

A presumed Bufflehead x Hooded Merganser hybrid in Illinois

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Male Bufflehead x Hooded Merganser hybrid with female Bufflehead, Powderhorn Marsh, Chicago, Illinois, May 4, 1980. Note black border on rear portion of hybrid's white crown patch.

HYBRIDIZATION is of unusually frequent occurrence among the various members of the family Anatidae. Interbreeding has not only been known to occur between different species, but also between different genera and even different subfamilies. The Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) alone has been known to hybridize with approximately forty other species. The Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) is also a frequent interbreeder, having been known to cross with over twenty species (Johnsgard, 1968). By far the greatest amount of waterfowl hybridization has been among captive birds, but interbreeding involving wild birds, although less common, also occurs. The following is an account of a free-flying bird observed by the author, presumed to be a cross between the Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) and the Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*), birds of two distinct subfamilies (Athyinae and Merginae, respectively). To the author's knowledge, this particular combination has not been recorded previously, although the Common Goldeneye (*B. clangula*), a close relative of the Bufflehead, occasionally hybridizes with the Hooded Merganser (Kortright, 1943).

At about 3:45 p.m., on May 4, 1980, the author arrived at Powderhorn Marsh, Chicago. At this time, a ♀ Bufflehead was observed swimming in open water in a marshy area. It was accom-

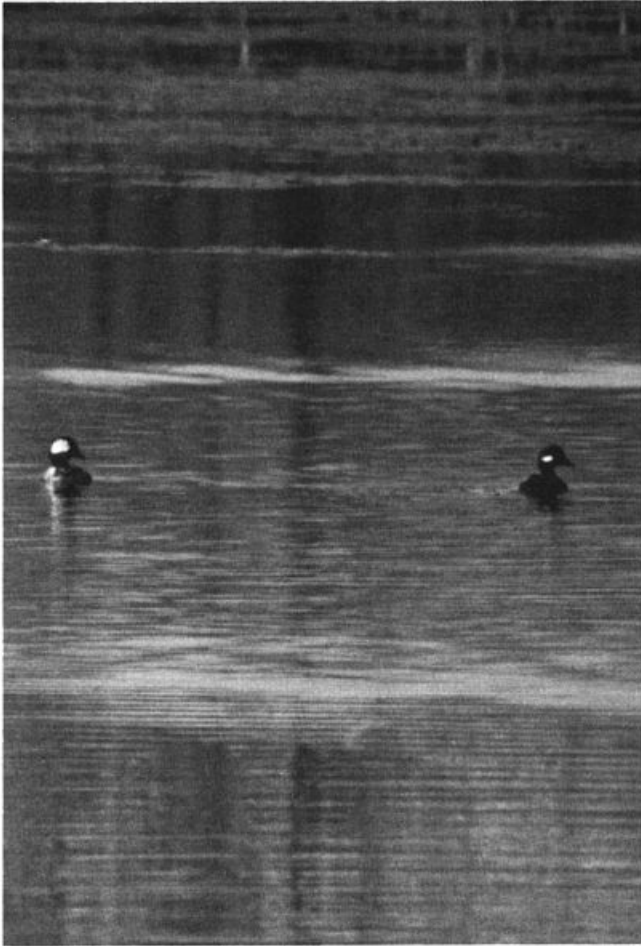
panied by a bird assumed to be its mate. Closer inspection of the male bird, however, revealed a black border on the rear portion of its white crest. The bird was tentatively identified as a ♂ Hooded Merganser, until it was noticed that it had a rather short, Bufflehead-like bill. It was then confirmed that the bird indeed behaved as if it were paired with the ♀ Bufflehead, and upon closer examination, the male bird was found to possess physical characteristics of both the Bufflehead and the Hooded Merganser.

Later that day I photographed both birds. Following is a description of the male bird based on notes taken at the time of observation and subsequent examination of photographs: the bird was basically the size and shape of a Bufflehead, and had the large, rounded head and short, steep bill characteristic of that species. The head and much of its neck were black, with the exception of the large, black-margined white patch previously mentioned. The bill was dark gray or blackish, and the iris was dark. The bird's lower neck, back, and wings (when at rest) appeared of dark, dusky grayish or brownish. The breast was whitish, with a small amount of darker mottling. On the side of the breast was the suggestion of a dark vertical bar extending down from the bend in the wing. It is not clear whether this bar is indicative of Hooded Merganser ancestry or merely a plumage variation, perhaps a

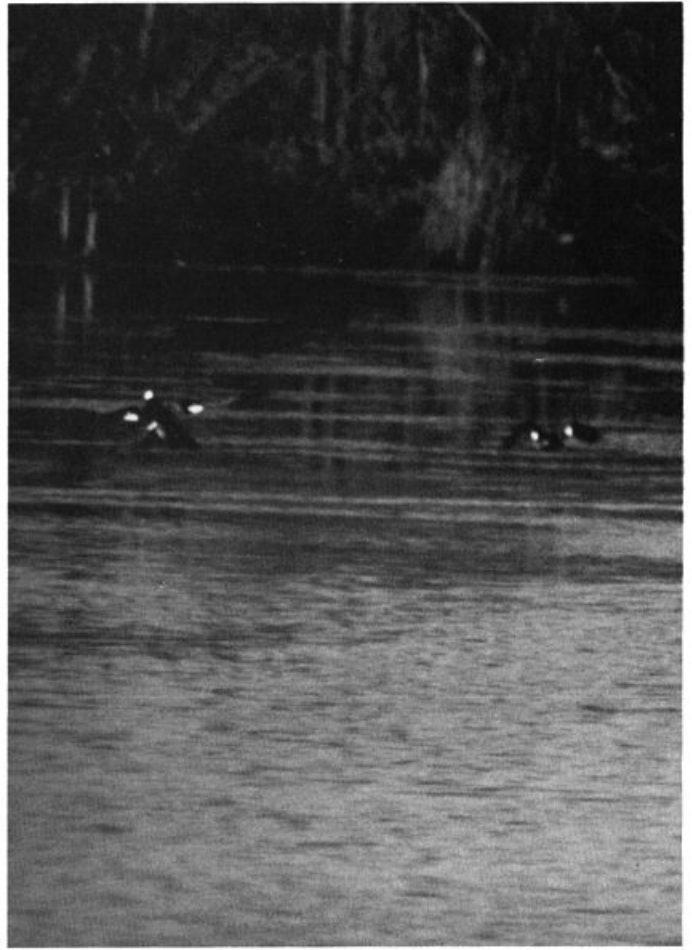
result of the onset of eclipse plumage (the accompanying ♀ Bufflehead also seemed to have a very slight suggestion of this vertical bar). The male's flanks and sides were grayish. Its tail, which was sometimes cocked up at an angle, Hooded Merganser-style, was blackish. In general, the coloration of the bird's plumage was rather washed-out. When observed in flight, the bird's upper parts (including back, rump, tail, and upper wing surfaces) were dark dusky or blackish, except for the speculum, which was white. In flight, the bird's upper wing pattern basically resembled that of a ♀ Bufflehead.

The presumed hybrid was observed swimming and diving with its mate. On at least one occasion, the two birds flew around the marsh for a few brief moments and then alighted on the water again, not far from their point of origin. Neither bird engaged in any vocalizations. After about fifteen minutes, the two birds flew off together and landed near the center of a larger lake, where they could not be well viewed. The author returned the following afternoon, but neither bird could be located.

THE PRESUMED HYBRID was observed with 7 X 35 wide angle binoculars at an estimated distance of 150-200 feet. It was viewed on a bright, clear day with the sun's illumination coming from the left of the author as he observed the bird



Hybrid's bill shape is most similar to typical Bufflehead bill shape.



Note hybrid's (left) dark wings, back, and tail; white speculum.



Presumed Bufflehead x Hooded Merganser hybrid. All photos by Walter J. Marcisz.

(side lighting).

The author subsequently examined the two drawers of Bufflehead study skins at the collection of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, but could not find any bird (including eclipse plumage specimens) which significantly resembled the presumed hybrid. None of the ♂ Bufflehead skins examined had even a suggestion of the black border observed on the rear portion of the hybrid's white crest. This characteristic was present, however, on skins of breeding plumage ♂ Hooded Mergansers examined.

According to Bellrose (1976), both the Bufflehead and the Hooded Merganser

nest in tree cavities and occupy partially overlapping breeding ranges. These facts tend to support the possibility that these two species might occasionally hybridize.

LITERATURE CITED

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