true, Sparrowhawks around here are often seen over fields and on cliff-top grasslands and perch on fence posts just like a Merlin. Merlins, however, stick to the wide open spaces - they do not enter woodlands or gardens except in very unusual circumstances.

Perhaps the best way of telling the difference is by behaviour. Whereas Merlins hunt by chasing down small birds in the open, Sparrowhawks hunt by ambush – they use cover to approach a small flock and then dash in and grab. They like to hunt where there is something to hide behind – this could be trees, buildings or a hedge. A favourite strategy is hedge-hopping – they fly along one side of a hedge then flip over the top to see what they can grab. So if you are driving along a Pembrokeshire lane and find yourself following a small grey or brown bird of prey it will undoubtedly be a Sparrowhawk, just cruising along and waiting for a suitable moment to flash up and over the hedge.