

Carolina Wren

(*Thryothorus ludovicianus*)

The Carolina Wren is a small, plump bird that weighs less than an ounce and measures 4.5-5.5 inches long, with an 11-inch wingspan. It has a rusty-brown head, back, and tail; a yellow-orangish chest and belly; a white throat; and prominent white eye stripes. Its bill is thin and curved downward, and its tail is frequently cocked up. Juveniles and adults of both sexes look very much alike, but adult males are *slightly* larger and heavier than females, and juveniles are *slightly* paler than adults. Even though the Carolina Wren is a small bird, it is the largest of the five wren species in Florida. Its range was traditionally the southeastern United States, eastern Mexico, and northeastern Central America. Because of climate change, its range now extends as far north as southern New England and extreme southern Ontario and as far west as central Wisconsin, Michigan, and Nebraska. Carolina Wrens do not migrate; they are resident throughout their range. However, they are very cold-sensitive. In the northern parts of their range, their populations decrease markedly after harsh winters, especially those with heavy snow.



Dan Pancamo, CC BY-SA 2.0 -<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

After mild winters, their range expands north into Maine and even Quebec.

Just as the range has expanded, so has its habitat. Once found primarily in woodland thickets, swamps, ravines, or rocky slopes covered with brush, the Carolina Wren is now also common in shady backyards and parks, as well as in overgrown fields and farmland. It is an energetic bird that frequents the undergrowth of shrubs and thickets, hopping along as it picks through dead leaves looking for spiders, beetles, grasshoppers, caterpillars, ants, moths, and other insects. It will also eat fruit, a few seeds, and, occasionally, a small lizard or tree frog. Carolina Wrens usually forage in pairs. They will come to platform, tray, and suet feeders, especially during colder months when insects are not as plentiful. They prefer mealworms, pieces of peanuts, sunflower seeds, and suet instead of the standard mixed seeds.

The Carolina Wren is a shy bird who is often heard before seen. The male sings frequently during the day— year-round! He has a loud, clear whistling voice and a repertoire of as many as forty songs. He will repeat a song three to five times and sometimes as many as twelve times before moving to a new song. Common songs are “tea kettle, tea kettle, tea kettle,” “tweedle, tweedle, tweedle,” and “cheery, cheery, cheery.” There are ten recognized subspecies of Carolina Wrens, each with a slightly different song and slightly different appearance. The female also vocalizes but she chatters instead of sings. Sometimes Carolina Wren couples will have a song-chatter duet! They also vocalize to warn each other and to defend their territory, usually from other wrens.

Carolina Wrens mate for life. Wrens born during the summer will usually find a partner by spring. To attract a mate, the male will bring the female food offerings and put on an elaborate courtship display. He will puff out his feathers and hop around the female in a stiff manner with his tail pointed up and fanned out.

The pair will then establish their own permanent breeding territory and build their first nest in a sheltered, enclosed spot such as a tree cavity, old woodpecker hole, or tucked in the middle of dense vegetation.



Carolina Wrens are also famous for choosing unusual spots, such as a hanging basket, a mailbox, a boot left on a porch step, or the pocket of a hanging jacket.

Both mates build the nest. It is cone-shaped, has a side entrance, and is built mainly of moss, weeds, bark, and sticks and lined with feathers. It may also include string, wool, sloughed snakeskin, or any other “building material” that the couple can weave in. Nests are generally 3.3-9.8 feet from the ground. The breeding season in Florida runs from March through August but may extend into September. Carolina Wrens raise 1-3 broods a season and build a new nest either in the same spot or nearby for each brood.

They frequently choose the same nest sites year after year. The Carolina Wren is one of twenty-five species of cavity-nesting birds in Florida that use man-made nesting boxes.

The female Carolina Wren usually lays one egg a day for a total of 3-7 creamy white or pale pink eggs with brownish spots. She incubates them for 12-16 days while her partner brings her food.

The mother stays in the nest for a few days after the chicks hatch to provide warmth.

The chicks fledge in 12-14 days. The newly fledged chicks remain close by for another 1-2 weeks, hiding in dense brush until they have mastered flying.

Their parents continue to feed them during this time. Only about 20% of Carolina Wren chicks survive the first year - some fall victim of brood parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds, some nestlings are weakened by blowfly larvae, and some fledglings are killed by domestic cats, raccoons, and snakes. Adult life expectancy is generally 4-6 years.

Nevertheless, Carolina wrens are considered a species of least concern.

Mary Jo Davis is the Chair of the Birds, Butterflies, Bats and Bees Committee.