

Wintering Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* preying on pipefish in coastal Western Norway

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Unprecedented numbers of Snake Pipefish *Entelurus aequoreus* have recently been recorded in the northeastern Atlantic, and a range of seabird species has been reported preying on these fishes (Harris *et al.* 2006, Håland 2006, Kirby *et al.* 2006, Lindley *et al.* 2006). All these observations are from the seabirds' breeding season, but so far no reports of wintering seabirds preying on pipefish have been published. Further, apart from a study on the breeding ecology of Red-breasted Merganser in western Norway (Råd 1980), little has been published from this region regarding this rather common seaduck species.

In this note I report observations of wintering Red-breasted Merganser preying on pipefish in coastal, marine habitats in Western Norway, in the same region where large seagulls were seen preying on pipefish near their breeding colonies (Håland 2006). My observation was in the early afternoon of 14 January 2007, during a survey of wintering seabirds and seaducks northwest of Bergen. Two adult male mergansers were spotted feeding intensively on small pipefish in a shallow sound, Kilstraumen, with fairly strong currents. During a 10-minute watch each male surfaced frequently with a tail of a pipefish protruding from its bill. The dive and chase for pipefish were fairly short, less than 20 seconds, indicating easy catches. In contrast, the handling and swallowing processes were longer, up to 25 seconds in one instance, illustrating the difficulty many seabirds have to handle this prey (Harris *et*

al. 2006, Håland 2006). During this short watch, a minimum of eight successful pipefish catches were seen, indicating an easy catch and high availability of the pipefish. In the same period (9-21 January) Red-breasted Mergansers were also observed preying on pipefish further south along the same coastline, at Øygarden (Julian Bell, pers. comm.), indicating that pipefish were regularly preyed upon in this region during the winter 2007. At Øygarden, several Cod *Gadus morhua*, with stomachs filled with small pipefish, were caught by sports fishermen (J. Bell pers. comm.).

As with the large seagulls (Håland 2006), I have not earlier recorded the Red-breasted Merganser preying on pipefish, although they are fairly common breeding and wintering birds in these coastal waters (e.g. Håland 1992a, b). Mergansers normally swallow their prey underwater, so this incident rapidly attracted my attention. Cramp & Simmons (1977) reports a range of prey for the mergansers, including pipefish *Syngnatiidae* on their merganser prey listing, but no details are given and pipefish were not among the common prey in the quantitative studies they referred to. That pipefish now are caught by a range of different seabird species suggests that this group of fish may take an important role in the diet of seabirds in a changing North East Atlantic, but probably more so for wintering birds than breeding birds (Harris *et al.* 2006).

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SAMMENDRAG

De siste par år har nålefisker, for eksempel havnål, økt voldsomt i bestand og utbredelse. Den store og uvanlige økning er knyttet til et varmere hav, med økologiske tilstander som synes gunstige for denne gruppen fisk. Stor tilgjengelighet av nålefisker, spesielt havnål, har resultert i mange rapporter om at sjøfugl nyttiggjør seg dem som føde. I 2006 ble dette også observert av kysten av Vestlandet, der både svartbak og gråmåke predererte store nålefisker, sannsynligvis stor havnål (Håland 2006).

Denne meddelelsen omtaler tilfeller av siland som fanger små nålefisker med stor effektivitet. Sannsynligvis var dette unge stadier av stor havnål, men det kan ikke utelukkes at det er andre arter nålefisk som er knyttet til de littorale, marine habitater.

Observasjonene er kort diskutert i perspektiv av de endringer som nå skjer i havmiljøet og parallelle endringer i sjøfuglbestandene i nordøstre Atlanterhavet de siste årene, Nordsjøen inklusive. At silanda, som er å anse som en norsk ansvarsart i et europeisk perspektiv, kan nyttiggjøre seg nye byttedyr når havmiljøet endrer seg, er positivt sett i et forvaltningsmessig perspektiv.

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