

FALCO ÆSALON, *Gmel.*

Merlin.

Accipiter lithofalco, Briss. Orn., tom. i. p. 349.

—— *æsalon*, Briss. *ibid.*, p. 382.

Falco lithofalco, Gmel. edit. of Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 278.

—— *æsalon*, Gmel. *ibid.*, p. 284.

—— *sibiricus*, Shaw, Gen. Zool., vol. vii. p. 207.

—— *cæsius*, Meyer, Taschenb. Deutsch. Vögelk., tom. i. p. 60.

—— *subæsalon*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 60.

Æsalon lithofalco, Kaup, Ueb. Falk. Mus. Senck., p. 258.

Hypotriorchis æsalon, Gray and Mitch. Gen. of Birds, vol. i. p. 20, *Hypotriorchis*, sp. 10.

THE persecution to which the Falconidæ have of late years been unrelentingly subjected has reduced the numbers of the various species to a par; but, if there be any difference in this respect, perhaps the Merlin is more frequently seen than any other of them, with the exception of the Kestrel and the Sparrow-Hawk. Not that the individuals are more numerous than in former years, but that its secluded habits, the wild situations it affects, and its power of rapid flight have tended to its preservation, and enabled the Merlin to hold its own, while the other Hawks have fallen victims to the traps and destroying devices of the keeper. The destruction of so many of the Raptorial birds is, in my opinion, greatly to be regretted; for without them the smaller birds are not under that salutary check necessary for the balance of nature. It must not be understood that I am advocating the wholesale slaughter of the little birds; neither do I wish to assert that man should not exercise his judgment on this point, and take upon himself the office the Raptorial birds were designed to perform: if his measures be tempered with mercy, no great harm will be done. As a proof that we are wrong in extirpating the predatory animals, I may state that one consequence of the persecution to which the Weasel has been subjected is the increase of the destructive Norway rat to such an extent that on some estates it has become a positive pest. A better animal for freeing the wheat-rick of rats and mice cannot be found than the Weasel: what folly then to utterly extirpate an animal whose only offence is that of now and then causing the death of a hare or young pheasant, and that only when the destructive rabbits, rats, and mice do not afford opportunities for its peculiar mode of sustenance!

Unlike the Hobby, whose habits lead it to frequent woodland districts, or the Peregrine, which gives preference to rocks and trees in the neighbourhood of water, the Merlin affects the open moor and the fell; and the more wild and desolate the district, the greater is its charm for this bold little Falcon. In such situations it breeds and nurtures its young, making its nest (if a few crossed stalks of ling can so be called) generally on the bare ground, often by the side of a stone or bunch of heath. Here, on the bleak hill-side, the white nestling first sees the light; here, far away from the haunts of man, do the parents sally forth to keep their charge supplied with fresh-killed Titlarks, Linnets, or any other small species that may catch the eyes of these vigilant birds. The romantic hills of Wales, the Peak and other wild districts of Derbyshire and the neighbouring counties, the stony moorlands of Yorkshire, Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Durham, the Cheviots, the Grampians, the savage hills of Ross-shire and Sutherland, and all similar districts in Ireland are the summer resorts of the Merlin. In winter both old and young leave these wild retreats for the more genial climate of the lowlands. It is then that we see him in the more cultivated districts; it is then that the little birds of the hedge-row and the stubble-field—the Greenfinch, the Bunting, and the Lark—have their numbers lessened by the sudden dash of the Merlin; it is then that the flock of Starlings, so busily engaged in searching for grubs in the grass-field, is stealthily approached, and scattered, terror-stricken, by his successful raid upon one of its members. Slily indeed does the Merlin sweep close to the ground, with noiseless wing, toward the flock he has espied from some neighbouring tree; to the sea-shore, where the Dunlin and the Stint trip over the bare shingle, or patter over the oozy mud, the Merlin also pays a foraging visit. To say that it is more numerous in one part of England than another would not be consistent with truth; for, although nowhere abundant, it is found during winter in every quarter, from the Scilly Islands to Northumberland, whence it retires in summer to the uplands, and particularly to the northern counties of Scotland, the Orkneys, and Shetland. Its range also extends to Iceland. In America it is replaced by the nearly allied, but yet perfectly distinct, *Falco columbarius*. In Norway, Sweden, and Finland it is numerous in summer, and even far beyond, within the arctic circle. On the continent of Europe it is a bird of the wilder part of the various countries, as it also is of Algeria and many other portions of North Africa. Mr. Jerdon states that it is a very rare visitor to the north part of Western India,