



K. MacDonald

Birding IN THE Backyard

SEPTEMBER 2025

MERLIN

BY KELSEY

No, not the wizard.

Known by medieval falconers as “lady hawks”, Merlins are small, stocky members of the falcon family with blocky heads. They’re roughly 10 to 12 inches in size, with a pale black mustache, thin white eyebrow, and broad, streaky chest. They have sharply pointed wings paired with a mid-length tail. Though generally described as dark and streaky, the female and immature Merlins are browner rather than the blue-gray of the males.

Merlins can cover a lot of ground very quickly in flight, with typical flight speeds reaching 30 miles an hour. During a chase, they can go even faster as they chase after prey, disappearing within seconds. They’re powerful fliers with quick wingbeats, and are rarely seen gliding. You may spot a Merlin perched for long periods as they scan around for prey to drop in on.

Merlins prefer to attack prey in open areas, allowing them to approach at speed and surprise their target. Merlins are a fierce, energetic predator often found patrolling shorelines and other open areas for small birds to hunt.

They typically catch their prey in mid air, coming in horizontally or from below to chase a bird upwards until it tires. Common prey birds are usually small, 1 to 2 ounces, and they have a tendency towards the most abundant species in an area. House Sparrows are a common choice.

Merlins don’t build their own nests, instead moving into old ones from other raptors or crows. They’ve also been spotted using magpie nests when available.

They usually prefer going for nests with a good view of their surroundings, and rarely make any modifications to their stolen nest.

This means that size of the Merlin’s nest can vary based on what built it originally. During courtship, Merlins will perform flight displays involving a strong, level flight paired with a rocking motion, U-shaped deep dives, or slow, fluttery circles and figure-eights near their desired partner.

Outside of breeding, Merlins are usually a solitary species. They’ll sometimes migrate in loose groups, roost with other Merlins, or stick to pairs during the winter.

Adult Merlins, though a predator themselves, can be preyed on by other raptors such as Peregrine Falcons, Great Horned Owls, and Cooper’s Hawks.



J. Morrison

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER BREEDING VS NON-BREEDING PLUMAGE

WINTER PLUMAGE (LEFT) AND NON-BREEDING PLUMAGE (RIGHT)



YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER'S BREEDING PLUMAGE is the well-known smart gray overall, paired with white flashes in the wings. They have yellow (Audubon's) or white (Myrtle's) on the throat, paired with yellow patches on their sides and rump.

THE YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER'S NON-BREEDING PLUMAGE still has the signature yellow rump patch, but the rest of the bird goes from gray and white to a duller brown, with a little yellow in the wings and no throat patch.

Watch for the Yellow-rumped Warblers as they migrate through our area for a short period in mid-September on their way south.



YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (BREEDING)
—J. MORRISON

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (NON-BREEDING)
—B. KUSHNER

GET IN FORMATION

BY KELSEY



One of the most obvious signs of migration is the V shaped formation used by geese and other birds as they move north or south. But why choose that specific shape? Are they just following the bird at the front?

The main reason behind this particular shape is likely aerodynamic efficiency. By flying behind and to one side of the bird in front, birds can catch updrafts, or small air tornados called *vortices*, off the wingtips of the bird ahead.

This works to reduce the energy expended by the following bird to keep aloft and increase the amount of time a bird can stay in the air without a break, which can be crucial during long migratory flights.

Though the bird up front doesn't benefit from the updrafts, the flock makes sure to switch leaders regularly, giving the frontrunner a break.

A study done on the endangered Northern Bald Ibis, as part of a project reintroducing them to Europe, has given us more knowledge on this process.

A flock of 14 ibises were fitted with data loggers, designed to use GPS and an accelerometer to determine their position in the flock and the timing of their wing flaps. The study found that the birds, who were originally hand-raised, did move themselves into a V-shaped formation for the long flight.

Not only that, but the birds timed their wingbeats in order to catch eddies from the bird in front, to help them with lift. Birds that were directly behind another reversed the timing of their flapping to avoid as much downdraft as possible from the bird in front. Neither behaviour was something they'd been purposefully taught before the migratory flight.

Other long-winged birds, such as geese, fly in a V for the same or similar reasons, though birds with smaller wings create more complex wakes that can make this a difficult task.

References

<https://bird-life.com/the-science-behind-flocking-why-birds-fly-in-v-formations-1-1507/>

<https://www.science.org/content/article/why-birds-fly-v-formation>

Squirrel Buster Bird Feeders

Keep squirrels to a dull roar...at a different feeder.

Squirrel Buster bird feeders are weighted to allow your birds access while keeping squirrels and other undesirable visitors from accessing your bird seed.

Available in 5 sizes for seed, and one for peanut halves.

Best used in areas with a few feet of open space around the feeder, to keep critters from perching somewhere else and reaching across to snag some seed.

Starting at \$49.99.



WHAT CAUSES BIRDS TO IMPACT WINDOWS?

BY KELSEY

Bird strikes are usually caused by reflections in the window that make it look like open air, or if two windows across from each other seem to make a tunnel (the birds look for the light and think they can get through). Hawks and other predators can also lead birds to hit windows as they try to escape.

There are multiple ways to cut down on or eliminate bird window collisions.

WINDOW DECALS ON THE OUTSIDE OF THE WINDOW.

Window decals are best placed on the outside of windows to avoid glare or reflection on the window making them disappear and become useless. Anything from post-it notes to UV or shadow static cling decals can work. It just needs to let the birds know that there is an obstruction in the way and they can't fly through it.

UV decals look similar to frosted glass to us but will fluoresce a bright purple in birds eyes. Just keep in mind that UV decals will eventually wear out with exposure to sunlight and will need to be replaced. If you would like to test the effectiveness of UV decals for your windows, making a few scribbles with a yellow highlighter gives a similar effect, though it lasts a day or so at most.

Shadow decals are black or dark gray static cling decals. They usually aren't quite as effective but unlike UV decals there's nothing for the sun to wear out, so they can last longer. Both UV decals and shadow decals come in a variety of shapes and designs which matter only for your aesthetic purposes. Birds aren't going to look at the hawk decals and think it's actually a hawk.

Feather Friendly is a more permanent type of decal and consists of tiny squares spaced roughly 2" apart. Feather Friendly comes in two colours, black and white, for different surfaces. The white decals are designed for windows, or other reflective glass surfaces.

The black decals are recommended for see-through areas, like glass deck panels.

FRUIT TREE NETTING PULLED TIGHT AGAINST THE WINDOW.

It may be distracting for those inside the house at first, but especially for windows with a large surface area that's hard to cover in decals it can work great. Similar to the decals, it's just to let birds know that the window isn't open air.

STRIPS OF BIRD SCARE TAPE.

This shiny tape should be hung in roughly 3 foot strands in front of the window. The strands will move in the wind and combined with the shimmering effect it tends to make birds wary and want to steer clear. Birds that are fleeing in a panic, especially from a predator, may disregard the scare tape in their alarm.

COVER THE WINDOW FROM THE OUTSIDE.

This eliminates the reflection completely. It doesn't usually look very nice, but putting up posterboard or another opaque covering on the window tends to take care of the problem quickly. Window strikes are often a seasonal issue, so you can take it down once the season has passed.

CLOSE THE BLINDS ON WINDOWS ACROSS FROM EACH OTHER.

This eliminates the tunnel effect. If you have two windows directly across from each other, birds can look at the light coming through the far window and think there is somewhere for them to go.

MOVE FEEDER CLOSER TO WINDOWS.

Feeders within three feet of windows, or suction-cupped to them, can actually reduce the risk of window strikes. Birds are slowing down to land on the feeder or just taking off and don't have the speed to hit windows as hard.

TURN OFF UNNECESSARY LIGHTS AT NIGHT.

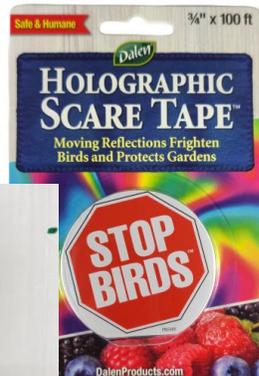
Migrating birds can be disoriented by lights left on at night as they try to navigate. This can lead to bird impacts, especially against taller buildings in their general flight path.

The [Audubon Lights Out](#) program has more information on light pollution and migratory birds.

HOLOGRAPHIC SCARE TAPE

Works best when attached at one end in 4 foot strips so it can move in the wind. The unpredictable way it moves mixed with the reflective tape makes birds wary of coming too close. Helps ward off all birds.

\$16.99 ea.



DID YOU KNOW

Because it's high in carbohydrates, white millet isn't as attractive to visiting rodents as other bird seed and is usually recommended if you want to feed birds without attracting pests?



THE EASY WAY TO DEAL WITH YOUR SNAIL PROBLEM

BY DAVE

European Brown Garden Snails are, as the name tells, an introduced pest species to our area. The damage they are capable of doing to our gardens and orchards is immense as they feed heavily on many plant species and the occasional dead animal.

If that wasn't bad enough, the garden snails are hermaphrodites; meaning that when they mate, they fertilize each other and lay between 80 to 100 eggs *each*, two or three times during the spring and summer.

The adults' thin, mildly glossy shells have 4 1/2 to 5 whorls over sculpted wrinkles. The shell opening, known as the lip, is curled back.

European Brown Garden Snails are 32 to 38mm in length, and 29 to 33mm in height. Their shells are yellow or yellowish brown to greyish brown in colour, with five brown bands interrupted by yellow flecks or streaks.

The head and foot of the snail are five to six centimeters long, and a green-black or yellow-grey colour. They also have a pale line running from the eyestalks to the shell. Young snails are yellow-brown flecked with black.

Once you've collected a bunch of these snails, store them in a large, clean plastic or glass container with a secure, screened lid. Fill the container with flour or bran bedding, making sure to replace it daily, and store the snails in a cool, dark area. This ensures the snails have no food plants in their guts that we may find distasteful.

Once your snails have been purged, rinse them thoroughly under cold, running water. Using a stiff brush, scrub the shells clean until the water is running clear again.

Then, pop those puppies into a pot of boiling water for three to five minutes, to make them easier to remove from their shells with a small fork or snail tong. Remove from the boiling water, and cut their dark intestinal tract free with a sharp knife before washing the meat thoroughly.

Now you're ready to make some escargot!

NOW FOR THE RECIPE!

Ingredients:

- 23g unsalted butter, softened
- 1/3 cup roughly chopped shallots
- 1/4 cup roughly chopped parsley leaves
- 4 cloves chopped garlic (minimum)
- Small splash of dry white wine, or squeeze of fresh lemon
- Pinch of salt and pepper

Preheat the oven to 205°C, or 400°F.

Blend ingredients using a food processor until finely minced into the butter.

Stuff the butter mixture firmly but gently into a clean, dry shell. Add a snail, and top with more butter mix.

Place the filled shells, mouths up, into escargot plate divots. If you don't have any, use a parchment paper-lined baking tray with small mounds of rock salt. Place each shell in the center of a rock salt mound, to allow the salt to brace the shell upright.

Bake for 10 to 12 minutes, and enjoy.



Audubon Bird Call

Twist the bird call using different speeds and pressure.

Though not utilizing any specific bird songs, it hits enough common notes that nearby birds can be curious enough to investigate.

\$14.99 ea.



FALL FEEDING

BY KELSEY

With fall now well upon us, it's a good time to prepare your bird feeders for the coming winter. Making sure you're feeding the right things, and using feeders that can stand up to the weather help keep it fun for you and helpful for your birds.

First, think bird seed. Many general wild bird mixes are filled with extra seeds like wheat, oats, milo, and red millet—or as we call them, filler seeds. Filler seeds are the seeds your birds will sort through and toss out as they search for the seeds they prefer, with the highest nutritional value. When tossed out of the feeder, they can create more of a mess for you to clean up as well as attracting unwanted visitors in search of a snack.

By sticking to their preferred seeds, you'll have less left behind to clean up, and more birds stopping by for a bite.

Around here, we find the most popular choices to be black oil sunflower seeds (hulled or in the shell), peanuts, white millet, nyjer, and cracked corn. Not every bird goes to these favourites equally, but there's a little something for everyone.

The most common seed that our birds enjoy is black oil sunflower seed. Black oil sunflower is relatively easy to open, has a high fat and protein content, and attracts around 70% of seed eating backyard birds. Larger birds like Steller's Jays and the smaller Chestnut-backed Chickadees alike can open and feed on black oil sunflower seed.

Though black oil is a great option during wet months, due to its protective shell, that same shell can also make it a messier seed to use. All birds will pick seeds in the shell by weight, choosing the heaviest, most worthwhile seeds first while leaving the light ones until last, if they eat them at all. They do this because they're energy efficient and need to get more energy out of the seed than they put in to open it, otherwise it's a waste of resources.

To provide birds with this nutritious option while skipping the mess and shell remains, using hulled sunflower seed is usually recommended.

Hulled sunflower seed is black oil sunflower without the shell, and we carry it in medium and fine chipped pieces. Hulled sunflower attracts all seed-eating birds and creates little to no mess when used due to its lack of a shell.

Just remember, because it's a raw seed that lacks the protection of a shell, it will more easily absorb moisture even out of the air, and clump up. Putting it into a feeder with good protection from the weather, and limiting the amount of seed put into the feeder at a time can help keep it fresh and dry.

Fall and winter is also the time of year when we see the most sparrow species, meaning it's a great time to think about adding white millet to your feeders. Though it doesn't attract the same variety of birds sunflower seeds will, millet is a great option if you're trying to avoid furry visitors. Millet seeds are high in carbohydrates, which aren't as attractive to rats and squirrels.

Millet works best in open, tray style feeders as the birds that enjoy it are ground feeders who may have trouble on some tube style feeders. Some, like the Dark-eyed Junco, are beginning to figure the tube feeder perches out, but they still prefer the open tray styles.

You can also add peanuts to your feeding station. Peanuts for birds should be plain and unroasted. While roasted peanuts are preferred by people, roasting reduces the nutritional value for the birds.

Halved peanuts, either in a dedicated peanut tube feeder or an open tray, are enjoyed by many birds including chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers. You can also crush the halved peanuts up and place them in an open tray for towhees and juncos to enjoy.

Peanuts in the shell are ideal for Steller's Jays or squirrels. Put a few at a time, or they'll take your entire stock in a day.

Lastly, cracked corn. While not enjoyed by many birds, it's a favourite of California Quail and ducks, as well as blackbirds. Sparrows can also enjoy a bit of corn, though they usually wait until it absorbs a bit of moisture to soften it up and make it easier to digest. Open tray feeders low to the ground are the best for cracked corn.

Providing your backyard birds with the seeds they love will keep them, and you, happy and give you plenty of activity to watch in your backyard all year round.

WEATHER DOMES

Worried about the rain? Want to make sure your bird seed—and your birds—are protected? Add a weather dome to your existing feeder.

Domes are available in acrylic, polycarbonate (UV-stabilized) plastic, and metal to suit your needs. They work with almost all feeder styles, and help protect your bird seed from rain, snow, or sun.



BIRD WALKS

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to thebirdstore.blogspot.com. **All bird walks are weather permitting and cancellations are posted to our blog by the morning of around 8:00 a.m.**

The Sunday Bird Walk leaves The Backyard at 9 a.m. on Sunday mornings, or meets on location at 9:15 a.m.

The Parksville/Qualicum Beach Tuesday Bird Walk meet up location is the Parksville Tourist Information Center parking lot by Highway 19, Northwest Bay Rd. and Franklin's Gull Rd. in Parksville, also at 9 a.m., or on location at 9:15 a.m.

Bird Walks are not held during the summer months (July & August) but resume in early fall. There is no charge for our bird walks, and they are designed to conclude before lunch (average approximately 2 hours).

We decide on the location of each bird walk the week before the scheduled bird walk outing. During the week we compile information about what birds are being seen and examine the weather forecast to ensure the walk is scheduled for the most productive location.

All experience levels welcome. Bring your own binoculars when possible for the best experience.

Check out our [online map](#) for common bird walk locations around Nanaimo and Parksville.

HOURS OF OPERATION

Monday-Saturday 9:30-5:30

Sunday 12:00-4:30

UPCOMING HOLIDAY HOURS

September 1st, *Labour Day*: CLOSED

September 30th, *Reconciliation Day*:

CLOSED

October 13th, *Thanksgiving*: CLOSED

BIRD SIGHTINGS

Report bird sightings by emailing birding@thebackyard.ca or calling 250-390-3669

IN THE BACKYARD

Chickadees & nuthatches at backyard feeders. Plumage changes in any goldfinch sticking around—from bright yellow to a duller brown in the males.

IN THE WILD

Various gulls.
Sea- and shorebird migration.

DELIVERY SCHEDULE FOR SEPTEMBER

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley

September 10th and September 24th

South Nanaimo to Duncan

September 3rd and September 17th

SEPTEMBER is

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
	1		S National Wildlife Day			World Shorebirds Day Hummingbird Day
7 Threatened Species Day			N			
14			S Hawk Migration Week			20
			N Bluebird of Happiness Day	G		Wildlife Ecology Day
						27

National Organic Month

LOCAL FIELD NATURALIST GROUPS

[Nature Nanaimo](#) | [Arrowsmith Naturalists](#) | [Comox Valley Nature](#) | [Cowichan Valley Naturalist Society](#) | [Malaspina Naturalists](#) | [Rocky Point Bird Observatory](#) | [Saltspring Trail & Nature Club](#) | [Victoria Natural History Society](#) | [Yellowpoint Ecological Society](#)

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