



Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)¹

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From a perch somewhere in your yard, a bird repeatedly utters a noisy call: “ta-whichity, ta-whichity, ta-whichity.” High in energy, this little brown bird with a stubby, rounded tail and a conspicuous white stripe over its eye is constantly on the move, stopping only briefly to sing. This bird shows little fear of humans, and, if you make no sudden moves or noise, may perch within a few feet of you. It also is bold, and may scold or chase your cat—but from a safe distance. If you have a bird with these qualities, you likely are sharing your yard with the charismatic Carolina Wren, which also inhabits wild environments throughout Florida. This songbird is in the family Troglodytidae (wrens) within the order Passeriformes (perching birds), and has 10 relatives in North America—5 of which also are found in Florida. The Carolina Wren is the largest of the Florida wrens. All species of the North American wren family are small, brownish in plumage coloration (sexes similar), and very active. In the wild, Carolina Wrens may live up to 6 years of age.

Identification

The Carolina Wren is a small but robust-appearing bird. It is about 5 1/2 inches in length, and 3/4 ounces in weight. It has a reddish-brown upper body, cinnamon-colored



Figure 1. Carolina Wren. Photo copyrighted by Dan Sudia. Credits: Photo copyrighted by Dan Sudia

underparts, narrow white stripes across its wings, a white bib on its chin, a bold white stripe over its eyes, and a slightly downward-curved bill (Figure 1). Its flight is characterized by numerous direct short flights from perch to nearby perch. They often display an established flight pattern of approaching and landing on a perch the same way repeatedly. Once this flight pattern is recognized, a person can predict where the bird will land and can use binoculars to observe the beautiful features of the bird as well as its behavior.

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Habitat

The Carolina Wren is a habitat generalist in that it uses many different habitats, provided that the habitats contain an abundance of heavy undergrowth for foraging, nesting, and avoiding predators. In Florida, they can be seen darting through the undergrowth of mesic hammocks, cypress swamps, scrub, pine flatwoods, sand hills, and, particularly, heavily vegetated urban residential areas. It is likely that they are most abundant in urban settings.

Range

The Carolina Wren is distributed widely in eastern North America. It occurs as far south as Mexico, west to eastern Nebraska, north into Canada, east to Massachusetts, and throughout the southeastern United States (Figure 2). Northern populations of this non-migratory bird, however, are unstable due to the severity of the winters. The highest levels of abundance are found in the Southeast, where warmer climatic conditions occur year-round.



Figure 2. Range of the Carolina Wren.

Foods and Foraging Behavior

Carolina Wrens are daytime hunters. They forage principally along the ground or low in bushes and shrubs, moving rapidly as they do so. Leaf litter is a particularly attractive foraging site. Their de-curved bill allows them to efficiently flip through vegetative debris or probe crevasses for the preferred foods: insects and spiders. Important prey include caterpillars, beetles, weevils, moths, grasshoppers, crickets, cockroaches, and, of course, spiders.

Reproduction

The breeding season of the Carolina Wren in Florida begins in March and continues through August. This bird is a cavity nester in that it places its

nest in artificial or natural cavities—or most anything resembling them. Woodpecker cavities, tree stumps, and tangles of vines serve as natural nest sites.

However, in urban settings, they are much more creative in that they place their nests in flower pots, hanging plant baskets, firewood stacks, old shoes, and, yes, even in the pockets of clothes left outside to dry. They can construct a nest within a day's time, but usually take several days to do so. The nest is a rather bulky cup-like structure, about 6-7 inches deep and 5-6 inches wide, with a domed entrance on the side. It is generally constructed from a hodge-podge of available vegetative materials, of which Spanish moss is often a major item. The nest is lined with fine grass, feathers, hair, pieces of plastic, and whatever else is available. A pair of breeding wrens often builds several nests each year, but usually only 2 or 3 are ever used for rearing young. Although the purpose of the extra nests is not known, they may serve to confuse predators—which, in an urban setting, are principally the house cat and gray squirrel.

Although females may lay as many as 8 red-brown spotted eggs per clutch, the usual number is from 4 to 6. Incubation, which takes from 12 to 14 days, is performed only by the female. However, both males and females share in the feeding of young at the nest. The nestlings fledge after 12 to 14 days, and are accompanied by the one or both parents for at least several days. The breeding pair usually raises 2 or 3 broods of offspring each year.

Social Behavior and Territoriality

Unlike most species in the wren family, the Carolina Wren forms mating pair bonds that are believed to last for life, unless one of the pair dies. The breeding pair maintains a year-round territory, which they defend fiercely against intruding wrens. In natural settings, the territories may range from 1 to 15 acres; however, in urban settings territories are often much smaller—like a backyard. The pair usually uses the same specific area for their territory from one year to the next. However, the territory may change in size seasonally and annually due to the changing availability of food and competition from other nearby pairs of wrens.

Male Carolina Wrens use many different vocalizations to stakeout their territories, or to attract a mate. The males most common vocalization is its characteristic song, "ta-whichity, ta-whichity, ta-witchity," which he delivers most frequently in morning and evening. Although females also have numerous vocalizations, their most interesting is a single syllable, plaintive call that they deliver over and over again near the nest a couple of days before the nestlings are to fledge. This call may be given for the sole purpose of encouraging the young to leave the nest.

Conservation Efforts

The Carolina Wren is a relatively abundant species in Florida, and, thus, is currently not in need of special management. Its healthy population status is at least partially attributable to its success in adapting to human-manipulated environments. However, in urban settings, predation of adults and nestlings by domestic cats probably limits population abundance growth. Further, the effects of pesticides and other toxins on the species is not known. Right now, however, this fascinating little bird is doing quite well, thank you! We invite you to enjoy the Carolina Wren as we do.

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