



169. Red-breasted Merganser. Pic. Sachin Main

# Sighting of Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* from Vasai, Maharashtra, India

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This note describes a record of a Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* from Rajavali village (19.38°N, 72.83°E), Vasai Taluk, Maharashtra, and its significance for the Indian Subcontinent.

Rjavali is a paradise for birdwatchers with its diverse habitats, including different kinds of wetlands and grasslands, supporting a wide variety of avian life. We routinely visit this area looking out for winter migrants, including ducks. During one such visit on 21 December 2016, while RG, and MP were busy shooting a territorial fight amongst Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta*, a fairly large duck-like bird landed nearby in the same pond at 0815 hrs. It had a lean, long, reddish beak, with a greyish body, and a rusty head. At first, we thought it was a Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*. We immediately took a few photographs [168], and watched its behaviour. After initially resting on the water for a few minutes, it started dabbling, and diving underwater. It was silent throughout the observation period, but was busy foraging.

We immediately called up SM and uploaded the pictures on 'Ask Id's of Indian Birds' forum on Facebook. Advait Marathe suggested the Red-breasted Merganser as a possibility, which SM confirmed after visiting the site again along with RG, and MP [169]. Later it was discovered that Vinod Varma had photographed the same bird a week ago on 14 December, but had thought it was a Great Crested Grebe. Subsequently, several birdwatchers, and photographers from different parts of the country visited the site seeking out this rare visitor. Its presence was reported (mostly in [www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org)) every day, from 23 December till 26 January 2017, when it was last seen by MP [170].



168. Red-breasted Merganser on 21 December 2016.

Structurally, and plumage-wise, the bird was unlike any of the regularly occurring waterfowl found in western Maharashtra. In particular, its long, spiky, almost entirely reddish bill was a unique feature; the culmen was dark red, and paled out along the sides of the upper and lower mandibles. Its head was rusty-red, with some rugged feathers on its crown, and nape,

giving it a tufted appearance. The rest of its upper body was grey with a white patch on its wing, which became more obvious in flight. Its throat and upper breast were a dirty white. It showed a white patch above, and below, its red eye giving an impression of a broken eye-ring. All these characters point to a female or a sub-adult merganser. The only confusion species would be Common Merganser *M. merganser*, but less deep bill and lack of chestnut head with sharply contrasting white throat would eliminate a female Common Merganser. First-winter birds of that species are expected to have a prominent white subloral stripe that was again absent in 'our' bird, which made us believe this to be a female Red-breasted Merganser. However, towards the end of its stay, the bird started showing extensive white on wing [3], which is more indicative of a male. With the available images, it may not be possible to make a conclusive statement on the sex of this bird.

Red-breasted Merganser is included in Grimmett *et al.* (2011), and Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) based on reliable records from Pakistan; however, its records from India have been questioned (see Praveen *et al.* 2014). It has been collected in Pakistan, and observed multiple times in Nepal, but the only two claims from India were from West Bengal. On 17 December 1889 a specimen was procured from a Kolkata market, and presumably, this same specimen was displayed in the Indian Museum for some years (Praveen *et al.* 2014). However, the specimen cannot be located now. There were also some reservations on the provenance of the specimen, as it had been procured from a market. The whereabouts of another specimen, collected from the 24-Parganas District in January 1961, are also unknown (Praveen *et al.* 2014). Due to these reasons, this species was kept out of the India Checklist (Praveen *et al.* 2016). This report is the first definite documentation of the species from within Indian limits, calling for its inclusion in the India Checklist. The species has a wide distribution in the Holarctic (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) and may be a rare vagrant to South Asia.

## References

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170. Red-breasted Merganser showing extensive white on the wing.