

## Merlin seen after several years in Punjab, India

While watching birds at Harike Wildlife Sanctuary (31.1504 N, 74.9513 E, 210 m), Punjab, India, the second author saw a raptor at about 1245 h on 21 January 2023. The bird was suspected to be a Merlin *Falco columbarius* but the photos were not very good as the bird was quiet far away. The pictures were posted on a Facebook group, Ask IDs of Indian Birds. As suspected, the identity was confirmed as Merlin. On the day that this individual was observed, we spent another two hours bird watching, but we did not see it again. Later on, during a discussion between the present authors, it was discovered that Merlin was seen after several years in Punjab, India.

Merlin is considered to be a rare/scarce winter visitor to Punjab (Naoroji 2006; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The oldest published record from Punjab, India, that we found is that of a specimen from Hoshiarpur (Hume 1869). In the same account by him, it is also mentioned: "About Amritsar it is commonly



The Merlin at Harike. © Paramnoor Singh Antaal.



Another view of the Merlin at Harike. © Paramnoor Singh Antaal.

captured and sold, by native huntsmen, for a very small price". Merlin has also been recorded in Kapurthala (Phillott 1907). Robson (1994) has reported single Merlin sighting

from Harike Wildlife Sanctuary. After this, there is no published record from Punjab to the best of the authors' knowledge. We checked the bibliography of South Asia Ornithology

(Pittie 2024) for published records of Merlin from Punjab but did not find any, except the ones already mentioned above. We also checked social media forums like Facebook and Instagram and citizen science platforms like eBird and iNaturalist, but did not find any reporting of Merlin from Punjab. Therefore, after carefully checking all the records/sources, we did not find any sighting of Merlin from Punjab State since 1994.

However, in the last more than a decade, a few sightings nearest to the present location have been from the Pong Lake area in Himachal Pradesh (Abhinav & Vikrant 2020; eBird 2024). This location is at an aerial distance of about 125 km to the north-east of Harike Wildlife Sanctuary. Incidentally, both the locations are connected with Beas River.

Therefore, after about twenty years of the last published record, the present observation reaffirms the status of Merlin as a winter visitor to Punjab, India. Harike Wildlife Sanctuary is a Ramsar Site of international importance as maximum bird species in Punjab have been seen at this location. The present sighting underlines the importance of this wildlife sanctuary for bird conservation because it continues to provide suitable habitat for raptors like the Merlin (and other resident and migratory birds also).

## References

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