

## Distinguishing the Mergansers

Jeff's post mentioning recent eBird reports of Common Mergansers at Bolsa Chica without any documentation touches a sore spot with several people (not just us eBird reviewers) who monitor coastal bird reports in Orange County. This is an issue that we see every winter, where there are multiple reports of Common Mergansers along the coast, typically at Bolsa Chica, many times without any accompanying reports of Red-breasted Mergansers, and in greater than 9 times out of 10, without any photos or solid documentation. Nearly invariably when photos are taken, they are of misidentified Red-breasted Mergansers. With that in mind, I thought it would be helpful to distinguish preferred habitat types and basic field marks between these two merganser species (and I've included Hooded Merganser as a bonus!).

**Hooded Mergansers in winter** are most often found on small creeks and small, shallow ponds, often but not exclusively in areas that have vegetation along the banks for cover. While they prefer inland freshwater areas, they can still occasionally be found in the coastal zone and/or in brackish waters, although it is rare and highly irregular for them to be found directly on the coast. The presence of a Hooded Merganser at Bolsa Chica this fall was truly notable for the location. Your best bet for finding Hooded Mergansers in Orange County is to look in protected freshwater creeks. Oso Creek at Forbes Road, Oso Creek upstream of Marguerite, Aliso Creek between Awma and Alicia, San Diego Creek downstream of I-405, and similar areas are where Hooded Mergansers can often reliably be found, as well as occasionally in suburban parks (Heritage Park in Irvine seems to be among the more reliable). Easily the cutest and most photogenic of the three North American merganser species, Hooded Mergansers are known for their gigantic crests that they raise up and down. Males have black and white heads (the crest is primarily white when raised) with brown flanks and a white breast with two black bars as well as bright yellow eyes. Females are generally brown with drabber yellow eyes.

**Common Mergansers in winter** are by and large a species of deep, large, freshwater bodies, including both rivers and lakes. It is uncommon for them to occur on small, shallow creeks and rare for them to be in salt or brackish water. Every once in a while I will receive correctly identified photos of

Common Mergansers along the coast, such as a photo of 13 obvious Common Mergansers in flight taken on 5 Jan 2018 at Dana Point Harbor. They may irregularly be found on the larger lacustrine water bodies in the county, but your best bet for finding Common Mergansers in Orange County is by far along the "Upper" Santa Ana River in Anaheim, where they often congregate together in the Burris Basin area and in the river proper, particularly upstream of Tustin Avenue. Common Mergansers have thicker-based bills than Red-breasted Mergansers. Males are generally characterized by dark green heads and bright white sides and breasts, while females have dark rusty-brown heads, gray sides, and a distinctive, well-demarcated white chin as well as a sharp cutoff from the brown head to the gray breast. Both sexes have dark eyes.

**Red-breasted Mergansers in winter** are a salt and brackish water species that is found almost invariably on the immediate coast in Orange County (e.g., the ocean, estuaries, lagoons, coastal riverine waters), occasionally extending inland a few miles where there are continuous brackish waters coming up from the ocean. The presence of a single bird on the "Upper" Santa Ana River this fall was very rare because of how far inland it is. Although they can be found anywhere along the coast, your best bet for finding Red-breasted Mergansers in Orange County is to go to the place where they are most frequently misidentified: Bolsa Chica! Red-breasted Mergansers have noticeably thinner-based bills than Common Mergansers. Males have green heads, a white collar on their necks, and generally a brown and black breast and gray sides. Females are very similar to female Common Mergansers but their heads are much duller brown and the border between their brown heads and gray breasts is more diffuse. Both sexes have shaggy crests (distinctive when visible) and red eyes.

While there is some overlap, as you can see the three North American species of merganser generally occupy distinct habitat types...but that doesn't mean that they are only ever found in those types. We encourage thorough documentation of any birds that are found outside of their typical range in the county.

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