

Four Morning Ducks

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I live alongside a river. At times this waterway swells unexpectedly, uncontrollably and terrifyingly. We residents retreat, shocked by how our murmuring brook has turned so menacing. Because most of the time this river is an intimate, soothing companion for people and animals who live nearby.

During spring and summer days there's abundant life above and in the water. Merganser ducks arrive in April, when chunks of ice still cling to the shady corners of the riverbank and before reeds and bushes can offer a secure nesting place. Deer and fox and heron come to drink and to search for food; above us, white-headed eagles perch, ready to dive at the water and sweep fish into their claws. An occasional black bear ventures here; and beaver, frogs and crayfish share the pools with abundant trout.

Early summer mornings along the river always offer something startling, so I frequently halt and follow the slightest movement on the water or in the sky. No rare birds are in sight but I nevertheless feel I'm witnessing some phenomenon for the very first time.

The Merganser are the most common wildfowl on this stretch of the river. They mate early in May so that their young have hatched by June. I followed a mother with a clutch of seven ducklings swimming downstream in early June, noting the time since these family outings follow a routine and thus pass my house at the same hour every day. I never saw that group again, but today, I spotted another Merganser family. How many days after hatching do young ducks venture into the current, I don't know, but these chicks appear too delicate to navigate this river. You could hold one in the palm of your hand, and doubtless prefer as I do that mother waits another week or two before leading her young into the river.

However fragile looking, the chicks are waterborne and paddle along in a pack, each only inches from the next and huddled close to their mother (not their father).

This morning I count four—a mother and three chicks (many fewer than usual). They are heading upstream. Mother Merganser cannot proceed in a direct line because of fast moving water pouring over the slippery rocks. The chicks stay close, placing themselves directly in her wake. Progress is slow for the mother, so the chicks are struggling too. One chick manages to place itself directly behind mother and hop onto her back and stay there for a meter or so, then slip off (or was it shrugged off by mother?). Its two siblings make no attempt to do the same so there's no competition among them for a help from mother.

On her part, mother Merganser doesn't appear alarmed about the chicks floundering behind her. Nor does she strike out for the riverbank to lead her family upstream by foot. She continues zigzagging around boulders, occasionally pushed back by the current, but making steady progress upstream.

Meanwhile that same chick keeps its advantageous place directly behind mother, climbing on and off her back as they move forward together. I wonder: is this feathered 'hitchhiker' the weaker one? Or is it the smarter chick of the three?

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