

THE STORY OF A WILD MERLIN

On the 11th November 2014, I was sent a link that had been posted on the Facebook page of a Wild Bird Hospital not too far from where I live. It was obvious from the comments on the post that the staff did not know what kind of bird she was and so I gave them a call and offered to collect her.

She had been found in a ditch at Scammonden Damn in West Yorkshire. From there she had been taken to a local pet shop who had kept her for 3 days until she was handed in to the hospital.

To make it easier for me to handle her, once we caught her up, I put some false aylmeri anklets on her with jesses, swivel and leash making it safer for me to get her out of the travel box without her flying out.



She had been eating well at the hospital and so I left her overnight in the box and then took her to see Richard Jones at Avian Services the next day to get her checked out.

On initial examination, she looked OK and even though she is a wild bird, I was quite amazed at how quickly she tolerated being handled, sitting on the fist without bating and not appearing stressed at all.

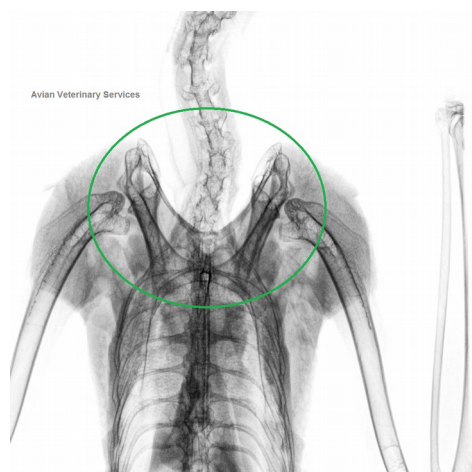
Once home, I noticed that her wing was drooping slightly and there were worms in her mutes and so it was straight back to the vet the next day. Richard examined her further and could feel that her clavicle was possibly broken. She was prescribed Metacam and a worming tablet and I was advised that she would need at least 3 weeks rest.

As she seemed quite happy to tolerate being around people, I found her a warm, quiet place at home and left her sitting on cage-type perch. She was fed mice and quail and I just left her alone.

I applied to APHA (Animal Plant & Health Agency) for a special licence to keep her, which was granted, as being a wild Schedule 4 bird this is a requirement under the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

By the beginning of December, the merlin's wing didn't seem to be any better and so I went back to Avian Services and asked Richard if he would take an x-ray of her wing.

The x-ray revealed that as well as a fractured clavicle, the bones that support the wing were also fractured, 3 in all. The fractures were healing but whether she would be able to fly and hunt effectively was debatable. The only way to see whether she could fly was to first put her in an aviary and so she could fly around, thus strengthening the wing. I decided to give my friend and fellow falconer, Phil Ashley a call as he had flown merlins before as well as many other small falcons.



Healthy X-ray

X-ray showing the merlin's broken bones

Luckily Phil had a spare aviary and he agreed to take the merlin with a view to strengthening her wing first. She settled into her new home very quickly and spent the next week or so chasing leaves on the floor and watching the other garden birds with great interest.

The merlin's wing was still causing us some concern and a decision had to be made of what to do, whether to train her first, get her entered and let her go, or to just hack her back into the wild from Phil's garden which was ideal because it backed on to open fields, ideal hunting ground for merlins.

So on the 4th January 2015 a decision was made to release her in an attempt to hack her back to the wild. She was fitted with a BTO ring and allowed to leave the aviary as she pleased.



Food was left for her, which kept disappearing and it wasn't until the 9th January that Phil discovered her back in the aviary sheltering from the bad weather. As he approached she flew out and landed on a stable roof. Phil was concerned about the weather and so he threw a chick into the aviary which she duly came down for and he closed the door to protect her until the weather subsided and then let her out again.

On the 14th January, blackbird feathers were found on the ledge in the aviary which appeared to be her first kill.

The Merlin continued to stay with Phil and on the 14th February she was seen chasing a flock of Fieldfare.

By the 26th March, she was still doing well and her wing seemed to be holding up as she got fitter. Although she had a few close calls from magpies and a local sparrow hawk, she continued to thrive. She would even sit on the top of the aviary which now housed Phil's Barbary Falcon and she would 'flirt' with him.

One morning, fog had come down and so Phil hadn't left her food. Her usual routine was to wait for him on a post in the middle of the field at the back of the house. He would then throw her a quarter pigeon and she would fly down and take it.

That evening when Phil went out to feed her she did a 'Red Arrow' fly past and went up about 100 feet waiting to be fed.

On the 3rd April I went to see how she was doing and sure enough, she was waiting on her favourite post. On seeing me she did a lovely circuit of the field and I could see that even though her wing still hung down very slightly, she was fit and agile. After landing on a nearby fence, Phil threw out her pigeon breast and she came down low at speed, picking up her food and flying around the house before landing on a compost pile in next door's garden to eat her food. She also

appeared to hide her food by the fence after getting a good crop full. She then took off across the field and disappeared into the distance.

On the 16th April, Phil contacted me to say that he had not seen her for two days. She was last seen on the 14th April on her post as if saying goodbye. Hopefully she has now gone to the nearby moors to find a mate and with any luck, she will return to Phil's for the winter.

Barbara Royle
Independent Bird Register

