

**DOUBLE-DECK NESTING  
BY CAROLINA WREN AND NORTHERN CARDINAL**

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*Abstract* — Herewith, I report a Carolina Wren's (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) nest in a hanging basket flowerpot, which subsequently had a Northern Cardinal's (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) nest built upon it. There was no interspecies aggression. Both species worked cooperatively to scare off a squirrel. The Carolina Wren and Northern Cardinal each fledged two young.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Carolina Wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) and Northern Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) are common breeding birds of eastern and central Oklahoma. Both will nest near human habitation, and both have widely overlapping nesting seasons in Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992, Reinking 2004, Stuart 2004). Carolina Wrens are well known for nesting in a number of unusual, often anthropogenic locations, including hanging flowerpots (Haggerty and Morton 2014). Northern Cardinals typically nest in trees or shrubs, and are reported to compete with Gray Catbirds (*Dumetella carolinensis*) and American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) for nest sites (Halkin and Linville 1999). However, E. Young observed Northern Cardinals nest in a hanging basket for five consecutive years, and again for three consecutive years at the same house in Arkansas City, south-central Kansas near the Oklahoma-Kansas state-line (pers. comm.). This note describes a highly unusual instance of the Northern Cardinal building a nest directly on top of a Carolina Wren's nest.

## OBSERVATIONS

On 7 April 2017, I observed a very energetic Carolina Wren building a nest in an old (2016) 10-inch flower basket that was hanging in a protected area of my covered patio; the fern in the basket was no longer living. Three days later, on 10 April, my daughter, Lisa Larner, observed that a Northern Cardinal had built a nest in the same hanging basket.

The next day I inspected the two nests. The wren nest was nestled in the base of the stems of the old fern. The nest was domed shaped



Figure 1. Double decker nesting by a Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) and Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) in a hanging basket flowerpot, Norman, Oklahoma. Photograph taken 18 April 2017 by author.

and opened toward the side of the flowerpot. Located 12.7 mm (0.5 in) above the wren nest was the cardinal nest, located in the center of the pot. This nest was cup-shaped, opened at the top and made of long, loosely-woven grass stems.

Daily, I observed both the wren and the cardinal sitting in their respective nests at the same time. Female Carolina Wrens do the incubation (Laskey 1948, Nice and Thomas 1948, Hagerty and Morton 2014). While the female was incubating, the male wren would bring food to the female. In contrast, the male cardinal did not feed the female cardinal as she incubated. Usually, male cardinals feed incubating females (Halkin and Linville 1999, Leslie 2009). When the

male wren brought food to the female wren, the female cardinal would raise her head and watch the wren, but the female cardinal did not become agitated or leave; she just observed the activity. The nesting wrens and nesting cardinals tolerated each other well, so far as I observed. On 18 April, I photographed both female birds on the nests at the same time (Figure 1). On 19 April, I looked inside the two nests. There were two grey fuzzy recently hatched nestlings in the wren's nest; the cardinal nest held three eggs and no nestlings.

The daily activity of the wrens involved the male calling as he approached the nest with food. The female wren then would leave the nest for a short time while the male fed the hatchlings. Both birds of the pair participated in feeding the nestlings. When the adults were feeding the young, I observed the adults' throats going up and down in preparation of feeding; which I thought it appeared to me as if the adult was regurgitating food, at least twice, at each feeding.

Early in the morning on 22 April, I observed a fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*) on the patio that was upsetting the male wren and the wren was making loud fussing noises. The wren darted at the squirrel several times with no success at driving the squirrel away. Soon several cardinals came to the patio to join the fight. No other species joined in. The wren/cardinal alliance resulted in the squirrel sneaking off the patio away from the birds. On this same day, I checked the cardinal nest. There were two nestlings and one egg. The next day the male cardinal started bringing food to the nest. The male and female cardinal continued feeding the young until they fledged.

On 28 April, at 0730 hrs, the young wrens were bobbing around in their nest. I left the house for the day. Upon my return at 1600 hrs, there were no wrens in the nest. I assume they fledged while I was gone. That was the last day I observed the wrens.

On 1 May, two cardinal young preened all day and sat on the edge of their nest. The following day the male and female cardinals were actively calling. I found one fledgling on the patio floor. The fledgling flew onto the top of a 0.61 m high patio ledge. From the ledge, it flew into a bed of daylilies (*Hemerocallis* sp.). A second fledgling was already in the yard and I observed it join the first in the flowerbed. I then checked the cardinal nest and found one egg. This was the last day I observed the cardinal fledglings.

## DISCUSSION

A similar co-nesting of Northern Cardinal and Carolina Wren was reported by user "natal" on the Houzz website, from an unspecified location in Louisiana ("natal", 2010). In this case, Carolina Wrens had built a nest in a hanging basket and laid eggs; some days later, "natal" observed a Northern Cardinal building a nest in the same basket. The wrens were feeding nestlings while the cardinal was still incubating eggs. The wren young fledged successfully. There were cardinal nestlings at one point, but it is not clear whether they fledged or not.

There are a few reports of two female cardinals nesting in the same nest at the same time, e.g. in Missouri in 1948 (Hawksley and McCormack, 1951), in Kansas in 1967 (Rice, 1969), and in Oklahoma in 2008 (Leslie 2009). There is also a report of Northern Cardinals and Song Sparrows (*Melospiza melodia*) nesting simultaneously in the same nest in Maryland in 1950 (Brackbill, 1952).

It may be significant that Carolina Wrens usually build domed nests, so that the eggs, or young, or even the existence of a nest, may not be visible from above. The female cardinals in the two cases presented of co-nesting with Carolina Wrens may not have been aware of the wren nests until construction of their own nests was well underway. In both cases the proximity of the two nests as to location and timing, coupled with the lack of agonistic behavior between the two species, appears to be very unusual.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**ERRATA:** In Volume 51, Number 2, June 2018, on page 15, the following errors occurred: on the second and third sentences of the Discussion, the scientific name for Eastern Bluebird should be in italics (*Sialia sialis*); and on the last paragraph of the Discussion, the second sentence, the date October 21, should read as 21 October. These errors are a result of the editor (EAY), not the authors.

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