

On Their Own by Coralee Bodeker

The birding at my grandparents' cabin in NW Wisconsin has been exceptional this week. Over the course of the first few days of my annual summer visit I've been lucky enough to watch Bald Eagles, Osprey, Common Loons, a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers, and one juvenile Green Heron.



The highlight of my visit thus far has been the chance to observe a band of five juvenile Hooded Mergansers. Each morning the little group comes right up to the dock and dives for breakfast in the lake weeds. At first I wasn't sure what species duck they were, but with the help of a few field guides (and some online sleuthing) I concluded that they were indeed juvenile Hooded Mergansers. I had considered two other possible breeding duck species in this area, Common Mergansers and Red-breasted Mergansers, but both are far too big physically for my group. In addition, both Common and Red-breasted Merganser juveniles exhibit a white patch running from the base of the bill and stopping just behind their eye—like a white version of a football player's eye black; my birds sport nothing of the sort. The mergansers before me are small, brown birds with red-tinged crests, white wing patches, and a thin yellow stripe on the lower bill.



Much like humans, most birds learn important survival tips from their parent(s) at a young age and once the parent(s) cease their parenting, the juveniles are on their own to experiment and learn further. These Hooded Mergansers are no exception. Born with the incredible ability to swim, their perfectly streamlined bodies and quickly-learned instinct to fish in shallow water finds my group well on its way to supporting itself, but that doesn't mean these tiny ducks are experts at "being" Hooded

Mergansers. I observe several of these juveniles struggling with their catch—one will dive and quickly resurface, struggling with an oversized perch halfway down its throat or a small sunfish speared a bit too far down its bill. It's giving me a good chuckle to watch he or she regretfully sort out his or her fishy problems. The five youngsters are excellent learning buddies. If one begins to preen him- or herself after a particularly fruitful catch, the other four almost instantly follow suit; the same goes for test flights around the bay (newly cast off by their mother, I've observed that they are hardly proficient flyers quite yet). One by one they all take off from the water until there are five little white-bellied birds flying low over the lake, creating a great deal of commotion in the process.

It's now about 7:30AM; with bellies full and the sun's rays heating up the white pine forest surrounding the lake, the little mergansers give up their fishing and slowly paddle around the point across the bay, not to be seen again until the next morning, eagerly slurping up a morning meal.

