

### Hooded Merganser *Lophodytes cucullatus*

Finding the ornate and striking adult male Hooded Merganser in San Diego County is an uncommon delight. Males and females combined, only 30 to 40 Hooded Mergansers are noted countywide each year. Though it occurs occasionally on larger lakes and coastal wetlands, this winter visitor prefers small freshwater ponds.

**Winter:** The Hooded Merganser is widely scattered through San Diego County, but it has a few favored sites: a private business park along San Marcos Creek at Questhaven Road (J8; up to 14 on 27 January 1998, J. O. Zimmer), Santee Lakes (O12/P12; up to 12 on 19 January 2000, G. Chaniot), and a pond in La Posta Creek 1 mile northeast of La Posta Ranch (S24; six on 9 December 1998 and 23 January 2000, L. J. Hargrove).

Though the Hooded Merganser avoids San Diego Bay and occurs in most other coastal wetlands only rarely, it is regular in the flood-control channel at the mouth of the San Diego River and in adjacent Famosa Slough (R8), where numbers ranged up to three on 22 January 2001 (P. R. Pryde). With records from Palomar Mountain (D14; three from 31 December 1999 to 9 February 2000, P. D. Jorgensen) and Lake Cuyamaca (M20; one on 7 December 2001, R. Ronin), the Hooded Merganser is as likely to occur in the higher mountains as at most places along the coast. In the Anza-Borrego Desert there are

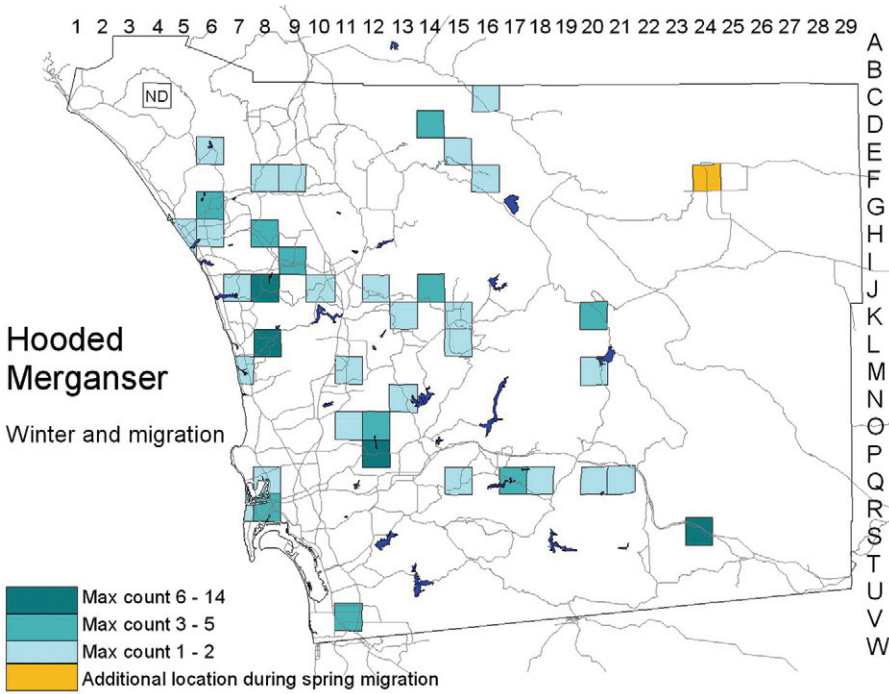


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

just four records of single individuals, all from ponds in the Borrego Valley.

**Migration:** From 1997 to 2002 dates for the Hooded Merganser in San Diego County ranged from 3 November (1999, one at Borrego Springs, F24, R. Thériault) to 24 March (2000, two at the San Diego River mouth, R7, M. Billings). Extreme dates recorded are apparently still the same as reported by Unitt (1984), 25 October and 30 March, except for a straggler at Santee Lakes 28 May 1977 (AB 31:1041, 1977).

**Conservation:** The Hooded Merganser has never been common in San Diego County. Christmas bird counts



suggest the number reaching this area stayed at about the same low level for decades. An increase, however, may have started about the time the atlas study was initiated in 1997. The Rancho Santa Fe Christmas bird count, for example, averaged only 0.6 Hooded Mergansers from 1980 to 1996. But from 1997 to 2003 it averaged 6.2. The Escondido count, though initiated in January 1986, did not record the Hooded Merganser until 2000, yet in 2002 it yielded 10. The Hooded Merganser, with its preference for small lakes, is a logical beneficiary of the importation of water and installation of reservoirs.