

OKLAHOMA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Vol. IV

June, 1971

No. 2

SUCCESSFUL NESTING OF THE HOUSE WREN IN CLEVELAND COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

BY MARY AVOLYN JOHNS

IN CENTRAL Oklahoma the House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) breeds southward irregularly as far as Cleveland County. In Cleveland and Oklahoma counties its nesting is often unsuccessful. The causes of this failure are obscure. Three "failures" mentioned by Sutton (1967, Oklahoma birds, p. 406) may have resulted from predation on one or both parent birds, though suspicion lingers that midsummer heat may have led to desertion of eggs. In any event, a successful nesting at Norman, Cleveland County, merits reporting in detail.

In the spring of 1969 the House Wrens appeared in my yard in Norman (in a residential section near the southwest edge of the city) on 21 April. They investigated the four wren-houses there for a day or so, finally showing preference for a gourd hanging in a tree that a Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) continued



SINGING MALE HOUSE WREN (RIGHT) AND MATE

Photographed 17 May 1969 by Gordon H. Folzenlogen at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma. Photo supplied by Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

to sing from. The Catbirds and House Wrens scolded and chased each other for several days. The Catbirds won out, and the wrens settled for a tiny nest-box hanging from a branch in a fairly well shaded place not far from the west end of the porch at the rear of my house. During this several-day period I continued to hear and see Carolina Wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) and Bewick's Wrens (*Thryomanes bewickii*) in the yard, but neither of these species appeared to be involved in any way in territorial altercations.

The House Wrens were busy for several days nest-building. Both the male and the female carried material. The male continued to sing a great deal. By 15 May the female was spending much time in the nestbox. I do not know when the eggs were laid or how many there were. There were at least five, for at least five young hatched.

On 8 June I observed two wrens carrying food to the nestbox. The young must have been very small from 9 to 11 June, for during this period I could not hear a sound in the nestbox. On 11 June I had to leave the city. When I returned on 19 June I could hear the young birds distinctly. Indeed, on that date I saw their widely opened mouths crowding the entrance to the nestbox.

On the evening of 19 June I noticed loud scolding from one of the parent wrens. Investigating, I found a fair-sized bullsnake (*Pituophis melanoleucus*) on a branch not far from the nestbox. I pulled the snake from the branch, carried it about 200 yards to the edge of our property, and threw it into some tall grass.

On the evening of 21 June loud scolding from at least one parent again attracted my attention. This time the bullsnake was a large one and its head was within a foot of the nestbox. Fearful that the young wrens had already been eaten, I grabbed the snake resolutely, pulled it away, and was bitten for my recklessness. I carried the struggling reptile to a pond not far from our house, and threw it in. It swam well. I hoped my throwing it into the water would frighten it off.

From 19 to 21 June I did not see or hear a male wren near the nestbox. All the food-carrying was done by one parent during this period—almost certainly the mother bird, since I heard no singing. On 21 June I heard a male bird singing several hundred yards away. On 22 June a male sang repeatedly near the nestbox but did not carry food to the brood.

On 27 June I witnessed the departure of most of the brood from the nest box. When I first went to the porch at 06:30 that morning the one parent bird that I saw was busy carrying food to the nestbox and also to a young wren well above the ground in a nandina bush not far away. Another young wren suddenly popped out of the nestbox, clung uncertainly to the perch just outside the entrance, was struck by a third chick that popped out, and both fluttered into the ivy covering the ground below. Struggling through the leafage, the

reached the nandina bush and climbed upward until they were two or three feet above the ground. The fourth chick did not appear until mid-day. It emerged as if shoved out, fell like a rock from the entrance, and was followed immediately by the fifth (and last) chick, which fluttered down. I did not try to help the fourth chick in any way. I did not see it climb into the nandina bush.

On the day of the "fledging" (hardly the right word, for not one of the chicks could fly well), I noticed that the two parent birds roundly scolded a Carolina Wren that happened by, but that they paid no attention to a Bewick's Wren that continued to sing not far away.

To my surprise I continued to see the young House Wrens for several days. I rarely saw the whole brood at one time, but on the morning of 1 July I watched the entire family for some time—all seven birds—on the back porch, some of them investigating potted plants, others hopping about the furniture or teetering on the edge of the rain-gutter near the roof.

Certain points should be made in conclusion: 1. When I opened the nestbox on 28 June I found no unhatched eggs or dead young. 2. I am not sure how many male House Wrens I saw or heard. I never saw or heard more than one bird singing at a time, and I believe there was only one male in our yard most of the time. 3. I feel sure that the larger of the bullsnakes did not capture the male wren, for there was no lump in the snake's body. 4. The fact that the birdbox used by the wrens was in a more or less shady place may have contributed to reproductive success. 5. Almost certainly the nesting would not have been successful had I not removed the bullsnakes.

1201 WALNUT ROAD, NORMAN, OKLAHOMA 73069, 6 DECEMBER 1969.

THE BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER IN THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

THE BLACK-THROATED Blue Warbler (*Dendroica caerulescens*) is so uncommon in Oklahoma today that bird students of the state cannot help wondering whether S. W. Woodhouse, writing well over a century ago, might have erred badly in calling "*Sylvicola canadensis*" (the scientific name in use for the "Black-throated Blue Wood Warbler" at that time) "abundant in Texas and the Indian Territory" (Woodhouse, in Sitgreaves, 1853, Report of an expedition down the Zuni and Colorado rivers, p. 71). Might Woodhouse have misidentified the bird? Probably not. Might his records have been mixed? Possibly.

John S. Tomer, who has been making a careful study of Woodhouse's itinerary and work in Indian Territory, informs me (letter of 13 December 1970) that Woodhouse listed "*Sylvicola canadensis*" among the birds observed by his party in 1849 (see Sitgreaves and Woodruff, 1858, Reports of Captains Sitgreaves and Woodruff of the survey of the Creek Indian boundary line, Exec. Documents