

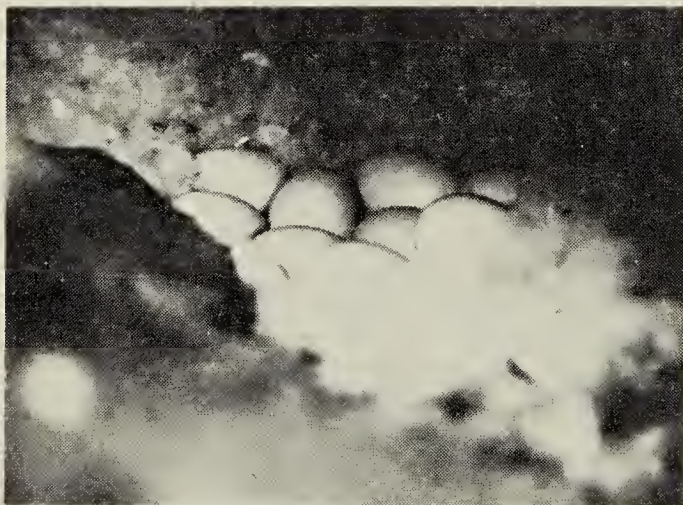
CLIFF-NESTING COMMON MERGANSER AT URANIUM CITY

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Cliff-nesting Common Merganser at Donaldson Lake, Uranium City, Saskatchewan, June 12, 1966

In 1966 and again in 1967, I found a Common Merganser nesting on a cliff on the edge of Donaldson Lake, eight miles northeast of Uranium City. R. W. Nero (1963. *Birds of the Lake Athabasca region, Saskatchewan*. S.N.H.S. Spec. Pub. No. 5) reported finding mergansers which were apparently nesting on a cliff at Carswell Lake to the south of Lake Athabasca, but he was unable to find



Eggs of Common Merganser, Donaldson Lake, June 17, 1966

a nest. Thus, this is apparently the first definite observation of cliff-nesting mergansers for Saskatchewan.

Donaldson Lake is accessible by car or truck via a fair mining road to some claims in the area. Many Uranium City residents fish the lake which abounds with lake trout 12 to 14 inches long. The cliff is on the southwest end of the lake where the access road meets the lake. On June 17, 1966, I scaled the cliff, which was about 110 feet high, to check a nest near the top that appeared to be a defunct raven nest. While I was resting in the deep shade of a boulder about half-way down the cliff, I saw a merganser coming in off the lake flying almost right at me. To my surprise she entered a hole about 10 feet from my position. Checking, I found her on a nest near the opening, but she immediately retreated into a deep recess back in the cliff; from this point of security she hissed vigorously.

By removing a few rock chips I was able to allow enough light in to photograph the nest; I also used some flash bulbs. I went back for some more pictures about two weeks later and was delighted when, upon leaving the nest, she exposed a complete, newly-hatched brood. I had time for only a couple of exposures before she had clucked all the downy young back to join her in the safety of the deep crevice. I did manage to reach in and grab the last of the retreating downy fluffs; my co-pilot, Ralph Schafroth, held it for some pictures and we also posed it on a rock before giving it back to its mother.

In late August I again revisited this nest hole and carefully plugged the retreat back into the cliff with rock chips. My purpose was to have the mother merganser at the mercy of my camera should she return to use this nest site again in 1967.

It worked — I visited the nest site on June 12, 1967 and there she sat on a full clutch of eggs. The only escape route now left was "out" but she made no attempt to leave.



Photographing nesting
Common Merganser, Donaldson
Lake, June 12, 1967

I returned several times for pictures and she would even allow me to arrange her more photogenically on the nest. She never once made any attempt to grab my bare hands with her formidable hooked bill. In photographing the merganser I would first remove a six-inch wedge of rock from the opening to allow light for the picture; even so the view was crowded. After each photo session I would carefully replace the rock wedge, reducing the nest-hole to its original small opening.



Photo by F. A. Heidelbauer

Cliff at Donaldson Lake containing nest of Common Merganser