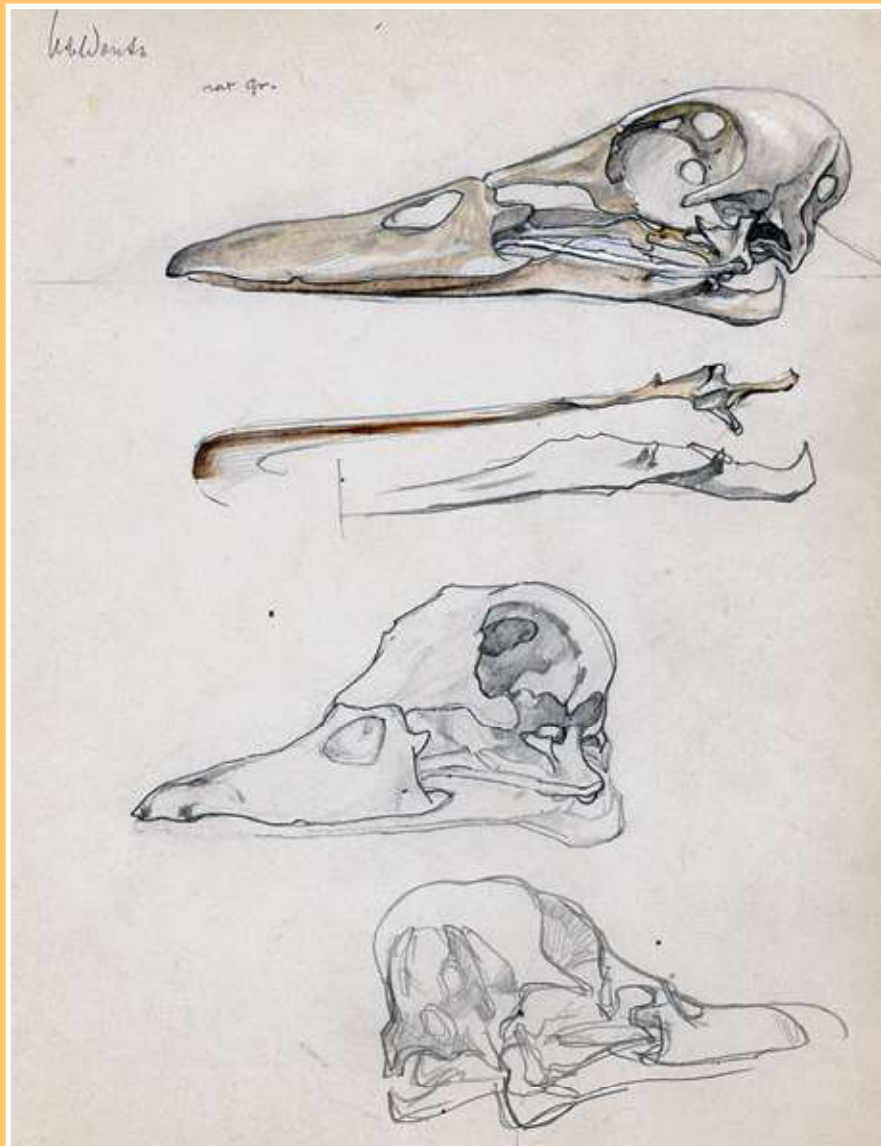


BULLETIN OF THE TEXAS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Vol. 53 No. 1-2 December 2020

Special Feature ...
Victoria County Birds—an Avian Crossroads



Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*). One northwest of Texas City, Galveston on 15 February 2017 (2020-70).

Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*). One ~8 miles east-northeast of Lake Jackson, Brazoria on 9 February 2020 (2020-23).

Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*). One at Lake McClellan, Gray on 23 March 2019 (2019-83).

Streak-backed Oriole (*Icterus pustulatus*). One at Fort Pena Colorado Park, Marathon, Brewster on 9-10 June 2019 (2019-41). One at Fort Pena Colorado Park, Marathon, Brewster on 8-23 Jun 2020 (2020-47).

Flame-colored Tanager (*Piranga bidentata*). One at Boot Canyon, Big Bend N.P., Brewster on 2 May 2015 (2015-35).

Yellow Grosbeak (*Pheucticus chrysopheplus*). One at Glenn Springs, Big Bend N.P., Brewster on 13 August 1997 (2019-15).

Blue Bunting (*Cyanocopsa parellina*). One 4.5 miles northeast of Hondo, Medina on 20 September 2019 (2019-62).

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A MUTATION OF THE BLACK-BELLIED WHISTLING DUCK (*DENDROCYGNA AUTUMNALIS*) IN HOUSTON (HARRIS CO., TEXAS)

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Mutations are a random genetic expression in a population of a given species, and are extremely rare in nature. Part of the reason for rarity of mutations is predators often discover them easier, resulting in subsequent predation, or removal from the gene pool. While pure white albinism (loss of all pigmentation) is extremely rare in nature due to increased risk of discovery and predation, leucism (partial loss of pigmentation) is more commonly expressed phenotypically (Hill 2010, Cortes-Avizanda et al. 2010).

Herein I describe a leucistic Black-bellied whistling duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) from an urban pond in Houston (Harris Co., Texas). As

discussed below, this appears to be not only the first recorded mutation of this species, but the first recorded example in the genus, which includes eight species globally (Madge and Burn 1988).

I have surveyed waterfowl and other aquatic birds by walking the perimeter (approximately 1 mile) of McGovern Lake (Herman Park, Houston) weekly since 10 November 2010. Details of the study site and methodology are provided in Mikulas et al. (2017), but briefly the surveys occur mid-week, beginning approximately 1 hr post-dawn.

While surveying McGovern Lake on 20 January 2021 at 08:45 hrs, I observed a lighter than normal colored Black-bellied whistling duck among a

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flock of 15 on the peninsula along the south-central bank of the lake (Fig 1). The bird essentially had a normal colored black belly, with light pink legs and a red mandible, but the deep chestnut brown color along the back and chest was replaced with a washed out amber anteriorly, becoming even lighter on the chest, and fading to grey on the lower back. Additionally the face was a lighter ash-grey than the normal color dark grey.

The chance for this to be another species of whistling duck was ruled out since the overall plumage pattern matched Black-bellied whistling duck. Similarly, the possibility of this bird being a sub-adult was ruled out since the red mandible, as well as the plumage pattern, matched that of an adult.

The chance observation of this individual was extremely rare. It was not observed during the next survey 1 week later (27 January 2021). While the precise number of unique individual whistling ducks observed at McGovern Lake during the decade of surveys is unknown, > 30,000 birds have been counted during that time, with 425 being the maximum number of unique birds counted during a given survey, and mean number/survey = 61.5 (N = 529 surveys).



Figure 1. The mutation Black-bellied whistling duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*) observed at McGovern Lake (Houston, Harris Co., Tx) on 20 January 2021 (photos by D.M. Brooks).

While aberrantly colored waterfowl mutations (e.g., Conn and Brooks 2012) and physiologically defective waterfowl (Mikulas and Brooks 2013) undoubtedly occur in nature, this is possibly the first record of a whistling duck mutation. No mention was made of mutations in the Birds of North America account (James and Thompson 2020), or the exhaustive whistling duck monograph by Bolen and Rylander (1983). Moreover, while mutations of whistling ducks cultivated in captivity exist, Google image searches using “mutation whistling/tree ducks in nature” failed to reveal any relevant photos, as did searches for “whistling/tree duck” in the Facebook groups “Waterfowl mutations” and “The Waterfowl color mutations group”, both of which focused on waterfowl mutations cultivated in captivity.

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