

**FIRST REPORT OF COMMON MERGANSER  
(*Mergus merganser*) FOR CUBA AND THE GREATER ANTILLES**

ALAIN PARADA ISADA<sup>1,2</sup>, ODEY MARTÍNEZ LLANES<sup>3</sup> AND LANCE J. DEGNAN<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Centro de Investigaciones de Ecosistemas Costeros (CIEC), Ministerio de Ciencia Tecnología y Medio Ambiente, Cayo Coco, Ciego de Ávila, Cuba, CP 69400*

<sup>2</sup>*Current address: Environmental & Life Sciences Graduate Program, Trent University, 1600 West Bank Drive, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7B8, Canada*

*E-mail: sepulturascream@hotmail.com*

<sup>3</sup>*Parque Natural El Bagá, Empresa Nacional para la Protección de la Flora y la Fauna (ENPFF), Cayo Coco, Cuba, CP 69400*

<sup>4</sup>*14 Fiddlers Drive, Doncaster, DN3 3TT, United Kingdom*

Cayo Guillermo (22° 35' 39" N, 78° 40' 11" W) is a 13 km<sup>2</sup> islet of the Sabana-Camagüey Archipelago off the north coast of Ciego de Ávila Province, north-central Cuba. Its terrestrial landscapes are typified by four distinctive vegetation types: sandy and rocky vegetation complexes, mangrove forest and coastal scrub. In addition, many brackish and coastal lagoons, mudflats and scattered patches of Australian pine (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) are also present. Exotic vegetation is especially abundant in those areas where the tourist resorts and roads connecting them have been heavily developed since 1993.

Many authors have contributed to the knowledge of this island's avifauna until the late 1980s, as summarized by ACC/ICGC (1990), with 64 bird species documented. Subsequent field expeditions (Kirkconnell et al. 1993, Blanco et al. 1998, Wallace et al. 1999, Shaffer et al. 2000) increased the total number of bird species recorded to 108 (Parada et al. 2006). At present, 111 species are known from Cayo Guillermo according to Rodríguez-Batista et al. (in prep.). Cayo Guillermo's avifauna is recognized nationwide and highlighted by some noteworthy vagrants (e.g., Chipping Sparrow *Spizella passerina*, Wallace et al. 1999; House Crow *Corvus splendens*, Orange-crowned Warbler *Oreothlypis celata*, Kirwan et al. 2008; and Dark-eyed Junco *Junco hyemalis*, Mitchell 2009). Here, we present observations of the first Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) reported for Cuba and the Greater Antilles.

The Common Merganser is a diving, fish-eating duck widely distributed across Europe, northern Asia and northern and central areas of North America. Throughout its range, it nests near large lakes and rivers in northern forested habitats. In winter, it may also occur in brackish waters (National Geographic Society 2006). Wintering grounds in North America include both salt and freshwater habitats and extend south along the coast from the Aleutian Islands through California and east throughout the western and central United States to the mid-Atlantic and northeastern states and southern Ontario and Quebec and the Maritime Provinces of Canada. Southernmost records, although rare and locally distributed, include southern Florida (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992), the Gulf Coast, Tamaulipas, Sonora, and Baja California Sur in Mexico (Howell and Webb 1995), as well as in Bermuda where it is considered casual (Birdlife International 2014).

In the early morning of 27 December 2013, LJD observed a female Common Merganser in the flooded tidal area between the Meliá Hotel and the main road on Cayo Guillermo with the aid of Nikon EDG binoculars. After consulting the Garrido and

Kirkconnell (2000) field guide and verifying that this was a new species for Cuba, LJD secured a reliable species identification by using a 30X Kowa Prominar telescope. The Common Merganser was at a close range (< 20 m) with 10-15 Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) in close proximity for several minutes. The sky was generally clear and winds light during all the observations. The average cloudiness and temperature was approximately 25% and 26.2° C, respectively, with an easterly wind of 30.4 km/h (Centro de Investigaciones de Ecosistemas Costeros [CIEC], Meteorological Database).

Key identifying features were noted, including that the Common Merganser had a shorter crest and a smoother, rounded head shape than the Red-breasted Mergansers, a well-defined white chin, and the reddish-brown head and neck pattern meeting the whitish-grayish breast in a sharp line of division. Red-breasted Merganser and Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) tend to show paler heads, shaggier and puffer crests and without any sharp contrast between the breast and neck coloration. In addition, the Common Merganser's body was larger overall and the serrated bill was slightly redder, thicker, and deeper at the base with a slight hook at the tip than the other merganser species.

A single female Common Merganser, presumably the same individual, was seen usually swimming but, on other occasions, loafing at the water's edge in same area every subsequent day at varying daylight hours. At noon on 30 December, the individual was also closely observed by OM along with LJD within a few meters away from where the merganser was initially spotted. The bird apparently remained in this coastal pond until at least 31 December. This extralimital record coincided with the peak of the species' southward migration along the Atlantic coast, from Long Island to Florida (Bellrose 1976). The Sabana-Camagüey Archipelago, especially in the central and east cays, lies along the Atlantic migratory flyway and provides critical stopover and wintering habitat for numerous transient and wintering Neotropical species. The occurrence of a Common Merganser here could be attributable to expanding populations noted across many parts of the Northern Hemisphere (Wetlands International 2006, Butcher and Niven 2007) and could be in part the result of favorable habitat changes in areas where trees have become mature and can support nesting cavities (M. L. Mallory, pers. comm.). On the afternoon of 18 December, the fifth cold front of the 2013-14 winter season and the second recorded in the Ciego de Ávila province, struck with light winds inland (10 km/h) and gusts at approximately 32 km/h in the northern coast (Centro de Investigaciones de Ecosistemas Costeros [CIEC], Meteorological Database). This may have contributed to the appearance of this vagrant along the Cuba's north-central shores. Although we did not obtain any verifiable documentation of this sighting in the form of a photograph or a specimen, we feel that our observations merit further consideration since the merganser was observed on multiple occasions by two knowledgeable observers. In fact, LJD is familiar with Common Mergansers as well as to many other fairly common year-round residents in the United Kingdom.

To our knowledge, this is not only the first report of this species for Cuba and the Greater Antilles, but also the second locality within the West Indies. The AOU Check-list (1998) describes Common Merganser as accidental in the Cayman Islands, and considers a report from Puerto Rico as erroneous. These observations constitute an addition to the avifauna of Cuba, raising the species number of Anatidae to 15 for the northern archipelago of Ciego de Ávila province and to 29 for Cuba as a whole (Acosta et al. 2006).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Erica Nol, Mark L. Mallory, and Philip Wilson who provided useful literature sources and to Felipe Matos for his timely assistance in providing the meteorological data cited herein. We are also grateful to Allan R. Keith, James W. Wiley, George E. Wallace, and two anonymous reviewers for contributing valuable comments from which the manuscript greatly benefitted.

## LITERATURE CITED

- ACC/ICGC [ACADEMIA DE CIENCIAS DE CUBA/ INSTITUTO DE GEODESIA Y CARTOGRAFÍA]. 1990. Estudio de los grupos insulares y zonas litorales del Archipiélago cubano con fines turísticos. Cayos: Coco, Guillermo y Paredón Grande. Instituto de Ecología y Sistemática, Editorial Científico-Técnica, La Habana, Cuba.
- ACOSTA, M., AND L. MUGICA. 2006. Aves Acuáticas en Cuba (reporte final), Waterbird Conservation for the Americas. Faculty of Biology, Havana University, Cuba.
- AOU [AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION]. 1998. Check-list of North American Birds. 7th ed. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- BELLROSE, F. C. 1976. Ducks, Geese, and Swans of North America. Stackpole Books, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.
- BLANCO, P., F. SHAFFER, M. ROBERT, AND E. SOCARRÁS. 1998. Adiciones a la fauna de los cayos Coco, Paredón Grande y Guillermo. Cuba. *El Pitirre* 11:41.
- BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL. 2014. Species factsheet: *Mergus merganser*. Available at: <<http://www.birdlife.org>>. Accessed February 2014.
- BUTCHER, G. S., AND D. K. NIVEN. 2007. Combining Data from the Christmas Bird Count and the Breeding Bird Survey to Determine the General Continental Status and Trends of North American Birds. National Audubon Society, Ivyland, Pennsylvania, USA. <<http://stateofthebirds.audubon.org/cbid/content/Report.pdf>>. Accessed 30 January 2014.
- HOWELL, S. N. G., AND S. WEBB. 1995. The Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America. Oxford Univ. Press, New York.
- KIRKCONNELL, A., R. M. POSADA, V. BEROVIDES, AND J. A. MORALES. 1993. Aves de Cayo Guillermo, Archipiélago Sabana-Camagüey, Cuba. *Poeyana* 430:1-7.
- KIRWAN, G. M., D. CALDERÓN, J. MINNS, AND I. ROESLER (COMPILERS). 2008. Neotropical Notebook: Cuba. *Cotinga* 30:92.
- NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY. 2006. Field Guide to the Birds of North America. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.
- MALLORY, M., AND K. METZ. 1999. Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*). The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.), Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/442>.
- MITCHELL, A. 2009. First record of Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) for Cuba and some other interesting records. *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* 22:98-99.
- PARADA, A. I., E. S. TORRES, M. L. ROJAS, R. G. FERNÁNDEZ, A. A. VELIS, L. M. CARRERA, AND J. M. GUZMÁN MENÉNDEZ. 2006. Biota terrestre del norte de la provincia Ciego de Ávila. Pages 77-181 in *Ecosistemas Costeros: Biodiversidad y Gestión de Recursos Naturales. Sección I. Ecosistemas del Norte de la Provincia Ciego de Ávila*. (F. A. Pina, Ed.). Editorial CUJAE, La Habana, Cuba.
- ROBERTSON, W. B., JR., AND G. E. WOOLFENDEN. 1992. Florida Bird Species: An Annotated List. Florida Ornithological Society. Special Publication No. 6. Gainesville, Florida.
- SHAFFER, F., P. BLANCO, M. ROBERT, AND E. T. SOCARRÁS. 2000. Observaciones y adiciones a la ornitofauna del archipiélago Sabana-Camagüey, Cuba, 1998-2000. *El Pitirre* 13:76-81.
- WALLACE, G. E., E. H. WALLACE, D. R. FROELICH, B. WALKER, A. KIRKCONNELL, E. S. TORRES, H. A. CARLISLE, AND E. MACHELL. 1999. Hermit Thrush and Black-throated Gray Warbler, new for Cuba, and other significant bird records from Cayo Coco and vicinity, Ciego de Avila province, Cuba, 1995-1997. *Florida Field Naturalist* 27:37-51.
- WETLANDS INTERNATIONAL. 2006. Waterbird Population Estimates. 4th Ed. Wetlands International, Wageningen, The Netherlands.