

# General Field Notes

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## Unusual Nest-site Tenacity of a Carolina Wren

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Mr. B. Ashley of Abbeville, Abbeville County, South Carolina, recited the following information to me about the unusual nest-site tenacity of a Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*), which took place on his Abbeville farm from late April through early May 1989.

In late April, Mr. Ashley discovered a pair of Carolina Wrens building a nest in a recess of a tractor body. The bulky nest contained no eggs on that day. In a few days, the nest contained 2 eggs; two days later, it contained 4 eggs, after which no more eggs were laid. The tractor was used for the first time in 1989 on the day 2 eggs were in the nest. After several hours, the tractor was parked within one foot of its original position. For about a week thereafter, the tractor was used for several hours each day, usually around midday, after which it was returned to its regular parking place. The incubating female (Laskey, 1948; Nice and Thomas, 1948) was repeatedly flushed off the nest prior to removal of the tractor from the shed. After one week elapsed, the tractor was removed from the farm for at least three days. When it was returned, the wren did not resume incubating the eggs; hence the pair had abandoned the nest. Mr. Ashley then removed the nest and eggs.

For the ensuing week, the tractor was not used. A pair of Carolina Wrens, presumably the same pair, built a complete nest in the identical site, but the female

laid no eggs nor did any adult roost in the nest. Mr. Ashley removed this nest after he was convinced the pair had abandoned it.

The chosen nest-site, a recess next to the engine of a tractor, is not unusual because Carolina Wrens may choose any recess or cavity in appropriate habitat that can contain their bulky nest (Bent, 1948; Laskey, 1948; Nice and Thomas, 1948; Burleigh, 1958; Harrison, 1975; pers. obsv.; E. F. Potter, pers. comm.). Carolina Wrens are also highly tolerant of disturbance near or at the nest, including removal and replacement of the nest; or removal of the nest to a new location nearby, during all stages of the nesting cycle (op. cit.; Grady, 1943; Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1949). What is unusual about the Abbeville pair is that the female completed laying her clutch of 4 eggs without interruption and that she incubated the eggs for about a week, despite the disruption of having the nest-site, the tractor, absent for several hours each day for about nine days. Higgins (1953) discovered that a female Carolina Wren in Massachusetts did not interrupt egg-laying when her nest (and nest-site) was moved once after she laid her third egg, as the wren continued to lay her fourth and fifth eggs in succession at the new location. This nest was successful. At Four Oaks, Johnston County, N.C., a pair of Carolina Wrens built a nest in the grill of a van which went on several trips a day during the nestling period in two successive years (The News and Observer, Raleigh, N.C., 7 June 1987; reference provided by E. F. Potter). The young were fed by the adults when the van returned home each day. At Charleston, S.C., E. Cutts watched a pair of Carolina Wrens carry a nesting attempt to 5 eggs in the rear bumper of an active automobile (Aud. Field Notes 11:398, 1957).

Inattentive periods of Carolina Wrens studied in Tennessee and Arkansas were remarkably similar, with means of 33 min 30 sec and 31 min and ranges of 9-70 min and 8-84 min, respectively (Laskey, 1948; Nice and Thomas, 1948). Inattentive periods of several hours each at Abbeville, S.C., longer than the maximum limits recorded in Tennessee and Arkansas, did not cause the female to abandon the nest because, I believe, the engine heat provided a natural incubator while the wren was unable to incubate the eggs. This permitted the wren to resume the incubation of warm eggs when the tractor was returned to the shed. Mr. Ashley told me the nest was always very warm while the tractor was running; indeed, he finally removed the second nest because he thought a potential fire hazard existed. Because the wrens selected the identical nest-site for their second nest, they may have abandoned the nest after the three-day plus absence of the tractor during the first attempt, not because of the tractor's absence *per se*, but because the eggs were chilled and no longer viable. The unusual nest-site tenacity of this pair of Carolina Wrens may have been abetted by a hot engine, regardless of the particular attraction of the cold tractor as a nest-site to this pair of wrens.

Acknowledgments. I thank D. M. Forsythe and E. F. Potter for reviewing this note. A record in the Southern Atlantic Coast Region of Audubon Field Notes is not listed in the Literature Cited section.

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## Dickcissel Found Breeding in Coastal South Carolina

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At 1030 h on 22 May 1988, S. C. Langston and I discovered the nest of a pair of Dickcissels (*Spiza americana*) at Patriot's Point, Mt. Pleasant, Charleston County, S.C. The nest, approximately 15 cm in diameter, contained five fresh blue eggs; and was located 40 cm above the ground in a small weed. The nest was located in a field dominated by mixed clovers (*Trifolium* spp.) 10-60 cm in height, with scattered small Red Mulberry (*Morus rubra*), Tamarisk (*Tamarix gallica*), *Baccharis* sp. and Hackberry (*Celtis laevigata*) trees about 1-3 m tall.

Prior to this record, the Dickcissel was considered a rare and erratic summer resident in the middle and upper portions of South Carolina with the first recent indications of breeding being from Spartanburg (Cannon, 1956). On the coast, however, the Dickcissel was considered a very rare and erratic winter visitor (Sprunt and Chamberlain, 1949). This record constitutes the first known nesting of this species on the South Carolina coast. The nearest previous breeding locations have been about 150 km from the coast in Aiken and Richland counties.

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