INVASION of the TEAKETTLES
by PAMELA HUNT
On July 19, 1991, a friend and I were doing a “Big Day,” one of those 24-hour efforts that birders sometimes undertake in an attempt to find as many species as possible in a single day. We started in the Upper Valley at 2:40 a.m., and by the afternoon we found ourselves in a Durham neighborhood seeking a rare bird that had been frequenting a residential shed for over a month. We politely knocked on the door and the homeowner was happy to show us the bird – or, more accurately, its nest. The bird made itself known immediately, as a female Carolina wren began scolding us from the nearby shrubs.
Scientific name: *Thryothorus ludovicianus*

Breeding Range: Eastern Nebraska to southern Maine, and south to northeastern Mexico and southern Florida. An isolated population occurs on the Yucatan Peninsula.

Breeding: Carolina wrens mate for life, with little evidence of “fooling around.” Pairs often forage together, and the male feeds the female during courtship. In New England, mating occurs from early May to late July. Often two broods are reared.

Nest: A bulky nest of grass, bark, string, small twigs and a variety of other materials is built, usually with at least a partial dome roof. Nest location can include natural cavities, dense vine tangles and upturned tree roots; in New Hampshire, Carolina wrens mostly nest in man-made receptacles such as birdhouses, plant pots, or mailboxes, or under overhanging structures like shelving or propane tank covers.

Eggs: Usually four eggs are laid and incubated for 16 days. Young birds leave the nest after 13-14 days; they are fed by the male if the female starts a second brood.

Territory size: Averages 10 acres. In areas with fewer wrens (like New Hampshire), territories tend to be larger.

Diet: Mostly insects and spiders, but also suet and seeds at feeders, especially in the winter.

Size: These sparrow-sized birds are five and a half inches long (the tail is two inches). They weigh just three-quarters of an ounce. Males are usually larger than females.

That was then and this is now. Carolina wrens no longer make news in Durham, but 25 years ago, that little wren and her nest were making history. Along with another pair in Hudson, these were the first documented breeding records of this southern species in New Hampshire. Now this boisterous little bird is found regularly from the Lakes Region south, although it remains uncommon in the higher elevations in the west. Carolina wrens have even been spotted in the White Mountains, with a handful of records from Lincoln to Lancaster.

**Movin’ On Up**

This is the story of the Carolina wren’s colonization of New Hampshire. It goes back farther than you might think, to a pair of birds found in Rye in August 1880. It took over 20 years for the next to be recorded, this time from Webster in 1902, and another appeared in Alstead the following year. After an even longer gap, a bird was found in Goffstown in 1935, and for the following two decades, sightings occurred every five years or so. By the 1970s, Carolina wrens were being seen annually; they had been reported in some 20 towns in southern New Hampshire.

These early reports were anecdotal, but population trend data in the state are now being collected by three long-running programs. The Christmas Bird Count began in 1900, although most...
New Hampshire counts didn’t become regular until the 1960s or 1970s, providing data on birds during the early winter. In 1966, the nationwide Breeding Bird Survey was implemented; New Hampshire’s 23 routes are surveyed annually in June. Finally, NH Audubon began a survey of cardinals and titmice in 1967 and expanded it to include all species in 1987. Now called the Backyard Winter Bird Survey (BWBS), it provides a snapshot of our wintering species in mid-February.

For Carolina wrens, these three data sets (when adjusted for effort) show remarkably similar trends (see Figure 1). Wrens were still quite rare through the 1980s, but showed signs of an increase in the early 1990s – right when those nests were found in Durham and Hudson. The rise remained steady through the early 2000s, but something dramatic happened between 2011 and 2013, when the number of wrens on all three surveys increased by a factor of two or three.

A similar pattern is seen in the distribution of these feisty little birds (see Figure 2). In the late 1980s, they were found mostly in southeastern New Hampshire, where they were still not annual. Roughly a decade later, they had started filling in the Connecticut Valley and Lakes Region. Today, Carolina wrens are almost everywhere south of the White Mountains.

**Figure 1.** Population trends for Carolina wrens in New Hampshire from 1966 to 2016. Data sources include the Backyard Winter Bird Survey (BWBS), Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), and Christmas Bird Count (CBC). Numbers spiked from 2011-2013.

**Figure 2.** Town-level distribution of Carolina wrens in 1986-1990 (left), 1999-2003 (center), and 2012-2016 (right). Data from NH Bird Records and NH eBird.
Carolina wrens aren’t the first species to follow this pattern. Another fairly recent arrival to the state – the red-bellied woodpecker – started about five years earlier, and is now three to four times as abundant as the wren. Much earlier, northern cardinals and tufted titmice made headlines in the early 1960s when they first started to appear in the state. These two species are now widespread south of the White Mountains and still moving north. Fifty years ago, they were new and exciting, and birders sought them out.

**Dangerous Cold Snap**

So why is this suite of southern birds colonizing New Hampshire? (In the interest of full disclosure: it’s also true that some northern species are moving south.) The newcomers share a few things in common: 1) they don’t migrate; 2) they frequent bird feeders; and 3) they do well in human-dominated habitats.

Being non-migratory means that they need to survive all year long, and that’s where feeders can come in handy. While most of the birds we see at our feeders can do quite well without the supplement, the Carolina wren is something of an exception. It is far less cold tolerant than the other southern birds that have taken up residence here. During particularly frigid periods, these wrens may only survive where there is readily available food. It is likely that the gradual warming we’ve been experiencing as a result of climate change is helping Carolina wrens along. That said, the sudden population spike after 2010 indicates that other factors are also likely at work – including basic biological variability.

This same sensitivity to cold explains the dramatic drop in population that occurred between 2013 and 2015. Many readers will remember the winter of 2014-15 for its snow, but it was also cold. It was the coldest winter in New Hampshire since 2002-2003, and the previous winter was the second coldest. Thus, at the tail end of one of the warmest decades on record, during which they’d increased dramatically in population and range, the Carolina wrens of the Granite State were hit by two very cold winters in a row. Many didn’t make it, and we are only just starting to see the population recover.

**What Next?**

While researching historical records for this article, I came across a paper published in the ornithological journal *The Auk* in July 1909. There had just been a spate of sightings north of the state. Once a rare and thrilling site, the northern cardinal is now a year-round resident of the Granite State. The tufted titmouse is another relative newcomer often seen at New Hampshire feeders. The tufted titmouse may depend on feeders to survive the winter. The tufted titmouse is another relative newcomer often seen at New Hampshire feeders.

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Carolina wrens are monogamous and form breeding pairs that last for years. As part of courtship to attract a mate, the male will bring food to the female.
Although Carolina wrens are attractive little birds, it’s their vocalizations that first get your attention. Their loud melodious song, almost invariably rendered as *teakettle teakettle teakettle* in field guides, is given only by the male. Males will sing at any time of year in New Hampshire, although activity is most intense in spring and summer.

Young birds first utter song-like phrases when they are about 40 days old. They need to be exposed to the songs of other males for at least three months if their song is to develop normally. A given male may have between 17 and 55 variants of this song, and it cycles through these over the course of a singing bout.

As with most birds, song is used to both defend a territory and attract a mate. Male wrens can be very aggressive toward other males. If an intruding bird does not respond to song with a female’s distinctive chattering call, it will be attacked and driven away. In contrast, within a mated pair, the female often pairs her chatter with his song in something resembling a duet. Both sexes also utter a variety of short calls, which are often the first indication that you have this species in your neighborhood.


Pam Hunt is a biologist at NH Audubon, where she works closely with Fish and Game on the conservation of the state’s nongame birds.

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