

## MEMORIES OF MERGANSERS

by Tudor Richards

Common and Hooded mergansers are among my favorite birds. The same could very likely also be said of the Red-breasted Merganser, if I were familiar with it on its nesting grounds farther east. Although it's always nice to see this third, very handsome merganser as a common migrant and winter resident along the New Hampshire coast, this duck is surprisingly scarce inland, where most of my many years of birding (even waterbirding) have been spent. Perhaps my oddest inland record of a Red-breasted Merganser is of a single individual (scrutinized through a scope so as not to confuse it with the very similar and much more common Common Merganser) with a mixed flock of fifty-six scoters, on Echo Lake, Franconia Notch, October 15, 1948. Presumably all these birds were fresh from breeding grounds to the north or northwest and had been forced down by bad weather or exhaustion before they could reach the ocean for the winter.

During my later boyhood years in Groton, Massachusetts, an impoundment (called "the Moat") of the Nashua River, half in Groton and half in Pepperell, behind the East Pepperell dam, became my favorite birding place. Scattered dead trees stood in the permanently flooded areas, and an abandoned railroad on the Pepperell side made much of the area accessible by foot and bicycle. One of my greatest thrills occurred on my first visit to the Moat, on April 2, 1932, when I caught sight of a pair of small ducks, the drake showing a lot of white on its head. They soon proved to be, not Buffleheads, as I first thought, but my very first Hooded Mergansers. This was when the species was still recovering from overhunting during the preceding decades and was still only an uncommon migrant in Massachusetts. Since then, I have on occasion purposely looked at that wonderful illustration by Louis Agassiz Fierstein in Eaton's *Birds of New York*, showing a pair of Hooded Mergansers on a pond with scattered dead trees sticking out of the water beyond, because it reminds me of that first experience with the species.

Common Mergansers also frequented the Moat, and on April 21, 1935, I saw a female, despite her large size, enter a hole low down in one of the inundated dead trees. Then, on September 12 of that year, a tight flock of seven Common Mergansers was seen swimming in the same area. This was presumably a family that had been raised there, because it was much too early in the season for them to have been migrants from the north. This seems to have been the first instance of an apparent Massachusetts Common Merganser breeding record since May 1921, when Capt. A. W. McGraw saw a mother and nine young on three occasions on a pond in Huntington, as reported in a footnote in E. H. Forbush's 1925 classic, *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States*. Forbush also recounts one even earlier sighting: in June 1907, Lewis E. Forbush, son of the great ornithologist, saw a mother merganser of

undetermined species (but presumably a Common) carrying some of her young on her back on a pond in Worcester County. The episode was reported both in *Game Birds, Wild-fowl and Shorebirds of Massachusetts and Adjacent States* (1916) and in *Birds of Massachusetts*, in which, curiously, Forbush suggested the possibility that the birds were Red-breasted Mergansers.

Exciting as my 1935 merganser experiences were, more exciting things were yet to come. On the strength of these sightings, on June 16 of the following year I took a canoe to the Moat, specifically to look for a possible Common Merganser family, and to my delight soon found a mother merganser with two ducklings, not yet half-grown. The mother, however, was a small duck, in fact a Hooded Merganser. This was even better than what I had hoped for, since it established the first definite breeding record for the state of that species, and the sighting was duly reported in *The Auk* (1936, p. 441) and also mentioned in Griscom and Snyder's *The Birds of Massachusetts. An Annotated and Revised Check List* (1955). At the same time, it was one of the greatest coincidences in my life. Two families of Hoodeds were found there in 1937, one with four and one with two ducklings, and in 1938, two females more or less together, with one and two young, respectively. Such extraordinarily small numbers of ducklings are hard to explain. No other breeding locations of Hooded Mergansers seem to have been discovered in Massachusetts until 1946, and none for Common Mergansers until 1947. I never found another family of the latter species at the Moat.

One interesting aspect of merganser behavior — and, of course, that of various other ducks — is the habit of forming large flocks on large lakes in autumn, when smaller lakes and ponds are frozen or about to freeze. Examples are two records from Spofford Lake, in southwestern New Hampshire, from around dusk on November 21, 1962, and December 2, 1963. On the first occasion, Hooded Mergansers were seen building in numbers from none to sixty or seventy before it got too dark to identify arriving birds. Common Mergansers and the few other duck species present were less numerous, except for Black Ducks, which increased from twenty-four to an estimated 400, complicating observation. On the second occasion, sixty to possibly seventy-five Hooded Mergansers arrived before dark, along with about the same number of Common Mergansers. On this occasion, there were far fewer Black Ducks.

More impressive are the following estimated numbers of Common Mergansers. My first really high count was of roughly 1,000 on Squam Lake, in central New Hampshire, on December 7, 1946. At Lake Umbagog, in northeastern New Hampshire and western Maine, the famous ornithologist William Brewster never stayed late enough in the season to see more than the "two or three hundred" he mentions having seen in late September and October. However, on November 19, 1996, Robert Quinn and I saw roughly 1,000 Common Mergansers more or less together on Lake Umbagog, milling and flying about to an extraordinary degree. Then, in 1997 at about the same time of

year, Umbagog Refuge Manager Paul Casey saw an estimated 2,000, and, accompanied by Quinn and me in mid-November 1998, some 1,600. On these latter two occasions, the birds were more scattered than they had been in 1996. Even so, one can't help wondering about what happens to the fish populations in such cases!

For at least three-quarters of a century, Common Mergansers have raised broods on Squam Lake, where my family has had a summer camp for many years. Mother "shelldrakes," as we used to call them, occasionally with as many as twenty or more young, all in the shallows chasing minnows or trying to steal them from each other, have been a joy to watch over many decades. The largest families have presumably been the products of clutches laid by two or more females in a single nest hole, being incubated by one female and therefore all hatching at the same time. In recent years, the Common Mergansers at Squam Lake, like loons, have been getting tamer, often resting on a raft perhaps two hundred feet beyond the end of our dock. In most summers, we've had only one family, but in 1997 we kept seeing one containing fourteen or fifteen young, as well as an older family with eight or so ducklings. On one occasion, the larger family was on the raft and the other family was close by, as if it were waiting for its turn. A little while after the first family left, the second one did indeed climb onto the raft, lingering there for quite some time.

It is well known that female Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers compete for both nestboxes and natural holes, and this has been brought home to me strongly at least three times. The first was when, as a wildlife biologist, I was counting duck families all over New Hampshire for the Fish and Game Department. On June 16, 1949, while canoeing in Concord from Goodwin Point oxbow to the Merrimack River, I came across a mother Wood Duck with eighteen young, the largest number by far in my experience with that species. To my astonishment, three of the chicks, tagging along at the end of the line, were clearly baby Hooded Mergansers! Sixteen years later, when I was driving across a bridge over the Ashuelot River in Swansey on June 23, two of us spotted a mother Wood Duck with nine ducklings, two of which were Hooded Mergansers. The third occasion was on a recent television nature program that showed still another mother Wood Duck with a number of her own ducklings plus one baby Hooded Merganser. It would appear that in such cases the female "Hoodie" started a clutch but was driven off by a slightly larger "Woodie," or that the Hooded Merganser purposely parasitized the nest of the Wood Duck, which in either case would have incubated all of the eggs. Three incidents from the spring of 1953, involving a hole high up in a tall snag near Turkey Pond, Concord, also illustrate the competition over nest cavities. On April 30, a drake Wood Duck was seen on top of the snag, while his mate looked out of the hole. On May 6, a Pileated Woodpecker was at the hole, which had bits of what appeared to be duck down around it, and on May 30, a Hooded Merganser was there. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine whether any eggs were

laid in the hole, or whether any young of any species were produced from that snag.

The courtship of Hooded Mergansers is nothing less than spectacular, because during it the drake keeps raising and lowering his striking, black-edged white crest in dramatic fashion as he swims and struts around the female. This is now a common sight in autumn in New Hampshire. What is uncommon, in my experience, is to see a courting drake, with crest raised, stretch out his neck, shake his head, and snap it back into an inverted position as he rises half out of the water and squawks! On October 21, 1987, my brother and I were looking for ducks along the Squam River in Ashland, New Hampshire, when we encountered five drakes courting a single female. The drakes were milling around the female, crests open most of the time, when one of them suddenly put on the full performance, a great show indeed!

A curious incident occurring on or about May 11, 1985, involving a female Hooded Merganser on the beaver pond behind our home in Hopkinton, New Hampshire, is perhaps worth describing. Seen close by at the same time was a mink actively moving in and out of a stone wall at the near edge of the pond. The merganser repeatedly swam very close to the mink and then suddenly scooted off for perhaps 100 feet, quacking continuously as if to distract the mink from ducklings (although none were visible). A drake Mallard also swam close to the mink but didn't really get involved. Then a drake Wood Duck appeared farther out in the pond, attracting the attention of the merganser. The latter bird swam up to and around the one dead tree standing in the water with a nestbox on it and twice flew up to the hole in the box, looking in but not entering. Perhaps she had young in there almost ready to leave, but if so, why did she apparently try to lure the mink out into the pond? In the end, she swam to the far side of the pond and began dabbling and diving, while the mink, which had never seemed to pay attention to her, disappeared. No merganser family was seen there that summer, but one might have been overlooked or left the pond soon after leaving the nestbox. Unfortunately, I forgot to check the box the following winter. So much for the present for mergansers.

*(Well, not quite. The author reports that during the summer of 1999, while this article was being prepared for press, he finally saw his first Red-breasted Merganser family: a mother and seven young in a tidal marsh on Grand Manan Island, Maine.*

— mlp)

**Tudor Richards** has birded for many years in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. He was coauthor, with Bob Quinn and the spirit of William Brewster, of "The Birds of Lake Umbagog," which appeared in the June 1998 issue of *Bird Observer*. They are working together on a much more comprehensive examination of the history and status of the Umbagog region's bird life.