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Vol. 32 • Issue 2

FEATHERED ELEGANCE: A male Hooded Merganser flaps its wings. Distinguishing field marks include his ornate crest and chestnut sides.

A beautiful BEGINNING

How the distinctive Hooded Merganser sparked a love of birds **BY SOPHIE A. H. OSBORN**

I was a self-professed "mammal person" when I took my first ornithology class several decades ago. As much as I had enjoyed the feathered visitors that came to our winter feeders when I was growing up, birds somehow seemed more alien and less engaging than mammals. But as winter began to lose its grip on the Vermont hills where I lived, I started to use my binoculars on a regular basis and soon noticed there were infinitely more birds around me than I had ever realized. And they were far more captivating than I had imagined.

Driving past a small pond bordered by alders and young cottonwoods on my way home from class one afternoon, I noticed a pair of ducks gliding together in perfect synchrony across the water's smooth surface. I was familiar with Mallards, but these waterbirds looked smaller and more delicate than those ubiquitous paddlers. I pulled out my binoculars and quickly located the duo, then felt my pulse quicken as I stared at one of the most strikingly exotic birds that I had ever seen.

The more distinctive member of the pair — the male — was an elegant vision in black and white, with rich chestnut sides. Two ebony bars boldly highlighted each side of his improbably white chest, while several delicate white stripes near his slightly upraised tail formed a stark contrast to his dark back. Most dramatic, though, was the ornate, fan-shaped crest — a snow-white oval bordered by black — that he raised over brilliant yellow eyes and a slender, serrated, jet-black bill. When he lowered his raised crest, the snowy oval folded to become a thick white line near the top of his head. His mate was a more subtle concoction of grays and browns with a striking russet crest, brownish-red eyes, and a black-and-yellow bill.

Agog, I quickly searched through my bird identification guide. The pair was unmistakable: Hooded Mergansers. I watched the duo move placidly around the wooded pond for many minutes before rushing home to tell bemused friends about the most incredible bird I had ever seen outside a zoo.

Fortunately for wildlife enthusiasts of all stripes, Hooded Mergansers are widely distributed in North America and, though rarely abundant, can be found almost anywhere there is fresh water during the spring migration. The smallest of the three North American merganser species, the Hooded is the only one that occurs exclusively on this continent. Breeding in forested stream, pond, and wetland habitats in eastern North America and in the Northwest, the Hooded Merganser is particularly abundant in the Great Lakes region. It also occurs regularly in the Great Plains during migration and breeds in scattered locations throughout the area. Although wintering Hooded Mergansers can be found in most of the southern states, eastern populations winter primarily in the Southeast, whereas western birds winter mainly in California and the Pacific Northwest. In addition to haunting their usual freshwater habitats, wintering Hoodeds also frequent brackish estuaries and tidal channels.

In the years since I saw my first Hooded Mergansers, I've been fortunate enough to observe the species nearly every spring, and I continue to be delighted by its diminutive elegance, its entertaining courtship displays, and its intriguing natural history.

Despite its name, the Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) is considered taxonomically intermediate between the *Mergus* mergansers — Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) and Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) — and the three *Bucephala* species — Bufflehead

(*Bucephala albeola*), Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*), and Barrow's Goldeneye (*Bucephala islandica*). Appearance-wise, the male Hooded is most likely to be confused with the male Bufflehead since his black-bordered crest is superficially similar to the more extensive white crest of the male Bufflehead. But like its fellow mergansers, the Hooded has a slender, toothed bill that helps it catch and hold on to squirming fish. Diving beneath the water's surface to pursue and capture its prey, it also uses its excellent underwater vision to locate and feed on aquatic insects and crustaceans, especially crayfish. Like other ducks that are well adapted for diving, the Hooded's legs are set far back under its body, giving it a low profile when it is swimming but making it particularly awkward at walking on land.

The Hooded Merganser's elaborate courtship displays are intermediate between the mergansers and the goldeneyes. Like most ducks, many of the Hoodeds more subtle courtship behaviors consist of ritualized movements such as wing flapping, preening behind the wing, head shaking, drinking, and an upward stretch of the head. Newcomers to watching ducks are often unaware that these movements, which can be widely prevalent in a spring flock, are ritualized behaviors by males that highlight their plumage to females while warding off unwanted rivals. Like the Bufflehead, the Hooded Merganser also raises its crest, sometimes in conjunction with other displays.

Aside from the more subtle courtship displays, the male Hooded often shakes his head with his crest raised. After drawing attention to himself with this head shaking, he then throws his bead backward until it is lying against his back. This striking display, which is similar to the dramatic head-throw display of the goldeneyes, is accompanied by a hoarse, frog-like *craa-crrroooh* croaking call as the merganser returns his head to its normal position and turns his crest toward the female he is courting. Sometimes, rather than throwing back his head, the male follows his introductory head shakes by extending his neck, opening his bill, and emitting a hollow *pop* call. The female, meanwhile, may rapidly bob her head up and down, making a hoarse *gack* call as she points her bill toward the water.

Like the *Bucephala* and Common Merganser, Hooded Merganser nests in tree cavities. Female Hoodeds typically search for a cavity over or close to water, in a live or dead tree. They also will nest in broken-top snags and cavities formed by broken-off tree limbs. Hoodeds readily use nest boxes, and their populations may have benefitted from the many boxes installed in forested habitats for Wood Ducks. Females can lay up to 13 of their unusually spherical and thick-shelled eggs in a chosen cavity and will sometimes lay eggs in another Hooded's nest. Such "brood parasitism" has led to certain cavities containing more than 40 Hooded Merganser eggs.

Once females begin incubating their eggs, their mates abandon them. Although females are ensconced in a cavity, incubation can be a risky time. Incubating Hoodeds have been killed while on the nest by raccoons, minks, and black rat snakes, all of which may consume their eggs, too. Black bears, pine martens, starlings, Northern Flickers, and other woodpeckers also prey on eggs. When they are threatened, female Hoodeds will engage in a

OUT FOR A SWIM: A group of males and females glide along the smooth surface of a lake. During migration and winter, as many as 40 mergansers may gather together in one place.

"Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language." — *Aldo Leopold*

broken-wing distraction display to try to lure predators away from their nests.

After approximately 30 days of incubation, the eggs hatch over a two-day period. Hatching is virtually synchronous; only a few hours elapse between the hatching of the first and last eggs. The precocial, fuzzy-headed, down-covered ducklings are a chocolate brown with buff-colored cheeks, creamy throats and bellies, and several pale flecks on their backs. The young are ready to leave the nest within 24 hours of hatching. Having checked around her cavity to ensure that it is safe for her ducklings to emerge, the female makes soft, gravelly clucking calls below the cavity, and her intrepid ducklings begin leaping from their nest cavity into the water below, where they quickly congregate around her. If the ducklings leap out onto solid ground, they quickly follow the female as she leads them to the nearest water.

The ducklings begin feeding on aquatic insects on their first day out of the nest, catching their prey by submerging their heads in the water or making shallow dives. Approximately 70 days after leaving their nest cavity, the youngsters are capable of flight. In flight, the slender-bodied Hooded Merganser is dark above and light below and flies with rapid, shallow wing beats that make a distinctive whistling sound.

Although Hooded Merganser suffered the common avian fate of having its numbers reduced by overhunting in the early 20th century, today the fish-eating duck is not particularly prized by hunters. Out of the approximately 15 million ducks killed each year in the U.S., hunters take about 95,000 Hooded Mergansers — a still significant number. Hooded populations also have been affected by habitat modification — particularly logging that destroys their forested habitat and reduces the availability of nesting cavities.

Because Hoodeds need clear water to see their prey, deforestation, grazing, river channelization, and agricultural practices and other land uses that affect water quality and increase sediment loads in aquatic habitats negatively affect them. Despite these past and present anthropogenic pressures, the duck's populations appear to be stable and possibly even increasing in parts of its range.

After spotting my first beautiful Hooded Mergansers, I began seeing other birds that had somehow escaped my notice — a blue-winged American Kestrel hunting from a fencepost; an elegant pair of Cedar Waxwings preening in a fruit tree; a boldly spotted Wood Thrush filling a somber wood with ethereal song. In her famed Harry Potter book series, author J. K. Rowling wrote about "portkeys" — or enchanted objects that instantly brought anyone who touched them to a specific location. I suspect most birdwatchers have "portkey" birds — as I dubbed my Hooded Mergansers — that initially captured our attention and inadvertently transported us into an awareness of the birdlife that surrounds us.

Aldo Leopold touched on this phenomenon when he wrote: "Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language." Those of us who were first captivated by a striking bird will readily attest that as our awareness of the birds around us grew, so too did our appreciation for the less spectacular but ultimately no less riveting subtleties of plumages, forms, behaviors, and songs that make the world of birds so utterly fascinating and endlessly enthralling.

SEAFOOD SPECIAL: A female Hooded snags a crawfish with her serrated bill. The species primarily eats aquatic insects, fish, and crustaceans.

Sophie A. H. Osborn is a wildlife biologist and a natural history writer. She has worked on the conservation of more than a dozen bird species in the United States, Central America, and South America. She has written for Wyoming Wildlife *and* Sojourns *magazines, and her first book,* Condors in Canyon Country — The Return of the California Condor to the Grand Canyon Region, *won the 2007 National Outdoor Book Award in the Nature and Environment category, among other national and regional awards.*