

Spotted Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna guttata*— Probable Breeding in Australia

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Summary

Spotted Whistling-Ducks *Dendrocygna guttata* are widely distributed on the New Guinea mainland where they are resident and locally nomadic. There are, however, few breeding records and no published data on nesting.

A few sightings of this species have been reported from Cape York Peninsula, north Queensland, in recent years, but there is no confirmed breeding record for Australia.

In December 2000 a group of eight Spotted Whistling-Ducks was observed at Chili Beach on Cape York Peninsula. Appearance and behaviour suggested a drake and a duck, with six juveniles. Two video cameras were used to film these birds over about two hours.

Introduction

The Spotted Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna guttata* occurs and breeds in New Guinea (Coates 1985). The first record of this species in Australia came from Weipa on Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, on 19 March 1995 when Niland (1996) saw 'two pairs of quite unfamiliar ducks on one of the ponds' of the Comcalco Wastewater Treatment Plant. Several subsequent sightings have been reported, mostly in Queensland Ornithological Society (now Birds Queensland) newsletters. The most recent observations have come from Chili Beach on Cape York Peninsula. Most reports of these observations in Australia either refer to adult birds or make no mention of whether the birds seen were in adult or juvenile plumage. This paper, however, reports a group of eight Spotted Whistling-Ducks, two adults and six birds in juvenile plumage, all six juveniles appearing to be of similar age, at Chili Beach in December 2000.

Observations

On 8 December 2000 Klaus Uhlenhut led a small group of people, including the author, along a narrow track through thick scrub behind the beachfront at Chili Beach in the Iron Range National Park, to a small opening that gave a view across a small section of a teatree-studded lagoon. As we approached, typical whistling-duck calls could be heard. A group of eight Spotted Whistling-Ducks could be seen on the water near the shoreline: two adults with prominent white spots on their sides, and six juveniles without spots which resembled juvenile Plumed Whistling-Ducks *D. eytoni*. When approached, they all moved farther out among the teatrees *Melaleuca* in the lagoon.

Two days later Peter Slater and I spent several hours observing the birds. When we arrived, the eight Spotted Whistling-Ducks were resting on a fallen tree-trunk close to the lagoon's eastern shore, near where they had been two days previously. As we approached, they all dropped to the water and swam away amongst the trees, but then they settled down and the juveniles began to feed.

The juvenile Whistling-Ducks fed by dabbling on the surface of the water, and by diving. The latter method was reminiscent of Eurasian Coots *Fulica atra*, with a small bounce on the surface of the water before going down head first, and then

returning to the surface with another small bounce. Each time one dived it came back to the surface in exactly the same position. They spent from 10 to 15 seconds under the water, apparently consuming underwater any food obtained, for none was seen to bring food to the surface.

Over a period of more than an hour the party moved around among the trees in the lagoon casually feeding, slowly working its way farther out into the lagoon, where the Whistling-Ducks eventually all climbed onto a log that was partially hidden from our view. During this period we also heard much calling and splashing from a concealed and inaccessible southern section of the lagoon. After about 30–40 minutes (during which we had moved away to try to find other access to the water), seven of the eight Whistling-Ducks had returned to the fallen tree-trunk on which they were roosting when we arrived. A few minutes after we returned, the eighth, a juvenile, flew in and joined them.

Throughout our several hours of observation, the two adult Whistling-Ducks shepherded the juveniles and seldom let them stray far from one or other of the adults. The juveniles appeared unconcerned, dabbling and feeding while on the surface of the water, and preening or drowsing while perched on logs (Plate 34, front cover). Nevertheless, while on the water they did swim away when an adult shepherded them from our position, or called them away, which the presumed female did several times with a high-pitched ticking call. In contrast to the juveniles, the adults appeared alert at all times, even when perched on logs. The adults were not seen feeding.

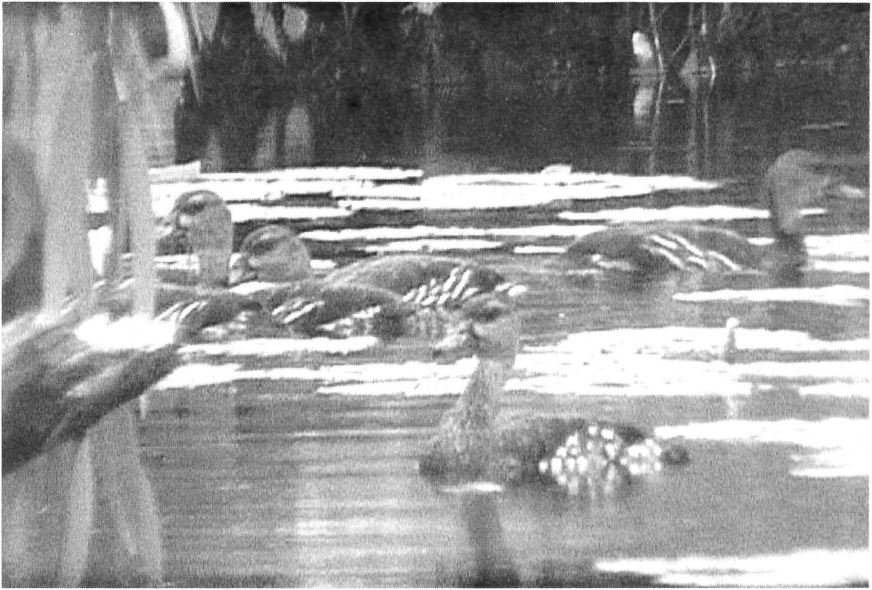
On occasions, when one or more of the juveniles drifted too close to us the presumed drake swam around and positioned himself between those juveniles and us and slowly moved them farther away (Plate 35). Likewise, on several occasions the presumed duck gave several high-pitched ticking calls, apparently because one or more of the juveniles was getting too close to us, then led them away (Plate 36).

Although it was difficult to distinguish between male and female (Marchant & Higgins 1990), over the period of our observation it became apparent that one adult was a drake and the other adult was a duck: the plumage of the presumed drake appeared to be more richly coloured; he appeared to be slightly larger; and he was much more alert and more active in shepherding the group than was the presumed duck (Plate 35). Only the presumed duck gave the high-pitched ticking call.

Discussion

Published literature (Coates 1985, Marchant & Higgins 1990) suggests that in the subfamily *Dendrocygninae* there are strong pair-bonds, as was evident in the Spotted Whistling-Ducks that we observed at Chili Beach.

It does not seem credible that this group of eight Spotted Whistling-Ducks flew across Torres Strait then down Cape York Peninsula to Chili Beach as a family group. It seems even less credible to suggest that the two adults gathered together six juveniles of similar age into a family group that they then proceeded to shepherd. Therefore, I conclude that the group comprised a duck and a drake, and six of their offspring which were hatched in the vicinity of the lagoon where we saw them.



Adult presumed male Spotted Whistling-Duck, positioned between some of the juveniles and the photographer, looking alert and in the direction of the observers, Chili Beach, Qld, 10 December 2000.

Plate 35

Photo: Gordon R. Beruldsen



Presumed female Spotted Whistling-Duck leading a group of three juveniles away from observers at Chili Beach, Qld, 10 December 2000.

Plate 36

Photo: Gordon R. Beruldsen

If true, this would be the first breeding record for Australia. The Birds Australia Rarities Committee (submission 319) accepted the species record but did not accept the breeding record because the juveniles were free-flying. The Committee did accept that the circumstances were 'highly suggestive' of breeding.

Based on the splashing and calling that we heard from the inaccessible southern end of the lagoon, Peter Slater and I both came to the conclusion that there was another group or two of Spotted Whistling-Ducks present, for one lot of splashing and calling was quite close and the other some distance away. Our assessment was that there were possibly between 20 and 30 Spotted Whistling-Ducks on the lagoon on 10 December (and probably also on 8 December).

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