

Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii*



Folk Name: Wagtail Wren

Status: Extirpated/Lost

Abundance: Formerly—Migrant, Breeder, and Winter Visitor

Habitat: Cities, towns, residential areas, and farms

The Bewick's Wren is a former resident of both Carolinas. These birds were part of the endemic Appalachian subspecies which is now believed to be extinct. Today it has been extirpated from most of the eastern United States, but populations still thrive in the west. It was the second largest wren in the region. The Bewick's Wren averages 5 ¼ inches in length and has a much longer tail than the Carolina Wren. It is brown above and grayish white below. Adults have a thick buffy eye line and are known for being “slender” or “petite” in their overall appearance. Their tail is somewhat rounded, lightly barred, and has white tips on the outer feathers—which is distinctive.

The story of the Bewick's Wren is a bit of an ornithological mystery. In the late 1800s, this bird was considered “abundant” in towns in western North Carolina. In 1919, the authors of *Birds of North Carolina* described it as a “common summer visitor in the mountains” and noted that “elsewhere in the state it has been recorded only from Statesville and Raleigh.” E.M. Hoffman and Elmer Brown reported finding the Bewick's Wren in Salisbury on March 3, 1923.

In South Carolina in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bewick's Wren was described as an “uncommon” breeding bird from the upstate east to Chester County. Ornithologist Leverett Loomis was the first to report Bewick's Wren breeding in the Piedmont of the state. He designated this wren “not very common” in Chester County in the late 1870s and noted they were “found about dwellings, out-houses, wood-piles, brush heaps in the woodlands, etc.” Loomis later confirmed that the species “breeds very sparingly” in Chester County, and in some years was common in winter, while in others it was absent. He also reported that “in spring and autumn, and during genial days in January and February, they are exquisitely vocal.” Loomis collected at least one specimen from the vicinity of the Chester County Courthouse, and he collected four other specimens of Bewick's Wren in Chester County during the winter, all of which are now housed in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University.

For unknown reasons, the status of this wren rapidly changed, and by the late 1930s, Bewick's Wren had become “rather scarce” in the mountain of both Carolinas and only sporadic sightings were reported from the Piedmont



and areas to the east. There were two reports of nesting in the Carolina Piedmont. Wade Fox reported Bewick's Wrens nesting in Greensboro, Guilford County, on April 28, 1939, and Robert Witherington photographed a failed nesting attempt of a pair at Winston-Salem, Forsyth County, on May 31, 1950. In the latter attempt, the birds built a nest in a nest box and occupied it for at least 10 days before abandoning it, leaving one unhatched egg behind which was later collected on 29 June.

In an assessment of this bird's decline published in 1978, Mark Simpson hypothesized that competition due to the range expansion of the House Wren and the introduction and range expansion of both the European Starling and the House Sparrow, may have combined to contribute to this native bird's rapid demise. Today, the Bewick's Wren has been entirely extirpated from both Carolinas, and it no longer breeds in most of its original breeding range in the eastern United States.

There are fewer than a dozen reported sightings of Bewick's Wren in the Central Carolinas after the 1920s. On April 4, 1930, William McIlwaine was walking down East Boulevard in Charlotte, when he spied an unusual bird. McIlwaine wrote:

[It was] singing beautifully. Sitting in a little tree. He looked dark like a Song Sparrow. But I did not have my glasses. Then he flew to the ground. I got near enough to see a long wren-like bill and tail. No Song Sparrow. My books tell me this was a Bewick's Wren. Hurrah! Another species! But I did not see him well. And when I came back with my glasses he was gone.

Elizabeth Clarkson reported a Bewick's Wren visiting her feeder at Wing Haven on 12 January and again on 27 January in 1952. Bewick's Wrens were reported on two Stanly Spring Bird Counts on May 7, 1966, and April 29, 1967. David Wright found one "in a fence row in southern Iredell County, N.C" on September 27, 1984. He noted "the white tail spots as the wren jerked and spread his tail." Bruce Neville reported seeing one at Rankin Lake

in Gaston County on August 3, 1986. He provided this remark: "Was actually quite amazed to pish out a Bewick's Wren! Had seen and heard several Carolinas, including 2 immatures. This bird was slimmer and 'cooler' brown and had a longer, pale-edged, active tail." Lastly, David Wright reported a Bewick's Wren at the Irwin Creek WWTP in Charlotte on June 6, 1990.