

Profile

Black-bellied Whistling Duck

Dendrocygna autumnalis

Although the Black-bellied Whistling Duck is a common species in Central and South America and in the very southern areas of the United States in Texas, Arizona, and Florida, it is relatively new to Corkscrew. The first confirmed observation was in September, 2007; it was seen sporadically in 2008 and 2009 but has become a regular sighting since 2010.

Black-bellied Whistling Ducks are most active at dawn and dusk and often forage at night, so the best chance to see the duck is early in the morning or late in the evening.

Formerly known as Black-bellied Tree Ducks, they actually do perch in trees. Additionally, tree cavities provide nesting sites.

They look most like ducks, but their lack of sexual dimorphism, relatively long-term pair bonds, and lack of complex pair-forming behavior more resembles geese and swans. Their long necks, long legs, black bellies, and white wing patches make them a distinctive-looking waterfowl.

They are highly gregarious, forming large flocks when not breeding, and they are non-migratory apart from local movements.

Black-bellied Whistling Ducks preferred habitats are shallow freshwater ponds, lakes with plentiful vegetation, and marshes where they feed on seeds and other plant food. Tree-lined bodies of water are of particular value. Less than 10% of their diet is non-plant, that being mostly snails and insects.

They often forage in cultivated fields for seeds and grain. In Mexico, they are sometimes called Cornfield Ducks because they forage in the freshly harvested corn fields.

They can also be seen just hanging out in flocks on golf courses and other grassy areas near suitable waterways.



Pairs most often partner for life and share the responsibilities of incubation and brood rearing. Preferred nesting sites are in tree cavities, but they will nest in nest boxes or on the ground in grassy areas or under brush near water. Tree cavities don't necessarily need to be near water. Ground nesting is most common where mammalian nest predators are absent.

In spring and summer, a pair will fly overhead, land in trees, and call back and forth,

looking for a suitable nesting site in a tree cavity. Because they are large birds, they need a large cavity, relative to the size of a woodpecker hole. There is strong nest site fidelity, so once they find a good nesting cavity, they may reuse that same spot for several years.

Female black-bellied whistling ducks lay an average of 13 eggs. Several females may lay in the same nest cavity, so broods can sometimes be quite large. Males help incubate, which is not typical for waterfowl but common among whistling ducks.

Within two days of hatching, the ducklings leap one by one from the nest cavity when the female calls to them. Once they are all assembled on the ground, she leads them to water. They can feed themselves immediately, but they may stay with the parents for up to six months.



An adult perches above the north lake, *top*. Immature ducks (gray bills & legs) take flight in Panther Island, *bottom*.

Males and females are similar in size and color. In general, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks are long-legged, long-necked and the most erect of all ducks. They have a black belly with a chestnut nape, lower neck, chest and back. A chestnut cap tops the head. They boast a bright orange bill, gray face and upper neck and white eye ring. The long pink legs are easily observed while they are perched in trees.

The downy plumage of ducklings has attractive dark lines over a creamy yellow. The immature look like adults, but are more dull and grayish brown with gray bills and feet and mostly gray bellies with some black spots.

They are vociferous in flight, giving a high pitched and loud whistle that usually is patterned like *zee-zee-ZEEE-ze-zee*.

