

BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING-DUCK: A
NEW SPECIES FOR OKLAHOMA

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On the early afternoon of 30 August 1985, Vera Jennings, while studying shorebirds and waterfowl at Vann's Lake in Wagoner County, northeast Oklahoma, discovered two unfamiliar ducks consorting with a flock of 150 semi-tame giant Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*). This lake, an old oxbow of the Verdigris River located 3½ miles north and a mile east of the hamlet of Tullahassee, covers approximately 160 acres. The geese had been released by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation in former years, and each bore a collar by which it could be individually recognized.

The unusual ducks were not difficult to identify (see photo). When standing, their long necks and elongated pinkish legs gave them the appearance of tiny geese. Even so, their dark plumage was distinctive. Although their bellies were black, their backs, necks and breasts were rich, dark chestnut. Contrasting vividly with these darker areas, and separating belly from back, was a broad white band that could be seen to extend along the entire dorsal surface of each wing when the birds were flying. Their light gray heads were fronted with rather large pink-red bills. One duck was more richly colored than the other, possibly indicating that it was a male and that the two were mated. They were Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*), a species never before documented as suspected wild birds for Oklahoma.

BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING-DUCK



Note the long legs, light-colored bill (pink in color photo) and grayish head. Photo taken 7 September 1985 at Vann's Lake, Muskogee County, Oklahoma, by Jeri McMahon.

Thus began a period of nearly a month during which the ducks were under almost daily scrutiny by a succession of interested persons. Invariably, the whistling-ducks remained in the company of the much larger geese, usually loafing on the bank or swimming leisurely about.

Jennings returned to the lake with Sarah Gallagher and Martha Jennings at 1830 on the day of discovery and found both whistling-ducks. Next day, Inez Strohink and Marion Norman saw them. On the early evening of 4 September, James and Marion Norman both observed the strange ducks. On 6 September, they were photographed early in the day by Tom Alford. Later that day, Vera Jennings showed them to six personnel of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.

Jeri McMahon, Jennings and Opal King visited Vann's Lake on 7 September, but only one whistling-duck was there. McMahon took photos of it (see cover). On 12 September, the Normans and McMahon took Tulsans John Tomer and James Hoffman to the lake. They all saw the remaining bird well and heard it whistle frequently as it swam. Thereafter, this lone duck was observed practically every day until last seen on 27 September.

There is one other sighting of this species for Oklahoma. On 18 July 1983, a single Black-bellied Whistling-Duck appeared with three free-flying Egyptian Geese (*Alopochen aegyptiacus*) at a small private pond in southwest Tulsa (Hayes, E., 1983, Tulsa Audubon Society Newsletter, August-September, p. 8). It wore a half-inch metal band on its left leg indicating probable origin from tame stock. Several photographs were taken. Photos of the Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks seen in Wagoner and Tulsa counties have been deposited with the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee.

Pulich (1988, The birds of North Central Texas, Texas A&M Univ. Press, College Station, p. 35) gave the status of this species as a "Recent invader in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Nesting in the Dallas area." He speculated that, because most records are from heavily urbanized areas, nestings so far north of the normal range along the central Texas coast and southward may be the result of introduced stock. However, several recent extralimital records far northward possibly indicate expansion of range. For example, nesting was reported in Burleson County, southeast Texas, in August 1972 (Cain, B.W., and K.A. Arnold, Southwest Nat. 18:474-75, 1974), and in Dallas County in July 1981 (Amer. Birds 36:192, 1982). Recent sightings also have occurred in El Paso from 1 August-30 November, 1982 (Amer. Birds 37:197, 1983); Midland on 18 September 1982 (Amer. Birds 37:197, 1983); and Waco on 30 April 1982 (Amer. Birds 36:869, 1982). The Texas sighting nearest Wagoner County, Oklahoma, was of a pair carefully observed on 16 May 1984 in Collin County near the Fannin County line; the landowner reported that they had been present earlier in the year (Pulich, 1988, *loc. cit.*). This latter location is approximately 270 miles southwest of Wagoner County, Oklahoma.

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