

Bird Notes

An Observation of Wandering Whistling-Duck in outback South Australia.

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On 11 September 2010, I was driving along the Birdsville track with two interstate birders. Along the southern bypass track to the ferry there was a large (temporary) waterbody on a grassy, swampy plain where we stopped around mid-morning. Here we observed many birds including Pink-eared Duck, *Malacorhynchus membranaceus*, Black Swan, *Cygnus atratus*, Brolga, *Grus rubicunda*, Caspian Tern, *Hydroprogne caspia*, Whiskered Tern, *Chlidonias hybrida*, White-winged Black Tern, *Chlidonias leucopterus*, and Gull-billed Tern, *Gelochelidon nilotica*. Earlier that day we had also seen Plumed Whistling-Duck, *Dendrocygna eytoni*, on a number of occasions.

Upon approaching the swamp on foot a flock of some 30 Whistling-Duck flew up. The flock flew up from a distance of less than 100 metres and flew towards the observers, passing almost overhead at a height of some 10 metres, to land again at the site from where they first flew up. Initially we assumed that they were Plumed Whistling-Duck but when we observed them through binoculars as they flew overhead we realised they were Wandering Whistling-Duck, *Dendrocygna arcuata*. Once the birds had settled back at their original spot, they allowed scope views confirming the identification. The main distinguishing fieldmarks observed were the dark hind neck, dark crown, dark bill, rufous shoulder patch and dark (not pink) legs (Pizzey 1998; Higgins 2002). The plumes were shorter than those of Plumed Whistling-Duck although

that feature alone is insufficient for positive identification. The observers are familiar with both species of Whistling-Duck having seen them both many times before, in Australia as well as overseas.

The weather was sunny, calm and clear, with a temperature of approximately 18° C. In preceding months there had been regular, at times heavy, rainfall events originating in the tropics which had caused widespread inundation of normally dry areas, and presumably led to widespread dispersal of waterfowl into areas they otherwise avoid. Wandering Whistling-Duck are known to be dispersive and their movements largely determined by variations in water availability (del Hoyo *et al*, 1992). Preceding weather patterns had probably contributed to their appearance in South Australia.

A few weeks later a sighting of a single Wandering Whistling-Duck was reported at Mungerrannie on the Birdsville track (Edward Smith pers. comm.). Subsequent visits by the author and others to the Birdsville track were unsuccessful in relocating the species.

This is the first confirmed sighting of Wandering Whistling-Duck in South Australia although the species is not rare Australia-wide. The nearest records in the Birds Australia online atlas dataset are some 150 km North of Birdsville, Queensland, and near Ivanhoe, NSW. On 17 January 2011 a single bird was observed on Nerrin Nerrin station (south-east of the Grampians, Victoria). Of interest is a record in

August 1920 when Parsons notes the occurrence of large flocks of Plumed Whistling-Duck on Mt Leonard Station, some 150 km East of Birdsville, Queensland, and mentions some Wandering Whistling-Duck in these flocks (Parsons, 1921).

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This record was confirmed by the South Australian Rarities Committee as case number 26

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