

The Red-breasted Merganser as a Summer Bird on the Mississippi Coast

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On 5 July 1980 we found a molting male Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) resting on the south beach of Deer Island in Harrison County, Mississippi. The merganser allowed us to approach within 10 m (Figure 1) before it flew a few meters to the safety of the water. The bird appeared healthy. On 6 July we found another male Red-breasted Merganser in similar plumage resting on a small spoil island a few hundred meters west of the Gulfport harbor, also in Harrison County. On 19 July Jackson observed a male Red-breasted Merganser near the entrance to the Biloxi Small Craft Harbor just north of Deer Island.

While this species is a common wintering bird on the Gulf coast, it is rare during the summer months. Burleigh (1944:356) commented that the Red-breasted Merganser "is the only duck that was observed during every month of the year" on the Mississippi Gulf coast. He further noted that "From the middle of April until late in November only one or two individuals were noted in the course of a day." Our observations suggest that the species' status as a summer bird in Mississippi has changed little if any in the past 40 years - refreshing in view of declines in species' populations that are so often reported.

Other recent summer records for the species on the Mississippi coast include the following sight records: (1) an individual seen on 24 July 1960 at Bayou Caddy, Hancock County, by L.E. Williams and S.G. Clawson (Gandy and Turcotte 1970:25); (2) five birds, all in immature or female plumage seen between 14 and 17 June 1977 near East Ship Island, Harrison County, by W.C. Weber -- Weber also noted that he saw none in July in the area (Weber and Jackson 1977); and (3) one female seen on 1 July 1978 near East Ship Island by W.C. Weber (Jackson and Cooley 1978).

Imhof (1976:126) notes that in Alabama a few Red-breasted Mergansers spend the summer almost every year. Lowery (1974:209-210) records the species from Louisiana only through late June.

The Red-breasted Merganser differs from the other two North American Mergansers in that it regularly nests away from trees. This independence of tree-cavity nesting habit may be the reason for its apparently unchanged status since many cavity nesting species have declined along with the extent of forests. While the Red-breasted Merganser normally nests only as far south as central Michigan, there are extralimital breeding records from Pennsylvania (Shugart and Gauthreaux 1968), North Carolina (Chamberlain and Chamberlain 1956),

and South Carolina (Parnell 1967). It is thus conceivable that someday we might add this species to our list of breeding birds.

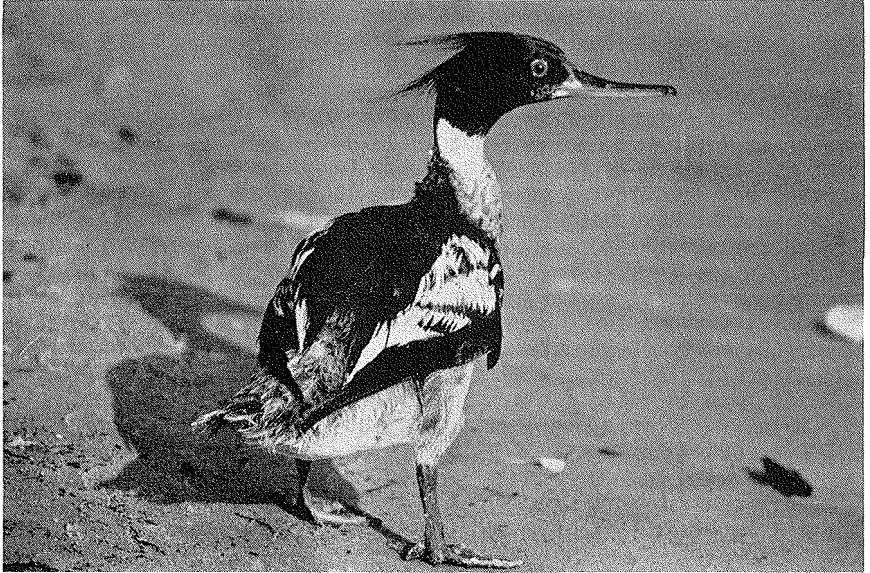


Figure 1. A male Red-breasted Merganser on Deer Island.
Photo by J.A. Jackson.

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