

Red-breasted Merganser

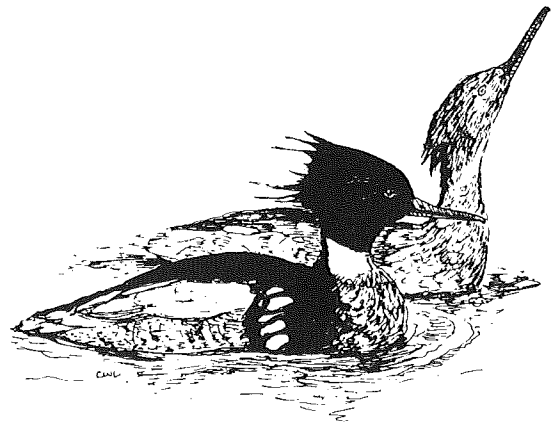
Mergus serrator

Only a local breeder south of Canada, the Red-breasted Merganser is most familiar in Vermont as a migrant. The Atlas Project established the first state breeding record for the species. A nest was located on the New York portion of Lake Champlain on the Four Brothers Islands in 1958; and a pair, but no nest, was found there in 1975 (Carleton 1980). Perkins and Howe (1901) and Fortner et al. (1933) claimed it as a rare migrant in Vermont but offered no references to breeding. The species tends to show a sporadic breeding distribution in the U.S. (Bellrose 1980).

Spring and fall migrations are the best times for observing Red-breasted Mergansers in Vermont. Migrants are found in spring from mid March to mid May and during the fall from mid September to early December. The species is found most commonly on Lake Champlain, but occurs elsewhere, including Lakes Memphremagog and Morey, Caspian Lake, the White River, and the Connecticut River (especially at Herrick's Cove). Seasonal totals are low, ranging from 7 to 70 birds. Peak daily counts range from 9 to 28, with peak dates in spring around the second or third week of April, and in fall from mid September to mid October. Wintering Red-breasted Mergansers are occasionally observed on Lake Champlain during Christmas Bird Counts, as well as in January.

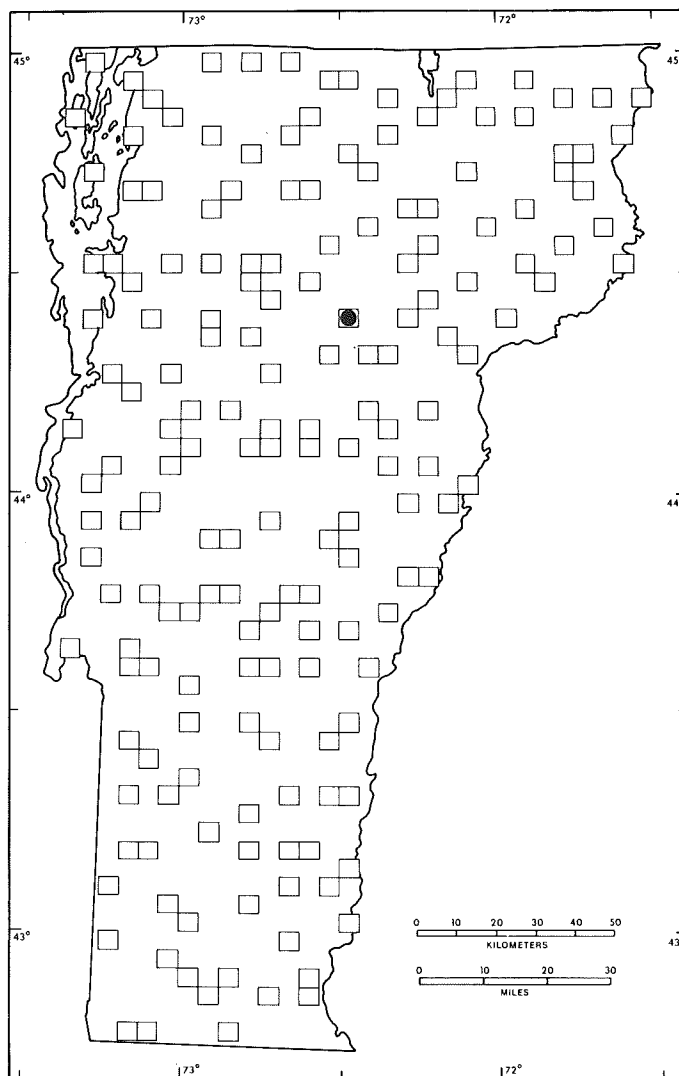
Confirmed breeding for the Red-breasted Merganser has been documented only once in Vermont, on June 22, 1980, at Watson Pond (Calais, Washington County). Nine small ducklings and the hen were observed on what G. F. Oatman described as a "fairly large man-made pond surrounded by open fields but with woodland nearby" (ASR, G. F. Oatman). This area is characterized by irregular topography, numerous small lakes and swampy wetlands, and spruce-fir and northern hardwood transitional vegetation.

Red-breasted Mergansers generally do not



breed until their second year, often staying in brackish or salt water as yearlings. The species winters mainly in estuaries and on sheltered bays. Courtship and pair formation begin on the wintering grounds. The courtship ritual is an intricate series of neck and body movements accompanied by a guttural song (Johnsgard 1965; Palmer 1976). The Red-breasted Merganser prefers inland lakes for breeding, particularly those with marshes, rocky islets, or vegetated islands (Bellrose 1980). This species demonstrates a marked tendency to nest on islands. Bengston (1970) and Palmer (1976) have both stated that ideal breeding habitat is a small island or islet having low or prostrate woody growth or other low overhead shelter, such as conifer limbs. The well-concealed ground nest is located amidst boulders or driftwood, or under dense shrubs near water. Forbush (1925) mentioned egg dates in Maine as falling between mid May and early June. Six to 12 eggs constitute a clutch; incubation by the hen lasts 29 to 35 days, with an average of 32 days. The drake abandons the hen soon after incubation begins. Assuming the ducklings at Watson Pond were 5 days old on June 22, and assuming 40 days from the laying of the first egg to the hatch (Bellrose 1980), initiation of egg laying probably occurred about May 8.

Red-breasted Mergansers consume a variety of prey, including fish, crayfish, shrimp, crabs, and aquatic insects. Although Red-



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 1 (0.6%)

Possible breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 1 (100% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	0	0	0
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	1	5	100
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

breasted Mergansers usually capture prey by diving, they are known to herd prey into shallow water (Emlen and Ambrose 1970). They locate prey by partly submerging their heads and peering, a technique also practiced by the Common Loon.

No apparent population expansion or regular nesting pattern of Red-breasted Mergansers has been reported in the northeastern U.S. Vermont's single breeding record and the irregular nesting on the Four Brothers Islands substantiate a sporadic breeding distribution in the region.

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