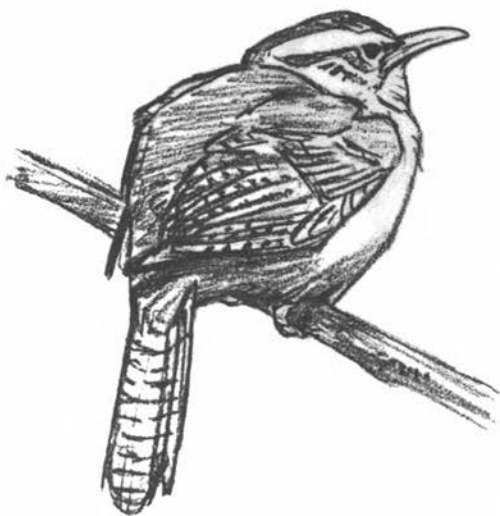


ABOUT THE COVER: CAROLINA WREN



The wren family comprises perhaps the ultimate collection of birds known as "little brown jobs." Diminutive size, generally brownish coloration, short, stubby tail, often held cocked over the back, and a thin, slightly decurved bill all serve to identify a wren immediately. Wrens tend to inhabit areas of undergrowth and, although known to be curious, are often difficult to view as they forage among dense tangles. They are extremely vocal and have distinctive songs.

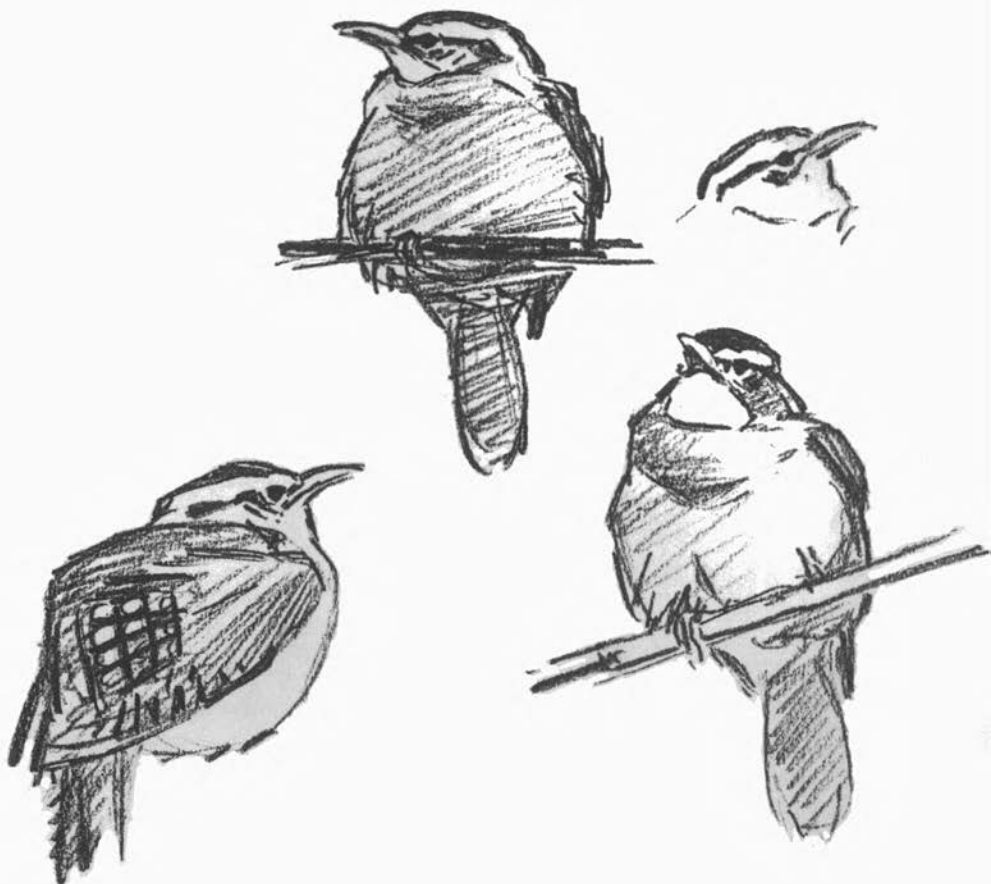
Of the four species that occur regularly in our area—House, Winter, Marsh, and Carolina—only the Carolina is present on a year-round basis, the others retreating for winter to warm climes in southern states and farther south. The Carolina Wren is the largest and most distinctive of our local representatives. The upperparts are a rich rusty brown, the underparts are warm buff, and it sports a prominent white eye stripe. Its preferred habitat is moist, tangled woodlands, which abound in southeastern Massachusetts, where the greatest population density occurs. It is frequently encountered in residential situations and can be found in brush piles and in outbuildings in need of repair, where it searches for insects, spiders, egg cases, and the like.

The Carolina Wren is a superlative songster. Its loud, ringing, sometimes ventriloquial song is often characterized phonetically as *teakettle, teakettle . . .* or *whee-udel, whee-udel . . .* Each of the phrases is either two- or three-parted. On occasion, especially in the South, where it is much more common, it utters phrases similar to other bird songs and for this reason is referred to as "Mocking Wren." A recording was made of a variant song of a Carolina Wren in Acton in 1985 that even the most accomplished and knowledgeable local bird-song experts were unable to identify. The Carolina Wren is also unique in that it is the only songbird in our area that sings in every month of the year. In addition to its song it utters a variety of nervous scolds and twitters and has a characteristic,

clear, descending *pirrrr* call note.

This wren can be curious and conspicuous, bouncing spritely in a tangle or up a vine-covered tree trunk. At other times it can be a master of concealment—retiring, elusive—with only an occasional scold giving a hint of its presence. The Carolina Wren has another habit unusual among birds. It apparently stays paired with its mate even during the winter months.

Historically, the Carolina Wren population has grown and expanded during periods with consecutively mild winters, only to be wiped out during cold,



Field sketches by Barry W. Van Dusen

snowy winters. For the past decade the numbers of Carolina Wrens recorded on Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) have increased consistently each year. Selected CBC totals seem to bear this out. In 1979 there were 81 recorded; 132 were found in 1984, 231 in 1987, and a surprising 315 in 1988. The record-breaking cold of December 1989 seemed to have little impact on the population.

Each year in late summer and fall, individual Carolina Wrens appear well north of their normal range. Some of these come to feeding stations, where a preferred food item is peanut hearts. It seems that some of these stragglers survive the winter and on occasion attract a mate and successfully breed. The increased incidence of these wayward stragglers is reflective of the increased population of the species in its normal range. Perhaps the recent progeny of Carolina Wrens that nest in Massachusetts are better able to cope with the vagaries of our New England weather.

Richard A. Forster

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

Barry W. Van Dusen has generously given *Bird Observer* several covers—*Cox's Sandpiper* (December 1987), *Young Least Sandpipers* (August 1989), *Little Egret* (October 1989), *Field Studies of Bobolinks* (June 1990)—in addition to many notable sketches and drawings such as *Snow Bunting* in December 1987, *Spotted Redshank with Greater Yellowlegs* and *Terek Sandpiper* in October 1990. He has also provided us with insight into the creative process by words that he has written for this column from time to time, giving the artist's point of view. Barry regularly exhibits his work; his most recent show was at the Worcester Center of the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Barry is a full-time wildlife artist who lives at 13 Radford Road in the wilds of Princeton, Massachusetts, with wife Lisa, a nutritionist, a recently adopted Papillon puppy appropriately named Skipper, and a sociable, freely flying pet budgerigar named Jerry, who listens to the radio, sings to gain attention, and dive-bombs visitors in little ellipses of flight. Barry's working studio is in his home. When special birds are attracted to the artist's grounds (which are landscaped with wild flora designed to attract them), the artist birds with binoculars and sketchbook. A recent visitor (a resident?) to Barry's brush pile was a Carolina Wren, which was still present in early December, and we are delighted to print some of the resulting field sketches on these pages.

The drawing of the Carolina Wren on this month's cover also appeared in R. K. Walton's *Bird Finding in New England* (1988), published by David R. Godine of Boston.

Dorothy R. Arvidson