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The visually striking male Common Merganser.

Birds of Barrington: THE COMMON MERGANSER

ONE OF THE PLEASURES of winter birding is the search for wintering waterfowl. Ducks that have bred in wetlands at more northerly latitudes fly south to swim and forage in ponds and lakes that are not covered with ice. In this relatively mild winter, local lakes are apt to lose their thin ice cover in mid-February, much earlier than usual. Ducks, including Common Mergansers, (*Mergus merganser*) will move in almost immediately. Water that stays open during the winter, such as that on the Fox River at the Carpentersville Dam, often hosts the species all winter long.

Despite its moniker, the Common Merganser is hardly common, either in appearance or in numbers. The male is a large and visually striking duck with bold black and gleaming white plumage that makes it easy to identify in flight, along with its very straight, pointed-at-both-ends profile. Its head actually is covered in dark green feathers

but they look black, or at least very dark, from a distance.

The female looks quite different. Similar in size, she has cinnamon-red head feathers that protrude in a shaggy crest on the back of her head. She lacks the black and white contrast feathers of her mate, sporting instead a back of gray plumage, and white wing bars and chest.

The beak of both sexes is carmen red, and long, thin, and sharp, suited for catching the fish and other freshwater creatures that mergansers relish. As diving ducks or “fish ducks” as they’re sometimes called—as opposed to surface-feeding ones—mergansers spend a lot of time underwater. So many times, I’ve pointed one out to others, only to have it instantly disappear from sight to pursue an underwater snack. The name “merganser” translates roughly from Latin as “plunging goose”. In fact, another nickname for the species is “goosander”.

At different times, we host three types of mergansers in the Barrington area: Common, Red-breasted, and Hooded. The Common is the largest, but least abundant locally. To see one, you need to visit an open body of water sometime between November and March. Common Mergansers are one of the last ducks to arrive in the fall and one of the first to leave in late winter or early spring. They are apt to appear at any lake that hosts fish for them to consume. Some local favorites are Baker’s Lake, Honey Lake, Hawley Lake, Lake Barrington, and if you happen to travel to the city, Lake Michigan. There is time still left to find Common Mergansers nearby before they take off for their breeding grounds, not to return until late next fall. U



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A female Common Merganser with duckling.

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PHOTO: LINDA M. BARRETT

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