



## Sea Duck Information Series

# Common Merganser

(*Mergus merganser*)

French: *Grand Harle*

### Description

Common mergansers are the largest of the three merganser species in North America; adults weigh 1,230 – 1,700 grams (2.7 – 3.7 lbs) and are 54 – 71 cm (21.2 – 27.9 in.) long.

Males are somewhat larger than females. Adult males have an iridescent, greenish-black head, with white neck, under parts, and secondaries against black upper wings, gray back and tail. Unlike red-breasted mergansers, male common mergansers in breeding plumage have no crest on head. In late summer during molt, males resemble breeding females in overall coloration, except the male's wing has a larger white patch and they develop a crest shorter than the female's.

Adult females have a rusty-brown head with a long crest and distinct white chin patch, slaty-gray breast, back, wings and tail, white flanks and belly. Both sexes have a long narrow serrated scarlet-orange bill that is highly specialized for grasping small fish. In flight, mergansers have a flat, pointed profile and are said to resemble a "lawn dart."

Common mergansers are usually silent except during courtship or when alarmed. Their alarm call is a hoarse *grrr*, *karr*, or *gruk gruk gruk*.

### Range

Common mergansers occur worldwide throughout the arctic and subarctic, nesting within the boreal forest tree line area and along ocean coasts. In North America, they breed across the continent from interior Alaska to Newfoundland, south throughout the Acadian and Great Lake forest regions, Aspen Parklands and Montane Forest. They are typically found along river and coastal areas where trees are large enough to provide cavities for nesting.

During winter, common mergansers remain as far north as open water is available, and are most frequently found in fresh water, whereas red-breasted merganser winters more on salt water. They winter predominantly in coastal areas of Alaska, Canada and the continental United States. Birds also



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*A flock of Common Mergansers*

winter in fresh water areas across the continental United States and into northern Mexico.

### Habitat and Habits

Common mergansers are often the first waterfowl to return north in the spring and the last to move south in the fall. They usually migrate along major rivers, lake chains, and coastlines during day and overland by night. They tend to winter in fresh water areas, such as large lakes, rivers, as well as estuaries and harbors. Nothing is known about migration patterns or connectivity between nesting and wintering grounds. Interestingly, banding data has shown that some wintering populations in the continental United States move south to breed.

Pair bonds are formed during winter and early spring. They arrive on breeding areas in April and May (variable by latitude) and begin laying eggs about 2 weeks after arrival. Females select the nest site and often return to the same site used in previous years. Males remain near nest site into the incubation period and then depart for molting locations in larger lakes, bays, and rivers.

Common mergansers nest in cavities. Nests are typically located near ocean coasts, lakes, and rivers

bordered by mature forests that provide suitable tree cavities, often formed by other species such as woodpeckers, or resulting from broken tree limbs and hollow tops. Rock crevices, spaces among tree roots, and holes in banks may also be used for nesting. They will also use appropriately sized nest boxes, like those designed for common goldeneye. Nests may be located far from water.

The nest is a simple bowl lined with down from the female once egg laying is complete. Females typically lay between 9 – 12 eggs that are incubated approximately 32 days before hatch commences. Young from several broods may join to form large aggregations called crèches. Females may molt with their broods, or disappear and molt in seclusion before young are fully grown. Young are able to survive well independent of the female and can fly 60 – 75 days after hatch.

Diet varies with habitat and geographic location. They forage primarily on small fish, commonly including salmon, trout, suckers, sculpin, sticklebacks, shad, chub, and minnows. They are also known to forage on aquatic invertebrates, frogs, small mammals, and birds. Downy young eat mostly aquatic invertebrates such as caddis flies, mayflies, backswimmers, flies, water

striders, and dragonflies, but switch to fish when about 12 days old.

Common mergansers often swim together in small groups along the shoreline, where they dive frequently for food. During migration and winter, flocks of hundreds of common mergansers may forage cooperatively by driving fish ahead of them.

### Population Size and Status

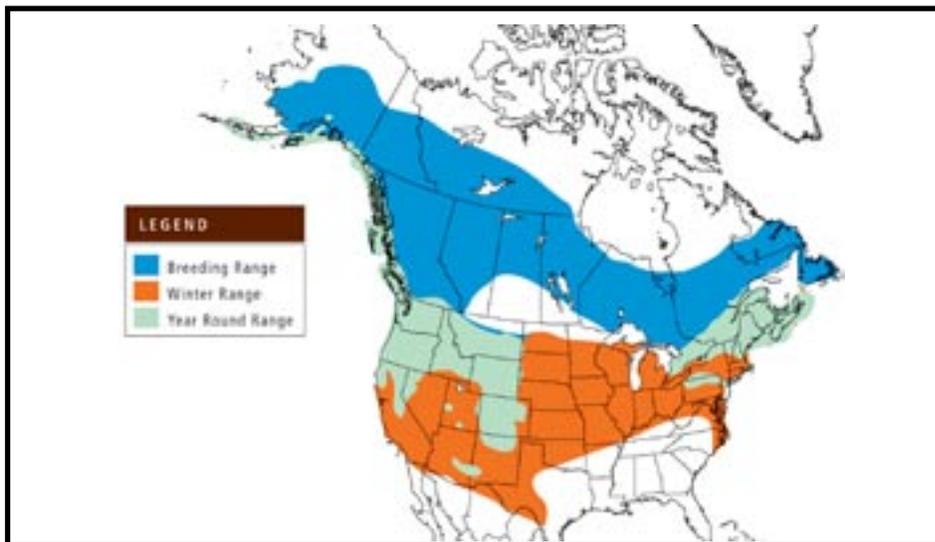
Size and trends of populations in North America are not reliably known, often because aerial surveys of breeding birds do not differentiate common and red-breasted mergansers and because large portions of their range are not surveyed. Aerial surveys and Christmas Bird Count data suggest a total population size of 600,000 to 1 million birds within North America.

The North American Waterfowl Breeding Survey indicates increasing numbers of all merganser species combined from 1957 to 2002. Local population densities and trends vary widely across the range of the species, but little is known about factors contributing to population regulation.

### Management and Conservation

Common mergansers are harvested throughout their ranges, but total sport and subsistence harvest is low. They are considered poor table fare and are not favored by most hunters. The number of birds taken by sport hunters in Canada and the United States averages 32,000 per year for both countries. Most are shot along the Atlantic and Pacific flyways. Subsistence harvest in Alaska was estimated at 100–200 birds per year between 1985 and 1995.

Culling programs have been conducted on some rivers where interactions of mergansers and fishery activities are of concern, but the harvest is poorly quantified. Reductions in merganser populations were somewhat effective in increasing survival of young salmonids, but



*Distribution of Common Merganser in North America*

merganser populations took a long time to recover.

Perhaps the most important factor limiting common merganser populations is availability of nest cavities. Consequently, logging can have a detrimental effect by removing larger trees suitable for nesting. Common mergansers may benefit from nest box programs designed for other species.

Because of the merganser's fish diet, it is an important indicator of contamination pathways and health of aquatic ecosystems. Elevated levels of various contaminants, including PCB, DDE, dieldrin, dioxins, furans, and mercury have been found in merganser tissues in the Great Lakes and other sites. In some instances, levels of mercury in mergansers were a possible risk for human consumption and for reproduction of the birds.

Overall, this is one of least studied ducks in North America and much remains to be learned to enable effective management. Current studies are looking at nesting ecology and movement patterns in Alaska using banding, radio-telemetry, and genetic methods.

### References and Resources

- Mallory, M., and K. Metz. 1999. Common merganser (*Mergus merganser*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 442 (A. F. Poole and F. B. Gill, eds.). The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and the American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D. C.

Seaduckjv.org – the website for the Sea Duck Joint Venture.



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*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](http://seaduckjv.org) or contact:

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