

WATERFOWL — FAMILY ANATIDAE

Fulvous Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*

A population collapse that eliminated the Fulvous Whistling Duck from San Diego County in the 1950s was on the verge of eliminating it from all of California by the beginning of the 21st century. The species is kept commonly in captivity—or as an ornamental waterfowl in free flight—so for decades sightings have been assumed to be due to escapees. Since 1997 even that source has largely dried up.

Breeding distribution: The status of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck in San Diego County was poorly documented before the species was extirpated. The only specific record of breeding is J. B. Dixon's of small young in the San Luis Rey River valley on 18 May 1931 (Willett 1933).

Migration: Stephens (1919a) wrote of the Fulvous Whistling-Duck, "Rather common spring migrant. Rare winter visitant. Stragglers may remain through summer and breed." Yet two of the three SDNHM specimens were collected in fall: Mission Bay (Q8), 10 September 1922 (11313), and Warner Springs (F19), 21 October 1956 (30051). The last represents the most recent presumed wild Fulvous Whistling-Duck in San Diego County.

In the 1970s and 1980s free-flying Fulvous Whistling-Ducks kept at Sea World and the Wild Animal Park resulted in many sightings nearby, especially in the San Diego River flood-control channel (R8). Since 1997, however, the only reports were of one at the Tijuana River



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

mouth (V10) 26 June 2003 (R. T. Patton, J. R. Barth) and three in the nearby estuary 2 August 2003 (M. Billings).

Winter: One specimen was collected 5 miles west of Santee (P11) 14 December 1954 (SDNHM 30023), another at San Diego in December, year not cited (Salvadori 1895).

Conservation: The reasons for the Fulvous Whistling-Duck's extirpation remain unclear. The species is not dependent on natural habitats; in the southeastern U.S. rice fields are its principal habitat. Draining of marshes and development of floodplains likely affected it, yet other ducks like the Mallard and Gadwall have proliferated under the same conditions. The threat to the Fulvous Whistling Duck in California may lie in the birds' presumed Mexican winter range.