

FIRST REPORTED BREEDING OF BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING-DUCK IN NORTHERN FLORIDA

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The Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) is a widespread Neotropical breeding bird (Madge and Burns 1988) whose primary breeding range north of Mexico is southern and coastal Texas and a small area of southeastern Arizona (Sauer et al. 1997). Since at least the early 1980s, an additional small breeding population, which now numbers more than 500 birds, has been established in west-central Florida near Sarasota (Pranty 1996a; B. Pranty pers. comm.). Outside of these primary breeding populations, individual birds and groups of birds are known to wander widely throughout North America, as far north as Iowa and Michigan (Stevenson and Anderson 1994), Maryland (Ilif 1996 cites the third state record, the first being 12 birds in June 1993; P. Davis pers. comm.) and Quebec (10 birds in June 1993; Yank and Aubry 1993). In the spring and summer of 1998, an apparently wild Black-bellied Whistling-Duck spent at least three months in a pond in Digby Co., Nova Scotia (B. Maybank pers. comm.).

The Texas population has been expanding rapidly over the past three decades; trend analysis data from the USGS/National Biological Survey's North American Breeding Bird Survey indicate an average annual increase of 1.5%, with an even more rapid increase since the late 1980s (Sauer et al. 1997). Until the early 1970s, the species was largely restricted to southernmost Texas (south of the Nueces River), but by 1998, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were common breeders along the entire length of the Texas coast and extending into the rice belt around Houston (T. Eubanks pers. comm.). The species is now a regular and increasingly common breeder in southwestern Louisiana (Steadman 1994; Purrington 1996; G. Jackson pers. comm.), and there is a recent breeding report from southwestern Arkansas (Purrington 1996).

The Florida population also is increasing and expanding its breeding range, including the northern peninsula. The Bienville Plantation/PCS phosphate mine Swift Creek complex between Jasper and White Springs, Hamilton County, Florida, contains thousands of hectares of active excavations, dredge-spoil mounds, and clay settling ponds, which provide transitory suitable habitat for aquatic birds. Some portions of the complex are inaccessible, whereas others are accessible only by special permission or during scheduled waterfowl hunts. Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were first recorded at the Hamilton County mines in June-July 1995 (J. Krummrich, R. Rowan pers. comm.) when one adult was seen in a public waterfowl area just east of US-41 (Pranty 1995). Many observers saw one to several ducks here, especially on the south and west sides of settling pond #4 (1 km northeast of Genoa; DeLorme 1997, p. 54, A2) on various dates from June 1996 through mid-October 1997 (B. Bergstrom, M. Manetz, B. Roberts, R. Rowan et al. pers. obs.). In July 1996, two or three apparent pairs were seen at the mines; and in August of that year, three independent hatch-year birds were seen (R. Clark; in Pranty 1996b). This latter observation suggested possible breeding but did not preclude dispersal of the young birds from a natal site elsewhere. On 22 November 1996, 10 adult birds were seen on this pond (B. Bergstrom pers. obs.).

On 12 October 1997 I led a Georgia Ornithological Society field trip to the PCS phosphate mines in Hamilton County, Florida, which are approximately 1 km NE of Genoa. We saw four adult Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks at 1400 EST swimming near two or three small dredge-spoil islands off the SW shore of settling pond #4 (the same area as many of the previous sightings). During the hour that the ducks were observed, the four

adults at various times were united into a single group and separated into two pairs. Eight yellow-and-black striped ducklings estimated to be a few days old followed one pair of adults. The group alternately swam in open view and left the water to roost on the ground of the islands, which was partially concealed by weedy and brushy vegetation. The adult Black-bellied Whistling-Duck is unmistakable, with pink-orange bill and feet, white eye-ring, rusty-orange breast sharply contrasting with the black belly, and bold white wing patch (greater wing coverts). The downy ducklings were extremely brightly marked with equal-width yellow and black stripes running mostly vertically on the body and horizontally on the head. (This is well illustrated in the color plates in Bellrose [1976]). These birds were seen in an area where there are no large trees (or cavities) nearby; however, there are numerous small islands in the pond, and the species does sometimes nest in vegetation on the ground (Bent 1925).

This October 1997 breeding record for Hamilton County, Florida (30°30'N), with an anticipated date of independence of young in early December (Terres 1980), seems unusually late, although the species has been known to breed in coastal south Texas from May to October and occasionally in early November (Oberholser 1974). This is the first confirmed record of breeding for the species in the northern half of Florida. Six of the eight ducklings were seen on 16 October 1997 (J. Ault *vide* R. Rowan). After this mid-October 1997 sighting, all subsequent attempts by several observers through mid-December 1998 to find juvenile or adult whistling-ducks at the Hamilton County phosphate mines failed (B. Bergstrom, R. Clark, R. Rowan et al. pers. obs.).

The small Hamilton County population in residence from 1995 to 1998 may have been established by strays from the growing population in Sarasota County, where birds are increasingly sighted in Myakka River State Park (Pranty 1997; various observers *vide* Dotty Hull, summer 1998). Nine downy young were observed at the park on 5 September 1998 (Larry Manfredi *vide* B. Pranty pers. comm.). Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks also are frequently sighted at the Polk County phosphate mines (Pranty 1996b). In addition to Sarasota and Polk counties, sightings had been reported through 1996 from nine other counties in southern Florida (south of Orlando) and from Brevard, Hernando, Lake, Orange, Volusia, and Wakulla counties in the northern half of the state (Stevenson and Anderson 1994, Langridge 1996, Pranty 1996). Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks have occurred sporadically from 1994 through 1998 at the Zellwood Farms complex in Orange County (B. Anderson pers. comm.). Seven birds appeared in Gainesville, Alachua County in May 1997 (Pranty 1997). During 1998 \leq 25 birds were observed in Gainesville and 75 birds were also seen in southeastern Marion County (R. Rowan pers. comm.). On 29 April 1998 an adult Black-bellied Whistling-Duck was seen 4 mi south of St. Augustine in St. Johns County (Pranty 1998). In January of 1999 a hunter-submitted wing suggested the species' presence in Manatee County (B. Pranty pers. comm.). Elsewhere in the Southeast, there have been a few sightings (accepted by the appropriate state bird records committees) from northern Alabama, northwestern and west-central Mississippi, southern coastal South Carolina, and western Tennessee, (Steadman 1991; Davis 1995; Muth 1996; G. Beaton, G. Jackson, T. Schiefer pers. comm.). A Black-bellied Whistling-Duck—Georgia's first accepted record—spent several days in June 1998 at the E. L. Huie Land Application Facility in Clayton County (G. Beaton pers. comm.).

The Hamilton County, Florida, breeding record reported in this paper probably represents the northernmost breeding of *D. autumnalis* to the east of Louisiana or Arkansas. In July 1998 several adult Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks with young were reported from Yemassee, Beaufort Co., South Carolina (N. Lloyd, S. Sisler pers. comm., *vide* T. Piephoff), although the age or origin of the young could not be confirmed.

Although the origin and early history of the species in Florida are obscure, Robertson and Woolfenden (1992) concluded that the ongoing colonization was a natural process, akin to the spread of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) in Florida in the mid 1970s. Stevenson and Anderson (1994) mentioned that the first reported

sightings (1943) and the first breeding (1969) of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in the wild in Florida were attributed to escaped birds, yet they concluded that the established breeding population in Sarasota County was descended from wild migrant birds from Texas. Others have suggested that the source of the Sarasota ducks was the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico (B. Pranty pers. comm.). Regardless of the source of the original colonists, it seems likely that the population from Sarasota (Pranty 1996) rather than Texas (R. Rowan pers. comm.) is the source of the growing number of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks sighted throughout Florida.

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