

General Field Notes

General Field Notes briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, significant nesting records, or summaries of such items.

First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.

Second Nesting Record of Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) in North Carolina

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In recent years, there have been regular sightings of Common Mergansers (*Mergus merganser*) along the Green River in Polk County, NC. In the spring and early summer of 2008, Jay Davies, former fishery biologist, and Master Officer Toby Jenkins of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission made several sightings of a female Common Merganser with young on the lower Green River where it flows into Lake Adger in Polk County, North Carolina. These sightings were not reported or documented at that time.

Later that year on the 2008 Tryon, NC, Christmas Bird Count, Davies and Zora Rhodes saw and recorded a male Common Merganser on the lower Green River near Lake Adger. Subsequently, several male and female Common Mergansers have been seen on the Green River and Lake Adger and were recorded for the 2009 and 2010 Tryon, NC, Christmas Bird Counts.

Davies, Jenkins, Rhodes, Jerry Johnson, and others saw the birds continually throughout the winter months of 2011. Davies saw a pair of Common Mergansers sitting together on a rock in the Green River at the end of March 2011.

Evidence of nesting

On 5 June 2011, Jennifer Metzger took a picture of a female merganser with young on the Green River near Lake Adger and submitted it to Jenkins. On 13 June, after several attempts by Johnson and Rhodes to document the female, Johnson was able to take a close-up photograph with a Canon 50D 75-300 IS while kayaking (Fig.1). The photograph captures the female's

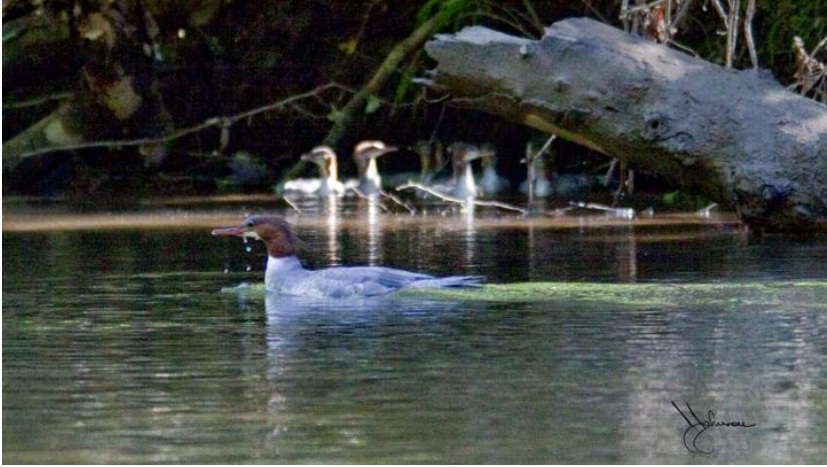


Figure 1. Female Common Merganser with 10 young on 13 June 2011 on Green River near Lake Adger. White throat patch confirms identification as female Common Merganser. Photo by Jerry Johnson.

white throat patch, which confirms that she was indeed a Common Merganser, and it shows her with approximately 10 young.

On 25 June, while canoeing the lower Green River into Lake Adger, Davies and Rhodes counted 11 Common Mergansers grouped together. On 28 June, Johnson photographed 11 Common Mergansers verifying the female Common Merganser with 10 young (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Group of 11 Common Mergansers photographed on Green River, 28 June 2011. Photo by Jerry Johnson.

On 8 July, Jenkins photographed 16 Common Mergansers on Lake Adger. On 10 July, Johnson also counted the 16 birds together on the lower Green River. This crèche of juveniles suggests that more than one brood of Common Mergansers may be present in the area.

The 13 June photo was submitted to and verified by several members of the NC Bird Records Committee, making this the second record of a Common Merganser nesting in North Carolina. The first record was documented in 1938 when a pair nested successfully in a stump at Bennett's Pond in Chowan County, NC (Potter et al. 1980).

Discussion

Since the early 1990s, there have been several Common Mergansers reported during the summer months on Lake Jordan in the eastern piedmont of North Carolina but without known nesting (LeGrand 1990). The Green River nesting record may indicate a return of this species to its former range. According to historical research by David S. Lee (1999):

The Common Merganser breeds throughout the forested boreal Holarctic. In eastern North America it presently nests only sporadically south of New England. Brimley (1941) reported the species as nesting in Chowan County, NC, in 1938. Kiff (1989) reviewed historical information, obtained unpublished museum egg data, and concluded that the species historically nested throughout much of the southeastern United States. He mentioned records from western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, and Tennessee, and he cited a report from Audubon of nesting in Kentucky. Thus, it appears that nesting in the South was formerly widespread and that the local decline of these birds corresponds with the time beavers (*Castor canadensis*) disappeared from the region. Common Mergansers also experienced a breeding range contraction in Europe in this same general time period.

With the return of the beaver to North Carolina, there should be den trees for nesting cavities available throughout the state (Potter et al. 2006). The section of the Green River where the Common Mergansers are found provides good nesting habitat for these ducks similar to good nesting habitat found on forested stream sites farther north. Starting in Henderson County, North Carolina, the Green River flows first into Lake Summit, which catches much of its sediment load. Next, it flows through the Green River Game Lands before it reaches Lake Adger. This section is rather pristine with secondary-growth forests and several beaver dams. Thus, there are many large den trees with cavities excavated by Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*). These cavities provide good nesting sites, a known limiting factor for the Common Merganser.

Being a piscivorous species, the Common Merganser needs an abundance of aquatic invertebrates and fish to rear its young. In fact, it is an important

indicator species for the health of aquatic ecosystems (Mallory and Metz 1999). According to William T. Russ II, Western Aquatic Wildlife Diversity Biologist for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (pers. comm.), this section of the Green River where the birds are found has very good water quality. Based on a 6 May 2010 fish sample at a boating access area on Green River, it has one of the highest counts for diversity and abundance of fish in the Broad River Basin, which includes the Green River.

Johnson, Rhodes, and others plan to monitor the presence of the Common Merganser in the lower part of the Green River flowing into Lake Adger in the coming years.

Literature cited

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Received 23 August 2011, accepted 3 November 2011