

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck

Dendrocygna autumnali

This attractive subtropical species was first reported to breed in Florida in 1968, when a few birds escaped from the Crandon Park Zoo near Miami and bred nearby (Stevenson 1968, Owre 1973). These birds in the Miami area failed to become established and were not reported after about 5 years. This species breeds and resides from southern Arizona and Texas south to Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil.

Habitat. The Black-bellied Whistling-Duck is a nocturnal feeder, obtaining its predominantly vegetarian diet by grazing, dabbling, or diving.

Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks usually nest in tree cavities, but they readily use nest boxes (Johnsgard 1975a). Cavity nests are usually not lined with down or any other material. When they nest on the ground, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks build "shallow baskets of woven grasses" (Johnsgard 1975a). As with the Fulvous Whistling-Duck, clutch size is obscured by egg dumping, but Bolen (1962 in Johnsgard 1975a) considered a typical clutch to contain 12 to 16 eggs. The eggs are whitish and frequently nest stained. Incubation lasts 26 to 31 days, and the young fledge at about 60 days of age (Johnsgard 1975a). Two broods may be raised per year (Ehrlich al. 1988.)

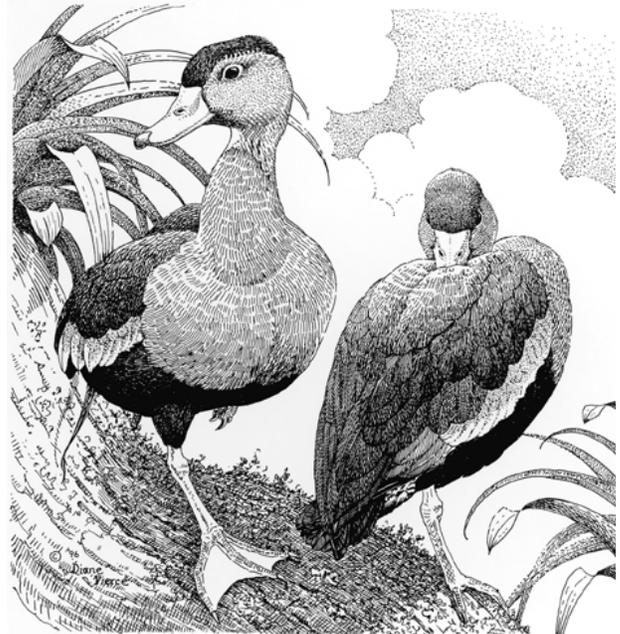


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Seasonal Occurrence. The species is resident in Florida.

Status. Since 1968, Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks have frequently been found in central and south Florida in late summer and early fall, sometimes in flocks of Fulvous Whistling-Ducks. These records probably represent wild birds migrating into Florida; however, it is possible they nested within the state. In 1981, a flock of 11 birds wintered in Sarasota County, and 5 or 6 remained through the summer of 1982. The flock increased to at least 35 birds during the winter of 1982-83 and was considered to be a wild flock, presumably migrating from Mexico (Atherton and Atherton 1983). Interestingly, the first report of this species in Florida occurred in Sarasota County, when Lester Smith saw 6 birds on 14 August, 1943 (Longstreet 1944), "a report little-noticed at the time, which now seems prophetic" (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992).

During the Atlas project, 12 potential breeding records were obtained for this species in Hardee, Lake, Manatee, Palm Beach, Polk, and Sarasota counties. Three of the records occurred in natural wetlands, 3 in small ponds, 2 in phosphate mines, 2 in flooded agricultural fields, and 1 in a sewage treatment pond. A record from Ruskin, Hillsborough County, in January 1990 (fide Gail Parsons, pers. commun.) was not within the "safe-dates," (Fulvous Whistling-Duck safe-dates were 1 May - 1 Sep) but indicates a further range extension. Since 1992, additional birds have been reported in Hamilton, Hernando, Indian River, Orange, Volusia, and Wakulla counties, indicating the species continues to expand its range in Florida. In 1996 2 or 3 pairs apparently bred and produced young in Hamilton County, fewer than 25 km (16 mi) south of the Georgia state line (Pranty 1997 a, l).

In Palm Beach County in May and June 1988, an adult Black-bellied Whistling-Duck was accompanied by an immature (C. Kilmer, in litt.), which takes 10 to 21 months to reach adult plumage (Cain 1970 in Johnsgard

1975a). On 26 May, 1989, R. D. Goodwin and B. Pranty observed a pair of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks copulating near the Myakka River on the Manatee/Sarasota County line. This was the best indication to date th this species was breeding in the wild in Florida. Breeding was proven on 31 August, 1990, when about 6 adults and "two broods of six or more" were found in a Hardee County phosphate mine by L. McCandless and J. Sampson (VRF 1990, photograph in Palmer 1991).

Early reports of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks in Florida considered the birds to be of exotic origin. But it is now the more-or-less unanimous consensus that most (if not all) of the birds now seen in the state are wild birds colonizing the peninsula from Mexico (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992; Stevenson and Anderson 1994). This natural range extension of the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck into Florida is very similar to the range extension o its close cousin the Fulvous Whistling-Duck a quarter of a century earlier.

In light of the species' continually expanding range into the southwestern United States, it seems safe to conclude that the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck will continue to increase its range and numbers in Florida also.

Bill Pranty

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck

