

## Hooded Merganser

Members of the merganser family have long, slender, narrow, serrated bills that are adapted to catching and holding small fish. Mergansers are also called “sawbills.” All of the mergansers have crests, but none like the Hooded Merganser, whose fan-shaped, white and black crest makes this duck one of the most spectacular of all waterfowl. When the drake has his crest fully flared, his identity is easy to ascertain.



Three mergansers are in North America: hooded, red-breasted and common. The Hooded Merganser is the only family member indigenous to North America. All three species occur in Texas, but you need to go to the Texas Panhandle to see them. Recently I was fortunate to see all three species on a small reservoir in Amarillo. Red-breasted Mergansers winter in brackish to salt water along the Gulf of Mexico. Hooded Mergansers can be found over much of the state, including the Hill Country, during the winter and migratory seasons.

Hooded Merganser males, or drakes, are very dapper in their breeding plumage. A

small duck in comparison with other ducks, these mergansers have pointed wings and are very fast fliers. The males have crests which can be opened and closed like fans. When fully opened during courtship rituals or when engaging other males, the drake's crest is white with a black trim around the edges. When closed during rest periods or flying, the crest is flattened and the white appears only as a line.

His thin bill is black and shorter than the length of his head. His head, neck, and back are black, excluding his crest. He has a bright yellow eye. His breast is white with two black diagonal stripes in front of his brownish flanks. He might not be as gaudy and colorful as the Wood Duck drake, but his contrasting plumage makes him one of our most beautiful waterfowl. His ability to manipulate his appearance by changing his crest adds to his exceptional dapperness.

The female Hooded Merganser has a reddish brown crest that offers little contrast to the earth-tone colors in her plumage. She and her mate have white secondary feathers in their wings which are quite evident in flight. Hooded mergansers nest in tree cavities, so the female's subtle plumage helps her hide with her ducklings in the brownish vegetation found along woodland streams.

I mentioned in my last article that I witnessed the courtship of three drakes and two females during my trip to the winter Texas Ornithological Society in Amarillo. The setting was a small reservoir with cattail reeds forming the backdrop for the ritual. The males had their crests wide open as they swam in front of the hens. The drakes tucked their bills against their breasts and rotated their necks in an oval loop as they bobbed their breasts in the water. It was obvious that the spectacular open crests were the key attraction of their “water dance.”

The females watched the males perform but appeared non-committal as they bobbed in the water. The ritual lasted for a few minutes before the drakes took a rest break. The ceremony was repeated several times, with no acceptance moves made by the females. The females swam away leaving the males time to preen for the next event. It would be interesting to be able to ascertain what causes a female merganser to choose her breeding partner – was it totally looks, was it or whether certain actions the males did to make her take notice, or was it a combination of both. We will never fully understand the dynamics of the selection process, but they are definitely intriguing to watch.

One caution when observing our winter ducks along the two forks of the Guadalupe River or on small ponds, male Hooded Mergansers could be confused with male Buffleheads. Both are small and have a great deal of white in their plumages. Buffleheads have large white patches on their heads in the same location as the merganser’s crest. The Bufflehead patch is not trimmed in black and the patch cannot be opened or closed. The bufflehead patch is also used in their courtship rituals. The female bufflehead has a white face spot that is missing on the female merganser.

As spring approaches, I am sure the hormones will be urging the males to court the females, so be aware of these small ducks being in our area. If you are lucky, you could witness an impromptu show in a moment’s notice.