

Hooded Merganser

Lophodytes cucullatus

“Hooded” is something of an understatement for this extravagantly crested little duck. Adult males are a sight to behold, with sharp black-and-white patterns set off by chestnut flanks. Females get their own distinctive elegance from their cinnamon crest. Hooded Mergansers are fairly common on small ponds and rivers, where they dive for fish, crayfish, and other food, seizing it in their thin, serrated bills. They nest in tree cavities; the ducklings depart with a bold leap to the forest floor when only one day old.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Hooded Mergansers are small ducks with a thin bill and a fan-shaped, collapsible crest that makes the head look oversized and oblong. In flight, the wings are thin and the tail is relatively long and rounded.

Color Pattern

Adult male Hooded Mergansers are black above, with a white breast and rich chestnut flanks. The black head has a large white patch that varies in size when the crest is raised or lowered, but is always prominent. Females and immatures are gray and brown, with warm tawny-cinnamon tones on the head.

Behavior

Hooded Mergansers dive to catch aquatic insects, crayfish, and small fish. Males court females by expanding their white, sail-like crests and making very low, gravelly, groaning calls. Hooded Mergansers fly distinctively, with shallow, very rapid wingbeats.

Habitat

Look for Hooded Mergansers on small bodies of freshwater. In summer, these small ducks nest in holes in trees, often near freshwater ponds or rivers. For winter, they move to larger bodies of freshwater, marshes, and protected saltwater bays.

Cool Facts

- Hooded Mergansers find their prey underwater by sight. They can actually change the refractive properties of their eyes to improve their underwater vision. In addition, they have an extra eyelid, called a “nictitating membrane,” which is transparent and helps protect the eye during swimming, like a pair of goggles.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 15.7 - 19.3 inches
- Wingspan - 23.6 - 26.0 inches
- Weight - 16.0 - 31.0 ounces

