

WELL-KEPT SECRETS

Bill Turcotte¹
240 Lowe Circle
Richland, Mississippi 39218

Common birds have secrets not always revealed by their physical appearance but by their behavior. The Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) has two secrets I discovered only recently. One is the roosting behavior. I described and photographed two Carolina Wrens at roost in a wreath of pine cones on the wall of the front entry of my son's house in south Jackson (Turcotte 1997). At the time, temperatures were in the low thirties (°F) and it was sleeting. The birds had all back feathers fully extended and looked like pin cushions with evenly-spaced pinheads showing beneath the brown outer tips of the feathers. One bird nearly covered the other and their closed tails were pointed downward. The head and bill were barely showing on the bird on top and concealed on the other one. The small, white dots on the inner parts of the extended feathers and the rounded appearance did not resemble a bird. Presumably, the extended feathers provided better insulation from the cold and could be a protective camouflage against night-time predators.

In the breezeway of our house in Richland, we had a pair of Carolina Wrens that nested in a gourd and raised five young. While the birds were nesting and feeding young, I watched the adults feeding young. The male and female used different approaches to the nest while feeding the young and one individual was always more cautious before entering the nest. Each time they left the nest they carried off fecal pellets. The food appeared to be spiders and small

insects and occasionally cornbread crumbs from our feeder opposite our front porch.

On two occasions, I glimpsed fleetingly what I thought to be a spread, rounded tail of one of the wrens just before it lit on the feeder. I had never noticed that before, since nearly always the Carolina Wren carries its tail folded at an angle and square at the tip.

In early January 1999, while erecting martin poles, I drove the car to unload ready-mixed concrete. When I stopped the car, I saw two Carolina Wrens in a brush pile where I had put some old martin gourds nearby. The birds were engaging in either territorial defense or courtship behavior. Through the windshield I could see them plainly showing aggressive behavior while moving about and several times they sat with tails pointed downward, spread widely, and with rounded, lighter-colored tips on the outer feathers.

The outer tail feathers of the Carolina Wren are graduated in length, the outermost being the shortest length. The Bewick's (*Thryomanes bewickii*) and Rock Wrens (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) are well-known for fanning their tails.

The Bewick's waggles the tail from side to side, a distinctive habit. The Carolina Wren's rounded tail is a well-kept, secret field mark.

Literature Cited

- Turcotte, W. H. 1997. Roosting Posture of Carolina Wrens. Mississippi Kite 27:6-7.

¹Deceased