Common Merganser

Mergus merganser

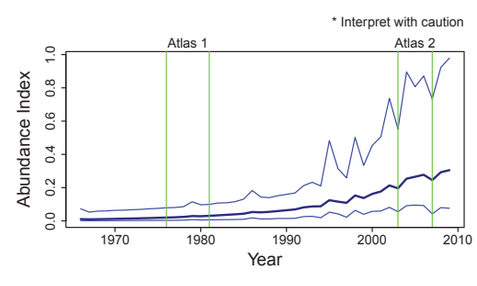
The Common Merganser is the largest duck breeding in Vermont and one of the hardiest. Its breeding range is circumpolar, encompassing the northern boreal and mixed-forest region across North America, Europe, and Asia (Mallory and Metz 1999). In early winter flocks gather on large lakes before moving south, but small numbers of adults remain as far north as open water permits. Mergansers are adapted for capturing fish, but other aquatic prey and even birds and small mammals may be taken (Mallory and Metz 1999). The fish species taken depends primarily on the size and abundance of available prey. Some game fish are undoubtedly taken, and Atlantic salmon parr stocked by the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department certainly fall within the preferred size range of 10 to 40 centimeters (4 to 16 inches). Persecution for this habit, documented in the Maritime Provinces (Erskin 1992), probably occurred in the Northeast and contributed to locally depressed populations in the early twentieth century.

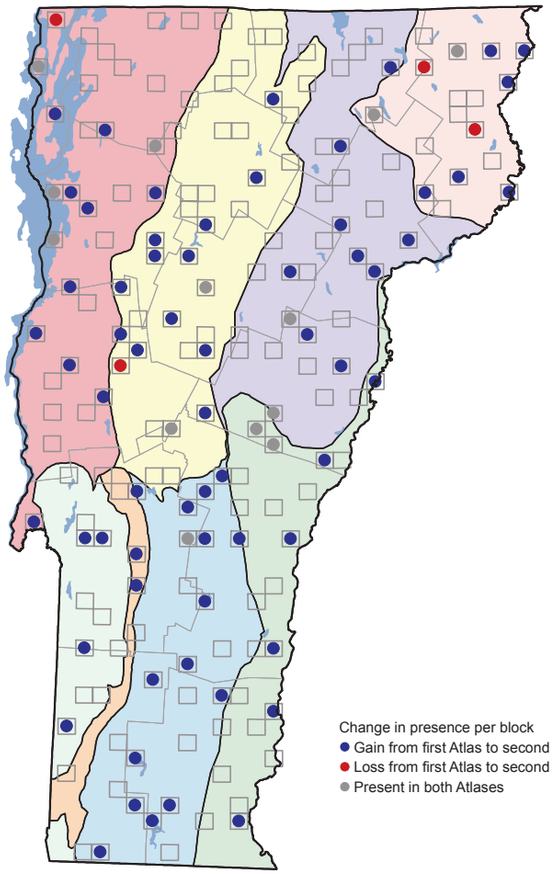
Common Mergansers are among Vermont's earliest returning waterfowl and may be found searching for suitable nesting cavities along streams and lakes in March. Cavities in large trees are generally used. Intraspecific brood parasitism is common (Mallory and Metz 1999), and several females may lay in the same nest box (D. Kibbe pers. obs.). Nests may be in upland sites hundreds of meters from water, although sites adjacent to water appear to be preferred. In the absence of ground predators—on islands, for example—nests may be on the ground. Clutches range from 6 to 14 eggs; larger clutches are suspected to represent multiple females. During the 2- to 3-week egg-laying period, the female is generally accompanied by her mate. Once the hen begins her month-long incubation stint, however, the drake leaves to join other males on large water bodies. Though a female can frequently be seen flying to or from the general vicinity of the nest early in the morning, the nest itself can be very difficult to find, and most confirmations are of young. The young leave the nest shortly after hatching at the urging of the female, who calls to them from the base of the nest tree, up to 30 meters (98 feet) below the nest.

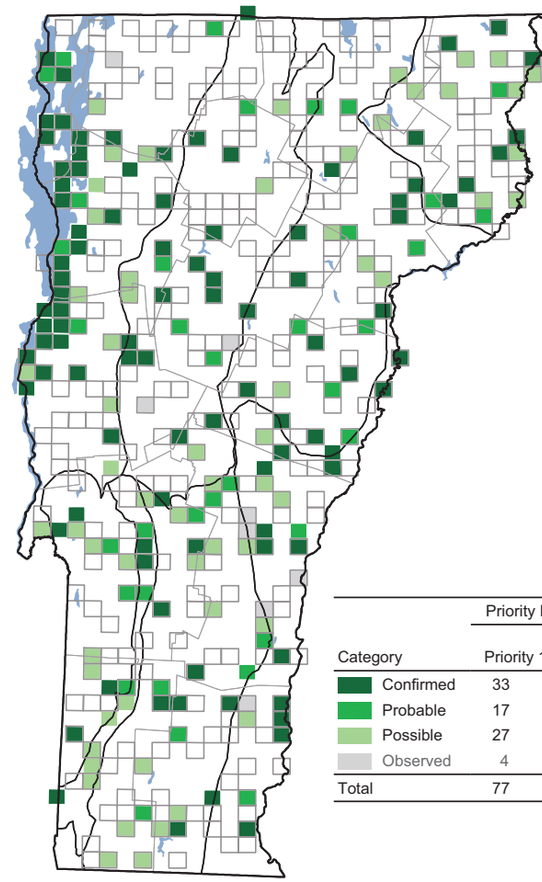
Despite this habit of early nesting, all 7 Vermont nest records date from mid-May to mid-June. Common Mergansers are generally laying by April in central New York (D. Kibbe unpubl. data), where the earliest egg date is 4 April. The 14 records of newly hatched young from the second Vermont atlas fall between 23 May and 13 July. By July, many young are capable of flight and/or have moved considerable distances downstream from their nest site. Often several broods will coalesce by mid-summer and flotillas (called crèches) of young Common Mergansers may be seen.

Common Merganser numbers in Vermont have increased significantly, by 8.5 percent per year from 1982 to 2007, part of a regional increase in population (Sauer et al. 2011). The second atlas found evidence of breeding in more than three times as many blocks compared with the first atlas. Likewise, New York and Pennsylvania's second

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME







Category	Priority Block Count: Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	33	71
Probable	17	33
Possible	27	55
Observed	4	8
Total	77	159

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	5	14	+ 9	+ 180
Northeastern Highlands	4	8	+ 4	+ 100
Northern Green Mountains	3	14	+ 11	+ 367
Northern Vermont Piedmont	2	11	+ 9	+ 450
Southern Green Mountains	1	16	+ 15	+1500
Southern Vermont Piedmont	2	8	+ 6	+ 300
Taconic Mountains	0	4	+ 4	+ 400
Vermont Valley	0	2	+ 2	+ 200
Totals	17	77	+ 60	+ 353

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	46	21
Northeastern Highlands	54	13
Northern Green Mountains	33	14
Northern Vermont Piedmont	38	16
Southern Green Mountains	50	18
Southern Vermont Piedmont	40	10
Taconic Mountains	42	6
Vermont Valley	62	3

atlases found increases of more than 130 percent (McGowan and Corwin 2008, Wilson et al. 2012).

Availability of suitable nest trees may have been a limiting factor in the Northeast in the early 1900s, when most of Vermont was in pastures. Vermont's forests have grown substantially since then, increasing the availability of suitable nest sites near water. The largest member of their family, adult Common Mergansers are vulnerable to few predators and their fishy flavor deters hunters. Raccoons may destroy nests, and snapping turtles and large fish may prey on the young. As a large, fish-eating bird, the Common Merganser may accumulate toxic chemicals that could interfere with their reproduction or survival. Although polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), dichlorodiphenyldichloroethylene (DDE), dieldrin, and mercury residues were found in the 1970s in merganser eggs (Haseltine et al. 1981), there is no evidence that these chemicals were affecting populations.

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