



Sea Duck Information Series

Hooded Merganser

(*Lophodytes cucullatus*)

French: *Harle couronné*

Description

The hooded merganser is the smallest of the three merganser species in North America. An adult weighs about 620 grams (1.4 lbs) and is 40-50 cm (16-20 in.) long; males are larger than females. Like other mergansers, they have a long serrated bill for grasping and handling live prey.

Males are easily distinguished from other species by their small size, flashy white fan-shaped crest bordered by black on their head, and buffy sides with white vertical stripes. Females can also be distinguished from other mergansers by their small size, a non-red bill, and bushy gray-brown crest. Immatures resemble females but without the crest.

In flight, hooded mergansers have a rapid, shallow wingbeat and can be identified by their slender body and head, relatively large tail, and black and white coloration. Their wings produce a soft high-pitched whirring sound in flight.

Hooded mergansers are usually silent, but may vocalize during courtship and around nest sites. Males give a purring croak or a hollow *pop* sound while displaying. Females give a soft croak or rough *croo-croo-crook* in flight or around nests.

Range

Hooded merganser is the only merganser species restricted to North America. They breed throughout the east and Pacific Northwest, and are most common around the Great Lakes region. Highest breeding densities in the east occur from central Ontario and Quebec to Minnesota.

In the west, breeding is regular in patchy wetland habitats of coastal and intermountain areas from northern California to south-central British Columbia. Only scattered breeding has been documented across intervening regions (western boreal forests, prairies, Great Plains, Cordillera, Great Basin).

Primary winter areas include the southeast U.S., from the lower Mississippi basin to coastal areas



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Male Hooded Merganser

from Texas to Massachusetts. In the west, most hooded mergansers winter from southern California to southern British Columbia. They also occur in small numbers over a much wider range.

Habitat and Habits

This is a secretive duck and relatively little is known about its biology and ecology compared to other ducks.

Hooded mergansers are closely tied to forested habitats, and use a wide range of forest types throughout their range. Hooded mergansers nest in tree cavities and readily use man-made nest boxes. Females do not line nests with nest material and prefer nest boxes lined with wood shavings or boxes used the previous year.

Females breed when at least two years old and return to the same nesting area year after year. They lay 9-12 almost round white eggs, about one egg every two days. Incubation begins after the last egg is laid and lasts about 30-34 days. Females commonly lay their eggs in each other's nests as well as those of other cavity-nesting ducks.

Ducklings hatch within several hours of each other and, at the urging of the female, leave the nest

within 24 hours of hatching. They are down-covered and precocial, and begin feeding themselves the first day. Ducklings may feed by diving, dabbling, or by submerging their heads or entire bodies in search of food, usually aquatic insects.

As soon as females initiate incubation, males undertake a molt migration, often in a northerly direction to still largely unknown molting areas. After breeding, females also have a molt migration, but it is unknown whether they molt at the same sites as males.

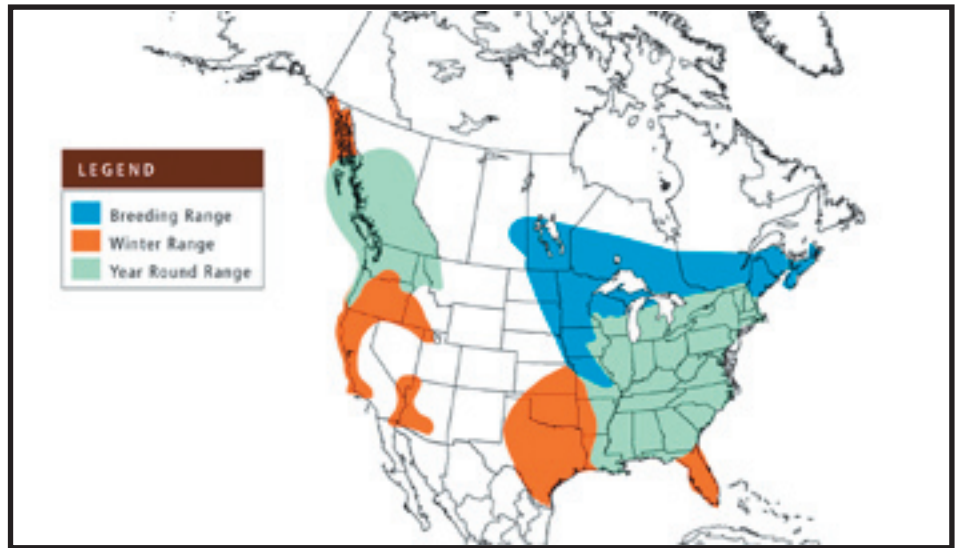
They are short to intermediate distance migrants, and some birds in their southern range may remain residents year-round. Banding data show that birds breeding in the northeastern U.S. migrate to coastal Atlantic states and those breeding in more mid-continent areas migrate within the Mississippi Flyway. Birds breeding in the Pacific Northwest presumably migrate west and south to coastal areas.

Hooded mergansers feed by diving in relatively clear waters where they can see their food. Their diet is varied and includes aquatic insects, fish, snails, earthworms, crayfish, and amphibians.

Population Size and Status

Numbers of hooded mergansers are difficult to ascertain because they are secretive and inhabit wooded areas that are not easily surveyed. Further, most winter and breeding surveys do not distinguish among the three species of mergansers because of difficulties in identification from the air. These same difficulties make it difficult to estimate trends in population size.

A crude estimate of continental population size is 300,000 to 400,000 birds. The scant available information on population trends, including Christmas Bird Counts and Breeding Bird Survey data, suggests that populations are stable or possibly increasing in some areas.



Distribution of Hooded Merganser in North America



Male Hooded Merganser

Management and Conservation

Historically, populations likely suffered from deforestation as forests were cleared for agriculture and potential nesting sites were lost. Breeding habitats may now be improving as forests age.

Nest box programs can create nest sites in areas otherwise unsuitable for nesting by hooded mergansers and may be very useful for augmenting local populations.

Large segments of the breeding population are vulnerable to the effects of acid rain, which can alter

invertebrate and fish communities and affect prey abundance in breeding habitats. However, the effects on populations of hooded mergansers are unknown.

The current impact of hunting on this species is unknown. Although not prized as a game species, an estimated 90,000 hooded mergansers are shot annually by hunters, mostly in the U.S. About half of those are from the Mississippi Flyway.

Much remains to be learned about hooded mergansers. More information is needed about habitat requirements, prey/habitat interactions, and the impact of hunting and other potential limiting factors such as contaminants.

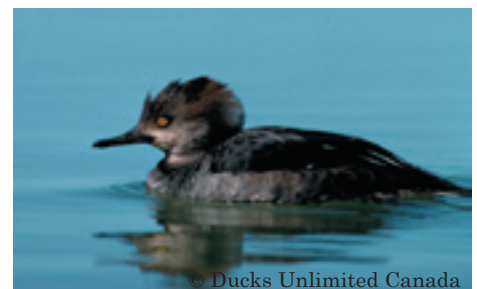
Given the apparent disparate east-west breeding ranges, complemented by banding data that suggest no interchange between east and west populations, it seems prudent that the species be managed as two distinct populations in North America.

References and Resources

Dugger, B. D., K. M. Dugger,

and L. H. Fredrickson. 1994. Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*). *In* The Birds of North America, No. 98 (A. Poole and F. Gill, Eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.: The American Ornithologists Union.

Seaduckjv.org – web site for the Sea Duck Joint Venture



Female Hooded Merganser



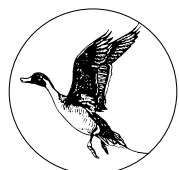
The Sea Duck Joint Venture is a conservation partnership under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan

To learn more about the Sea Duck Joint Venture (SDJV), visit seaduckjv.org or contact:

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