

Hooded Merganser

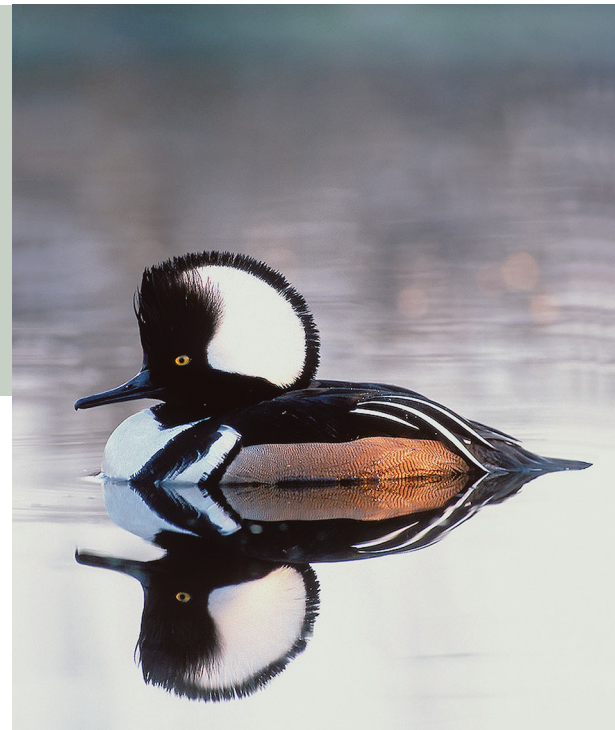
Lophodytes cucullatus

The Hooded Merganser competes with the Wood Duck both for the title of best-dressed male and for tree cavities in which to locate nests. The best-dressed title may go to the Wood Duck, but the Hooded Merganser often wins the nest battle. Mergansers generally return in early March, two weeks or more before Wood Ducks, and may be laying eggs at our latitude by the end of the month (D. Kibbe pers. obs.). Hooded Mergansers occur throughout eastern North America and are most abundant around the Great Lakes. A disjunct population occurs in the Pacific Northwest. The only merganser indigenous to North America, the hooded seldom winters south of the United States.

The Hooded Merganser nests in tree cavities, preferably located over standing water; beaver ponds with flooded timber are ideal habitat. The male accompanies the female to the nest site while she is laying her 10-egg clutch, but abandons her once the month-long incubation starts. Hooded Mergansers usually do not breed until two years of age, an unusual trait for a relatively small duck, but often return to their natal area to nest (Dugger et al. 2009). Nests are difficult to find and females with broods are secretive. Vermont atlas workers found 16 nests between 18 May and 10 June. Seventy-two percent of the confirmations were of young out of the nest. Approached closely, the female may reveal her breeding status by performing a distraction display, propelling herself across the water surface with flailing wings (Dugger et al. 2009).

The first Vermont atlas found that Hooded Mergansers were uncommon; their presence was concentrated in the Champlain Valley, with other small clusters in the Northeastern Highlands, and the north-central and southern sectors of the state (Norse and Fichtel 1985). The second atlas found that the number of Priority 1 blocks with Hooded Merganser had tripled, with increases throughout the state. Both atlases obtained a high rate of confirmations (more than 50 percent).

The marked increase in Hooded Merganser occurrence parallels that of the Wood Duck in Vermont. An

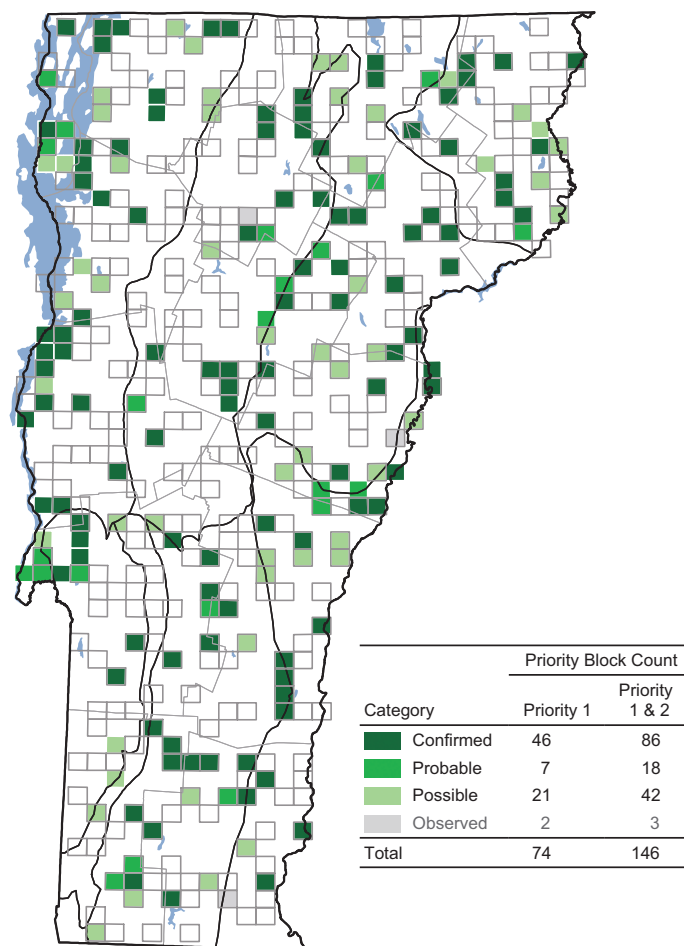
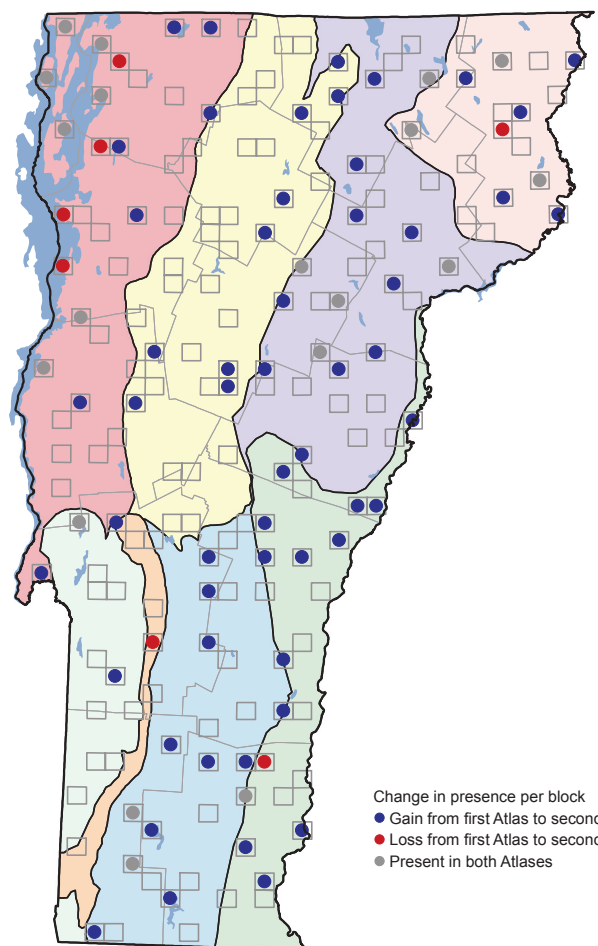


increase in Vermont's beaver population by 130 percent between 1980 and 1990 (VFWD 2004), and the maturation of the state's forests have probably benefited both species. Although each species commonly parasitizes the other's nests (Dugger et al. 2009), this behavior apparently has not been to the detriment of either species' population.

Second-generation atlases indicate that Hooded Merganser populations have increased substantially in the Northeast during the past two decades. In New York, the second atlas found that the number of blocks hosting the species had more than doubled (McGowan 2008), while in Pennsylvania the increase was 185 percent (Wilson et al. 2012). Ontario found an 80 percent increase in the probability of observing Hooded Merganser in a block since the first atlas.

Although Hooded Mergansers often accept artificial nest boxes, particularly if placed over a water body, there appears little reason to implement such intensive management from a conservation perspective, although such efforts may serve as important educational tools. With mature, cavity-producing trees readily available and beaver populations proliferating across the landscape, nesting habitat does not appear to be a limiting factor. Acid rain reduces prey availability in unbuffered water bodies and remains a concern for this and many other aquatic species (McNicol et al. 1987). Maintenance of high water quality to reduce turbidity and support the integrity of food chains has been recommended as a means to support Hooded Merganser populations (Dugger et al. 2009).

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	11	14	+ 3	+ 27
Northeastern Highlands	4	8	+ 4	+ 100
Northern Green Mountains	0	9	+ 9	+ 900
Northern Vermont Piedmont	5	15	+ 10	+ 200
Southern Green Mountains	3	13	+ 10	+ 333
Southern Vermont Piedmont	1	12	+ 11	+1100
Taconic Mountains	1	2	+ 1	+ 100
Vermont Valley	1	1	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	26	74	+ 48	+ 185

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	41	21
Northeastern Highlands	40	10
Northern Green Mountains	29	13
Northern Vermont Piedmont	46	21
Southern Green Mountains	50	19
Southern Vermont Piedmont	45	12
Taconic Mountains	19	3
Vermont Valley	25	1