

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture February 25th, 2010.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

The **Osprey** has increased as a breeding bird around the Bay Area. Its breeding range is somewhat similar to that of the Common Merganser. It is a common bird at the Russian River for example and likes freshwater lakes and streams. It has expanded its range and is now breeding in the Marin watershed in pretty good numbers, at Alpine Lake and some of those other lakes. Quite a few active nests there. It is seen annually at Lake Merced in SF, but there is no evidence of nesting in SF. It just seems to forage at Lake Merced and seems to fly off into Marin County. It is a migratory bird, it used to be completely absent from CA in the wintertime. It now is regular in southern CA in the wintertime, in northern CA still scarce but not unheard of. It is highly migratory, most birds winter in the tropics. Even though it is only mid-February the birds are already on their way back, they have been reported. One bird was seen on the class field trip to Lake Merritt, it was heading north.

It has been decades ago Joe has seen **Common Merganser** at Lake Merritt.

Green Heron was also new to the cumulative field trip list.

Mergansers

Fish eating ducks. Have a long, tubular bill with saw tooth edges that are visible at close range. Feed by diving and catching fish which they swallow head first. The saw tooth hooks grip the scales of the fish. They are not designed for chewing, the birds have to swallow the fish whole. They are designed for holding and keeping things from slipping away. The fish head gets in first and it meets the gizzard, which is an internal meat grinder that all birds have. The head and eventually the whole fish gets crushed and then passed through a series of filters, the digestible portions go through kind of a sieve and into the stomach, the indigestible portions get spit out in the form of a pellet. Basically all birds produce pellets.

Common Merganser

OCCURRENCE

Tends to breed in the Sierra and around inland lakes and rivers.

Can be quite common during the summer months in the Great Basin. Things like the Klamath River have tons.

Is showing up in larger numbers and in different places in the Bay Area than it used to.

Historically it did not breed in the Bay Area apart from the Russian River which still has a lot of them, probably the center of the breeding activity for the Bay Area. Now it also breeds along a number of other freshwater rivers, including Pescadero Creek, where it has been seen with chicks, and Alameda Creek. It has been confirmed nesting as far south as Monterey County now.

It has been showing up in the wintertime at unusual places recently. For example on the Las Gallinas Sewer Ponds. Also at Rodeo Lagoon, where it is unusual even though it is fresh water.

They are found in big numbers in the deep freshwater reservoirs like Calaveras Reservoir, that is

where you would expect to see them. Also Crystal Springs Reservoir, although they are not that common there. They like clean water with lots of fish.

A very scarce bird in the city of SF. One was at Crissy Field within recent weeks. One was at Lloyd Lake in GG Park a few years back.

Why they are showing up in more unusual places recently is unclear. It may have to do with that they are just more. But it is more likely that these are not local birds, that they are moving in from somewhere else. The birds that are being seen are for the most part in female aspect or immature males. We are seeing a smaller number of adult basic (bright) plumage males.

The nominate subspecies from Europe and Asia has been recorded in the Aleutians. It is sometimes called Goosander, which is the British name for the species

Although they are diving birds they are well enough balanced that they walk around a bit and they seem to like to haul out on logs.

Nest in tree cavities.

FIELD MARKS

Tend to have a rounder crown and less of a shaggy appearance compared to Red-breasted Merganser.

Striking red coloration to the bill.

Often show a long tail that may be angled up slightly.

Much thicker, longer bodied bird than Red-breasted Merganser.

Adult Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

The males are a bit larger than the females.

Mostly white on the sides.

Often a salmon pink wash on the belly and sides.

Black back.

The black appearing head has a green sheen in good light.

Crest not shaggy but smooth, giving the back of the head a bulky appearance.

Bright pinkish red feet.

Female Aspect

Gray body.

A little bit of the white on the wing coverts or secondaries can show up on the side.

Reddish brown head.

Crest shaggy but can be slicked down.

Well defined white chin patch, visible from the side.

The whole front of the neck is solid reddish brown.

The brown is very sharp and crisply demarcated from the gray on the neck.

More orange-red colored feet.

Immature

White stripe under the eye

Pink rather than red bill.

Pattern on face less strong, demarcations less strong.

First year males retain a female aspect plumage through the fall and much of the winter in both Common and Red-breasted mergansers.

Nominate subspecies "Goosander"

Bill with shallower base and larger hook.

A wedge of dark feathering projects on the sides of the maxilla, *americanus* lacks that.

More peaked forehead, *americanus* flatter.

Lacks the black line that *americanus* has across the median coverts.

Females slightly lighter than in *americanus*.

Red-breasted Merganser

OCCURRENCE

Ranges further north as a breeder than the Common Merganser does.

Does not nest in CA.

Migrant and winter visitor, pretty much limited to the ocean and bays. Also on large inland lakes such as the Salton Sea or even the Death Valley sewer ponds.

A more common bird in the Bay Area as a winter visitor and migrant, especially on SF Bay.

It also would be the species expected to be found in sewer ponds and suboptimal habitat.

Basically water you would not want to drink would have Red-breasted and water that is potable would have Common.

FIELD MARKS

Always show a shaggy crest, females even more so than males. The crest often looks double, having two peaks. They look as if they have just been electrocuted. They are not capable of combing themselves, the crest is never slicked down.

Bill decidedly thinner, without the Common's thick base. Looks longer, sometimes slightly upturned. About the same thickness throughout the whole length, like a toothpick.

Head smaller.

Adult Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

Gray vermiculations on the side.

White scapulars.

Not really a red breast, but there is a reddish brown cast to the brown color of the chest which is otherwise heavily streaked.

White ring around the neck.

Female Aspect

Chin and foreneck not necessarily as whitish as the Nat Geo shows, but the brown is less sharply demarcated from the gray on the neck and the white chin (if there is any) than in Common Merganser. It can be interpreted as demarcated sometimes, but there is never as crisp a razor-sharp line as on Common Merganser.

Immature

White stripe under the eye

First year males retain a female aspect plumage through the fall and much of the winter in both Common and Red-breasted mergansers.

Hooded Merganser

OCCURRENCE

Strictly a migrant and winter visitor to the Bay Area.

Marginal as a breeding bird in the extreme northeastern part of CA.

Prefers shady, sheltered, quiet pools.

Almost always found in freshwater but can occasionally tolerate saltwater. Also in brackish water from time to time.

Have been pretty regular at Lloyd Lake in GG Park in recent years. Sometimes in the Arboretum.

Frequently in Five Brooks Pond at Pt Reyes in the wintertime.

Radio Road in Redwood Shores is another good place.

FIELD MARKS

The smallest of the three mergansers that get to the Bay Area.

The feathers on the head when lying flat can give the bird a hammerhead kind of appearance with quite a noticeable projection at the back of the head.

Unlike the other mergansers mostly dark wings.

A little white on the secondaries and a little white stripe on the median coverts.

Adult Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

White crest with a black trim.

Crest either big and fan-shaped or may lie down flat reducing the white area to a little white stripe. The crest is always flattened in flight.

Crest always clean and neat and well combed.

Gold colored eye.

Rather large looking head with a rather small bill.

Bill all dark.

Chestnut sides and flanks with dark vermiculations.

Black stripes on the sides of the white breast.

The male Buffelhead also has a black and white head. However it has an all white body and no black trim to the crest.

Female Aspect

Crest a little bit more shaggy than on the male, quite fluffy but relatively uniform.

Gray looking bird with a grayish head, the crest a little bit more reddish.

Bill yellow with a dark culmen.

If you see a female aspect bird with an all black bill that is an indication that it is a male.

Immature Male

Early in the season probably not distinguishable from female.

The eye gets yellow.

The bill blackens.

Females also have some white edges to the scapulars.

In both sexes the white scapular edges can be hidden.

Smew

OCCURRENCE

Replaces the Hooded Merganser in Eurasia.

Preferred habitat similar to that of the Hooded Merganser.

In places where Smews have been seen outside of their normal range in NA they have often been seen associating with Hooded Mergansers.

First record for CA from Foster City Lagoon. The bird was found on a CBC. It was a young male, molted into snappy plumage in February. All CA records are of males.

There are fewer than a handful of records of Smew for CA, all from northern CA.

Smews are raised in captivity and have the potential of escaping, although they are expensive.

They are not easy to keep because you have to feed them fish. After research on lost smews it was concluded that all the records from CA are of wild birds.

FIELD MARKS

A shorter, thicker bill compared to any other kind of merganser.

Adult Basic (Bright) Plumage Male

Quite distinct, mostly white bird with black and gray highlights.

Black mask on the face including the dark eye.

Female Aspect

Cinnamon brown head with sharply contrasting white lower face and throat.

Gray body.