

Mexican Whistling Ducks...

by Dianne Miller, Winter Texan from Saskatchewan Canada

Marching single file, seemingly with purpose. Soldiers mustering on the parade ground? Cows heading home at feeding time? Nope. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks. As a Winter Texan from Canada, I find the birds of Southern Texas fascinating. Dozens of Whistlers dwell along the Resaca de la Guerra that flows past our mobile home at Palm Resaca Park in Brownsville, Texas. Resacas are former channels of the meandering Rio Grande River formed after flooding. The city now maintains these canal-type waterways for flood control, irrigation, and natural habitat.

The Whistlers, both males and females, are distinctive rust-brown ducks with black bellies and tails, white patches on their wings, long necks and legs, and pink bills and feet. It's not long before one of those marching in line spots a tempting seed or insect and drops out. A second one stops, and another, until the line is abandoned in favour of lunch. In a while, by some mysterious fowl reasoning, one of the birds will lead the way and, as the others notice they're being left behind, they scurry to fall into line. Away they march until distractions again interfere with their formation. The procedure is repeated until the satiated crew settles along the Resaca wall for a mid-day snooze. Perhaps these are Whistler retirees.

In March we see the ducks prepare for breeding in their lifelong pair bonds. One of the permanent residents has erected nesting boxes at intervals along the Resaca. The boxes, about 3' high, 2' wide, and 2' deep, are anchored atop a 5' pole and can replace the usual nests in tree cavities. When it's time to lay eggs, the female enters the box through a hole cut in the front. Often, the anxious dad perches on the sloped roof and leans over stretching his neck to peer inside probably saying, "Is everything OK?" or "Hurry it up, would you!" Each female lays about 13 eggs and as many as 4 females will share the same box. We must follow our own snowbird migration north before the eggs hatch, but we're told that the chicks climb through the hole within two days of hatching and fall onto the grass below where the adult parents come along to gather their young for an 8-week crash course in Whistler survival. By the time we return the next November, the fledglings are marching confidently as adult Black-bellied Whistling Ducks.

