

BIRD OF THE MONTH

WANDERING WHISTLING-DUCK

By Josie Pyle

Scientific Name: *Dendrocygna arcuata*

Family: ANATIDAE

Order: Anseriformes

Other names: This species is also known as Water Whistler, Water Whistling-duck, Whistling Tree-Duck and the Red Whistler.

Description: The Wandering Whistling-Duck is a large duck with rich red-brown plumage overall, with a paler face, front of neck and upper breast. There is a dark stripe on the crown of head, nape and back of neck. The bill and legs are dark. There are elongated flank plumes, which are off-white with chestnut edges. In flight, the dark underwings, cinnamon and chestnut underbody, white undertail and trailing dark legs are seen. See photograph below.



Similar species: The Plumed Whistling-Duck, *Dendrocygna eytoni*, is the other species of whistling-duck found in Australia, and is distinguished by its very prominent flank plumes. The Wandering Whistling-Duck has a lower, more curved posture both swimming and standing than the Plumed Whistling-Duck.

Distribution: The Wandering Whistling-Duck is found in northern and eastern Australia, from the Kimberley region, across the north of Australia, to south-eastern New South Wales. It is vagrant to the south-east and the south-west of the country. This species is also distributed through Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and the Pacific Islands.

Habitat: The Wandering Whistling-Duck prefers deep vegetated lagoons and swamps, flooded grasslands, sewerage farms, grain stubbles, pastures, irrigated

lands and rice-fields. It prefers deeper waters where aquatic plants and insects are plentiful.

Feeding: The Wandering Whistling-Duck feeds almost entirely on aquatic vegetation and seeds, but also on young grass, the bulbs of rushes and other herbage, insects and other small aquatic animals. Wandering Whistling-Ducks forage in tight flocks, with the birds in front diving, and those behind flying over them.

Breeding: The Wandering Whistling-Duck breeds in the northern Wet Season. The nest is a grass lined scrape in the ground out of reach of rising floodwaters, and is hidden in tall grass or shrubbery. Wandering Whistling Ducks are monogamous, and pair-bonds are most likely life-long.

Avicultural Notes

Housing: The optimum housing for the Wandering Whistling-duck would be a planted enclosure with a pond at least 1m deep as they are a species that likes to dive. However, they are often successfully kept in enclosures with a fibreglass pond or stock trough - access to some water is important as they are an aquatic species. The Wandering Whistling-duck tends to be a shy species, so sheltered areas for the birds to hide in is essential. With adequate cover, birds tend to become reasonably tame, as long as the keeper keeps some distance!

As with many other aquatic species, the Wandering Whistling-duck is intolerant of hard floors, with a tendency to develop a deformity of the foot called bumblefoot. While a grass or similar floor is optimum, enclosures with a hard floor can be modified with a covering of lawn clippings, mulch or similar substrates.

Birds will nest in grasses, under bushes or in hollow logs or artificial sites such as boxes. Roosting sites may be provided by low thick perches.

Feeding: Although their diet in the wild consists mainly of aquatic plants and insects, Wandering Whistling-ducks can be maintained on a diet of mixed grains and pellets or crumbles provided on the land. Green leafy plants such as silverbeet and duckweed or lucerne are also taken and may be floated on the water. An increase in the protein content in the diet prior to the breeding season and while rearing young is advisable. This may be achieved by adding duck starter crumbles (or similar) and/or live food.

Breeding: In northern areas birds breed from September to April while in southern regions September to January is more common. Nests are usually

constructed away from water and consist of a grass platform without, in contrast to many other duck species, little down lining.

Clutch sizes vary from 6-15 eggs and are incubated for 28-30 days. Males may assist with incubation but this is variable between pairs. On intrusion, nests are defended by birds rustling their wings and creating “hissing” sounds.



Ducklings are led to water within a few hours of the last one hatching and, if artificial ponds are used, care needs to be taken that the ducklings can exit the pond easily – even ducklings can drown! Parents, as well as other ducks if kept as a group, are fiercely protective of their young utilizing the defence postures mentioned above and will stamp their

feet to tell the young to form a group.

Ducklings achieve full feathering at 10 weeks, at which time they also become independent. Ducklings are flighted at 12-13 weeks.

Status: The Wandering Whistling Duck is kept by small numbers of aviculturists in South Australia.

Summary: While kept by a limited number of aviculturists, the Wandering Whistling-duck is a species that is easily maintained in a basic enclosure with suitable substrate and pond. Their quiet and harmonic whistle is a wonderful addition to a quiet moonlit night.

References:

<http://birdsinbackyards.net/finder/display.cfm?id=205>

Brown, Dr. D. 1998 **A Guide to ... Pheasants and Waterfowl.**
ABK Publications. South Tweed Heads.