

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

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COMMON MERGANSER

*Mergus merganser*

Family: ANATIDAE  
B105

Order: ANSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Uncommon to locally common breeder on lakes, ponds, and large streams of the Coast, Klamath, Cascade, and Sierra Nevada Ranges. Winters in small flocks on large, fresh waters in the Coast, Klamath, and Cascade Ranges, and foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Also occurs in the Central Valley, Modoc Plateau, Transverse, and Peninsular Ranges in nonbreeding seasons. Found commonly on the Colorado River November through April, and uncommonly on the Salton Sea.

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Forages in clear water 0.5 to 1.8 m (1.5 to 6.1 ft) deep. Swims on the surface, searches underwater, and dives for fish. Also probes among submerged rocks to flush out prey (Anderson et al. 1974). In Canada, fed on perch, carp, trout, salmon, fish eggs, aquatic invertebrates, frogs, newts, tadpoles, and small amounts of aquatic plants (White 1957). Duckling feeds on insects caught beneath the water.

**Cover:** Dives for cover.

**Reproduction:** Breeds in deciduous riparian habitats in later forest stages, along streams, rivers, and lakes. Nests in cavities or dark recesses in trees, snags, and stumps near water; especially old cavities of pileated woodpecker. Also may nest in caves in cliffs, in tangles of roots, beneath rocks, and in nest boxes; occasionally in holes in buildings. Nest height 0-61 m (0-200 ft). Nest lined, and eggs covered, with grass and down.

**Water:** Requires bodies of fresh water, and associated vegetation, for feeding, roosting, nesting, and rearing of young.

**Pattern:** Uses lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams of coastal ranges and interior foothills. During breeding season, closely associated with riparian woodlands.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Active yearlong. Mostly diurnal, but some movements and migrations occur at night.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Inland migration between large bodies of water usually nocturnal; movements along coast usually diurnal.

**Home Range:** In northwestern California, broods were spaced an average 5.6 km (3.5 mi) apart on rivers (Foreman 1975, 1976). Home range generally includes 3.2 to 4.8 km (2-3 mi) of river (Palmer 1976).

Territory: No data found on territory size. Breeding areas also contain rocks for loafing and roosting. Flocks together in nonbreeding seasons.

Reproduction: Breeds late March through late September; peak activity in June. Clutch averages 9 eggs; range 6-17. Eggs laid on successive days. Female incubates eggs 28-32 days. Male leaves nest area when incubation begins. Precocial young tended by female only; independent at about 5 wk.

Niche: Eggs and young vulnerable to predators such as raccoons and tree-climbing snakes. Seasonal movements may be influenced by shortage of food and by ice (Bellrose 1976). Also vulnerable to loss of riparian vegetation, especially large trees and snags, and the use of pesticides on watersheds. Pair may abandon a stream if it becomes turbid prior to nesting.

#### REFERENCES

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Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. California's Wildlife. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.