

At the time Herbst said he didn't realize that his sighting represented the first Illinois record of a breeding Red-breasted Merganser. But he did know it was something special.

Herbst closely observed the duckling noting its yellowish bill, lightly colored legs, and white belly and breast feathers.

Its head and neck still sported downy feathers. The bird had a whitish loreal strip and small white spot under the eye.

Herbst submitted documentation to Alan Anderson, vice-president of the Chicago Audubon Society and Cook County compiler for the Illinois Breeding Bird Atlas. Herbst recalled he could find no Illinois nesting records of Red-breasted Mergansers in *Birds of Illinois* (Bohlen), *Chicago Area Birds* (Mlodinow) or in Arthur Cleveland Bent's *Life Histories of North American Wild Fowl*.

Red-breasted Mergansers typically nest in the northern portion of North America. Their breeding range usually extends only as far south as northern Wisconsin and northern Michigan.

Anderson wrote to Herbst telling him that according to

Vernon M. Kleen of the Illinois Department of Conservation, Herbst's record of the nesting merganser is the first in the state of Illinois for the species. "Your finding will be the highlight of the atlas study in the county," Anderson told Herbst.

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*'Much to my amazement, a smaller, chocolate brown duck stumbled out of the water and stood beside the female Red-breasted Merganser.'*

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Five days after his first encounter with the young bird, Herbst saw the mother and young again. "This time the young merganser seemed more independent of mom," said Herbst. "But when alarmed, the bird quickly took to the water and disappeared under the surface."

Later Herbst observed the

youngster swimming alone. "He could scoot forward over the surface but could not yet fly," said Herbst.

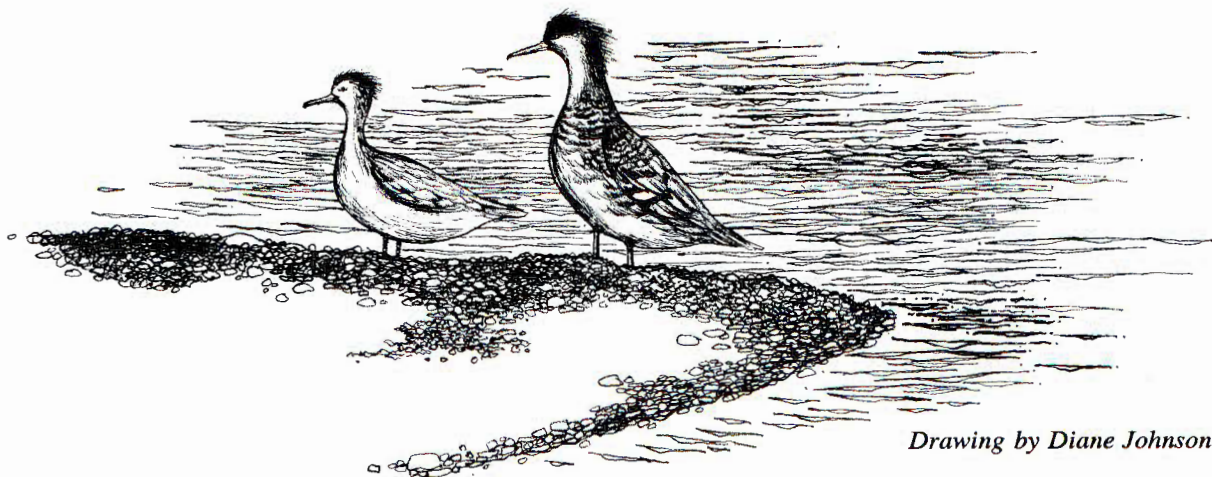
The female and her youngster should have had plenty of food to eat. The pond where they swam contained bass, sunfish and crappie as well as frogs, tadpoles, crayfish, water bugs and pond larvae.

Red-breasted Mergansers typically lay eight to ten eggs. Herbst theorized that the duckling's brothers and sisters may have fallen prey to predators such as a coyote which Herbst observed with young nearby.

"I also saw one very large snapping turtle on the north end of the pond," said Herbst. "Pollution in the bottom sludge may have gotten into the fish eaten by the female and reduced the number of eggs laid," he speculated.

Herbst's conclusion: "The young merganser was a true survivor."

"It's great that this record is accepted as a state first," said Herbst. "But the credit goes to the young Red-breasted Merganser for letting me share an all too brief glimpse of his or her early life." ■



*Drawing by Diane Johnson.*