

Hooded Merganser *Lophodytes cucullatus*



Folk Name: Hairy-head, Sawbill, Frog Duck, Crapper Crown

Status: Winter Resident, local Breeder

Abundance: Uncommon to Common

Habitat: Lakes, ponds, slow-moving creeks

To many, the male Hooded Merganser rivals the male Wood Duck as our most handsome duck. These small divers have a pronounced, white head crest, outlined in black, that when raised gives them a distinguished and strikingly distinctive appearance. Their crown is especially noticeable during early spring when they engage in elaborate courtship displays with repeated head-bobbing, head-shaking, and convoluted “head-throwing.” The appearance of the female is quite a different story. The female is mostly brown with a reddish-brown crest, and she is well camouflaged, dull, and muted overall. Females can be easily overlooked if a male is not around. When disturbed, Hooded Mergansers immediately dive, disappearing in an instant. They all pop up later—far across the pond and away from danger.

Hooded “mergs,” as birders call them, are common here during the winter, and a few might show up on any lake or small pond. They are less common in late spring and early fall, and are rare here in the summer. Leverett Loomis characterized this duck as “plentiful” around Chester County during winters in the 1880s, and today winter numbers are still good, as indicated by its Christmas Bird Count ranking of 43rd on our list of top 50 birds in the last 20 years.

The Hooded Merganser is a rare breeding resident in the Central Carolinas, and of our three breeding ducks, the Hooded Merganser is the rarest by far. Like the Wood Duck, it requires a cavity for successful nesting. Preferred



nesting habitat includes forested ponds and in trees growing along the banks of wide, slow-moving streams. Historical evidence suggests the Hooded Merganser was possibly once a more widespread breeding bird in the Carolinas. Extensive timber harvests in both states may have contributed to a decline in breeding here. In the 1880s, Loomis tried to confirm breeding in Chester County, but was ultimately unsuccessful, writing: “I am not aware that any remain during the breeding season in this immediate locality.” Since the nests are hard to find, definitive evidence of the nesting of the Hooded Merganser in the Carolinas is sparse.

Between 1990 and 2010, Pete Hogeboom, a volunteer with Ducks Unlimited, confirmed multiple Hooded Mergansers breeding in Wood Duck boxes along the Catawba River in Mecklenburg County. On April 17, 1997, he documented one pair breeding in a cypress Wood Duck nest box in Withers Cove on Lake Wylie. There was a clutch of 11 eggs in the box, and the eggs were still “warm” when Hogeboom examined them.

Artificial wood duck nest boxes are crucial to the



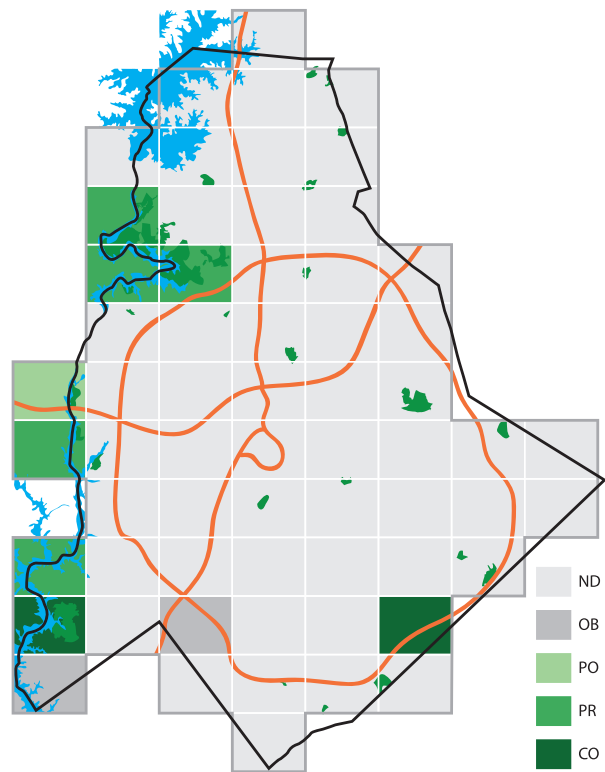
Males courting a female at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge. (Jeff Lemons)



Young Hooded Mergansers in Mecklenburg County. (Will Stuart)

success of our local merganser breeding population, as natural nest cavities are a very limited and valuable resource. Many species of birds compete for use of these cavities. One local paper carried this United Press story captioned “Duck Duplex” in 1954: “A game manager B.H. Popov reported that two ducks were found nesting in the same hollow tree in northern Forest country. A hooded merganser entered the tree through a hole near the ground. A wood duck had a private entrance about 10 feet higher up.”

In North Carolina, the breeding population of the Hooded Merganser has been placed on the state Watch List because its breeding status in the state is poorly understood, and it may be imperiled.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Local (PR/5, CO/2)