

Wren Quest

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CAROLINA WREN, GEORGE C. WEST

How many times have you been asked by a coworker or a nonbirding relative what your favorite bird is? That is often a hard decision; at least fellow birders give you a chance to think of ten favorites. I have no problem: Carolina Wren; yup, that little brown job, not the Superb Blue Wren of Australia, the Resplendent Quetzal of Central America, or the Painted Bunting that occasionally finds its way to Massachusetts. *Thryothorus ludovicianus*, technically translated as reed of Louisiana, the site of the original specimen, tops my list. The Carolina Wren is a member of a family of basically small- to medium-size brown songbirds that are perky and for the most part great songsters. It is believed that the male sings on average about thirty-two songs, and females often join the males in singing duets.

The guides say that these birds are common in open woods and backyards of the southeast. The northern edge of their territory varies over time, gradually moving north and sometimes falling back during winters. Here in Massachusetts we have seen this trend over the years, although I believe that the population, especially in areas south of Boston, is now well established and a severe winter will not have a devastating effect. The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology has a program called Project Feeder Watch, and they have been keeping an eye on the range expansion of this species in the northeastern United States. Mild winters have assisted the wren in moving north, and feeder watchers report many of these wrens are visiting feeders for suet, peanuts, and black oil sunflower seeds. Certainly the feeders improve the wrens' chances of survival during hard winters. In Woodstock, Vermont, Kent McFarland reported another food source: he saw a Carolina Wren eating spaghetti out of his compost pile. Another Cornell project is the Great Backyard Bird Count held annually on Presidents Weekend in February. Last year in Massachusetts 273 individual Carolina Wrens were reported from 183 locations.

Beginning the Quest

I began my love affair with Carolina Wrens, appropriately, on Valentine's Day, 1993, at Race Point in Provincetown. I was with Dave Lange on the "death march" from the parking lot to Hatches Harbor, hoping for a rare loon or alcid, when a pair of Carolina Wrens scolded me from an isolated patch of bayberry bushes in the dunes, far from the safety of the Province lands. Wow, I said to Dave, these guys are everywhere! Two months earlier I had participated in the Buzzard's Bay Christmas Bird Count (CBC), which tallied a record 264 individuals. Ten years before, in 1982, the same CBC recorded just 23 individuals. Range expansion? I guess. I made a commitment that day to try to see a Carolina Wren in each and every city and town in Massachusetts. Foolish. I knew that my quest would be difficult in many parts of the

state. Berkshire and Franklin counties posed problems from the get go, but I was determined to start the quest.

Leaving Provincetown that afternoon, we were diverted from gulls and sea ducks; wrens were in order. We added Truro, Wellfleet, Eastham, Orleans, and finally Brewster, with just a tad of daylight left. My birding career was altered. No longer would I chase down the rare bird to add to my year list; I would spend nearly every weekend searching new communities for the wren. I enlisted many birding companions on this quest. Marj Rines, my number one devotee to the cause, joined me nearly every time; in fact, she searched during the week and added towns before I did. I remember she had a wren in Ashland on March 19, 1993, with Dick Forster, and I didn't find one in that town until November of 1994. I visited 350 of the 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts during 1993. That in itself is some sort of conquest. The last town I visited was Gosnold, on the island of Cuttyhunk, on August 26, 1995.

Finding wrens in southeastern Massachusetts was a piece of cake in 1993. I recorded them in 148 communities – every town in Barnstable, Bristol, Norfolk, Nantucket, and Plymouth counties. Elsewhere it was more difficult. I found none in Hampden and Hampshire counties, which was very surprising because the Connecticut River traverses the area, with potentially nice habitat for Carolina Wren. I did see them in two towns in Berkshire County and one in the Franklin County town of Montague. Ah, Montague. I went to a feeder there to see a Boreal Chickadee (I saw it), but I was much more excited by the Carolina Wren at the same feeder. This was my only Franklin County bird until two birds in Whately on December 31, 2001.

It soon became clear that I needed a map to color in my accomplishments (Figure 1). The National Survey Company in Chester, Vermont, has a great outline map of Massachusetts, and that piece of paper is just as important to me as my signed copy of Roger Tory Peterson's first edition field guide. Can you imagine a grown man going into hysterics over a coffee-stained, ripped map that has been misplaced? This has happened several times, and usually it has been found under the seat in the car, or in with the Sunday newspaper. The map was my only record, and friends told me to copy it; easier said than done. Well, I really lost it. I tore the house apart several times, but the map, missing for several days by now, was nowhere to be found. The last place to look was the Watertown Recycling Plant where I take my papers each Friday (it is only open Friday and Saturday). I knew my last "coloring" took place on Sunday night and that it had to have gotten mixed up with the recycled papers I had taken to the plant that week. I know the fellow who runs the plant and I showed up at opening time and asked to search for the map among the gazillion newspapers and magazines in the dumpster. I figured there would just be the previous Saturday deposits of paper, so there I am in the dumpster going through the amazing collection of reading material that people get rid of (I had no time to linger over the X-rated material I uncovered). Folks started to arrive with new stuff to deposit, and at least they looked before they tossed it into the dumpster! I spent over two hours looking without luck. I was going to have to reconstruct the map based on my dates, each year a different color. Nearly a month went by before I spotted a folded white piece of paper behind the dining room buffet table, perched on the baseboard of the white wall.

It was my map. I now have another copy, I have a computer copy, and the map no longer takes trips in the car.

I also made up rules (after all, it is my game). For example, although I try to see each and every wren, hearing a bird is okay. In the early days of the quest, time was important. On March 20, 1993, Marj and I had wrens in seventeen towns, starting at first light in West Bridgewater and ending in fading light in Acushnet. Some of those birds were just drive-bys. According to my second rule the bird could be counted wherever I was located, so if we happened to be lucky enough to find suitable habitat on a town line, a “twofer” could be recorded. I simply stepped across the boundary marker and added two towns! We had one “threefer” – Milford, Hopedale, and Bellingham on November 7, 1993, along the Charles River where all three towns meet. Actually, to find the right habitat at a town line is challenging and difficult, so I’m not at all embarrassed to count towns this way. I had a really nice two-town day recently on Route 32 in Palmer. I was along the Quabog River in an industrial part of town. I stopped, and over the noise of all the traffic I heard the now all-too-familiar chattering of my wren. I positioned my car right next to the “Entering Monson” sign and began to spish loudly. Soon a pair of wrens approached. They were visible but retreated when a car stopped to see whether I needed help (maybe professional help). I spished again, and they finally crossed the line into Monson. Town number 244. I have found that the best places to search for wrens are areas with people, thickets, and water. Cemeteries often are good places to look for wrens. This year alone I’ve found wrens for the first time in eleven town cemeteries. I’ve even taken to reading the accounts of where murders have occurred in isolated patches of woods and thickets, especially in Chelsea, hoping that searching good body-dumping habitat will lead me to find a wren in one of my missing communities.

From Project to Obsession

I thought of my wren quest as just a three-year project, but it has become an obsession. Valentine’s Day 2003 will mark ten full years of searching. There were setbacks, such as the winter of 1993-1994, which was hard on Carolina Wrens. The severity of that winter also affected wrens in the entire Northeast as indicated by Project Feeder Watch data from Cornell. In 1994, I added just six towns to my first year of 148 – very discouraging. The next year was a bit more encouraging: I added fifteen new towns, and was up to 169. The next four years of my quest produced horrible results. I added just *one* town in 1997 (Harvard), but still I had the urge to continue. Since I was finding new places to bird, and seeing other good birds, life was good! The year 2000, the Millennium, brought a reversal of fortune, with eleven new towns, and thirty-two new towns were added in 2001. I had finally seen a wren in every city and town in Essex County, and so far this year I have added thirty-five towns for a total of 260 cities and towns in Massachusetts. Just ninety-one to go!

Birding in unfamiliar territory is fun. As mentioned, I am always finding new places to go birding and more importantly learning the distribution of birds in our state. One thing that is obvious is that certain species are a lot easier to find, notably Eastern Bluebirds in southern Worcester County; they are everywhere. Red-bellied

Woodpeckers (my next quest) are also very common along the southern border of our state clear out to Sheffield. I have also noticed that Eastern Towhees, a bird that has decreased in distribution in the east, are fairly stable in other areas. We even come across unusual birds in my quest for Carolina Wren, finding a Western Tanager at a feeder in Berkley, Red-headed Woodpecker in the tiny town of Millville, a nest of Cooper's Hawks in Fairhaven. Along the way we have picked up fresh road kills of both Barred and Saw-whet owls, and I saw my first Massachusetts moose on a search for wrens in the northwestern town of Heath. This young bull moose was flirting with a group of young heifers and was not bothered by our close attention.

Over the years we've made the game fun in other ways. In 1993 Marj took advantage of traveling around the state to play another game – how many species of birds could she find painted on mailboxes. On November 13, 1993, we added a *real* Carolina Wren on a mailbox in Douglas, town number 140. We also kept track of odd, interesting, or amusing places where we found wrens. On March 30, 1993, we had a hard time finding a bird in Raynham, searching many places without luck. We proceeded into Taunton for an easy pickup, and then returned to Raynham for gas on busy Route 138, when a Carolina Wren sang in a bush behind the service station. I reached 229 in the City of Somerville on March 24, 2002, which was a milestone mostly because it is very hard to find any habitat in one of the most congested places in Massachusetts. The bird was singing loudly along Route 16 at Dilboy Field by Alewife Brook (it is about seven feet or less across that brook to Arlington). But perhaps the Fairhaven bird will get top honors for location. On March 27, 1993, we heard a wren calling along the road. I began laughing and called Marj over – the wren was singing its *teakettle-teakettle* song in a bush, right next to an old tea kettle! I returned the following winter to photograph the singing tea kettle; it was gone, but a pair of wrens was still there singing away.

For the most part, I have found Carolina Wrens on my own, finding suitable habitat, spishing every potential thicket, and then moving on to the next spot. I find what I think is ideal habitat and keep returning. Sometimes it takes years for the wren to find my spot. I have to thank several birders who have given me tips on locations to try, where I have eventually come up with a wren. There are twenty-two towns that I've added as a direct result of these tips. From inside, I've enjoyed the feeders of several birders – Jonathan Center in Chelmsford, Sandy and Don Selesky in Westford, and Steven Moore and Barbara Volkle in Northborough. On a tip from Steve Ells, I visited Peter and Gretel Clark, who run the Miles River Country Inn in Hamilton. What a great location for a wonderful New England country bed and breakfast. The owners sat me down in their dining room along with their guests, served me a great cup of coffee, and one of the best homemade muffins I've ever eaten. And, oh yes, a pair of wrens made frequent trips to the feeders outside.

Some other observations you might find entertaining or informative. During the nonbreeding season you will almost always encounter just two birds in each location. They will almost always be heard first, and they are easily called in with spishing or Screech-Owl imitations. Many times we have had Screech-Owls call during daylight hours while we were looking for wrens. This is especially true in August and

September, when young birds are searching out new territories. In fact, in all the 260 communities, wrens were detected first by voice. The exceptions were Randolph, where a Carolina Wren was found on the grounds of the School for the Deaf, and, after sixty attempts, the town of Wenham, the last town I needed in Essex County. The wrens are quite vocal most of the year, but there is a time when they really quiet down and are hard to detect. From late May to mid-to-late August there is hardly a peep. There is a resurgence of singing in late August that continues right on to spring. A singing wren on a cold morning in February with snow on the ground really lifts the spirits, hinting of things to come. I have had to work hard to find wrens, even in perfect habitat, during this down time, which coincides with molting. I came up with the theory that the spunky Carolina Wren was just too embarrassed to be seen while in disarray!

Although I've seen parents feeding fledged young several times, I have never found a Carolina Wren's nest. I've spent too much time searching thickets and not the right places. There was a discussion on Massbird long ago about how to attract a wren to a nesting box. It turned out that not many nest boxes proved attractive to the wrens; they preferred mailboxes, hanging plants, and old Christmas wreaths. Bizarre nesting locations included the underside of a propane tank lid, the inside of a clothespin bag, a hanging upside-down canoe, a plastic bag hanging from a coat rack, a rolled-up braided rug on a garage shelf, and the top of a moving garage door.

Conclusion but No Ending

Not only is the Carolina Wren population in Massachusetts increasing, the bird's range is also expanding in our neighboring New England states. Vermont had just one confirmed breeding record in the first statewide Atlas published over twenty-five years ago. The Vermont Institute of Natural Sciences will be undertaking a new

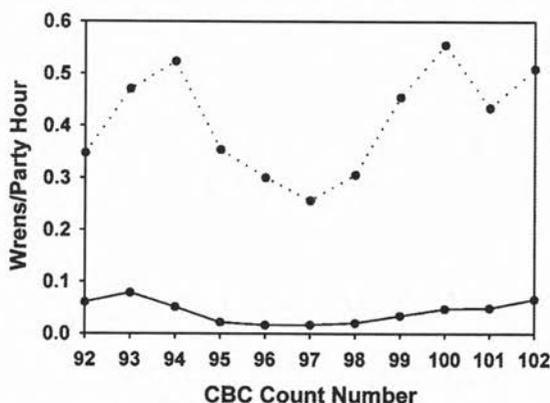


Figure 2: Christmas Bird Count data on Carolina Wrens from count numbers 92 (1991-2) to 102 (2001-2). The top line shows wrens per party hour throughout the state; the bottom line shows corresponding data for nine western Massachusetts counts.

Breeding Bird Atlas in 2003, and organizers are envisioning a much higher number of confirmed reports, not only in the southern sections, but much farther north as well. In New Hampshire the first confirmed breeding record was in 1981 in Hudson and Durham, although the bird had been reported in the state for more than twenty years before that. Most records are from the southern part of the state; however there are several records from as far north as Plymouth, North Conway, and the Hanover area. There is a breeding record of Carolina Wren as early as 1908

Table 1 shows data from 1982, 1992, and 2001 CBCs in Massachusetts. The data indicates that the Carolina Wren generally experienced increasing population size and range in the state during that time, both in the number of birds and in the number of counts.

Count Circle	1982	1992	2001
Andover	-	2	9
Athol	0	0	5
Buzzard's Bay	23	264	183
Cape Ann	0	12	24
Cape Cod	1	77	117
Central Berkshire	0	1	0
Cobble Mountain	-	4	9
Concord	0	26	109
Greater Boston	0	20	60
Greenfield	-	2	4
Groton	-	-	3
Marshfield	1	26	114
Martha's Vineyard	11	147	175
Mid Cape	1	130	154
Millis	2	not reported	50
Nantucket	0	6	64
New Bedford	13	21	78
Newburyport	0	5	13
Northampton	0	20	25
Northern Berkshire	0	2	0
Plymouth	1	107	71
Quabbin	-	2	2
Quincy	0	17	52
Southern Berkshire	-	1	1
Springfield	1	49	35
Stellwagen	-	2	5
Sturbridge	-	-	5
Taunton-Middleboro	3	60	74
Truro	-	-	34
Tuckernuck	0	1	4
Uxbridge	-	22	58
Westminister	0	1	2
Worcester	1	13	10
Total	58 (23)	1040 (29)	1549 (33)
Number per party hour	0.0375	0.4705	0.5093
Number counts with wrens	11	28	31

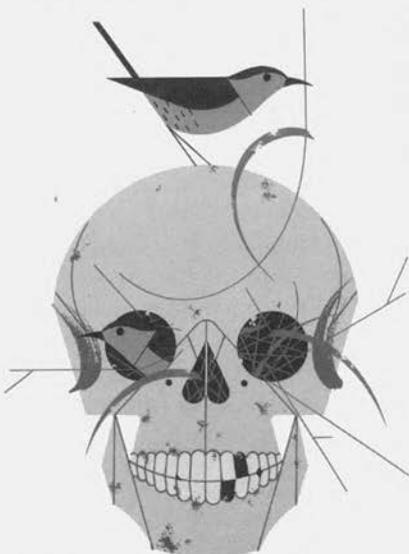
CBC results from northern New England

State	1982	1992	2001
Maine	1	5	10
New Hampshire	0	9	20
Vermont	0	5	24

from Maine and few since then, although there is a noticeable increase along the southern coast up to Portland. There have been records as far north as Augusta and from Bangor. Certainly the best data on the Carolina Wren are from the Christmas Bird Counts and Breeding Bird Atlas Surveys. Figure 2 shows why it has been hard for me to add new communities beyond the Connecticut River and the hill country of Worcester and Franklin Counties.

As you read this, there will be less than three months left in my ten-year quest. I won't wager much that it will end; somehow birding, whatever aspect, never ends for us. Those towns in north central Massachusetts and the Berkshire Hills may never be blocked off my map (I'm not sure how many more different color markers I can find anyway). You can bet, however, that I'll continue to travel all around our state, and that my ears and eyes will be forever vigilant for the songs and calls of my favorite bird. 

Robert H. Stymeist has been interested in birds since 1958. His love of urban birding continues today, and he keeps an annual list of birds found in the City of Boston. His other favorite spot is Mount Auburn Cemetery, which he didn't find out about until 1963, even though it was only two miles from his home. He has recorded 213 species in the cemetery. Bob was a founding member of Bird Observer and served as its President from 1978-1984. He has been Treasurer of the Nuttall Ornithological Club since 1981, and has been the Statistician for the Brookline Bird Club since 1987. He would like to thank those who have joined him on his wren quest when they could have gone elsewhere: Herman D'Entremont, Linda Ferraresso, Chris Floyd, Kenton Griffis, Janet Heywood, Dave Lange, John Kricher, Philip Martin, Marj Rines, Oakes Spalding, Martha Steele, and Lee Taylor, as well as those who participated vicariously and offered help in his search: Jim Berry, Bob and Dana Fox, Tom Gagnon, Seth Kellogg, Geoff LeBaron, Mark Lynch, Jim MacDougall, Kathy Mills, Noreen Mole, Nick Nash, Tom Pirro, and many others. He also thanks Marj Rines and Marta Hersek for their invaluable editorial assistance.



Cemeteries are good places to look for Carolina wrens.
WRENTED, CHARLEY HARPER