

## Whistling Ducks

By Celeste Silling

If you live in our area along the Texas coast, you might have been lucky enough to see a Black-bellied Whistling Duck... or maybe whole swarms of them! These ducks don't behave like any other duck we see around here. They are less likely to be paddling in lake than they are to be perching on a telephone pole. They can be found here in Texas and in Louisiana and other Southern states and are a favorite of locals and visitors alike!

The Black-bellied Whistling Duck can be identified fairly easily. It has the basic shape of medium-sized duck, with a long neck, short tail, duck bill, and webbed feet. It has a chestnut neck and chest, gray face, and a black belly (go figure). Perhaps its most distinguishing feature is the pink bill and pink feet, which stand out in almost any habitat.

But if you can't get a good look at the feet and bill, this bird's odd behavior is a dead giveaway to its identity. The Black-bellied Whistling Duck, unlike most other ducks, likes to perch in trees, on buildings, at bird feeders, and anywhere else you least expect to see a duck. They form flocks of up to 1,000 birds, often taking over whole trees, ponds, or rooftops.

Within the flock, pairs form life-long pair bonds. The pairs are formed in winter of their first year. To court the females, the males stretch their necks out horizontally, dip their bill, and flick water onto the bird's back. They're well known for this courtship display.

They nest in tree cavities and nest boxes, unlike most other ducks who prefer to nest on the ground near water. They don't make a nest either, preferring to lay their eggs on whatever debris is in the spot they choose. Black-bellied Whistling Duck chicks can walk almost immediately after hatching. They are fuzzy with black and yellow feathers, which can help them camouflage. The chicks and fledglings can often be eaten by snakes or even fish, so they need all the help they can get!

Like their name implies, these ducks can whistle. Their tell-tale call is a high whistle that consists of one long first note followed several shorter whistles. You might have heard this call (or a whole chorus of it) while the birds were flying past or swimming or standing nearby. It can often be alarming when you're not expecting a whole crowd of whistlers overhead!

Black-bellied Whistling ducks can often be seen at bird feeders, but in nature they mostly eat plants such as smartweed, grasses, sedges, and amaranth. They can also eat small invertebrates like spiders, snails and insects. If they live near a farming area, they can often be seen snacking on some of the crops like millet, corn, rice, and wheat.

If you see these birds around this winter, I hope you can now easily identify them and appreciate their weird ways! They are immensely fun to watch and one of the most charming birds in our area!

Photos by Mike Williams

Captions: It's nice to have all your ducks (or ducklings) in a row! Baby Black-bellied Whistling Duck chicks can walk and have their eyes open almost immediately after hatching.

Caption: The Black-bellied Whistling Duck is well known for perching in trees, unlike most other ducks.

