

Received: 8.7.2024.
Accepted: 11.10.2024.

COMMON MERGANSER *Mergus merganser* – A NEW BREEDING SPECIES OF THE PLITVICE LAKES NATIONAL PARK

Veliki ronac Mergus merganser – nova gnijezdarica Nacionalnog parka Plitvička jezera

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Common Merganser, *Mergus merganser*, is a large fish-eating duck, a polytypic, Holarctic species that nests near large lakes and rivers in forested habitats in the northern hemisphere. In Europe, five populations are recognized, with the population in Croatia presumed to be a part of the Balkan population (SCOTT & ROSE 1996). First recorded as a breeding species in 1999 (TUTIŠ *et al.* 2013), the population has been increasing since, with an estimated 14-21 pairs breeding in Croatia in the 2013-2015 period (DUMBOVIĆ *et al.* 2019). Population trends in the neighboring countries also show a strong increase. In Slovenia, the population of Common Merganser surged from about four breeding pairs in 1995 to 85–110 by 2017 (BASLE 2019). In Serbia, the first breeding record was from 1987 (MARINKOVIĆ *et al.* 1989), and since then it was recorded expanding to several larger accumulations, with an estimate of 50-70 breeding pairs (PUZOVIĆ *et al.* 2015). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Common Merganser was first recorded breeding in 2005, with an estimate of 126 pairs for both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (MARINKOVIĆ 2008). It generally nests in tree holes, either made by the Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* (KEAR 2003) or in broken tree limbs and hollow tops of standing trees (FOREMAN 1976).

Since 2020, detailed surveys have been conducted across all lakes and lake shores in the National Park. During those surveys, on 17th June 2020, two adult female Common Mergansers were observed on Kozjak lake. Birds were seen on the western banks of the lake, and upon closer look one of the females had a fledgling on its back. Female Common Mergansers were observed during the surveys on Kozjak and Proščansko lakes before the observation of fledglings. It was presumed that in 2020, there was only one pair breeding. This is the first recorded breeding for Plitvice Lakes National Park.

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Subsequent surveys were conducted between 2021 and 2024, to find Common Mergansers in the area, as well as to locate the potential nest. Locating the nest cavity was not successful, as the area has numerous old trees with suitable cavities. Two surveys were done per year, once per month in May and June, in the period when ducklings leave the nest. After the confirmed breeding in 2020, adult birds have been recorded every survey year. While there were observations of both male and female Mergansers in the Park, there was no confirmed successful nesting in 2021. In 2022, 2023 and 2024 adult females with ducklings were observed with broods of 6 to 11 ducklings (Table 1, Fig 1). All adult females with broods were observed on Kozjak Lake. Based on conducted surveys, it is estimated that 1-2 pairs of Common Mergansers breed in the area of Plitvice Lakes National Park.

Table 1. Observations of Common Mergansers *Mergus merganser* in Plitvice Lakes National Park (2020–2024).

Tablica 1. Opažanja velikih ronaca *Mergus merganser* u Nacionalnom parku Plitvička jezera (2020.–2024.)

Date	Number of adults	Brood size
17 th June 2020	2 females	1 duckling
21 st June 2021	3 females	
21 st May 2022	3 females	9 ducklings
3 rd June 2023	2 females	1 ♀ / 6 ducklings 1 ♀ / 7 ducklings
10 th May 2024	6 females	1 ♀ / 11 ducklings



Figure 1. Female Common Merganser with ducklings, observed in 2022. Photo: Josip Turkalj
Slika 1. Ženka velikog ronca s mladuncima, promatrana 2022. godine. Foto: Josip Turkalj

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SAŽETAK

Tijekom istraživanja u Nacionalnom parku Plitvička jezera 2020. godine zabilježeno je gniježđenje velikog ronca *Mergus merganser*. Zabilježene su dvije odrasle ženke sa jednim mladuncem, što predstavlja prvo gniježđenje velikog ronca u NP Plitvička jezera, te ukazuje na širenje vrste u Hrvatskoj. U razdoblju od 2021. do 2024. godine, gniježđenje je potvrđeno 2022., 2023. i 2024. godine. Procjenjuje se da se na području Nacionalnog parka Plitvička jezera gnijezdi 1-2 para velikih ronaca.