

HOODED MERGANSER PREYS ON VOLE

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On August 3, 1992, while I was casually observing a female or young Hooded Merganser (Lophodytes cucullatus) swimming and feeding along the open channels of the Beaver Pond in Manning Provincial Park, B.C., I saw the bird make a sudden dash across the water to pick up a small mammal that was swimming parallel to the bulrushes. The following 20 minutes was comparable to any episode of a Disney wildlife production, as the merganser used every trick in the book in its efforts to kill, dismember and swallow a very agitated and active mammal, which was identified as a vole, probably a red-backed vole (Clethrionomys gapperi), which is known to be fairly common in Manning Park.

Holding the vole by the tail, the duck thrashed it from side to side on the water surface before releasing it, only to jab at it and retrieve it by the tail, eventually crushing it until dead, with many grabs to prevent the vole from escaping. Although there was no obvious attempt to drown the vole, I suspect that drowning may nonetheless have been a contributing factor to its demise.

Having killed its prey, the merganser immediately attempted to swallow it head first, only to have the protruding hips and rear legs obstruct the process. After many attempts at swallowing the vole intact, the merganser changed its tactics and attempted unsuccessfully to remove the legs and tail by grabbing them and vigorously shaking the carcass before attempting another swallow. It was very obvious that the merganser could not swallow the mammal whole, and was having great difficulty in trying to dismember it, but was very determined to partake of this unusual prey species. Unfortunately, I was unable to stay to witness the final results of the saga.

Mammals would appear to be a highly unusual prey item for Hooded Mergansers. Neither Bent (1923) nor Bellrose (1976), in summarizing the food of this species, made any mention of mammals being eaten. Although frogs are mentioned as prey by at least two authors (Salyer and Lagler 1940, Beard 1953), the most detailed study of Hooded Merganser foods yet published, that of Cottam and Uhler (1937), which analyzed the stomach contents of 138 Hooded Merganser from widespread locations in the U.S., made no mention of terrestrial vertebrates among the food items.

LITERATURE CITED

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Steller's Jay, British Columbia's provincial bird. (Photo by Al Grass.)