



# MONTEREY NEWS



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## Brightly Colored Mergansers

Few ducks in the Berkshires are more eye-catching in spring than the male Common Merganser. The boldly black and iridescent green crest on its head is supported by a pristine pure white body, which itself is offset by a bright orange bill up front and webbed feet in the back. Like the green-headed mallards, Common Mergansers are among the first to appear after the ice is out in our local waters such as the Konkapot River behind the general store as well as above beaver dams in Rawson Brook. A female is vastly different in color, painted with earth-bound shades of brown by mother nature. However, she is similarly crowned as the males, with a flowing wind-swept crest that flares behind the movement of her head, as illustrated.

Mergansers are diving ducks. They are excellent swimmers and use their sawtoothed bill to get a grip on fish and gulp them down. As high-profile competitors in local waters, they have learned to survive by quickly ducking out of sight, diving below the surface of the water, with the flash of a fisherman's gun. Sometimes, when in danger, they will take to the air, gradually rising from the water using both feet and wings to patter upward over the surface before getting enough impetus to lift into the air. Otherwise, they spend much of their time on the water hunting, loafing, even sleeping in small flocks.

Like the Wood Duck, the new hatchlings are precocial, because shortly after they are born they are called by their mother to climb out of the cavity high in a tree, such as the ancient maples along Curtis Road on the way to Gould Farm, to drop like a stone one by one, frantically flapping tiny wings, if only to hit the ground running toward the nearest water.

Mergansers are very sensitive to changes in their environment. If there is a break in the food chain of their local waters, they will be the first to know. Their most common health problems are caused by toxic chemicals that get into the water due to soil erosion, runoff, or acid rain (created by air pollution). Their carnivorous diet may vary from small fish,



water insects, mollusks, crustaceans, and a few frogs. All are dependent on a healthy aquatic environment.

Common Mergansers are short migration waterfowl, among the first to arrive in the spring, and the last to leave in the fall. Their re-appearance in Monterey in the seasonal reaches of Lake Garfield and the Housatonic watershed of both males and females portend another season of nesting and reproduction. The preservation of our water conditions and aquatic habitat for waterfowl like the colorful Merganser is essential, and will allow future generations to appreciate them.

—George Emmons