

Common Merganser

Mergus merganser

The Common Merganser is a Holarctic species that breeds from southern Alaska across Canada from the southern Yukon to northern Ontario and Newfoundland. East of the Rocky Mountains its breeding range extends south into the northern Great Plains, through the Great Lake states, and east into northeastern Pennsylvania, New York, and central and northern New England (AOU 1983). Local breeding occurs in Virginia and North Carolina. Common Mergansers winter throughout their breeding range, where open water persists, and south to Florida, the Gulf Coast, and Mexico (AOU 1983). Most Vermont lakes freeze over in winter, but small flocks of Common Mergansers winter on unfrozen portions of rivers throughout the state, utilizing the open water below dams and near rapids. On Christmas Bird Counts highest winter numbers are usually encountered along Lake Champlain. Because this species is regularly seen in all seasons in Vermont, migration patterns are difficult to discern. The spring movement appears to peak around the second or third week of April (RVB, Spring 1974-82).

This duck prefers forested areas where there are numerous ponds, lakes, streams, and rivers. Clear water is important for locating prey (Palmer 1976). A frequent associate of the Common Merganser is the Common Loon, although loons are known to chase and harass mergansers that feed on lakes where the loons are rearing their young (Palmer 1976). Common Mergansers, like loons, appear to suffer from human exploitation of lakeshore habitat and disturbance from recreational activity. One limiting factor in habitat selection that the Common Merganser does not share is the Common Loon's need for a large body of water for takeoff. In Vermont during the summer, Common Mergansers are frequently encountered on lakes in the North Central region and Northeastern High-

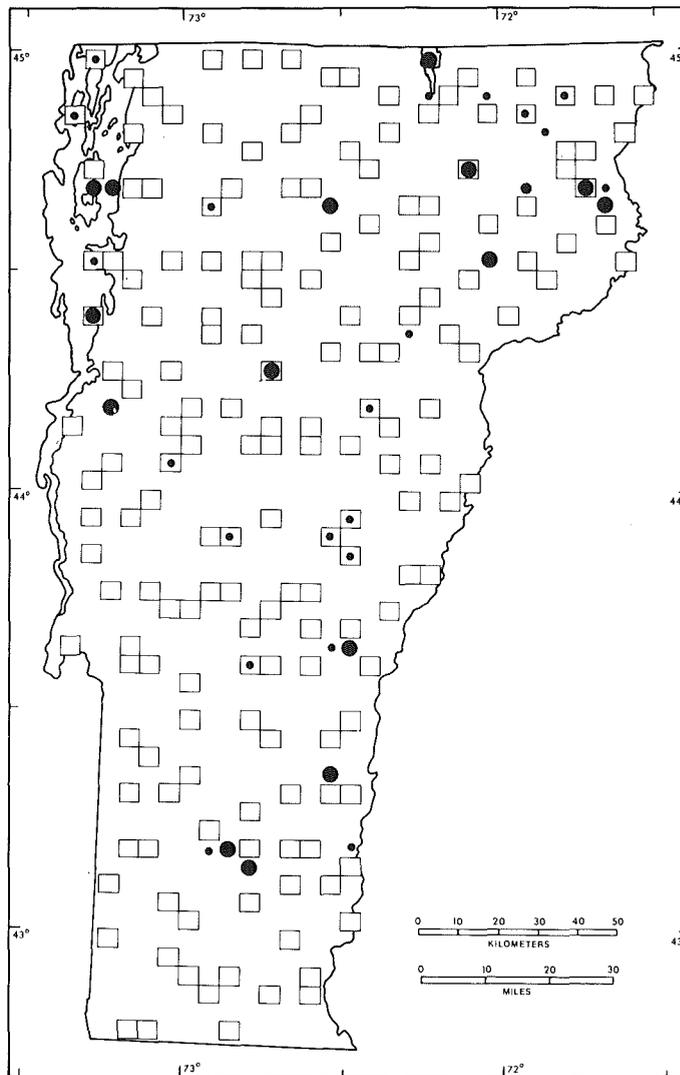


lands, and are often confused with Common Loons.

The nest is in a tree cavity or in a down-lined hollow on the ground. The same nest site may be used for several years (Palmer 1976). A nest cavity was discovered at 9 m (30 ft) in a dead sugar maple in Vermont (W. J. Norse, pers. observ.). On one of the Four Brothers Islands in Lake Champlain two ground nests were discovered, one hidden among roots and under low-hanging cedar branches, the other beneath a stump (Harper 1914). Harper believed that these instances of ground-nesting by Common Mergansers were due to the lack of mammalian predators on the island.

Breeding displays include an upward stretch in which the drake pulls his upper body out of the water, lays his bill on his breast, and flaps his wings. Pair formation often occurs during the winter, and continues into the spring.

Eggs are pale buff or ivory yellow (Harrison 1975) and clutch size is generally 7 to 14 eggs (Bull 1974; Palmer 1976). Drakes abandon the females when incubation begins. Only two egg dates exist for Vermont—May 20 and June 25; Bull (1974) reported egg dates for 34 New York nests as May 5 through July 10. Incubation lasts about 32 days. Downy young were observed in Vermont on seven dates ranging from June 10 to July 30. Soon after hatching, the young scramble from the nest cavity and drop to the ground or water, where they join the hen. If danger is imminent, juveniles will often hide near shoreline vegetation. As the season progresses, broods mix and move to larger lakes (Palmer 1976). The hen may



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 17 (10%)

Possible breeding: 13 (76% of total)
 Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 4 (24% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	5	16	29.0
Green Mountains	3	6	17.5
North Central	1	5	6.0
Northeast Highlands	3	19	17.5
East Central	4	21	24.0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	1	4	6.0

abandon her young before they learn to fly (Johnsgard 1975).

Fish is the predominant food in the diet of Common Mergansers. Although they are known to eat at least 50 species of fish, these mergansers tend to feed on the most abundant local fish (Palmer 1976).

Common Mergansers were not found in the Taconic Mountains, probably because of the lack of suitable wetland breeding habitat. The species was not found to be a common breeder anywhere in Vermont. The Champlain Lowlands and Northeast Highlands probably provide the most suitable habitat for the species, as both have abun-

dant areas of open water and the Northeast Highlands are heavily forested. That the North Central region, an area of abundant lakes, streams, and forestland, had among the lowest occurrences is puzzling. Confirmations were most frequently of fledged young.

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