

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* in Gajoldoba, Siliguri, West Bengal

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The Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* is a polytypic species with a distribution ranging over North America, Europe, Greenland, and Asia. Through this note, we would like to present photographic evidence of its presence in northern West Bengal.

On 18 December 2016, we were coming down Teesta River after seeing three Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* at Gajoldoba / Teesta Barrage (26.76°N, 88.58°E) at 0945 hrs, when SD spotted a bird through his binoculars, moving on the surface of the river, between two big islands of sand bank. Its actions were slow, and we thought it resembled a Common Merganser *M. merganser*. Common Mergansers are regular here, but this bird appeared a little smaller in size and was alone. Common Mergansers hunt in shallow, fast-flowing waters, and are very fast moving and restless. However, this lone bird was feeding in the deeper part of the river, and feeding from the surface itself. The bill of this bird was thinner, compared with that of a Common Merganser. SD took some record shots [171, 172], and we started approaching it. It flushed, and we could not locate it again.

After returning from the trip, we compared our photographs with the images on Oriental Bird Images (<http://www.orientalbirdimages.org/search.php?keyword=Red-breasted+Merganser>), and those in Grimmett *et al.* (2011). An overall thinner appearance, thin scarlet-orange bill, sign of a double crest, and slate grey back, wings, and tail all point towards a female or first-winter male Red-breasted Merganser. Images were further sent to Shashank Dalvi, who confirmed our identification.

Since then, several bird-watchers, including us, have visited Gajaldoba to search for this species. Biswapriya Rahut, and Mousumi Dutta photographed it on 24 December, and Arup Kumar Banerjee did so on 26 December. Both of them found it foraging alone. It was also photographed on 29 December 16 by



Santanu Manna

173. Red-breasted Merganser following a Common Merganser; note difference in bill lengths.

Santanu Manna. However, on this day, the bird was found along with five female Common Mergansers, and he obtained some good comparative photographs [173]. On 01 January 2017, SD, and Arup Kumar Banerjee searched for the bird but could not find it. It was re-sighted on 07 January 2017 and several bird-watchers were able to photograph it again. The last date when it was observed was on 26 January when Sourav Dhawa was able to photograph the bird.

Though there are two historical reports from southern West Bengal (Praveen *et al.* 2014), these were not accepted as definite as the specimens could not be located. The species has been reported at least four times from Kosi Barrage in Nepal, with the latest being in 2008 (Praveen *et al.* 2014). Gajaldoba is a similar barrage, in the same biogeographic zone, and is less than 200 km east of Kosi Barrage, making this a highly likely spot for this species. In this part of the country, there is also a high chance that Red-breasted Mergansers are overlooked as Common Mergansers, particularly those in female, or juvenile plumages.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Shashank Dalvi for confirming the species from the photographs.

References

- Grimmett, R., Inskipp, C., & Inskipp, T., 2011. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press & Christopher Helm. Pp. 1–528.
Praveen J., Jayapal, R., & Pittie, A., 2014. Notes on Indian rarities—2: Waterfowl, diving waterbirds, and gulls and terns. *Indian BIRDS* 9 (5&6): 113–136.

Editorial comment: The Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* is accepted for the India Checklist, based upon the two notes published here.



Sandip Das

171–172. Red-breasted Merganser.