

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*

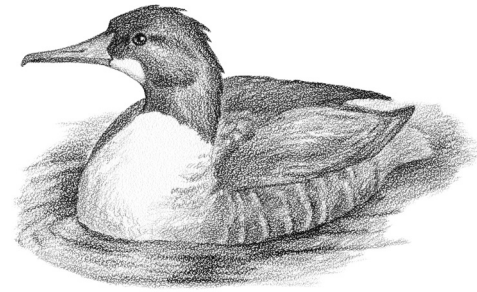


Folk Name: Sheldrake, Goosander, Fisherman Duck

Status: Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

Habitat: Lakes



The Common Merganser is our largest merganser, but contrary to its name, it is our least common merganser. It is a rare winter visitor here in the Central Carolinas. This sawbill is believed to have historically nested throughout a portion of the southeastern United States, but it disappeared as a breeding bird in the Southeast prior to the modern era. There is only one historic breeding record for North Carolina. The disappearance of the Common Merganser appears to have coincided with the loss of the American Beaver and beaver-created wetlands.

Today, the beaver has been reintroduced in much of its former range; beaver wetlands are common once again; and Common Mergansers have been recently documented nesting in Buncombe, Polk, and Henderson counties. Only time will tell if this duck will establish itself as a persistent breeder in the state and then possibly become a more regular winter visitor to our local lakes.

The earliest report from this region was published in May 1938. The editor of *The Chat* reported that the winter of 1937–1938 was “a flight year” for both Snowy Owls and “American” Mergansers. He noted first time reports of Common Mergansers on Christmas Counts in both Chapel Hill and Raleigh, and that “George Lay reported them common on Lake Badin near Salisbury” that winter.

There are about 10 additional reports from the twentieth century. Gabriel Cannon identified a female “new to me here” in Spartanburg on January 9, 1949. At least one Common Merganser was sighted on Lake Norman at the Cowan’s Ford Dam during the winter of 1977–1978. A female showed up in Charlotte on December 13, 1983, and it remained long enough to be counted on the Charlotte Christmas Bird Count on December 31, 1983. Heathy Walker reported up to three Common Mergansers in Gaston County in coal ash ponds at the Riverbend Steam Plant from mid-December 1991 into March 1992. David Wright reported one at the



observation ponds at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge on December 29, 1991. These locations are only a half-mile apart, and this may have been one of the same birds. This bird remained at the refuge at least until February 26, 1992. Taylor Piephoff reported another on Lake Norman on March 6, 1993.

A Common Merganser was reported on Lookout Shoals Lake in Iredell County on December 19, 1994, and Robin Carter reported a female at Landsford Canal State Park on March 19, 1995. Grady Goldston reported one on Lake Tillery on December 1, 1999; Dwayne Martin reported one on Lake Hickory on December 23, 2000; and Simon Thompson reported one in Shelby on December 30, 2000.

We have had multiple reports of Common Merganser in the region since the turn of the twenty-first century: a pair on Lake Norman in December 2002, a pair at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County in February 2005, and sightings on Lake Norman and Mountain Island Lake that December as well. Common Merganser has been found annually in counties along the Catawba River corridor since 2010. Individuals were also reported in Cabarrus County in 2008 and 2015, and at High Rock Lake in Rowan County in 2014. In 2015, a late movement of ducks, presumably due to freezing lakes in the north, brought one Common Merganser to Rankin Lake in Gastonia; three to Lake Norman on January 8, 2015; and as many as 13 showed up at Riverbend Park in late February, providing our largest count ever. Observation dates recorded in our database range from 3 December to 19 March.