



Wildlife Note — 52
LDR0103

Wrens

by Chuck Fergus

Wrens are small, active birds, basically brown in color, that often perch with their tails held straight up. They forage on or just above the ground in thick brush, forest understory or marsh vegetation. Wrens belong to Family Troglodytidae, with about 70 species in the New World, most of them in the tropics. Only one species lives in the Old World: the winter wren, which likely spread from Alaska to Siberia and extended its range westward until, eons in the past, it reached Britain and Iceland.

Some wrens nest in cavities; others build roofed structures out of plant matter. The males of several species build “dummy” nests, preliminary nests placed in tree cavities, woodpecker holes and nest boxes, and less frequently in odd enclosed spaces such as tin cans, pockets of clothing hung outdoors, hats, boots, flower pots and drainpipes. Later, a female will choose one of the male’s dummy nests, finish its construction, and lay eggs in it. Wrens often pester other birds and evict them from nest cavities, puncturing their eggs or pecking their young to death. They destroy nests in cavities and in the open; they also wreck other wrens’ nests. Why such belligerence? Does an abundance of empty nests discourage predators from looking further and finding an active wren’s nest? Or does killing its rivals’ offspring reduce pressures on prey populations, making it easier for a wren to feed its own young?

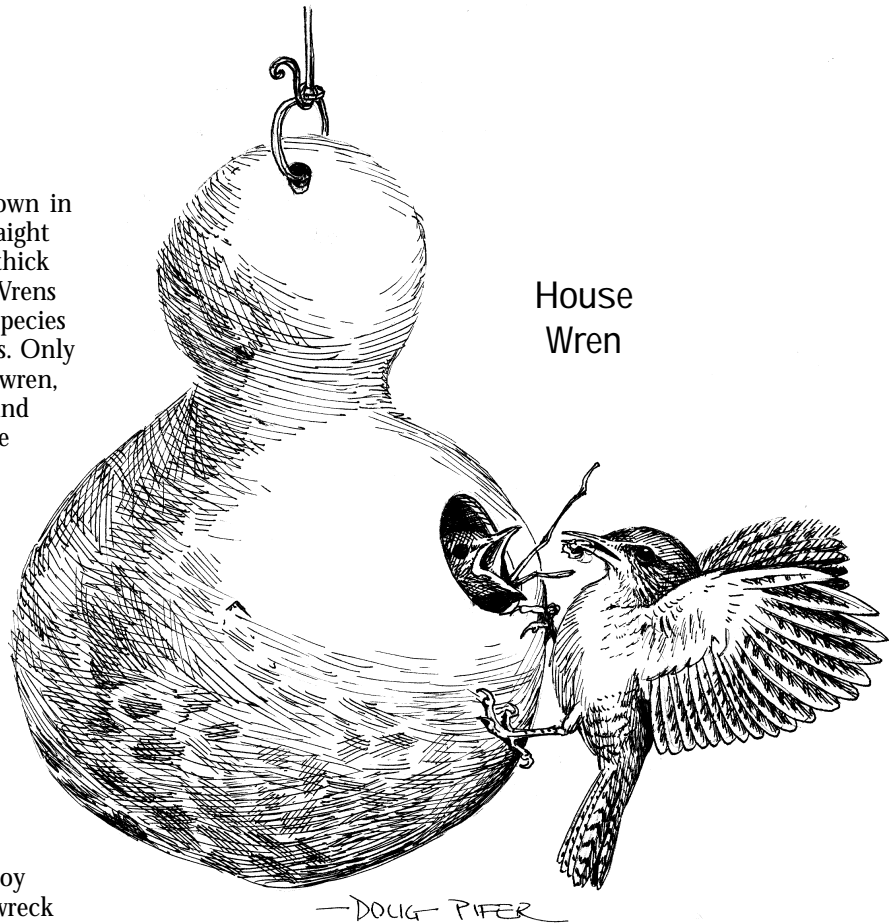
Wrens eat mainly insects and spiders. A few species will also feed on berries and seeds. Owls, small hawks and house cats take adult wrens; raccoons, opossums, minks, weasels, mice, squirrels, woodpeckers and snakes raid wrens’ nests. Some wrens migrate southward in winter, while other species remain as permanent residents on their breeding range. Five species are found in Pennsylvania.

House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) — The most common wren in Pennsylvania, this bird was named because it often lives around humans’ dwellings. A house wren is five inches long and weighs a third of an ounce. Its overall color is gray-brown. House wrens live in open shrubby woodlands, small woodlots, woods edges, towns, suburban backyards and city parks. They feed on insects, spiders, millipedes and

snails. The species breeds across southern Canada and the United States. Individuals from the East winter mainly in Georgia and Florida.

Males arrive on the breeding grounds in late April or early May. They establish territories of one-half acre or larger and advertise for females with a rich, liquid song. Males build dummy nests out of twigs in tree cavities, nest boxes or hollow fence posts; one male may construct up to seven such nests, defending them and the space around them. When building dummy nests, house wrens may destroy the nests and young of tree swallows, chickadees, bluebirds and prothonotary warblers. Females either arrive later than the males or stay hidden in brush until they begin inspecting the males’ territories. If a female finds a territory to her liking, she will finish one of the male’s dummy nests by adding a lining of grass, plant fibers, rootlets, feathers and animal hair.

In May, the female lays five to eight eggs, which are white



House
Wren

Carolina Wren



and speckled with reddish brown. She incubates them for 12 to 15 days. After the eggs hatch, the male helps with feeding the young, bringing grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars and spiders to the growing nestlings. About two weeks after hatching, the young leave the nest. Females typically produce two broods per summer, rarely three. A female may abandon her first brood soon after the young have fledged, leaving the male to rear them; she may then move to another male's territory, mate again, and lay a second clutch. A male house wren may mate with two or more females in his territory, although he will usually help only the primary female raise her young. A "floater" is an unmated male who enters an established territory and tries to drive away the resident male or mate with the female. If he succeeds in taking over a territory, he may destroy the female's eggs or young. At that point, she will usually renest.

Most house wrens leave the breeding range in September and early October. They migrate by night; some are killed when they collide with communications towers. On their southern wintering grounds, they forage in thick brush. The oldest house wren on record lived seven years, but most individuals probably survive for only a year or two. Ornithologists believe the species has been expanding southward since European settlement began: the house wren benefits from forest fragmentation and does well in towns and residential areas.

Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) — The Carolina wren inhabits the eastern United States and Central America. It is a permanent resident wherever it breeds. At 5½ - 6 inches long, and weighing 0.7 ounces, it is the largest of our wrens. Carolina wrens are colorful birds with rusty-brown upper plumage, a buffy or cinnamon breast and a white stripe above each eye. They prefer moist or bottomland woods with moderate to dense shrubby

or brushy cover; they also inhabit gardens and yards. Carolina wrens forage mainly on the ground, often near downed trees or brush piles, using their curved bills to lift up leaf litter and snatch prey. They also climb up tree trunks like creepers or nuthatches. Carolina wrens catch caterpillars, chinch bugs, beetles, leafhoppers, grasshoppers, crickets, katydids and many other insects. They eat seeds of poison ivy, sumac, smartweed and other herbaceous plants, plus fruits and acorns.

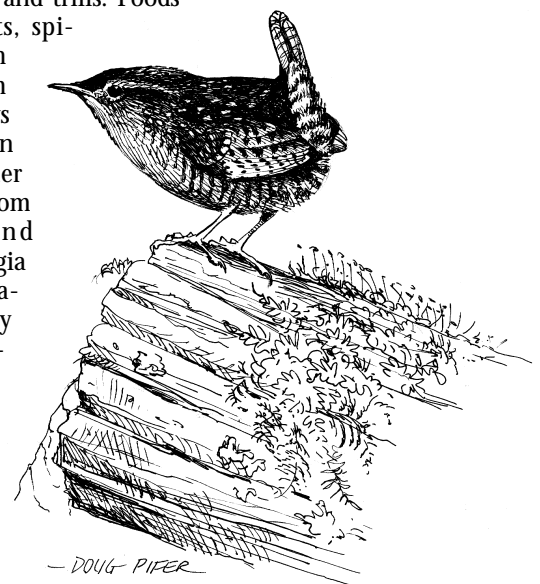
Unlike the house wren, the Carolina wren is monogamous. Pairs often forage together and defend a territory year-round. The species has a clear, ringing song, *tea-kettle, tea-kettle, tea-kettle*, which it may give year-round. Carolina wrens nest in tree cavities, bird houses, crevices in stone walls, among exposed roots and in cracks or crannies in buildings. Using leaves, twigs and other plant materials, both sexes build a dome-shaped nest with a side entrance. The normal clutch is five or six eggs. Incubation is by the female and takes two weeks; the male feeds her on the nest. The young leave the nest about two weeks after hatching. Pairs usually raise two broods per year.

In the last century, the Carolina wren has been expanding northward. Pennsylvania is on the northern edge of the species' breeding range, which extends north after mild winters and ebbs south following harsh winters. Extended periods of ice and snow can devastate local populations. Bewick's wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*) is a similar-appearing species that bred in southern Pennsylvania until around 1976; since then, it has not been found nesting here.

Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) — At just over four inches in length, the winter wren is our smallest wren. Its plumage is dark brown, and its tail is stubby. Look for this secretive bird in deep woods, particularly hemlocks, where it forages in brush piles and ravines — behaving "more like a mouse than a bird," notes ornithologist Kenn Kaufman. The male's song is a series of warbles and trills. Foods

include insects, spiders, small fish taken from stream shallows and berries. In the East, winter wrens breed from Newfoundland south to Georgia in the Appalachians. They nest in cavities, and a brood of five to six young is the norm. Males may mate with more than one female.

Populations have been growing in

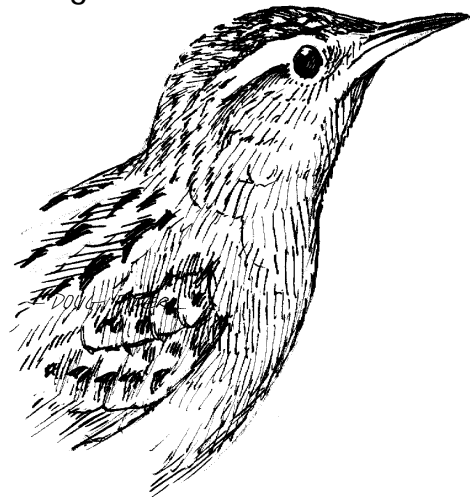


Winter Wren

Pennsylvania in recent years. Winter wrens head south in early fall, although some remain in the north and winter along streams and in swamps.

Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*) — This small (four and a half inches), shy wren inhabits moist upland sedge meadows with little or no standing water. It was formerly known as the short-billed marsh wren. Sedge wrens often breed in small colonies; Hal Harrison once counted 35 to 40 singing males on a 10-acre site. They may occupy a suitable habitat for several years, then disappear. Males sing a dry, rattling song. The actual nest is a ball of dried or green sedges woven into growing vegetation two to three feet above the ground. The usual clutch is seven eggs. A female generally produces two broods per year, and males may mate with more than one female. Surveys have shown that the sedge wren is rare and declining in the Northeast. *Cistothorus platensis* is listed as a threatened species in Pennsylvania.

Sedge Wren

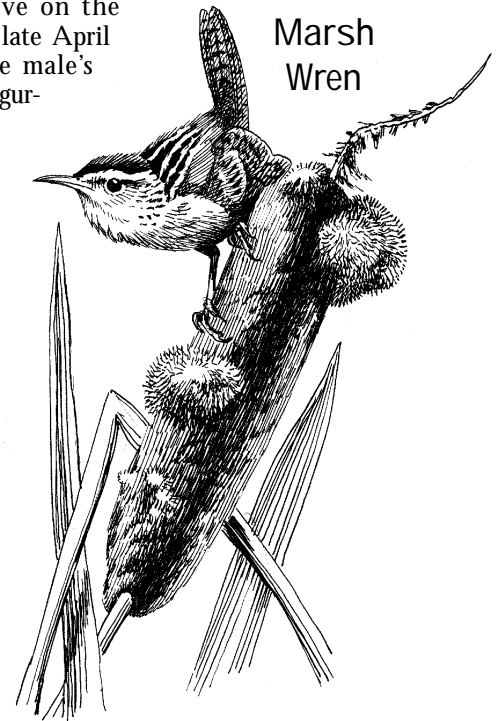


Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) — This is the typical wren of the cattail marsh. It is four and a half to five and a half inches long, its brown plumage marked with black and white stripes on the back and a white eye-stripe.

Marsh wrens arrive on the breeding range in late April or early May. The male's song is reedy and gurgling, lasts one to two seconds, and is given up to 20 times per minute, by day and at times by night. Not particularly musical, it reminded one naturalist of "air-bubbles forcing their way through mud or boggy ground when trod upon."

The marsh wren forages on the marsh floor, flitting up and clinging to stalks and leaves of cattails, bulrushes

and other plants while searching for prey. It takes aquatic insects and their larvae, other insects, spiders and snails; often it nabs larvae from the surface of the water. Both males and females will peck and destroy the eggs of other birds in their territory; red-winged blackbirds often attack marsh wrens on sight. Males typically build dummy nests — around six for each breeding nest used by a female. The female weaves an oblong nest out of cattails, reeds and grasses, secured to standing vegetation. A short tunnel leads to a central cavity in which three to six eggs are laid. The female incubates the clutch for about two weeks. Fed by both parents, the young fledge after 12 to 16 days; the adults care for them for another two weeks. Two broods are produced each year. Male marsh wrens are polygamous: up to half of all breeding males may each mate with two or more females. Marsh wrens in the East winter along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.



Marsh Wren

Wildlife Notes

Allegheny Woodrat
Bats
Beaver
Black Bear
Blackbirds, Orioles, Cowbird and Starling
Blue Jay
Bobcat
Bobwhite Quail
Canada Goose
Chickadees, Nuthatches, Titmouse and Brown Creeper
Chimney Swift, Purple Martin and Swallows
Chipmunk
Common Nighthawk and Whip-Poor-Will
Cottontail Rabbit
Coyote
Crows and Ravens
Diving Ducks
Doves
Eagles and Ospreys
Elk
Finches and House Sparrow
Fisher
Flycatchers
Foxes (Red & Gray)
Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird and Brown Thrasher
Herons
Kingfisher
Mallard
Mice and Voles
Minks & Muskrats
Northern Cardinal, Grosbeaks, Indigo Bunting and Dickcissel

Opossum
Otter
Owls
Porcupine
Puddle Ducks
Raccoon
Rails, Moorhen and Coot
Raptors
Ring-necked Pheasant
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Ruffed Grouse
Shrews
Snowshoe Hare
Sparrows and Towhee
Squirrels
Striped Skunk
Tanagers
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Vultures
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Wild Turkey
Woodchuck
Woodcock
Wood Duck
Woodpecker
Wood Warblers
Wrens

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