

# New Observations Show that Multiple Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye Males Were Present in the Central Valley, California

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## ABSTRACT

We report simultaneous observations in early 2025 of two hybrid Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) × Common Goldeneye (*B. clangula*) males on the American River in Sacramento County and at Stonegate Pond in adjacent Yolo County in the Central Valley, California. These observations correct apparently mistaken previous inferences by Airola et al. (2024) that a single hybrid bird moved between these two sites. We also report on a hybrid seen contemporaneously at the Sutter Bypass with a hybrid at the American River. Based on plumage similarity, and lack of simultaneous occurrence, it is possible that the hybrid that occupied Stonegate Pond may have moved 45 km to the Sutter Bypass. Thus, at least two hybrid Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye males, and possibly three based on plumage differences, appear to have occurred in the Sacramento area over 2022–2025.

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Airola et al. (2024) reported on the occurrence, longevity, and movements of what they considered to be a single Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) × Common Goldeneye (*B. clangula*) hybrid in the Sacramento region over 2014 to 2024. The reporting that a single hybrid male likely moved between two sites, the lower American River, Sacramento County (38.5731, -121.3533) and Stonegate Pond in West Sacramento, Yolo County (38.5397, -121.5384), California (Figure 1), was based on general plumage similarity, a rarity of hybrid forms, and a lack of simultaneous sightings of a hybrid at each site.

Here we report simultaneous observations of a hybrid at both of these sites in 2025 (Figure 1), strongly suggesting that the occurrences reported over 2022–2024 (Airola et al. 2024) did not represent movements of a single individual between sites as previously inferred, but rather two different individuals. We also report the circumstances of another 2025 record of a hybrid Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye male in the Sutter Bypass in Sutter County and discuss whether this record represents one of the two Sacramento area individuals or a third hybrid male in the Central Valley.

A hybrid Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye male was reported on the lower American River above Watt Avenue during fall and winter of 2014–2024 and at Stonegate Pond during 2022–2024 (Airola et al. 2024). In 2025, we suspected that the sites may have supported two different birds because of their repeated closely timed occurrences at the two sites (e.g., on 7 and 9 February at Stonegate Pond, and 8 and 10 February at the American River). Therefore, on 14 February we conducted simultaneous surveys of the American River above Watt Avenue and at Stonegate Pond. At 17:00 that day, we simultaneously observed one male hybrid at Stonegate Pond and a second one at the American River.

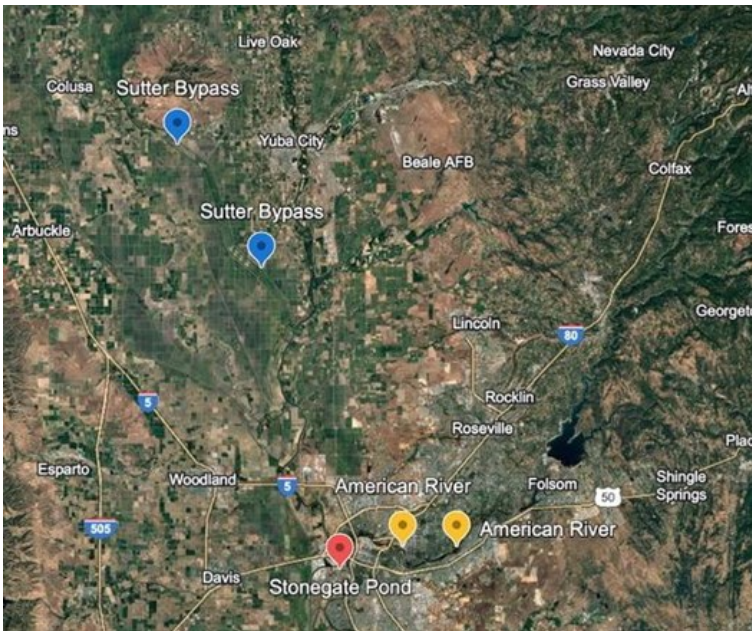


Figure 1. Locations of Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye hybrids in the Sacramento Region in 2025.

These observations strongly indicate that our previous inferences regarding movements of a single individual, based on the general similarity of plumage, rarity of hybrids, and lack of contemporaneous periods of presence and absence (Airola et al. 2024) were incorrect. More careful examination of plumage in the hybrids at the American River and Stonegate Pond showed subtle, but distinct and consistent differences (Figure 2). The hybrid at the river had a very small white spot behind the bill, small dual black projections behind the bill, and a rounded white patch behind the eye. In contrast, the pond hybrid lacked the small white spot, had more extensive dual black projections behind the bill, and a more angular edge of white behind the eye.



Figure 2. Hybrid Bufflehead  $\times$  Common Goldeneye males at the American River (left) 11 February 2024 and Stonegate Pond 22 January 2025 (right). The two hybrids displayed subtle, but consistent differences in facial feathering, including a very small white spot at the base of the bill, smaller dual projections of black behind the bill, and a more rounded white patch behind the eye on the American River bird, compared to the Stonegate Pond bird.

*Photos by Andrea Willey (left) and Frank Severson (right).*

On 14 and 17 January 2025, Huber and Perla observed a hybrid male Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye in a group of Common Goldeneye at the Sutter Bypass (Figure 3; <https://ebird.org/checklist/S209918352>; <https://ebird.org/checklist/S209716397>). By happenstance, their observation on 14 January was simultaneous with an observation by Airola of a hybrid near Paradise Beach on the American River, 48 km to the south. Thus, these were two different individuals.



Figure 3. Hybrid Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye at Sutter Bypass, Sutter County, California, 17 January 2025.

*Photo by Liam Huber.*

The Sutter Bypass observations occurred over a 37-day period (15 December to 21 January) when no hybrid was observed at Stonegate Pond during 14 surveys by Severson and others (eBird.org). The availability of only a few low-resolution photos from the bird at the Sutter Bypass hampers close comparison of plumages to determine if the birds were different or the same individual. The bird at the bypass looks generally similar to the one at Stonegate Pond (Figure 4), and we cannot completely discount the possibility that the same bird could have made the 45 km trip between the two sites. If, however, the Sutter Bypass bird is a different individual, then three hybrid males were simultaneously present in this part of the Central Valley. In addition to these male hybrids inland from the coast, one female reported to be a hybrid also was present in the southern portion of San Francisco Bay over 11–30 January in 2025 (eBird.org).



Figure 4. Comparison of Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye males at Sutter Bypass (left) and Stonegate Pond (right).

*Photos by Liam Huber (left) and Frank Severson (right).*

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#### LITERATURE CITED

Airola, D.A., F. Severson, A. Willey, C. Conard, and J. Langham. 2024. Bufflehead × Common Goldeneye hybrid winters for over a decade in the Sacramento region, California. *Central Valley Birds* 27:51–61.