



The State of **BIRDING**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARSHAL CASE AND IGOR LEBEDEV

Birding and ornithology in Russia, like so much else in this long-suppressed land, are in a sad way, perhaps as much as a century behind the study of birds in North America and Western Europe. That's the bad news.

The good news is that even though the birding community is small and

underprivileged by Western standards, it has managed to persevere and to develop exceptional field and teaching skills.

The most promising news is that Russian biologists are bursting with enthusiasm for the new scientific "openness" that recent political change has wrought.

These “good, bad and promising” observations belong to Marshal Case, the National Audubon Society’s senior vice president of education. He is the first science educator to work with Russia’s All-Union Ornithological Society and to take part in the grass roots training of that nation’s most promising young ornithologists.

Precision binoculars, spotting scopes, 35 mm cameras, field guides, video technology, educational films, ornithological papers and texts, birding books, bird art, even wall charts — almost everything that we rely on to observe and learn about birds, are difficult to come by in the Russian state.

So for most birders, the old ways are the only ways. Enthusiasts climb trees to peer into nests. They hang bird houses and feeders in the forest to draw birds to them. Wild birds are caged and studied. Skin collections take the place of books and guides. Fortunate birders and naturalists use army binoculars or opera glasses; less fortunate ones do not.

seated appreciation of nature. Birding as an avocation is mostly confined to backyard, bird house, and feeder watching.

This is the “birding life” that Marshal Case found when he began his close working relationship with many of the leaders of Russian ornithology a year and a half ago. Since then, he has made four extended trips to what was the largest state of the USSR when he started, and to what is now Russia, an independent country.

In these extraordinary and swiftly-changing times, some remarkable things have quickly been accomplished. The Audubon Adventures program, long a staple in American classrooms, is now being taught to thousands of “Soviet” students. A radio show called “Youth Audubon News” is broadcast across the entire commonwealth of states, and Audubon is co-sponsoring an eight-day youth ornithological camp outside of Moscow this coming June.

It was at this camp last summer

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By

Malcolm

Abrams

in RUSSIA

Despite — or because of — the lack of material aids, ornithologists are expected to have exceptional spotting skills and are trained to recognize bird sounds with military precision.

At the amateur level, birding in the field as we know it is almost nonexistent, even though the peoples who make up the Russian state have a deep-

(when it was sponsored by a Soviet aviation company) that Case got his best down-to-earth taste of ornithology, Soviet-style. He was invited as a guest by Igor Lebedev, the camp director and a renowned ornithologist, and Valyeri Savelyev, head of the children’s section of Russian state radio and television. The camp, located in the Moscow for-

est region about an hour and a half drive north-east of the capital, accommodated about 80 students, the brightest young (ages 9 to 15 years) biologists from the Moscow area, as well as four guest students from Great Britain.

"If you can imagine," Case enthused, "the total cost to run this camp for the whole eight days, for everything — including food, pay for the ten instructors, kitchen workers, guests, transportation,

two-story structure of glass and brick, it is similar in design to an American state university dormitory. The metal fence around the building and the doors carry heavy chains and padlocks, vestiges of an era only recently past.

Typically, the days began at 6 a.m., with an early morning bird walk. "We would hit the meadows, the power lines, orchards, right of ways, water ways, the same kinds of places you would bird here," Case

After a "power" breakfast of eggs, sausages, porridge, and fresh bread, the day's programs began at 9 a.m. "They do everything for the children. A lot of the food these kids were served, they would never get at home," Case noted.

For most activities, the children were divided into groups based on age and ability level. "When one group would be in the forest, another would be studying bird skins. They had a very good



Kids are kids. Instructor Vladimir Buyanov waits as campers make last-minute adjustments before heading into the field. The ornithological camp's main building is in the background.

collection which they brought in old trunks from the Pioneer Palace (the Soviet youth movement headquarters) in Moscow. They had a couple of really great instructors who would just have the kids huddled around studying plumages and field characteristics.

even the accordion player who would entertain you as you came up for meals — everything cost \$1,000 American!" This coming summer he will be returning with a small group of American students, and Audubon will help pick up the bill, a highly inflated \$2000!

In many ways, the camp is a microcosm of the Russian ornithological community. The "lodge" normally serves as a recreational facility where lower-middle class workers are sent on vacation. A

recounted. "The thing that impressed me about the children is that they have the most amazing ear for bird songs. It would be difficult to find a group of American kids who could match them.

"They don't have much equipment," he continued. "A few of the kids had binoculars; one had his grandfather's from World War II. And these were the best upcoming ornithologists, the cream of the crop from the greater Moscow area."

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"Another, less popular activity, was the very laborious sessions on bird songs and calls. Lebedev loved to teach songs and he didn't take any grief from anybody. The children sat there for hours, listening and memorizing, and he kept testing them.

"Out in the field, they heard birds that were so far away, you couldn't

see them through binoculars. They also have very good visual skills without binoculars. They really pick things out.

"And Russian birders still believe in studying nature close up. They'd support the foot of a kid and hoist him part way up a tree, then he'd scramble the rest of the way to get a look inside a nest. 'How many eggs are up there?' the others would ask from the ground. 'What's the nest made of?'"

How Russian ornithologists

FAMILY PORTRAITS

Number Ten



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.

Painting by
ALBERT EARL
GILBERT

COLOR SCHEMES OF WRENS ARE BUILT ON ONE theme: brown. While accents of white and black and rust are popular, they wear no brighter hues. But who needs color? Wrens may be drab, but never dull—they are among the most lively and tuneful of all songbirds. Some are backyard birds, exploring every corner of the garden or garage or porch, curious as cats, active as ants. Some wrens keep to wilder regions, playing hide-and-seek among the boulders or the cattails or the cactus. But seen or unseen, they do not go unheard. With a rollicking chorus in the garden, a sputtering stutter in the marsh, or a clear cascade of music from the canyon, the wrens add life to the North American landscape.

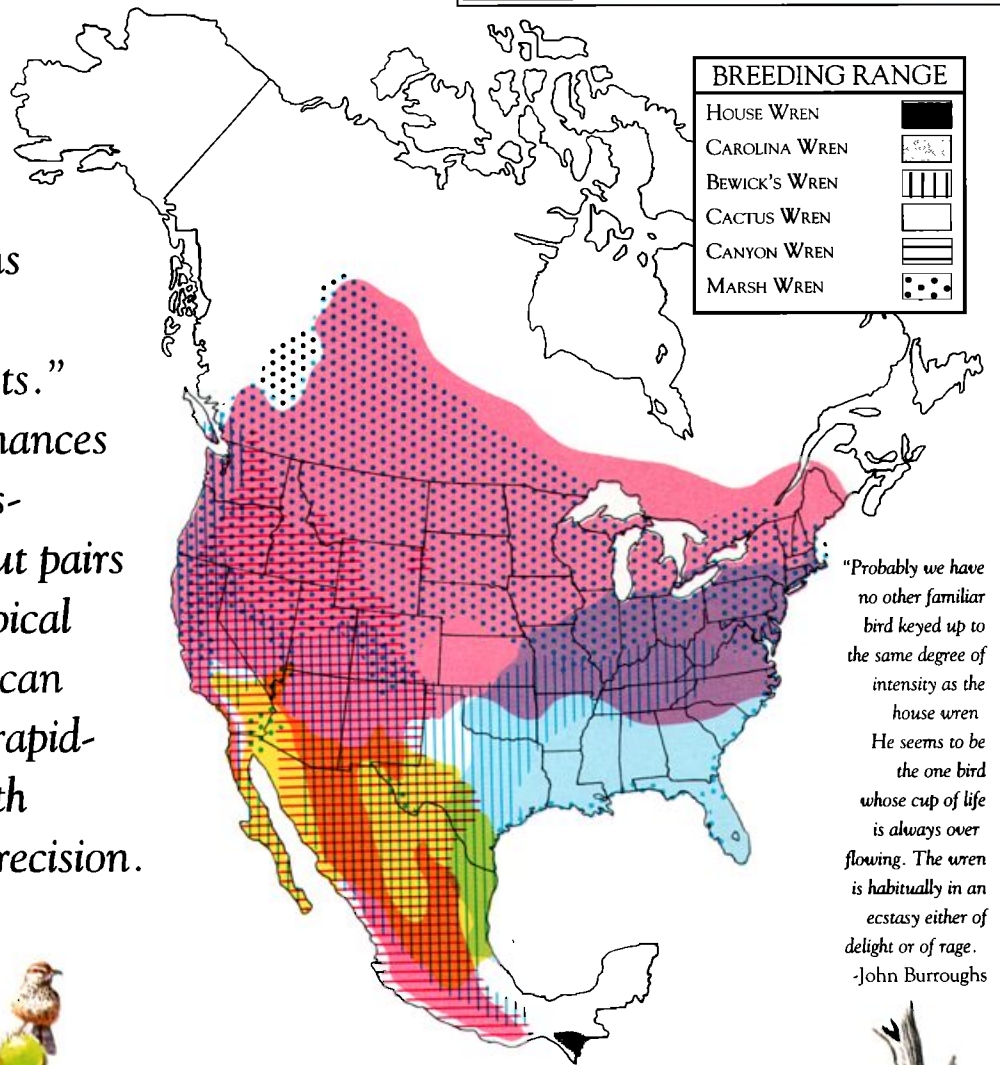
WRENS

1. House Wren 2. Cactus Wren 3. Bewick's Wren
4. Marsh Wren 5. Carolina Wren
6. Canyon Wren

WRENS



Song is an important activity for wrens... and some make it an activity for couples. Male and female Carolina Wrens often sing together in rollicking "duets." These performances are a bit disorganized, but pairs of some tropical wrens can deliver rapid-fire duets with amazing precision.

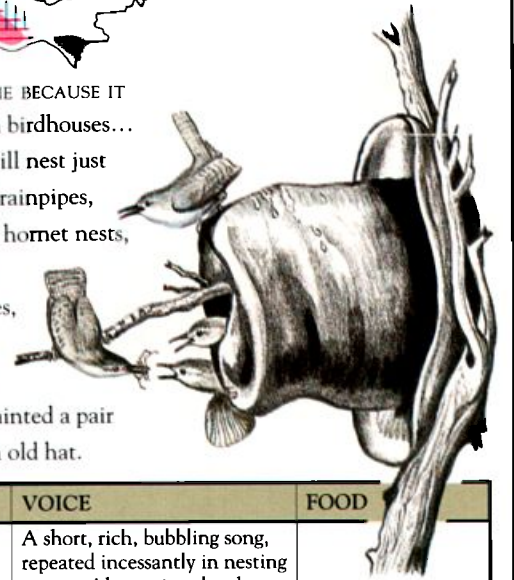


"Probably we have no other familiar bird keyed up to the same degree of intensity as the house wren. He seems to be the one bird whose cup of life is always overflowing. The wren is habitually in an ecstasy either of delight or of rage."
-John Burroughs

Tending its own well-built nest, amid a formidable fortress of cactus spines, the Cactus Wren may seem like a model citizen—but it has a dark side, too. Like several other kinds of wrens, the Cactus Wren has a habit of robbing the nests of other songbirds in the neighborhood, destroying their eggs. Of course, none of this behavior is really "good" or "bad." It is just part of the natural character of the bird.



THE HOUSE WREN GOT ITS NAME BECAUSE IT will so readily build its nest in birdhouses... or human houses. In fact, it will nest just about anywhere: mailboxes, drainpipes, hollow logs, coat pockets, old hornet nests, flowerpots, baskets, tin cans, boots, empty gourds, toolboxes, or in any kind of cranny in an open shed or abandoned auto. John James Audubon painted a pair of House Wrens nesting in an old hat.



SPECIES	SIZE/APPEARANCE	HABITAT	NEST	VOICE	FOOD
HOUSE WREN <i>Troglodytes aedon</i> The backyard wren for the millions, the House Wren is found in local varieties almost throughout North and South America.	Length: 4.75" A plain gray-brown bird with a light ring around the eye, darker barring on the wings and tail.	Open woodlands, farms, parks, residential areas.	A mass of twigs and grass, lined with softer materials like feathers and fur, placed in a natural or unnatural cavity.	A short, rich, bubbling song, repeated incessantly in nesting season. Also various harsh jeering or scolding notes.	Most wrens eat mostly insects, along with other small invertebrates like spiders, millipedes, and snails; some will occasionally eat seeds or berries. The Cactus Wren, an adaptable desert-dweller, will dine on cactus fruit, seeds, small lizards, nectar, and other items in addition to insects.
CAROLINA WREN <i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i> Common in the southeast, this colorful wren extends its range northward after any series of mild winters.	Length: 5.75" Rich rusty-brown above, pale cinnamon below, with a bold white eyebrow.	Dense thickets in undergrowth of deciduous woods and southern pinewoods, also shady suburban neighborhoods.	Built of grass, twigs, rootlets, and leaves, lined with softer materials, placed in a woodpecker hole, birdhouse, or other type of cavity.	Song is loud, rich, and rapid, a series of trebled phrases such as <i>liberty-liberty-liberty</i> , with many variations. Also gives sharp, ringing callnotes.	
BEWICK'S WREN <i>Thryomanes bewickii</i> Still very common in the west, this wren has declined sharply in eastern regions, for reasons unknown.	Length: 5.25" Brown above and grayish-white below, with a white eyebrow and white tail-corners. Rather long-tailed for a wren.	Thickets, open woodlands, streamsides in dry country, suburban yards, mainly in the west.	A cup of twigs, grass, and leaves, lined with feathers, built in tree cavity, birdhouse, or any similar niche.	Varies from one region to another, but the song usually includes a musical trill, preceded and followed by shorter notes.	
CACTUS WREN <i>Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus</i> The biggest wren north of the Mexican border, this is a social bird, found in pairs or family groups all year.	Length: 8.5" Boldly patterned with white eyebrow, stripes on back, bars on wings and tail, heavy black spots on underparts.	Desert and dry brush, as well as some residential areas in the Southwest.	A football-sized globe of sticks with entrance tunnel on one side, lined with softer materials; usually placed in a cholla or other cactus.	Grating and low-pitched, a fast <i>chug-chug-chug</i> , a slow <i>chrrrrgk</i> , and various other unpleasant noises.	
CANYON WREN <i>Catherpes mexicanus</i> This secretive wren of the western canyonlands is best known for its ringing, musical song.	Length: 5.5" Long-billed and short-tailed, mostly dark chestnut-brown with a bright white throat and chest.	Cliffs and rocky canyon walls, near streams or in very dry country.	A cup of leaves, mosses, and other soft materials on a foundation of twigs, placed in a crevice in a cliff, rock pile, or cave.	Song: a beautiful rippling series of up-slurred notes, running rapidly down the scale. Callnote: a short electric-buzzer <i>bzzzt</i> .	
MARSH WREN <i>Cistothorus palustris</i> A hyperactive, curious wren that lives in wet places.	Length: 5" Dark brown above and mostly white below, with a white eyebrow and short white stripes on the upper back.	Reed-beds and cattails in freshwater or brackish marshes.	A globular mass of reeds and grasses with an entrance in the side, lashed to cattails a foot or two above the water.	The song is a fast, nervous burst of sputtering, squeaking, and chattering, with hundreds of minor variations.	

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Oleg Yeregin, 16, winner of the All-Moscow Area Science Award, was a favorite target of “ferocious” mosquitos in the forest. Undeterred, he would like to return to the camp as an instructor someday. “I want to help beginners learn more about birds.”

from its parents. Keeping in mind that Russian children love pets and that almost all of these youngsters had collections of insects or amphibians, you might have expected them to “adopt” the young bird. But they didn’t. “It was a group decision made with the Russian instructors that the bird be left on its own, and if it got eaten, that was fine,” Case recounted. “It was an example of their belief in allowing nature to recycle itself.”

In a country where private cars are scarce and public transportation is unreliable, the opportunity to observe birds in the wild is rare for young naturalists. So nothing could deter them in the field. For

example, Case notes, the mosquitoes were “ferocious.” “You stepped into the forest and they were all over you. The kids didn’t have any insect repellent or special clothing. This one small boy — he had just won the All-Moscow Area Science Award — he would have 400 or 500 mosquitoes on him immediately. He would just stride through the forest wiping them off. There was joking about it, but it didn’t disrupt anybody’s studies.”

After lunch, the children were frequently treated to lectures by guest speakers who were often among the leading scientists in the country. Also in the afternoons there were games and exercises, and hobby time, where a typical activity was making bird nests. The evenings were “down time” when friendships were bonded, particularly with the British students who were popular.

Occasionally a film was shown. “I was embarrassed to see how out-

regard their subject matter was illustrated one morning when some of the children found a Blue Tit fledgling that had been separated

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Audubon’s Marshal Case (center) added scores of birds to his life list during the eight days of camp. He is seen here comparing notes with British instructor Derek Bolton (left). One of the four British youngsters at the camp, Thomas Simcock, trails.

dated they were," Case recalls. "They were the kinds of movies I saw when I was in the third grade in the early 50s."

More "embarrassing," was the absence of books. There were only three in the camp. "Except for a couple of the instructors, no one had even seen 'The Birds of the USSR,' that I had brought with me." Case said. "It shows you the level of materials and equipment that they don't have."

Perhaps one of the most interesting learning resources in the camp was Marshal Case himself. For most of the Russians, he was the first American they had ever encountered. They were fascinated

Case. He saw examples of this everywhere he went.

"I visited a Young Naturalist Center — these are the clubs that are all over the commonwealth for children interested in biology. Many children collect wild birds and often they're kept at the Young Naturalist Centers. The birds are cared for beautifully," Case noted. "You do not let these captured birds die."

Although there are laws against caging wild birds, they are not enforced, and the pet market in Moscow is a thriving, active place where people come to buy and exchange small animals that they have caught.

tionals is rare.

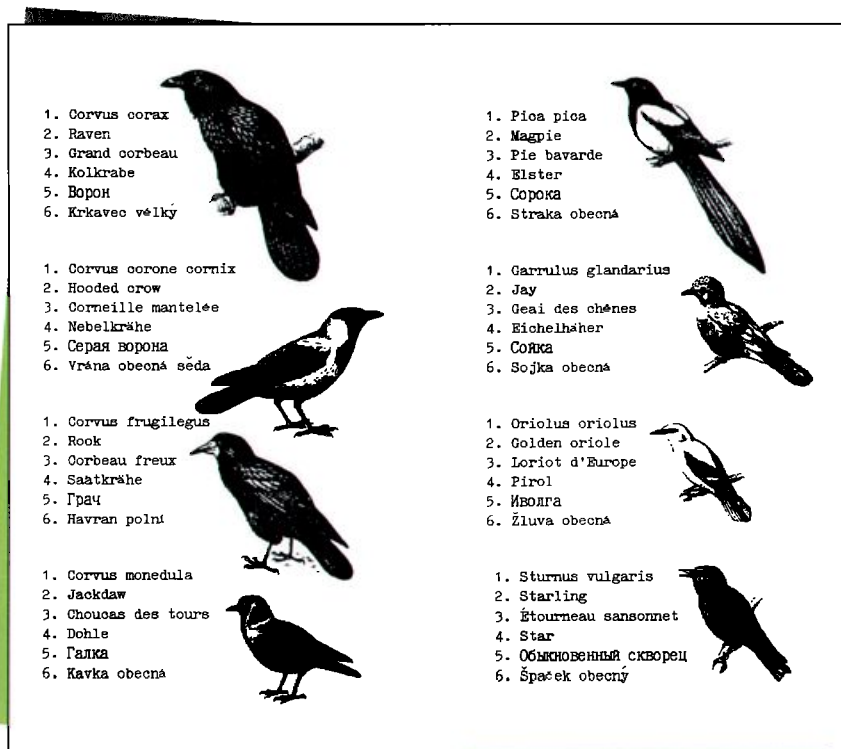
There are 160 natural reserves in the commonwealth, but few people go there for birding. Instead, they put up bird feeders and bird houses where they live or in nearby wooded areas. And for closer study, they capture birds.

Case believes that the peoples who live in Russia have a greater affinity with nature than most people in the United States. He likens their "nature relationship" to that of Native Americans. "I think overall, the people in Russia, to a person, are more tuned-in to nature than we are. It is a part of their culture, while it's disappearing in ours. It is a family tradition there — the study of nature in general, not just birds."

At the professional level, however, ornithology in the commonwealth of states, is still in the pioneer stages. The All-Union Ornithological Society, in its sixth year, has 2,000 members in all the countries that made up the Soviet Union. The American Ornithologists' Union, founded in 1883, has 5,000 members. And while "Soviet" ornithologists have been publishing scientific articles for many years, few papers have been printed in their native language. Instead, they usually appear in Western European journals.

Things will be changing. How quickly, how widely, how profoundly, no one knows. There are many, inside and outside Russia, who believe that the political upheaval is not over — that the situation is not stabilized. Meanwhile, there is excitement in the scientific community about contact with the West, exposure to new ideas and research, better resources, and financial opportunities. There is also fear of the fragility of it all.

So far, the contacts and agreements that Marshal Case made with the "Soviets" are intact, months



by his equipment — state of the art binoculars, camera, etc.

They were hungry to hear about America and particularly about Western ornithology.

Because there is so little in the way of technology and learning materials, Russian ornithologists, young and old, treasure what they have and perform every scientific task as precisely as possible, says

The special field guide for the Moscow Ornithological Camp.

This is the way people study animals in Russia and the commonwealth of nations that was the Soviet Union. Lacking money for travel, the transportation to get there, binoculars, scopes, even field guides and wall charts, birding as an activity for non-profes-



Back in Moscow, instructor Igor Pugathov (left) talks birds with an intense-looking group of young ornithologists at the Pioneer Palace. The National Audubon Society now has its own study group for junior naturalists at the Palace.

after the breakup of the USSR. “I don’t detect any change yet in the ornithological community,” he told *American Birds*. “The main problem is that in the Moscow area everyone is scrambling to either keep their job or find something else, because they are laying off a lot of people at the former Academy of Sciences of the USSR.

“Fortunately the connections that Audubon has made were with people who have made their way through these transitions. I don’t see us faltering on any of the contracts we have made.”

In addition to the youth camp, the weekly radio show, and the in-school programs, an Audubon television series is in the discussion stages. At the nitty-gritty level, Case is bringing bird books for the camp this June, Russian students will be attending an Audubon camp in Maine, and the Pioneer Palace has some new teaching equipment.

“The Pioneer Palace in Moscow has had 35 work groups — every discipline from biology to drama — that bright kids could attend after school and on weekends,” Case explained. “Now they have created a thirty-sixth group, the Audubon group. I’ve taken over 12 of our TV specials on video and we brought them a large-screen monitor and a VCR adapted for Russia. Bars had to be put on all the windows so that no one would steal the equipment, it’s so valuable over there.”

Marshal Case is one of the first Americans to work alongside the leading ornithologists at the Academy of Sciences and the naturalists who present educational programming on radio and TV. Both “sides” hope to cultivate more opportunities and friendships.

Unfortunately, it will probably be some time before amateur American birders will have the same opportunity to meet their

Russian counterparts and to add to their life lists.

Although there are many Russian entrepreneurs who would love to see bird tours flocking to their country, “ecotourism is a long way off,” Case reports. “Transportation and communication are very poor. A whole train disappeared and they couldn’t find it for a year! That’s how frustrating things can get.” As for cars, if you do manage to rent one, it will probably break down on Russia’s famous roads and you won’t be able to fix it, Case was advised by an interpreter.

If you do get out to the countryside, you’ll find that change is accepted more slowly. And a foreigner walking around in the woods with a camera and binoculars might be mistaken for a spy.

In America, a spy walking around in the woods with a camera and binoculars would probably be mistaken for a birder. ■