

### Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*

Of California's three mergansers, the Red-breasted is the only one with a preference for salt water. The Red-breasted Merganser is a common winter visitor on San Diego Bay but much scarcer at other coastal wetlands and rare on inland lakes. Almost all Red-breasted Mergansers reaching San Diego County are females or immatures with white breasts and rusty heads.

**Winter:** San Diego Bay is by far the principal site for the Red-breasted Merganser in San Diego County. In weekly surveys of the central and south bay from April 1993 to April 1994 Manning (1995) recorded an average of about 70 in January, the peak month, and a maximum of 117 on 21 January 1994. In weekly surveys of the salt works and adjacent south bay from February 1993 to February 1994 Stadlander and Konecny (1994) recorded an average of about 100 in December, the peak month in that study, and a maximum of 184 on 29 December 1993. From 1997 to 2002 the maximum reported in a single atlas square was 45 in southwestern San Diego Bay (U10) 18 December 1998 (P. R. Pryde). Numbers in the central and north bay are smaller than in the south bay. In weekly surveys of the central bay (National City to bridge) Preston and Mock (1995) found a maximum of 32 on 20 December 1994, whereas in weekly surveys of the north bay (bridge to mouth) Mock et al. (1994) found a maximum of 44 on 10 February 1993 and 7 December 1994.

Elsewhere along the coast the merganser is less numerous and less consistent but occurs both within estuaries and on the ocean near shore. Numbers as high as 30 along the beach at Encinitas (K6) 1 January 1999 (J. Ciarletta) and 18 in the west basin of Batiquitos Lagoon (J6) 28 December 1999 (R. and A. Campbell) are unusual. From

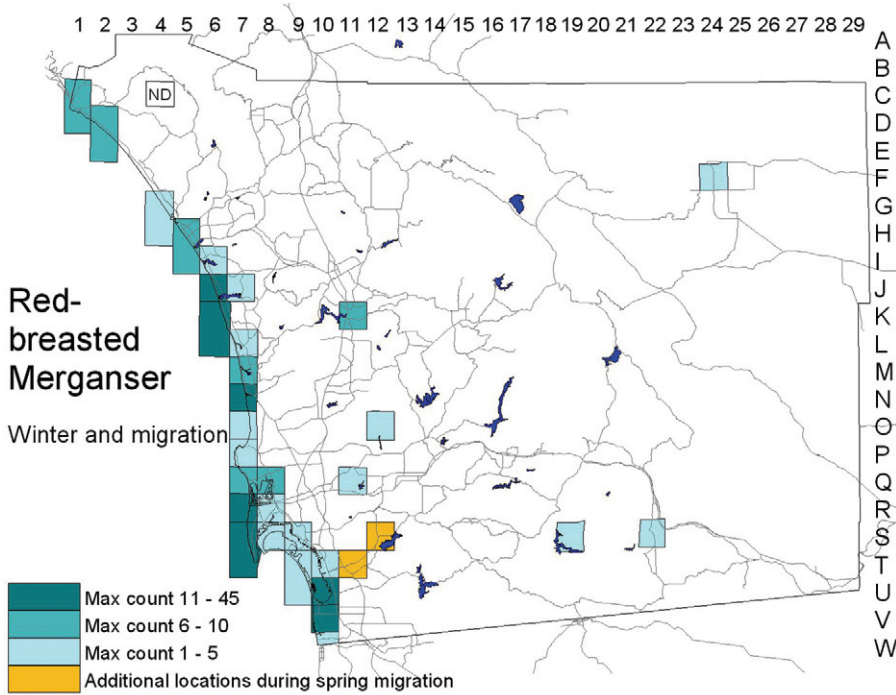


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

1976 to 2002 the Oceanside Christmas bird count averaged 9.1 Red-breasted Mergansers; from 1980 to 2003 the Rancho Santa Fe count averaged 8.8.

Though the Red-breasted is by far the commonest merganser along the coast, in San Diego County it is by far the scarcest inland. Nevertheless, atlas observers noted at least 14 individuals inland, with up to six at Lake Hodges (K11) 13 December 1999 (B. C. Moore) and three at the upper end of Lake Morena (S22) 20 December 1997 (R. and S. L. Breisch). Repeated sightings of one at Lake Murray (Q11) in 1997–98, 1998–99, and 1999–2000 (N. Osborn) were possibly of one individual returning for successive winters. Winter records for the Borrego Valley are of single birds at the Roadrunner Club (F24) 25 January 1990 (A. G. Morley) and 30 January 2000 (P. D. Jorgensen) and at Club Circle (G24) 4 January 1995 (M. L. Gabel).

**Migration:** Fall arrival of the Red-breasted Merganser has been recorded as early as 4 October (1978, Unitt



1984), but regular surveys of San Diego Bay 1993–95 found no arrival until November. In both 1993 and 1994 the earliest date on which Mock et al. (1994) and Preston and Mock (1995) recorded the species was 9 November. Spring departure is in March and early April, with a few stragglers remaining later. From 1997 to 2001 our latest was one at Batiquitos Lagoon (J7) 4 May 2001 (C. C. Gorman). Birds that fail to migrate and remain through the summer were not reported during the atlas period but can be expected occasionally, such as two on central

San Diego Bay to 16 August 1994 (Preston and Mock 1995), one at the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4) 19 July 1995, and nine at the Tijuana River mouth (V10) 14 August 1978 (P. Unitt).

Because the Red-breasted Merganser is so frequent a spring migrant at the Salton Sea, on par with the Black Brant and Surf Scoter (Patten et al. 2003), one might expect that the merganser uses the same migration corridor across eastern San Diego County. But there are only three records suggesting this, of 12 at Lake Henshaw (G17) 8 April 1981, five there 16 April 1982 (R. Higson, AB 36: 893, 1982), and one at Lower Willows, Coyote Creek (D23), 26 March 1993 (ABDSP database).

**Conservation:** With a high of 526 in 1975 and a low of 21 in 1994, results of San Diego Christmas bird counts suggest that the numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers on San Diego Bay vary considerably from year to year. But there is no clear trend. Because of its diet of fish, the Red-breasted Merganser is susceptible to concentration of contaminants as they rise up the food chain and is a species suitable for monitoring the biological health of San Diego Bay.