

### Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*

The Common Merganser's distribution in San Diego County is the converse of the Red-breasted's. Both species are winter visitors, but the Common frequents inland lakes and only rarely visits coastal wetlands. It prefers lakes in the foothills and mountains over those in the coastal lowland.

**Winter:** The lakes on which the Common Merganser winters in greatest numbers are Wohlford (H12/I12; up to 160 on 29 December 2001, N. Osborn), Cuyamaca (M20; up to 42 on 18 February 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan), and Henshaw (G17). At the last, our highest count from 1997 to 2002 was of 60 on 29 February 2000 (J. L. Coatsworth). The median on Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts 1981–2002 was 18, but large flocks are occasional. The count on 23 December 1996 yielded an exceptional 800. Smaller numbers are regular on El Capitan (N16/O16; up to 12 on 6 February 2001, D. C. Seals, 16 January 2002, J. R. Barth) and Morena (T21/S21/S22; up to 12 on 16 February 1998, S. E. Smith) and less frequent on other foothill and mountain lakes. Even minor ponds in the mountains get the occasional flock of Common Mergansers, such as 10 at Wynola (J19) 17 January 1999 (S. E. Smith) and 10 at the Lucky 5 Ranch, Laguna Mountains (N21/N22), 12 January 2002 (G. L. Rogers).

In the coastal lowland away from the steeper hills the Common Merganser is rare. During the atlas period we noted only a few scattered individuals in this zone. In coastal wetlands the species is even scarcer, with just four sightings 1997–2002 and only one of more than a single bird (three in the Tijuana River estuary, V10, 19 January 1998, R. B. Riggan). The various systematic surveys of San Diego Bay yielded only five in the intake channel for



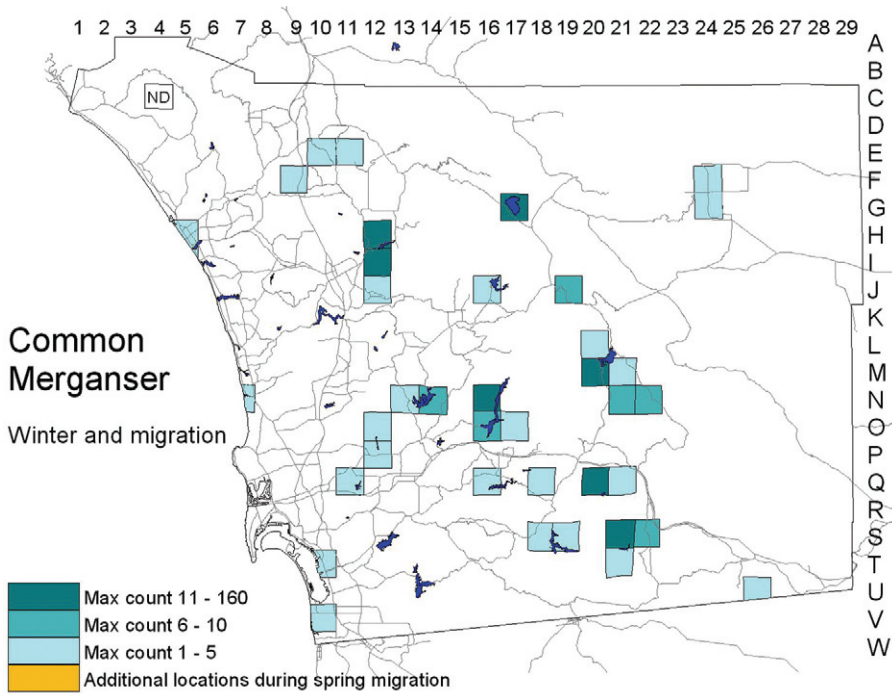
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

the power plant at Chula Vista (U10) 7 February 1989 (Macdonald et al. 1990) and single birds near the south end of the Silver Strand (U10) 29 December 1993 and 5 January 1994 (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994).

Records for the Anza–Borrego Desert are all from ponds in Borrego Springs (F24/G24): three or four from 3 to 31 March 1991, one on 18 December 1992 (A. G. Morley), and one from 11 December 1999 to 18 February 2000 (M. L. Gabel)

**Migration:** The Common Merganser occurs in San Diego County primarily from 12 November (1978, 10 at Lake Henshaw, D. W. Povey) to March. One at Lake Cuyamaca 14 April 2001 (M. Billings) and two at Lake Morena 26 April 1998 (S. E. Smith) were exceptionally late. The only summer straggler recorded was one at Lower Otay Lake (U13/U14) 15 June–26 September 1983 (R. E. Webster, D. W. Povey, AB 37:1027, 1983; 38:246, 1984).

**Conservation:** The variation from year to year on Escondido (including Lake Wohlford) and Lake Henshaw



Christmas bird counts is so great that any trend in Common Merganser numbers through the 1980s and 1990s is unclear. The flock on Lake Wohlford, however, was no more than 75 from 1986 to 2000 but reached 160 in 2001 and 101 in 2002. In any case, before the building of dams and the stocking of reservoirs with fish, the Common Merganser would have found practically no habitat in San Diego County.

**Taxonomy:** The New World subspecies of the Common Merganser is *M. m. americanus* Cassin, 1852.