

Nikon PHOTO QUIZ

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For this quiz, we feature a photo of a bird that even the most novice observers would readily identify as a duck.

Based on this duck's long, slender, cylindrical, and saw-tooth edged bill, we can confidently identify it as one of the four species of merganser on the Ontario checklist. Furthermore, the reddish colour of the bill allows us to easily eliminate both the accidental Smew (in which both sexes have a blue-gray bill) and the Hooded Merganser (in which males have a black bill and females a yellowish bill). Both of these smaller species of merganser also have much shorter bills than the bird in this photograph.

Therefore, in rather short order, we know that our quiz bird is either a Red-breasted Merganser or a Common Merganser. While discrimination of breeding-plumaged adult males of these two species is quite straightforward, females and males in eclipse plumage can be more difficult to separate from one another. This photo will provide us with an excellent opportunity to review the characters that are useful in identifying those individuals.

This bird's overall gray body colour and brownish head colour indicate that it is either a female or a male in the eclipse plumage of summer. We are fortunate to have a photograph of this bird with its wings spread, for this allows us to accurately determine the sex. It lacks the distinct, contrasting,

dark cheek stripe that would be evident on a juvenile merganser of either of these species. Adult male mergansers of both of these species retain extensively white lesser coverts in eclipse plumage. However, our quiz bird shows uniformly gray lesser coverts, indicating that it is an adult female. Our remaining task is therefore to separate the adult female Red-breasted Merganser from the adult female Common Merganser.

Adult female Common Mergansers have darker cinnamon-brown head colouration compared to the lighter, tawny-brown head of the female Red-breasted Merganser. Our quiz bird exhibits the darker cinnamon-toned head colour of the former species.

Although both species exhibit a crested appearance to the head, most field guides stress the difference between the shorter crest and more regularly rounded head shape of the female Common Merganser versus the longer, wispiest, spiky crest of the female Red-breasted Merganser. While this field mark is generally very useful on most birds, it is most useful in separating birds with a relaxed head posture, and can be quite variable in its usefulness on birds which have been recently diving or preening. In a bird apparently bathing and about to rear up and flick the wings, as this bird appears, it is probably not too useful a characteristic, as the head is not in a relaxed posture. The spiky appearance

to the crest of this bird is therefore not a character we should rely too heavily upon.

The bird's bill is quite crucial in diagnosing the proper identification. Common Merganser females tend to have bright, blood-red bills, whereas Red-breasted Mergansers tend to have duskier, dark-red bills. Our quiz bird seems more consistent with the former pattern.

Common Mergansers have fairly thick, very broad-based bills, whereas Red-breasted Mergansers have much thinner and more narrowly-based bills. Our quiz bird clearly shows a thick and very broadly-based bill that corresponds better with the Common Merganser.

The relative position of the nostril of the bill is also very useful. The forward edge of the bill's nostril extends to a point nearly 45-50% along the bill's length in the Common Merganser, whereas it barely extends to 25-30% of the bill's length in the Red-breasted Merganser. The quiz bird appears to show the more centrally located nostril of a Common Merganser (although the oblique angle of the bill makes this assessment difficult — a more perfectly lateral view of the bill would be desirable to properly assess this feature).

The feather border at the base of the bill is also useful in separating the two species (particularly in fresh plumage like our quiz bird). In the

Common Merganser, the feathering extends equally forward onto both the upper and lower mandibles, whereas in the Red-breasted Merganser the feathering extends noticeably further onto the upper mandible (thus coming much closer to the more basally-placed nostril). The quiz bird clearly demonstrates the former pattern of the Common Merganser.

The colour contrast in the area of the neck is also useful in differentiating these two merganser species. In the Common Merganser, there is a sharp and cleanly cut demarcation between the cinnamon-brown of the head and the gray lower neck and breast. The Red-breasted Merganser shows a much more suffuse blending between the



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tawny-brown colouration of its head and the light-gray lower neck, sometimes even fading to whitish in the front of the neck. The quiz bird is more consistent with the Common Merganser for this character as well.

Another useful field mark in separating the females of these two merganser species involves the colour in the chin area. The female Common Merganser typically shows a very well-marked white chin area that contrasts strongly with its dark cinnamon-brown cheek and throat. The Red-breasted Merganser often lacks any white in the chin altogether, or may show a diffusely

whitish area in the chin that does not form a discrete, evenly bordered chin marking, as is seen in the Common Merganser. Once again, our quiz bird clearly has a well-marked white chin that is more in keeping with the pattern of a **Common Merganser** — and indeed that is the correct identification.

This adult female Common Merganser was photographed on 23 September 2007 in Algonquin Provincial Park by Mark Peck.

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