

SUCCESSFUL NESTING OF THE HOUSE WREN
IN WESTERN OKLAHOMA

BY INA S. BROWN

Margaret Morse Nice, writing 53 years ago, considered the House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) "rare in Oklahoma as a nesting species", stating that there were "breeding records from only 4 localities", these in Tulsa, Cleveland, Garfield, and Cimarron counties (1931, *Birds of Oklahoma*, Univ. Oklahoma Biol. Surv. 3(1):135). Thirty-six years later, George M. Sutton (1967, *Oklahoma birds*, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 407) stated that "Nests, nest-building, recently fledged young, or midsummer singing" had also been observed in Washington, Okmulgee, Kay, Noble, Payne, Oklahoma, Alfalfa, Woods, Harper and Texas counties. The species' southern limits of breeding in Oklahoma were



HOUSE WREN

Adult female carrying food to young. The nest is in a cavity of a mimosa tree (Albizzia julibrissin) in Duncan, Stephens County, Oklahoma. Photo taken 9 June 1985 by John S. Shackford.

considered by Sutton to be Okmulgee, Cleveland, and Dewey counties, and he further stated that nesting was "often unsuccessful along south edge of range" (1974, A check-list of Oklahoma birds, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 30). J. D. Tyler (1979, Birds of Southwestern Oklahoma, Stovall Mus. Sci. & Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman, p. 36) cited only one mid-summer sighting, that of a "single bird seen 27 Jul and 4 Aug 1972" by Audrey G. Halloran in Lawton, Comanche County, implying that there were no known breeding records for that part of the state.

In Elk City, Beckham County, west-central Oklahoma, I observed House Wrens singing in my yard during late April and early May from 1967 to 1969. I assumed that they were migrating northward, because they were not subsequently seen or heard. On 8 May 1970, Eva Cheesman and I discovered five different pairs of House Wrens, each tending several young at a wet spot 3 miles north of Elk City. There, constant seepage below the dam of a small lake had formed a little marsh where buttonbushes (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) and black willows (*Salix nigra*) proliferated, and where a few large cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*) stood. Many of the willows were dead, as were several black locusts (*Robinia pseudo-acacia*) on the slopes above. Two of the five wren nests had been built in the locust trees. It seemed strange to us that so many nests had been built within such a small area. Cheesman and I visited the site often during the ensuing months. In late summer (13 to 17 August) we watched a pair carrying food and saw and heard so many adult and young birds that we felt certain the young were of second broods.

At another place a mile east and 1½ miles north of town we saw parent birds taking food to a nest 19-20 feet up in a dead willow stub on 10 July. These young we found out of the nest, below this very stub, on 13 July.

On 17 August, Warren D. Harden and Ron Wilson visited the marsh with me and measured the height of one nest in a dead willow of rather small circumference; it was 20 feet up. I told them of the second high nest in the dead willow stub just northeast of Elk City, but we did not visit it that day. The two high nests are of more than passing interest because, as Dr. Sutton had informed me by letter, it is unusual for House Wrens to nest more than about ten feet above the ground. When Cheesman and I again visited the marsh nest two days later, four young were hopping about below the nest tree with their parents.

On 11 September 1970, at the nest immediately northeast of the city, a pair of House Wrens was bringing food to young; this I believed to be their *third* nesting. This area has not been checked for several years, but House Wrens have been seen and heard each summer since 1970 at the marshy spot.

The first conclusive evidence of breeding in Elk City was obtained during the summer of 1980, when a pair nested in the Cliff Jarrel yard at 517 West Avenue D. Two broods of five young each were reared that year as well as the next two summers, in a small hanging wren house, according to Mr. Jarrel. I personally observed the wrens feeding chicks there all three years. The following summer the Jarrells moved.

In 1981, the species was reportedly nesting in a patio flower pot in Del Smith's yard at 1314 West C Street. Though I did not visit that nest, the descrip-

tion of the birds that Smith related by telephone was apropos of House Wrens. They returned during the spring of 1982, but did not nest in the same location.

Paul Kumpf, of 1704 West D, called me on 14 July 1982 to describe a bird singing continually near his patio. He held out the phone, and I could plainly hear the song; it was unmistakably a House Wren's. On 13 August, I saw five young in a wren house at the Orville Phillips residence (1604 West E Street) about a block away. All five fledged successfully the next day.

In 1983, a pair of wrens again nested in the Phillips' hanging birdhouse, and in one placed under the eaves on the west side of their house, another pair bred. The latter pair was carrying nest material in on 29 June. The Phillips' were not able to keep close watch on this second nest box, but five young did fledge from it. Hardly 60 feet away, a third pair of wrens was simultaneously rearing a brood in the yard next door!

The hanging nest they watched closely. There were 7 eggs in it on 21 June; two eggs hatched on 6 July, another on 7 July, two more on 8 July, the sixth on 9 July and one egg did not hatch. All six young fledged safely on 22 July and were observed nearby for a few days thereafter, when the Phillips' saw them no more. However, less than a block distant, Paul Kumpf began to see six young wrens in his yard that he presumed were from the Phillips' yard. All three of the 1983 nests successfully fledged two broods each.

The House Wrens in Phillips' yard actively chased the other wrens if they intruded on their space. Still, the close proximity of these three nests seemed as odd to me as had those in 1970 at the marsh 3 miles north of town.

The 1984 nesting season was just as successful for the wrens as in 1983 in the Phillips' yard and the one adjoining it, for each of three pairs again reared two broods. Thus, a nice population of House Wrens now appears to be nesting regularly in Elk City.

In Roger Mills County the species may breed successfully near Reydon. Three miles north of there, Cheesman and I heard singing males on 1 June 1980, and in early June of 1982 we again detected singing along a creek just south of town. Reydon is about 25 miles northwest of Elk City. I have conducted U.S. Fish and Wildlife Breeding Bird Surveys in Roger Mills and Beckham counties for 15 and 13 years respectively, and had never heard or seen House Wrens until 6 June 1984. On that date, about 12 miles north of Elk City and a half mile east of the Texas state line, I both heard and saw House Wrens near the North Fork of Red River during the Beckham County Survey.

House Wrens unsuccessfully attempted to nest along the north edge of Altus, Jackson County, in 1979. There, on 18 July, I heard singing that led me to the Lloyd Neal residence at 206 Williams Drive. Mrs. Neal and I watched two birds flutter in and out of a wicker nest box affixed to the Neal house. The Neals informed me later that the birds had disappeared three days thereafter, never having laid eggs. In 1984 however, they told me of a bird they saw singing vigorously in the campground at Quartz Mountain State Park, Greer County, 20 miles north of Altus.

Considering the occasional mid-summer records for House Wrens in Comanche, Jackson, and Greer counties, Dr. Sutton wrote me on 21 July 1982: "We may have to revise our concept of the southern limits of breeding within Ok-

lahoma". It was his wish that there could be more work done on this problem in southwestern Oklahoma. Thus, any successful nestings south or west of Elk City should be carefully documented and reported.

[As this paper was in final preparation, John S. Shackford photographed a pair of nesting House Wrens in Duncan, Stephens County, southwestern Oklahoma. On 7 June 1985 he discovered a singing male in the front yard of Helen Howland, 709 North 10th Street, and two days later found a pair of birds nesting there in a mimosa tree (*Albizzia julibrissin*). The nest, nine feet up, was in an excavated cavity of a broken-off stub, with an entrance hole slightly over an inch in diameter (see cover photo). Using a small mirror and flashlight, Shackford could discern at least one nearly naked young and one whitish egg with dark speckles in the nest. During the next hour he was able to take photos of the female on several occasions as she brought small food items to the nest. The male, however, sang intermittently not far from the nest and visited it but once, and then with no food visible in his bill.

Also on 7 and 9 June, Shackford detected another singing male at and near 1207 West Cedar, about three blocks to the west of the nest tree. On the latter date, he photographed a singing male which brought twigs to a nestbox at 1219 West Elder, the home of Ernest and Frances Neeld, less than a half mile northwest of the nesting pair. The Neelds reported that they had noticed no second bird this spring, but a male wren which "sang the same song" and its mate had nested in their birdhouses most years since they had moved to this address in 1971. On one occasion several years ago they had even caught flightless young on the ground and returned them to the nestbox.

Shackford observed all the wrens in well-established neighborhoods with admixtures of dense shrubbery, mature shade trees, and small backyard gardens. This breeding record represents the southernmost for this species known in Oklahoma, although whether or not young fledged successfully from it was not determined.]

106 SUNSET ELK CITY, OKLAHOMA 73644, 27 FEBRUARY 1985.

GENERAL NOTES

Green-backed Heron feeding on dragonflies.—On the afternoon of 13 September, 1980, my wife Emma and I were sitting on a boat dock at the University of Oklahoma Biological Station on the north shore of Lake Texoma near Willis in Marshall County, south central Oklahoma, when we noticed a Green-backed Heron (*Butorides striatus*) feeding on the bank just 30 feet from us. We observed it for perhaps 20 minutes through 7 × 35 binoculars. First, it caught and devoured a crayfish. Then, to our amazement, it "picked off" a dragonfly from its perch. Other dragonflies closeby moved down the bank away from us, and the heron followed. Our attention by this time was focused intently on this bird's queer foraging behavior: a stealthy approach, a quick thrust of the head, and several more of the odonates were "snapped up" in quick succession.