

## General Field Notes

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*General Field Notes* briefly report such items as rare sightings, unusual behaviors, or significant nesting records; or summaries of such items. Submit manuscripts to the appropriate state editor.

*First, second, or third sightings of species in either state must be submitted to the appropriate Bird Records Committee prior to publication in The Chat.*

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## House Wrens Nesting in Columbia, South Carolina

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On 21 June 2003, my next-door neighbor in Forest Acres, a suburb of Columbia, Richland County, South Carolina, told me of a wren nesting in one of his bird boxes that was “smaller and grayer than a Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) with no eye stripe and a sweet song”. Upon investigating, I soon saw a House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) enter the box. Because the box had no access other than the entrance hole, I had to use an inspection mirror and drop light to see the contents, which consisted of three recently-hatched young.

I checked the box several times over the next 16 days and found the nest empty, with one unhatched egg, on 6 July 2003. Three well-feathered young were in the box during the previous inspection of 4 July, and I assumed the young successfully fledged. Johnson (1998) reported a fledging age of 16–18 days for House Wrens, with a clutch size ranging from a low of four to a high of seven or eight eggs. The clutch size of second nestings for House Wrens, typically in “late June or July”, is smaller, four to six eggs, than first clutches of six to eight eggs (Johnson 1998). Whether this nesting effort was

the first or second is unknown, although my neighbor informed me this was the first time he had seen the House Wren nest in his yard.

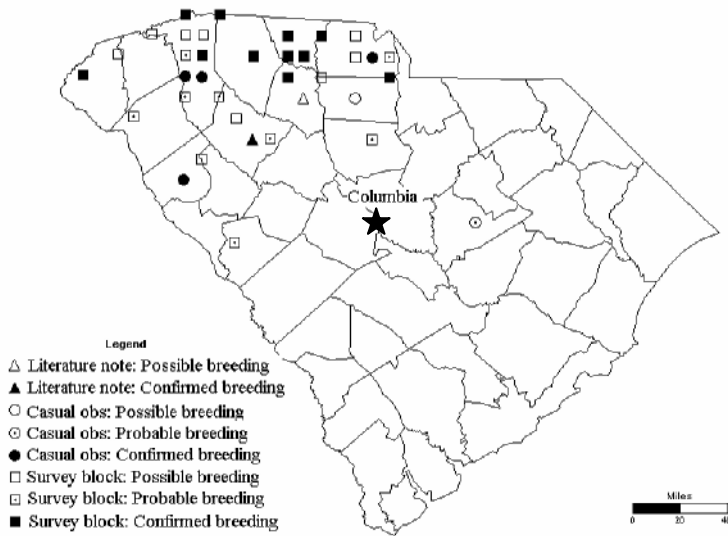


Figure 1 Breeding distribution of House Wrens in South Carolina, based on the South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas, 1988–1995.

House Wrens have been traditionally considered as “northern birds”, although they have probably been expanding their breeding range southward in the United States since the first forests were cleared for agriculture and residences by European settlers (Johnson 1998). The first documented breeding record for South Carolina was in a yard in Spartanburg in 1950 (Sprunt and Chamberlain 1949). Since then House Wrens have expanded their breeding range throughout South Carolina’s Upper Piedmont (Post and Gauthreaux 1989). Surveys during the South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas (1988–1995) showed probable House Wren breeding records as far south as Winnsboro and Edgefield (Fig. 1). An outlying record from Sumter County in 1991 was apparently an unmated bird building “dummy” nests in bluebird boxes (Lex Glover pers. comm.).

Columbia is located in the center of the state on the Fall Line separating the Piedmont from the Coastal Plain. Forest Acres is a mature subdivision first developed after World War II and features a prominent overstory of 20–30 m tall loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda*) with scattered oaks (*Quercus* sp.), sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), maples (*Acer* sp.) and other hardwoods. Lots are large, at least one-half acre, with well-developed hedgerows and shrubbery. Johnson (1998) notes that during times of expansion and at the edges of their breeding range, House Wrens are closely associated with areas of human habitation. Birders in the Columbia area and the rest of central South Carolina should be on the alert for the possibility of

more nesting activity by House Wrens. Caution should be used when interpreting nesting status, as the males are noted for building dummy nests that never get used (Kennedy and White 1992).

I wish to thank Lex Glover for reviewing this note.

### **Literature Cited**

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## **Boat-tailed Grackle Uses a Marsh Wren Nest as a Platform: An Example of Limited Nest Site Availability in Salt Marshes**

**William Post, John A. Herbert and Megan Barks**

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On 15 July 2003, Herbert and Barks found a Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*) nest that had been built on top of a Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) nest, located in smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*) growing on the edge of a tidal creek joining the Stono River, Johns Island, Charleston County, South Carolina. Neither the grackle nest nor the wren nest was in use, although the grackle nest contained one egg, which upon examination appeared to have been abandoned for at least two weeks. The grackle nest was 1.2 m above the mud and within 1 m of the creek edge. The height of the cordgrass to which the nests were attached, and that of the surrounding grass, was 2 m. The grackle nest was an open cup, outside diameter, 18 cm; height, 11 cm, both within the reported range for the species (Post et al. 1996). Although the grackle nest was attached to six stems of cordgrass, the top of the wren nest (10 x 18 cm) formed the main support for its nest (Fig. 1; specimen no. ChM 2003.).

The wren nest had a well-defined entrance hole and was lined, which would indicate that it had been occupied by a female (Kroodsma and Verner 1997), but it had no traces of egg shells or other materials indicating that it had actually held eggs. The grackle nest did not appear to have fledged young, as the nest was not fouled, as would have been the case if it had produced fledglings (Post et al. 1996).