



Feisty Falcon

In autumn stocky, jay-size falcons called merlins follow small birds, their main food source, south from boreal forests. In this season you're apt to encounter a merlin almost anywhere in the United States, but you'll have the best luck along both coasts, in places where shorebirds abound. Unlike its larger cousin the peregrine, the merlin doesn't stoop on prey; instead it overtakes it with a burst of speed. Yet this falcon misses so often, one starts to wonder why it doesn't starve. In 50 years of observing

FROM TOP: LYNDA RICHARDSON/CORBIS; D. ROBERT AND LORRI FRANZ/CORBIS

merlins, ornithologist William Brewster witnessed successful pursuits only twice. Perhaps the falcons are playing or just cantankerous. Whatever the reason, a merlin seldom passes up a chance to harass large birds that it has no intention of eating. Brewster described a long, raucous confrontation between merlin and crow: "Although the behavior of both birds was rough and aggressive, it seemed to represent mutual participation in a sportive game curiously regulated and much enjoyed.... [Each would] flee as if for its life, dodging and twisting; yet it was prompt enough to rejoin the other bird at the end of each bout." Merlins can be distinguished from peregrines and kestrels by their distinctive white tail bars.