

# Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

## **Bewick's Wrens Nest in Watauga County, N.C.**

Knowing of our love for antiques as well as birds, our son, Dick, gave us a Williamsburg nest bottle. The 2½-inch mouth would not interest any bird but a common wren, so we hung it as a decoration, not caring that it faced north and was not very close to protective shrubbery. It was hung on a blank wall, 2 feet beneath a tray feeder in good view from the kitchen eating counter and the driveway.

Returning from the National Audubon Convention in mid-July, we were pleased to find a Carolina Wren singing from atop the bottle. Having made detailed studies of the Florida subspecies, we found it of only passing interest. When we saw a somewhat smaller wren-type bird entering the bottle, we began to pay close attention. The bird always flew directly to the tiny twig perch and went in so rapidly that we were hard pressed to get details that would satisfy our desire for careful identification. Now and then the Carolina would go into the bottle but did not remain long. It took an unbelievable number of sightings to piece together the parts needed to be sure of which wren we were studying.

The bill was easily wren. The eye line was not as white as the Carolina's. The sides were buffy. The tail was long. There was fine barring on the upper parts, but it took a long time to be sure it was only the folded wings, and not the bird's back. The throat was white. Because we were looking down on the birds, we had no opportunity to see the underparts until I spied one of them having a preening session on a nail in the supporting post of the porch. The underparts were definitely white! This settled our minds in all but the most obvious identification mark—the white tail margins. Sometimes I caught a glimpse of a very thin one, but the tail was always folded. The 13 books in our home that had pictures or descriptions of Bewick's Wrens emphasized that, but the pictures usually showed the tails spread out. We were convinced we had Bewick's Wrens and began to read as much as possible about them, especially as to their rarity in our mountains. I made a notation in my bird notes, "7/14/81 Bewick's Wrens nesting in the Wm. bottle."

So far we were sure of a Carolina Wren that sang from the bottle and sometimes entered it, and a Bewick's that often entered the same nest. We assumed

we had a male and female, in that order, and further wondered if the possibility existed of cross breeding. The new *Terres Encyclopedia* often mentions mixing of species, contrary to former works I had read. Knowing of the House Wren's tendency to harm eggs and young, we worried about that, too.

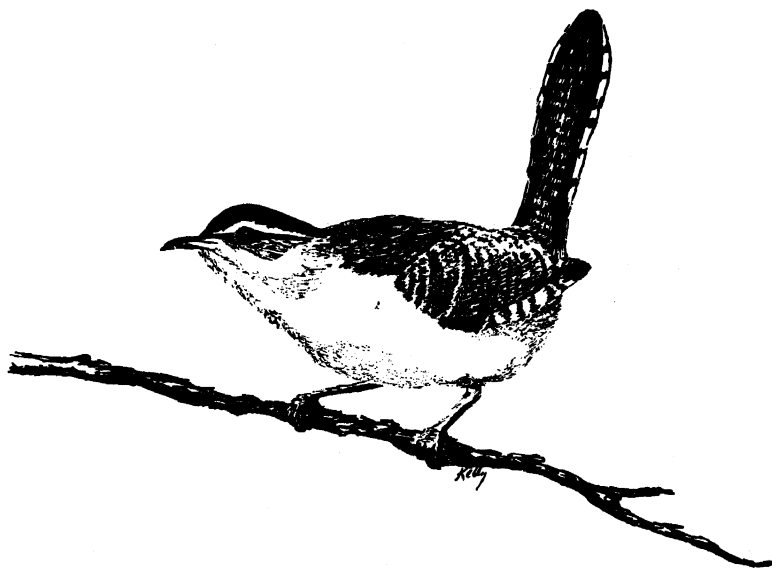
At last we knew the female was remaining inside long enough to be incubating. The male Carolina continued to enter now and then. Later we saw another Bewick's arrive and feed her. Was it courtship feeding or assisting in the feeding of young? On 16 July we saw a fecal sac carried out. Ah! Hatchlings at last! There were increased trips for feeding the babies, but not enough to supply a normal brood. No doubt there were not many babies.

On the nineteenth I saw the female skid upon arrival, sailing inside as if she had just waxed the floor. Up before dawn, I recorded the first feeding of the day as 6:15 a.m.

A slightly fanned tail was seen the twenty-third, and a proper white border was plainly seen.

In mid-morning of the twenty-fourth, we were drawn to the window by the loud and insistent scolds of the Bewick's Wrens. There were two birds, tails well fanned out, and looking exactly like most of our references. They were upset over something on the edge of the driveway or in the weeds and low branches. We finally found a chipmunk and suspected that fledglings were hidden, but at no time saw one. The commotion lasted 20 minutes or longer and we had time to get the tape recorder and get their calls. Comparing them later with the Cornell tapes, we had a good match.

On the twenty-sixth, all activity in the bottle had ceased. Remembering that young birds sometimes return to the nest to roost, I left the bottle undisturbed. When I could see a spider web across the mouth, I knew I could



take the bottle down for examination. Inside was an egg! I rolled it out gently with a spoon. Both its pattern and size were between the Carolina Wren and Bewick's. Allowing for individual differences within the same species might account for this, or does it? When the contents of the bottle were pulled out, they consisted of grasses and nondescript fluff. Neither the coarse twigs found in many wren nests nor a stick barrier across the large opening was found.

We came to the conclusion that a pair of Bewick's Wrens had their second brood of the season in our nest bottle. What part the Carolina Wren played is unclear. At no time did we see friction between these species. The number of eggs is unknown, but the number that hatched and fledged was small. At no time did we see eggs, shell fragments, or babies being removed. Did the Carolina kill some babies? Puncture some eggs? Obviously the odd egg was infertile or improperly incubated. Perhaps it should not be entirely ruled out that it was a hybrid egg, improbable as that may be.

The altitude of our home is 3400 feet and, in line with the habitat mentioned in several references, is brushy and rural, yet near humans. Our scarcity of House Sparrows and European Starlings is also favorable. The fledging date is about a month later than any mentioned in the literature studied. The very fact that Bewick's nested at all is amazing in view of the many statements that they no longer breed in our mountains and are not often even seen. — RUTH A. HAYNES, Route 4, Box 279B, Boone, N.C. 28607.

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**INDIGO BUNTING:** Alan Avakian observed a brown-plumaged individual, with bluish color in the wings, at Clemson on the extremely early date of 23 March.

**PAINTED BUNTING:** A female or immature male was present in John Fussell's yard in Morehead City from 11 March to 10 April; it may have overwintered in a nearby area.

**DICKCISSEL:** A colony was discovered in Anderson County, S.C., near Townville this spring. Harry LeGrand and Sidney Gauthreaux found three singing males at one site, and another male 0.5 mile away, on 23 May. A number of colonies and/or singing males have been found at various places over the past 8 years in that county, which undoubtedly contains more suitable habitat (grassy or weedy fields with a scattering of tall composites and/or shrubs) than any other in the Carolinas.

**HOUSE FINCH:** Jay Carter observed a female building a nest in a Longleaf Pine sapling bordering a golf course near Pinehurst, N.C., on 23 April; two males were seen nearby. This is the first nesting record for the Sandhills region. Marie Gerstenberg found an adult feeding young at Durham on 1 May. At localities where the species is scarce, two were at Rockingham, N.C., on 20 March (Douglas McNair), one was at Asheville on 22 March (Jerry Young), and two were at Cape Lookout on 10 April (John Fussell).

**PINE SISKIN:** Extremely late was a siskin that remained at a Winston-Salem feeder through 8 June, according to Ramona Snavelly.

**SNOW BUNTING:** One of the few sightings for the winter season was three noted by Avery and Susan Burns at Raccoon Key, S.C., on 20 February.