

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

HOODED MERGANSER

A beautiful winter visitor usually arrives on many of Victoria Park's ponds and lakes in late autumn and then flies back to its northern breeding areas in March. During its brief stay here, the hooded merganser is a real joy to observe with its attractive markings and very active feeding and courtship behaviors.

The hooded merganser is a small duck, and it appears even smaller when it's accompanied by the much larger cormorants that also inhabit our ponds. If you have binoculars don't miss an opportunity to get a really close look at one of these ducks. The male has a black back, white belly, and beautiful chestnut-red sides. Its most distinctive feature is the large white patch on its black head, which becomes even more

conspicuous when it is raised into a big white crown to impress other mergansers. The female is brownout her crest is an attractive reddish-brown, and her eyes are dark red, compared to the male's bright yellow.

Unlike other ducks, mergansers (there are 3 species in our country) have a very narrow serrated bill that enables them to hold onto slippery fish, frogs, clams, tadpoles, and insects, which they catch by diving underwater. If you watch hooded mergansers on our ponds you may also be entertained by the egrets and herons that walk along shore following these ducks, hoping to catch an escaping fish or frog. And watch out for the mergansers' interesting head-bobbing, crest-raising, and body-pumping performances as they prepare for the breeding season.