

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

THE ENIGMA OF THE RED-BREASTED MERGANSERS

By Clive E. Goodwin

When I first came to Cobourg in 1991 the Wensleys told me they were getting Red-breasted Mergansers regularly during the winter off the east end of Cobourg. I was surprised, as I'd been heavily involved in coordinating the winter waterfowl counts for many years, and there was nothing in any of the information I had to suggest more than the very occasional Red-breasted Merganser in winter here. Generally, Dr. Murray Speirs' comments in his 1985 *Birds of Ontario* that 'a few sometimes winter along the Lake Ontario shoreline [among] the much more abundant Common Mergansers' pretty well summed up the situation, and their numbers tended to diminish as one went east.

But Lori and Bill were quite right, of course. There often are numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers off the Wensley home in winter; and that's strange, because, on the whole, they really are quite uncommon at that time, although there seems to have been a steady increase generally over the past decade or so. Welcome to the enigmatic world of the Red-breasted Merganser.

Another puzzling episode with this species came in 2004, when we were helping Martha Robinson doing some atlassing in her Colborne square. The Lake Ontario shoreline between Wicklow Beach and Lakeport is normally inaccessible, as the one road in this section – MacGlennon Rd. – ends before it reaches the lake. Just south-east of this road is MacGlennon Point, which gives views of the shoreline in both directions. It could be interesting to arrange to go down there and see what could be found, so on June 23 I did. On emerging from a screen of cedars along the shoreline a big flock of female-plumaged Red-breasted Mergansers – at least 100 birds – erupted from the beach.

This species is normally supposed to be a bird primarily both of boreal forest and of larger waterbodies such as estuaries and the like. The last atlas shows them in a very few places along the lower Great Lakes, with Presqu'île being the only Northumberland location. This is consistent with what is known, as they will nest in colonies of other waterbirds, and at these times they can be semicolonial. From what I can make out the Presqu'île birds may number at most some 7 or 8 pairs. Now the birds in my flock were not the only Red-breasteds present: closer to me was an apparently mated pair swimming away very furtively, and as this species nests very late and the pair selects the nest site together, I felt pretty sure that was exactly what they were doing. But why were the other birds there?

We have little precedent in the database for such a large number in summer. In fact, we only have 140 summer records in all [out of 4552 total], and only two others are of over 25 birds. One, 65 birds seen by Paul Bridges on August 2, 1998 at Wesleyville, comes closest. The other was of 40 birds seen by the Wensleys in 2004, the day after the MacGlennon Point sighting! As far as I know there's no mention in print of flocks of summering non-breeders, but as the females are not felt to breed until they are three years

old there seems to be every likelihood of this - somewhere. Maybe gatherings of such birds are regular in secluded areas along the lakes, and we have simply been missing them. But Martha visited MacGlennon Point again in summer 2005 and there were no mergansers anywhere!

The other problem is that Red-breasted Mergansers are extremely common birds in migration, so maybe a 100 or so in June just do not seem very interesting. The largest single count of Red-breasteds in our area is of 10,000 birds, and we have 67 records of over 1000. But there are puzzles even when the birds are at their most abundant. Lori and Bill's records, consisting of 2500 almost daily counts in good habitat over more than 15 years, provide the clearest picture of numbers.

But what a picture it is. Joy looked at the bar chart of their records and compared it to the New York skyline! Some years there are lots and some years they're in much smaller numbers. Sometimes the fall peak is in October and sometimes in November. To try to make some order out of it all I divided the totals into the four seasons, and then arbitrarily split the years into two blocks – 1991-7 and 1998- 2005. Then I averaged it all two ways [thank heaven for computers!], one by the number of records, and the other by the total number of birds seen. And if you're still with me, the results are quite intriguing.

First, though, I should clarify what the 'total number of birds seen' means. If you report the same 10 birds every day for a week, the database will end up with 7 records and a total of 70 birds seen – the same ten birds - so it's easy to misinterpret the totals and overestimate the number of birds actually present. For clarity, let's call the 70 a total of 'bird days'. On a routine field trip this doesn't normally matter, as you're not likely to make daily trips to the same place, but with daily records it does. If you also look at the number of records it will give you a good idea whether an increase in numbers is real, or simply a reflection of more observations being made.

All that said, in winter Lori and Bill had an average of 431 merganser bird days between 1991 and '97, but over three times as many –1460 – from 1998 to 2005. There were also about double the number of reports [25 vs. 52], so there have been both more birds seen and sightings on more days. The species really does seem to be more common in the winter than it used to be.

Spring and summer, with averages of 1700 and 30 bird days respectively, don't seem to have changed very much over the years, but the fall changes are dramatic. The period 1991-7 had an average of 1533 bird days [not very different from spring] but 1998 to 2005 averaged 13,728 bird days, an almost ten-fold increase! The number of records has almost doubled as well, but mostly it would seem there are more – many more – birds.

Why? Where are they coming from, and why was there a sudden increase? I wish I had a nice, neat explanation. Maybe I'll be able to figure something out later; but right now, well, Red-breasted Mergansers can be enigmatic birds!