

House Wren *Troglodytes aedon*



Folk Name: Spider Wren

Status: Breeder and Winter Visitor

Abundance: Fairly Common

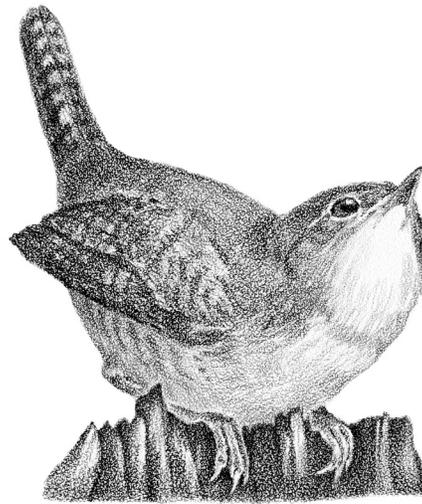
Habitat: Brushy areas in cities, towns, farmland

The House Wren is a fairly common breeding bird and migrant in most cities, towns, farms, and parks throughout the Carolina Piedmont. It is uncommon here in the winter months. This wren is brown above, mostly gray brown below, and it averages 4 ¾ inches long. It has a faint, buffy eye line and light barring on its wings and tail. It is well known for its loud bubbling song. We have records of this bird in the region during every month of the year. Most arrive in April and leave by the end of October. Winter records appear to be increasing.

In the 1800s, the House Wren was known to breed only in states to the north and west of the Carolinas. In 1910, Arthur T. Wayne designated it as “very rare in the interior” of South Carolina, occurring between September and May. Leverett Loomis found only two during all his years of bird study in Chester, both on May 4, 1888, during spring migration. The House Wren was considered a “rare transient” in North Carolina when the first edition of *Birds of North Carolina* was published in 1919, but the authors noted that nesting in the mountains might “reasonably be expected.” By the 1920s, observers had begun to document the expansion of its breeding range into North Carolina, but the first nests were actually confirmed here in the Piedmont.

Elmer Brown and his mentor, E.M. Hoffman, were the first to record nesting of the House Wren in North Carolina. They found a nest in Salisbury, “breeding about 1st June” in 1922 and shared the details of their find in a letter to C.S. Brimley at the North Carolina State Museum. Brown later noted the nest was discovered “under an old chicken house” by his friend Harold McCurdy, and it had “five fresh eggs” in it. Four years later, Elmer Brown recorded an account of two more House Wren nests he found at his home in Salisbury while on summer break from Davidson College:

This summer [1926] there have been two nests within fifty yards of our house. The first pair built on a sill over the door to the back steps of Harold’s [McCurdy] house. On June 3 the nest was almost finished. The eggs hatched on June 23. As we could not see in the nest, we did not count the eggs, for fear of the birds’ leaving the nest, as they did in 1922 when we removed an egg from the nest found then. The young birds left the nest on June 25. In the case of each pair, a new nest was begun about two weeks



after the young had left the old one, and we thought for a while that second broods were to be raised. However, neither nest was completed. The birds apparently left them after working on them for a while. I cannot account for this, as neither nest was meddled with, so far as I know.

The last day we have seen this bird is August 15. The House Wren is certainly an enthusiastic and tireless singer. He fairly bubbles over at the mouth. We often heard him singing gaily during the very hottest part of the day. Early on the morning of July 18, I heard one sing his song 151 times continuously in ten minutes.



House Wren adding sticks to a nest box. (Will Stuart)

On April 18, 1927, Brown observed one House Wren on the campus of Davidson College, in Mecklenburg County. He then documented a failed nest attempt on May 9, 1928. He noted “A pair of House Wrens started a nest in a bird box made from a tin can, but so far as I know, this nest was never completed.” House Wrens are notorious for building “dummy nests” in holes in their territory to prevent other birds from nesting. It is possible this “failed” nest attempt was one.

On April 23, 1928, William McIlwaine found a House Wren moving through Charlotte “on her way to a Virginia nest” and wrote: “They do not nest around Charlotte.” In 1930, he found a pair of House Wrens in town and reported possible nesting. Upon reviewing his notes he wrote: “On May 5 and 8. The first record was of a pair of birds, one singing, as they seemed pleased with a bird box. The record a few days later is just a check as seen.” Two years later in 1932, Frank Brown, Elmer Brown’s younger brother, confirmed an active House Wren nest in Mecklenburg County.

By 1940, Elizabeth Clarkson noted the House Wren was “common in my garden, with from one to three pair raising from one to three broods in our boxes.” Charlie Sellers recorded the return of the House Wren to Charlotte on 15 April in 1941 and described it as a “locally common” breeding bird. He discovered a nest on 9 June that year with three young. Clarkson noted their arrival on 12 April in 1944, but remarked that others had recorded their return as early as 8 April. In 1944, she reported the “male apparently arrives 2–5 days before [the] female.” This note from Iredell County was published in *The Chat* in 1941: “Grace Anderson reports a House Wren so overcome by the hot weather in July that it hung by one leg out of its nesting box in a vain effort to keep cool.”

Four House Wren nests were confirmed in Charlotte in the spring of 1943, and two pairs nested in Stanly County for the first time that spring. In 1944, members of the

Hickory Bird Club found a pair of House Wrens nesting in town. They noted that prior to that record the House Wren had not been known to nest west of Newton.

P.M. Jenness reported conclusive evidence of House Wrens breeding in South Carolina in 1945. However, several sources credit Ruth Click with reporting the first record of House Wren nesting in the state. She found them in Spartanburg County during the summer of 1950. A pair raised four young in her backyard that year. One keen backyard observer, Mrs. D.A. Lacrosse of Rock Hill, SC, took note of the nesting range expansion of the House Wren in 1964, writing:

When we first moved to South Carolina in 1949 the Carolina Wren seemed to be far the most common wren in yards—nesting in gourds, birdhouses, and any available object of convenient shape. Year by year the House Wren has become more common here, and now we seldom see the Carolina Wrens around the yard or in town, though I hear them by the roadside whenever I drive out of town. I am curious to know whether the House Wren always replaces the Carolina when the territory is extended in the Carolina area or if my observations are just chance.

In June 1959, a pair of House Wrens nested in a Brown-headed Nuthatch box in Charlotte after the nuthatches had raised two broods. The wrens put several pine twigs on top of the existing two nuthatch nests and laid four eggs by 20 June, and “successfully raised their brood.”

The House Wren currently nests in all North Carolina counties in our region. According to *The South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas* (2003), the breeding range of the House Wren in that state is limited to counties west of the Catawba River and north of Highway 378. Robin Carter had two in Chester County and one in Union County, SC, on June 10, 1987, and eight singing in Fairfield County in June 1990. Fairfield County appears to be this wren’s southernmost and easternmost breeding location in the state. In 1991, Kevin Hennings observed an active nest near Fort Lawn in Chester County from 29 May through 9 June. The nest was in a natural cavity in a pine stub in a clearcut field that had been recently burned. He watched the female carrying insects into the nest hole and the male singing nearby.

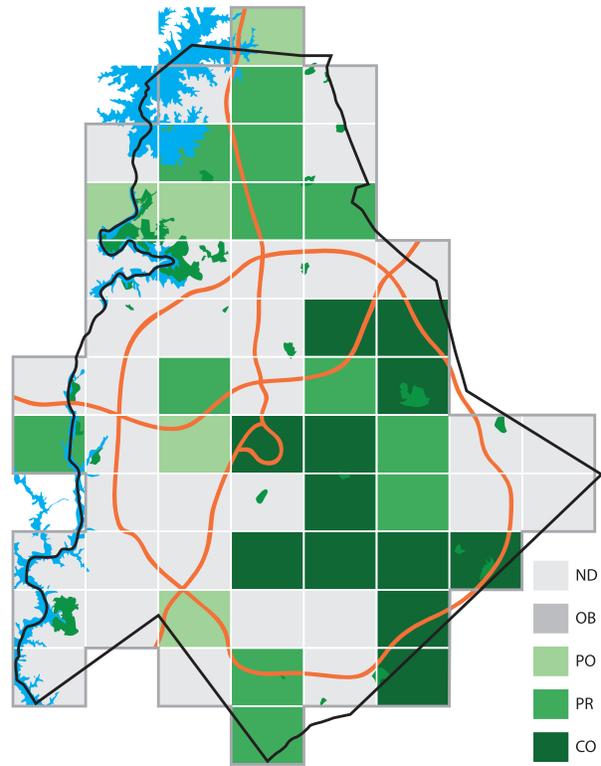
The House Wren often aggressively competes for nest cavities with other cavity-nesting songbirds including Carolina Wrens, chickadees, titmice, and bluebirds. They chase away competitors, destroy nests and nestlings and may fill neighboring cavities with sticks (dummy nests), to prevent nest building by other species. They have been known to drive out other birds from their nesting area and are believed to have played a contributing role in the extirpation of Bewick’s Wren in the east.

From 2008 to 2012, Dr. Mark Stanback conducted a research study on over 260 House Wren nests built in nest



House Wren eggs in a nest box on 28 June. (Mary Wyant)

boxes near Davidson College. Most House Wrens began nesting in spring by mid-April and summer nesting attempts were concluded by the end of July. Average clutch size was 5.52 eggs. His study provided evidence that House Wrens using nest boxes with larger entrance holes alter their nest structure inside the box to try to reduce predation. They accomplish this by making the berm of their stick nest higher so that the eggs are harder to reach inside the box. Stanback concluded House Wrens “respond to a predictable and adaptive manner to variation in the size of their nest entrance” with regards to the size of their stick berm.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Fairly Widespread (PR/12, CO/12)