



USC

Native Species Project

Californian nature information & conservation

Newsletter, December 2025



Next hike: January 10, Weldon Canyon (subject to change). Email sigurdse@usc.edu

Holiday magic. There's no special biological connection between the two species described here, other than that incense cedars are tall trees and merlins like to sit in treetops looking for prey. They are both fairly common in LA County and hopefully conjure up a bit of holiday magic. The merlin nests further north, and is found in our area primarily in winter.

California incense cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*). This fragrant tree is the closest we get to native redwoods in LA County, looking a bit like a "mini-sequoia" (albeit still quite large), with its fibrous, reddish-orange bark. Like the redwoods, it is in the cypress family, and can live for hundreds of years. It grows to around 150 ft. tall. The cones are tiny and resemble the fleur-de-lis (French and Quebec coat of arms symbol). The leaves are small scale-like needles, a bit like giant sequoia. **Fun fact:** ever noticed that many pencils have a nice odor when being sharpened? That's because incense cedar is often used for making them.



Incense cedars in San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mts. Note the tiny cone (photos Trond Sigurdson).

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*). This hypercarnivore is indeed "hyper" in more than one way. The merlin is a small falcon that rarely stoops the way a peregrine does, but in fast horizontal hunts, it can give any quick bird a run for its money. The subspecies in our area is sometimes called "black merlin" due to its dark color and almost black upper wings. It hunts large insects when young, later taking mostly small birds up to the size of a large dove.

Sound: [quick, repeated, tee-hee-hee-hee-hee](#). **Fun fact:** Falconers have realized what an efficient hunter the merlin is, and it has become quite popular in hunting smaller-sized birds. However, it may sometimes behave like it had too much coffee in the morning; before you know it, it's over the hills and far away.



Merlins photographed around LA (Photos: iNaturalist.com).

Supporting local flora and fauna: Consider a Christmas donation to a local nature center (e.g. Placerita Canyon Nature Center). They conserve wildlife and often rehabilitate injured animals.



<https://dornsife.usc.edu/bisc/undergraduate/usc-native-species-project/>

