

BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING-DUCK: A WANDERER REJOINS THE OFFICIAL COLORADO LIST

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Introduction

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) has a checkered history in Colorado, having previously been accepted to the official list of species occurring in Colorado (Chase 1982), but then subsequently removed (Nelson 1991), due to concerns of origin. In recent decades, birders have seen a great expansion of the breeding range of the species in the U.S. with a concomitant increase in the number of extralimital records in the U.S. and Canada. Those of us that still own older field guides can track this range expansion through the field guides via the larger and larger swaths of the breeding-range color in the southern states. This expansion culminates in Sibley (2003), with a swath of purple (defined as “year-round” occurrence) extending all the way north to the Red River (the border between Texas and Oklahoma) and with a swath of grayish-green (defined as “rare”) extending up the central and eastern Great Plains to southern Minnesota!

Unfortunately, Colorado has not participated in this recent spate of extralimital records. However, the Colorado Bird Records Committee (hereafter, CBRC or Committee) decided to re-evaluate all four of the Colorado reports in light of the changing status of Black-bellied Whistling-Duck in the interior of the continent and I report here on that endeavor. As this report deals with very different issues, compared to those of the usual Committee reports published in this journal, I follow a very different format from that typically published. I also dispense with most of the business and explanations found in typical Committee reports. Should anyone need more specifics about the operation of the CBRC, see Leukering and Wood (2002), the recently updated and published by-laws (Anonymous 2002), and/or the Colorado Field Ornithologists’ website (www.cfo-link.org).

Methods

In 2002, the CBRC re-circulated all four reports on file that had been submitted to the Committee to document occurrences of Black-bellied Whistling-Duck in the state. Per CBRC Bylaws, all accepted records received final 7-0 or 6-1 votes

to accept. Each report that was not accepted received fewer than four votes to accept in the final vote for that report. The CBRC members voting on these reports were: Tony Leukering, Ric Olson, Brandon Percival, Karleen Schofield, Larry Semo, John Vanderpoel, and Chris Wood.

Results and Discussion

Of the four reports reviewed, the Committee reached final decisions on all in the first round and accepted only one. The organization and style of reporting on the individual records and non-accepted reports included below follow that of Leukering and Wood (2002). The items of information are, in their order of appearance for individual occurrences: CBRC accession number, plumage, location, and date. In the parenthetical expression following the date is the re-circulation voting record. The format of the voting record is the number of accept votes on the left side of the hyphen and the number of not accept votes on the right side of the hyphen.

In this report, county names are italicized, in keeping with the style established for the *News from the Field* column in this journal (e.g., Semo and Wood 2003). I here report only the date span for individual records that were provided in the submitted reports; many of the birds were present prior to and/or subsequent to the dates reported to the CBRC. The Committee has not dealt with the question of full date spans as compared to submitted date spans.

8-78-74 - Not accepted - One individual was reported at Silt, *Garfield*, on or about 27 May 1978 (0-7). The only aspect of this brief and sketchy report supporting the observer's identification was the described long neck and overall dark coloration, despite the species' preponderance of obvious and diagnostic field marks, such as the orange-red bill and the large, white wing stripe. This report was previously not accepted (Chase 1981) and in this go-round, the CBRC did not accept the report for the same reason as in the report's first circulation: a poor description.

8-80-84 - Not accepted due to concerns about origin - A well-described adult visited the Chatfield State Recreation Area, *Douglas/Jefferson*, 21 September 1980 (2-5). The Committee accepted the identification of the bird as accurate, but a number of members felt that the location's proximity to urban Denver was cause for concern about the origin of the bird. This report was previously accepted as the first state record (Chase 1982), but a later Committee removed the species from the state list (Nelson 1991) due to concerns about the origin of this bird. That written, in many places in the "normal" range of Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, one can find large numbers of relatively tame

individuals in urban areas, such as city parks, even nesting in chimneys (L. Semo pers. comm.). Thus, any individual showing up in such a situation in Colorado should not be rejected out of hand.

- 8-81-59** - Not accepted - One adult was in the Colorado River bottomland just west of Silt, *Garfield*, 28 April 1981 (0-7). This report suffered a multitude of problems. But first, the history. In this report's first circulation through the CBRC, it was apparently accepted (Chase 1983). However, a statement in Chase (1983, pg. 78; "2nd record for Colorado; likely escapee") suggested that the CBRC considered the bird an escapee. I am not sure that I understand this, as the record was listed in the section of accepted records. In the CBRC report that removed this species from the state list, Nelson (1991) did not consider this report, so that Committee must have considered the report not accepted.

Back to the present. At least one CBRC member considered the description of field marks a bit vague and did not accept it on that basis. Many members were willing to accept the identification as submitted, but were concerned that, in combination with 8-78-74 above, the report suggested that a Black-bellied Whistling-Duck had been present in the Silt area for some three years. Such longevity at a single site would suggest other than natural origin, as extralimital individuals usually are present for only very short periods of time. Unfortunately, the 1978 report's description was less-than-stellar and this fact created a conundrum for many Committee members: If the 1978 bird was, indeed, a Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, then the 1981 report is almost assuredly unacceptable. However, since the description of the 1978 bird was lacking in details, there is no firm evidence that the identification was correct so, perhaps the 1981 report should be considered on its own merit. But the species is so distinctive, that the 1978 identification was probably correct so the 1981 report would be unacceptable. In the end, the Committee voted unanimously to not accept the report, with reservations.

- 8-91-14** - Accepted - One adult was at an unnamed reservoir in *Weld*, 11 July 1991 (7-0). Two Georgia birders found and photographed the bird, determined that it was unbanded, and noted its "normal, skittish" behavior. The previous Committee decision on this report was to accept the identification, but to not accept the report on questions of origin (Nelson 1993). That Committee report included this prescient statement, "The status of this bird could change if a pattern of vagrancy is established regionally for this species." The current makeup of the Committee considered the possibility of captive origin,

but felt that the species' recent history in the Great Plains (Table 1) suggested that the *Weld* bird was more likely of natural origin.

Thus, the CBRC welcomes Black-bellied Whistling-Duck back to the official list of Colorado birds, now 472 species long.

Table 1. History of vagrancy of Black-bellied Whistling-Duck in the western Great Plains.

State ¹	History
North Dakota	No reports
South Dakota	No reports
Nebraska	Three reports; the two documented reports date from 29 October 1989 and 2-28 August 1999
Kansas	Three records: 20 September 1956, 6-8 July 1980, 21 May 1982
Oklahoma	Multiple records: First on 18 July 1983; the species is "considered rare in SE Oklahoma (McCurtain County) and central Oklahoma (Major and Kingfisher Counties). There have been several records each year for these two areas starting around 1999."
Texas (panhandle only)	One hunter kill on 7 December 1980
Montana	No reports
Wyoming	No reports
New Mexico (east of 105° W)	Four records: 27 May 1988, 4 September 1988, 16 April 1990, 14 July 1996 (nine additional records/reports from southwestern part of state)

¹ Sources: North Dakota - D. Svingen pers. comm.; South Dakota - J. Palmer, pers. comm.; Nebraska - Sharpe et al. (2001); Kansas - Thompson and Ely (1989); Oklahoma - J. Arterburn, pers. comm. ; Texas panhandle - Seyffert (2001); Montana - J. Marks, pers. comm.; Wyoming - D. Faulkner, pers. comm.; eastern New Mexico - J. Oldenettel, pers. comm.

Reporting observers

Robert Andrews, Giff Beaton, H. F. Beattie, Michael Fitzpatrick, and Mrs. Willis Parkinson.

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