

# Conservation Corner

by James Cummins  
Executive Director  
of Wildlife Mississippi

The black-bellied whistling duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*), is a whistling duck that breeds from the southern parts of North America down to south-central South America. One of only two whistling-duck species native to North America, this duck is usually referred to as simply “the whistling duck.”

Once described by an early American birder as the most un-duck-like, the black-bellied whistling duck is an unusual species among North American waterfowl. With its long legs, peculiar appearance, and odd habits, the black-bellied whistling duck is a mid-sized waterfowl species.

The male and female look alike and have long red bills, long, pale-gray heads, somewhat long legs, and mostly gray-brown plumage. There is a lot of white in the wings, but this is more obvious when they are observed in flight. Juveniles are similar in appearance, but have a gray bill and a less contrasting belly.

Because of its unique appearance, the black-bellied whistling duck is often discernible. With an upright stance, long pink legs, and long neck, the adults are unlikely to be confused with any other bird within their range. The wing bar is unique, but may be hard to discern when on the ground. The fulvous whistling duck is the only sympatric duck that shows the similar whitish flank stripe, however; it differs from the black-bellied in that it has dark wings and a lighter belly rather than the other way around.

The black-bellied whistling duck is very social with its own species—form-

ing large flocks when not breeding. It usually nests in hollow trees found within its preferred habitat of quiet, shallow freshwater ponds, lakes and marshes, cultivated land, or reservoirs with abundant vegetation.

The black-bellied whistling duck feeds mostly at night, but can also be encountered eating at any hour of the day. They ingest a wide variety of plant material, but also consume insects and aquatic invertebrates if necessary. They often eat as they wade through shallow water, picking at submerged vegetation.

Unique among ducks in their strong monogamous pair-bond, the black-bellied whistling duck stays with its mate for many years. Both parents share all responsibilities associated with raising their young, from incubation to rearing.

Primarily cavity nesters, these ducks prefer the confines of a hollow-tree, but will nest on the ground when necessary. However, to avoid nesting on the ground, they have been known to nest in abandoned rooftops, chimneys, or nest boxes. The ducklings mature rather rapidly, leaping from the nest within 2 days of hatching and feeding themselves immediately. However, the young ducklings stay with their parents for up to 8 weeks.

The existence of healthy coastal wetlands greatly benefits the black-bellied whistling duck. Current populations seem to be strong enough to sustain hunting at present levels, which are lower than in the past and aimed mostly at preventing large numbers of these birds gathering on fields where they may harm crops.

James L. Cummins is ex-

# Celebrate your roots and show them off

Oops! My roots are showing, but it’s okay.

Exposed tree roots bother some people, but they are natural and important, at least to trees. Their roots don’t “come up” to the surface, they’re telling you they’ve got a problem growing deeper.

See, roots not only anchor plants and absorb water and dissolved nutrients but also need air to survive. And when soils are heavy clay or stay wet, air can’t penetrate very deep, so with the exception of aquatic or bog natives like cypress with specialized roots, most roots remain very shallow.

Also, as roots extend lengthwise they also grow in diameter, making them swell above ground. For a pretty graphic idea of this, stretch your arms straight out and wiggle your fingers. And imagine your shoulders being those roots you see on top of the ground beneath trees.

So it’s pretty natural. We don’t notice it so much in the woods where roots are usually buried in fallen leaves or covered with moss. But in-home gardens they can be

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FELDER RUSHING

a bit off-putting, especially where there used to be grass but is now too shaded and the soil is too poor for grass to thrive.

No need to be alarmed or embarrassed. It happens even in botanic gardens worldwide, where roots are recognized as important tree parts. No big deal, just different than what we may have gotten used to.

Horticulturists and those in the know have found five practical approaches to handling this, each perfectly acceptable. You might find one or another, or a combination, to work for you. Burying the roots with topsoil, by the way, is not recommended because it’s a temporary fix that, if done too heavily, can suffocate roots.

Easiest approach is to make the area look deliberate. Set it apart from the rest of the yard with a distinct border - straight, curved, whatever suits you - between where grass grows and where it will not. This yin/yang effect is an instant visual cue; in most cases this is all you need to do. But you can distinguish the edge with bricks, rocks, monkey grass, large branches, or just a shallow “border ditch.”

Accent the area with something bold that breaks the strong vertical/horizontal effect of flat ground and tree trunks. Could be a shade loving shrub, or a bench, large urn, or other light-colored



Root treatments: mulch, groundcover or exposed?

focal feature.

You can then simply cover the roots with leaves and bark mulch, which work well and help feed the tree roots. When the leaves fall outside the area underneath the trees, simply rake or blow them back.

You can cover the area with a permeable paving of flagstone, crushed oyster shells, slate, or the like. Bright evergreen moss is attractive and quite trendy, and all you need to do is rake or blow away Autumn leaves and pull the occasional weed.

The most common long-range solution is to plant English ivy, Asiatic jasmine, mondo grass, Liriope, or other low-growing shade-loving groundcover. You can use

a combination of some of those, plus taller shade plants such as *Aspidistra* (cast iron plant) and evergreen holly fern.

This may take time; keep in mind the old horticultural saying about groundcovers and vines: “First year they sleep, second year they creep, third year they leap.” And by the way, ivy growing on trees is not a big deal to the trees. Really.

Another approach, often used in botanic gardens, is to simply highlight the roots as part of the artistry of nature. Tuck a small plant here or there, and just let them be.

Exposed tree roots are worth celebrating.

*Felder Rushing is a Mississippi author, columnist, and host of the “Gestalt Gardener” on MPB Think Radio. Email gardening questions to [rushingfelder@yahoo.com](mailto:rushingfelder@yahoo.com).*

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## Obituary

### MARTHA JOYCE KEEN

Martha Joyce Keen, 70, passed away Monday, February 11, 2020 at Mississippi Baptist Medical Center in Jackson, MS.

A funeral service was held Friday, February 14 at Calvary Baptist Church in Durant with burial in Mizpah Cemetery.

**MOUNT SINAI M.B.C.**  
Mount Sinai M.B. Church in Pickens will present its Gospel Explosion on Sunday, February 23 at 3 p.m. 2-13,20

**LIBERTY HILL AMEZ**  
Liberty Hill AMEZ Church in Durant will host its Friends and Family Day Program on Sunday, February 23, at 11 a.m. 2-13,20

**PANCAKE FUNDRAISER**  
St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Lexington will host its annual Mardi Gras Pancake Supper Fundraiser on Tuesday, February 25 starting at 4:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Pancakes plates are \$5.00,

dine in or take out. Grab your beads at the door! 2-13,20

**WEST GROVE M.B.C.**  
West Grove M.B. Church in Lexington will host a Black History Program on Sunday, February 23 at 11 a.m. This event is free and open to the public. 2-13,20

**ST. JOSEPH C.O.G.I.C.**  
St. Joseph C.O.G.I.C. in West will host the Flemings Family and Friends Day Program on Sunday, February 23 at 11 a.m. with Sunday school at 9:30 a.m. 2-13,20

**UNION GROVE M.B.C.**  
Union Grove M.B. Church in Lexington will host its Black History Celebration on Sunday, February 23 at 3 p.m. 2-20

**GUIDING LIGHT**  
Guiding Light C.O.G.I.C. will host its Black History program on Sunday, February 23 at 11:15 a.m. 2-20

**EAST JONES CHAPEL**  
East Jones Chapel will host its Annual Black History Program on Sunday, February 23 at 11:30 a.m. 2-20