

The First Record of Fulvous Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin. Submitted: April 15, 2018.

Introduction and Distribution

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna bicolor*) is a species of waterfowl found locally from the southern United States, south throughout Mexico, Central America, into South America as far south as southern Bolivia, Paraguay, and northeastern Argentina (Clements *et al.* 2017). It is also found as a resident breeder on the Hawaiian Island of O'ahu, East Africa, Madagascar, India, Sri Lanka, and southwestern Burma (Clements *et al.* 2017).

In North America, the Fulvous Whistling-Duck is found locally in southern California at the south end of the Salton Sea (Hohman and Lee 2001) and in south and eastern-central Florida in the following counties: Brevard, Dade, Glades, Hendry, Highlands, Indian River, Manatee, Okeechobee, Orange, Osceola, Palm Beach, and Volusia, with concentrations in Florida around Lake Okeechobee and wetlands of Kissimmee and St. Johns Rivers (Turnbull *et al.* 1989a, Stevenson and Anderson 1994b). This species also is found from central Louisiana west of the Atchafalaya River on the Gulf Coast north to Calcasieu, Evangeline, southeastern Allen, and southeastern Rapides Parishes and east to western St. Landry, western St. Martin, and western Iberia Parishes (Wiedenfeld and Swan 2000), also west along the coast of Texas with range occasionally extending farther inland along major rivers, and south along Gulf coast of Mexico to Tamaulipas, Tabasco, and southeastern Campeche (Howell and Webb 2010). In the United States, breeds in freshwater wetlands, especially shallow waters with a depth of less than 0.5 m and in impoundments managed for rice production and temporally flooded grasslands and pasture (Mccartney 1963). Upland nesting by birds in pastures, hay lands, and small grain fields adjacent to rice fields, but individuals more commonly nest in flooded rice fields. Also, to a much lesser extent, shallow freshwater marshes with dense stands of flooded or floating emergent vegetation such as *Panicum hemitomon*, *Typha* spp., *Phragmites australis*, *Scirpus* spp. and in open-water zones vegetated with floating aquatic plants such as *Brasenia schreberi*, *Nymphaea odorata*, *Nuphar* spp. (Meanley and Meanley 1959). Typically, these wetlands have relatively stable water levels and receive high use by fall-staging individuals and spring arrivals before their dispersal into nearby flooded agricultural fields (Hohman and Lee 2001).

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is found along the Pacific coast of Mexico from south Sonora where they are historically rare (Russell and Monson 1998), south to western Chiapas with their range extending inland to southern Zacatecas and eastern Jalisco, possibly in southern Guatemala, and disjunctly in eastern El Salvador at Laguna El Jocotal, northwestern Honduras at Lake Yojoa (Thurber *et al.* 1987, Howell and Webb 2010, American Ornithologists' Union 1998a), and in northwestern Costa Rica in the Tempisque Basin, where the species likely breeds (Stiles and

Skutch 1989). The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is also found in the West Indies where their range extends south-eastward, this species is a common breeder in Cuba, is locally common in Hispaniola, and is uncommon in Puerto Rico (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). In South America, this species breeds from Colombia, northern Venezuela, Guyana, and French Guiana south, west of Andes to northwestern Peru and east of Andes to southern Bolivia, Paraguay, and northeastern Argentina (American Ornithologists' Union 1998a).

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is migratory in the northern portions of its range, except in Florida where a substantial portion of the breeding population may be resident (Turnbull *et al.* 1989a). In southwestern Louisiana, all 16 adults captured on their nests and equipped with radio transmitters left the state (Hohman and Richard 1994). Elsewhere, Fulvous Whistling-Ducks apparently exhibit only local movements (Hohman and Lee 2001). In southern Brazil, recoveries of individuals banded showed no seasonal patterns of movement (Antas *et al.* 1996). In Zambia, seasonal movements were characterized as partially migratory (Douthwaite 1977).

Spring migrants likely retrace fall migration route, but this is pure speculation at this time (Hohman and Lee 2001). The return of the Fulvous Whistling-Ducks to the Gulf Coast nesting areas begins in February and March and coincides with the onset of planting in rice-growing areas (Hohman and Lee 2001). In California, the Fulvous Whistling-Duck now arrives later than in the recorded past with the earliest birds turning up in April (Hohman and Lee 2001). The change has been noted since 1985, where prior to this time birds were recorded arriving on the breeding grounds in early to late March (Hohman and Lee 2001).

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is mainly a nocturnal migrant, but migrants are also observed along the Texas coasts in daytime (Cottam and Glazener 1959, Bellrose 1980, Hohman and Lee 2001). In southwestern Louisiana and California, post-breeding individuals concentrate at traditional sites before fall departure (Hohman and Lee 2001). Unfortunately there is no information on flock size, flight speed, or flight distances of migrants (Hohman and Lee 2001). A captive-reared duck released near El Campo, Texas, and recovered in Lerdo de Tejada, Veracruz, Mexico, traveled a distance of 1,070 km in less than a week (Flickinger *et al.* 1973).

The migration routes of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck are not well defined for North American birds because of general lack of banding and recovery information for the species (Hohman and Lee 2001). Individuals breeding in Texas and Louisiana likely follow the Gulf of Mexico coastline or migrate across western Gulf to wintering areas in southern Mexico (Bellrose 1980). There is some evidence of a Trans-Gulf migration as indicated by recovery in Cuba of individuals banded in Florida, offshore observations of individuals in coastal Texas and Louisiana and Sargasso Sea, and the absence of whistling-duck concentrations in southern Texas (Watson 1967, Bellrose 1980, Turnbull *et al.* 1989a). In California, individuals formerly concentrated in the vicinity of

Salton Sea and migrated south along west coast of Mexico (Hohman and Lee 2001). There is an irregular northward movement by some individuals after nesting season that occur in some years (Hohman and Lee 2001).

In the fall, migrants depart the United States breeding areas in September and October (Hohman and Lee 2001). The Fulvous Whistling-Duck was not recorded during waterfowl surveys of 8 federal wildlife refuges on the upper Texas coast that were conducted during the months of September-March between the years 1985-1997 (Anderson and Haukos 1998). In California, in 1949, peak concentrations at Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge were 240-300 birds that were recorded from mid-August-mid-September and only 5 birds were counted in early November (Hohman and Lee 2001). Since 1988, there are no records of Fulvous Whistling-Duck reported in California after late August (Hohman and Lee 2001).

Fall migrant Fulvous Whistling-Ducks traditionally stage on shallow, freshwater marshes in coastal Louisiana and Texas (Hohman and Lee 2001). Fall-staging habitat as typified by Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Louisiana consists of shallow freshwater marshes with fringes of *Panicum hemitomon* and open-water zones vegetated with *Brasenia schreberi* (Meanley and Meanley 1959). These are the same areas used by arriving birds in spring before their dispersal into agricultural areas (Hohman and Lee 2001).

The winter range of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck is the same as the breeding range, except in the southern United States from Louisiana to California, where this species is partially to completely migratory and winter occurrences, though common, are greatly reduced (Hohman and Lee 2001). The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is widely distributed in Florida except for the western panhandle area (Turnbull *et al.* 1989a). This species is a rare winter resident in the Bahamas (Raffaele *et al.* 1998).

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is a casual to accidental vagrant species throughout eastern North America with records coming from Quebec, Maine, southern New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia (Hohman and Lee 2001). There are records of vagrants reaching the Great Lakes region from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and southern Ontario and from the mid-west region from North Dakota, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado (Hohman and Lee 2001).

Along the west coast of North America north of California, the Fulvous Whistling-Duck is an accidental vagrant. There is 1 accepted record for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee of a flock of 11 from Coos Bay, Coos County that was photographed and recorded from February 14-24, 1970 (OFO 2016). In Washington State, there is a single accepted specimen record for the state by the Washington Bird Records Committee of a bird collected on

the south shore of Grays Harbor, Grays Harbor County, on October 3, 1905 (Jewett *et al.* 1953). In British Columbia, the Fulvous Whistling-Duck is an accidental vagrant with 1 record from Vancouver Island (Macoun and Macoun 1909).

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is also casual in Middle America from the Valley of Mexico south to Guatemala and Nicaragua (Hohman and Lee 2001). In West Indies, this species is a rare wanderer to the Cayman Islands, St. Barthelemy, Antigua, and Barbados (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is classified as very rare in Jamaica and a vagrant in the Virgin Islands and the remainder of the Lesser Antilles (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). This species is also classified as casual in central Chile and central Argentina and accidental in Panama (American Ornithologists' Union 1998a).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is a medium-sized duck where males are larger than females. The males measure 44-51 cm, in length and weigh 545-958 grams. Females measure 42-49 cm in length, and weigh 595-964 grams. In the context of British Columbia there is no other species of waterfowl that looks remotely like the Fulvous Whistling-Duck making identification fairly straightforward.

The following identification information of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck is taken from Hohman and Lee (2001) unless otherwise noted.

The males are slightly larger than females, but measurements overlap extensively between the sexes. In general profile, the Fulvous Whistling-Duck is gooselike; with long legs and neck and an erect stance that makes this species look tall. Unfortunately Fulvous Whistling-Ducks have reduced buoyancy and a low body profile in water. Adults have a slight crest. Adult birds have a slaty-gray bill and gape. The eyes are dark brownish. Adults are blackish-brown on the back, wings, and tail that contrast with an ivory, buff-streaked flank, light buff to whitish upper and lower tail-coverts, and tawny-cinnamon under-parts. The legs and feet are a deep bluish-gray colour. The mantle-feathers and upper-wing coverts have variable reddish brown edging. The chin is pale white. The feathering on the sides of the upper neck is furrowed as in several species of geese, such as the Snow Goose (*Chen caerulescens*). The neck is dusky-gray basally and laterally and buff-tipped giving appearance of fine dark lines arranged in half collar, somewhat lighter overall than the face, nape, lower neck, and breast. The posterior area of the crown and nape are dark cinnamon-brown. The wings are more broad and rounded than found on other ducks. This species is distinguished in flight by a slow wing beat, long neck, and legs trailing beyond tail. There is a crescent formed by contrast between the light-buff upper-tail on

the coverts and dark tail and the lower back especially noticeable during landing and take-off. Juvenile birds are indistinguishable from adults in overall appearance.

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck resembles the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) in size and profile, but body posture less erect. The Fulvous Whistling-Duck lacks; a white eyering, pinkish legs, pinkish to reddish bill, black belly, and conspicuous white patch on the wing evident in flying and nonflying Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks.

The calls of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck are a thin, squeaky whistle “*pi-piTEEEEW*” or “*pitheewe*”(Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). This species also gives a soft, conversational “cup-cup-cup” (Sibley 2000). The males are distinctly higher pitched than the females (Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Fulvous Whistling-Duck is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with a single record by J. S. Rolns who collected 5 birds out of a flock of 11 individuals in Port Alberni on September 20, 1905 (Macoun and Macoun 1909). The specimens were secured and are present in the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria. It was likely the same wandering flock that secured Washington State’s only record with a specimen collected along the west coast at Grays Harbor in Grays Harbor County, on October 3, 1905 (Jewett *et al.* 1953). Hopefully any future records will have other records from nearby states or provinces to help validate the bird’s origin. There are a couple of historical hypothetical records that are discussed in Campbell *et al.* (1990a).

This species does wander throughout North America making records problematic because they are also kept in captivity. There are recent documented observations of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck from Boundary Bay, Crescent Beach, Serpentine Fen and at Sardis Pond in Chilliwack (T. Plath Pers. Comm.). Unfortunately in all cases the birds were tracked back to a collector that had lost them (T. Plath Pers. Comm.).

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