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DOWN WITH THE HOUSE WREN BOXES

BY ALTHEA R. SHERMAN

If, when a felon is on trial for high crimes and misdemeanors he is confronted by numerous eye-witnesses, who are trustworthy and fully competent to testify, if by their evidence it is proved that for upward of twenty-five years he has been seen committing the most flagrant crimes against his neighbors; if the depositions of these expert witnesses have been spread upon the public records and printed in volumes accessible to every one, it would appear that the public ought to demand for the good of our country that the felon be sentenced, and that the sentence be executed without dangerous delay.

In the case of the people of North America versus the House Wren together with his subspecies the Western House Wren the eye-witnesses of his crimes are numerous, trustworthy, and exceedingly competent; among them are men, who rank with our most eminent ornithologists: men whose professional business during many years has been the careful study of birds. Besides these there are many other men and women less famous, but equally trustworthy as witnesses, who from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific coast and from the Gulf states to the farthest north range of the House Wren in Canada have made numerous statements regarding this species. Their observations cover a period of more than a quarter of a century and have been published in various ornithological books and magazines, which are open to the examination of all.

In this prosecution the public must be jury, judge and executioner and, most unfortunately, a large part of the public is unfitted to act in any of these capacities: as jurymen, because they have already formed an opinion; this opinion is not based on any real knowledge on the subject, either first-hand or otherwise, but having a wren-box on their narrow village lot they refuse to listen to the warnings of those who have seen the House Wren at his nefarious work. They are fond of *their* bird and are angry when the truth is spoken about it; they act precisely like the parents of vicious children, refusing to believe



Lynds Jones.

the evil things their darlings do. They did not see the rattlesnake strike its fangs into the tender flesh of the little child that died last summer, yet the dying child was found and the rattlesnake near it: good enough circumstantial evidence for them was this, but the testimony of most trustworthy and competent witnesses of the evil done by the House Wren they flout and vilify. Neither are they fitted to act as judges. A judge in law must have knowledge of the literature of law, but with little or no knowledge of ornithological literature many people feel themselves supreme judges of this Wren; they will not take the bird magazines wherein they could find much convincing testimony.

It is a relief to turn from the ignorant and narrow-minded to those of more open minds: to those for whom the opinions and testimony of eminent scientists may have weight, and to remind them that among those who have borne most damaging testimony against the bad character of the House Wren may be found Messrs. Robert Ridgway, Otto Widmann, J. A. Munro, P. A. Taverner, Dr. Arthur A. Allen and Major Allan Brooks. For the presentation of this case to the open-minded a vast amount of data might be quoted: if desirable there can be given the names of the observers, together with the date and name of each magazine, also the page in it upon which the incriminating evidences against the House Wren have been published. In collecting these data a careful search has been made through five hundred and fifty-two copies of bird magazines in which several hundred people have had something to say about the House Wren and its subspecies the Western House Wren; for convenience at this time the name House Wren will include both the species and its subspecies.

Of all the magazines *Bird-Lore* has published the largest array of evidence relating to the criminal character of the House Wren. In its January-February, 1905, issue two veteran ornithologists spoke without shouting, yet most emphatically, regarding the danger from the House Wren, which attends the placing of bird houses. Any policeman will tell you that in a time of peril a gentle admonition will turn some people into a path of safety, but that on others he must use his club. It must be confessed that in connection with the danger here discussed, there is scarcely one of us who has not deserved the club. It is now a full score of years since Mr. Otto Widmann wrote the following gentle warning: "I would also say to those who put up bird houses of any kind to keep a watchful eye on the House Wren. He is as great a nuisance as the English Sparrow. He enters homes in the absence of the owners, ruins their nests, pierces and throws out

eggs and can do enough mischief in one season to threaten the existence of a whole colony of martins. Nor are his attentions confined to bird houses either; open nests also suffer from his sneaking visits, and much of the damage laid at the English Sparrow's door may be traced to the innocent-looking Jennie Wren."

In the same number of *Bird-Lore* Mr. Robert Ridgway gave similar testimony. In speaking of his bird houses he said: "These nesting-places are occupied solely by House Wrens, for they will not allow any other bird to use them. Each spring a pair of Carolina Chickadees build their nest in one of them and have begun incubation by the time the House Wrens arrive, but that is as far as the poor Chickadees get, for the wrens immediately oust them and destroy their eggs." Again in the same magazine ten years later he writes: "The House Wren is equally tyrannical, and no small bird can nest in its vicinity. Several pairs of Carolina Chickadees and Tufted Titmice, and a pair of Bewick's Wrens, that had been with us all winter, and would have nested in boxes near the house but for the rascally House Wrens, who, though possessing boxes of their own, drove the other birds away." Farther on he speaks of this destructive little demon saying: "The first House Wren ever seen or heard by me in southeastern Illinois was noted in the vicinity of Olney some time near the year 1870. . . . Bewick's Wren was THE 'House Wren' of the entire region. . . . In the vicinity of Olney, the House Wren is now by far the more numerous of the two, especially in the town itself; and, wherever it has chosen a home, Bewick's Wren is forced out, for Troglodytes will not brook the presence of any species, Wren, Chickadee, Titmouse, or Nut-hatch, which requires similar nesting-sites. Thryomanes on the other hand is exceedingly tolerant of other species, and therefore is far the more desirable, especially since it is equally tame and a far better songster. . . ."

A half decade passed and again Mr. Ridgway spoke, this time in the *Illinois Audubon Bulletin*, (1920). The deposition is similar to that given above, and this is the heart-breaking part of it: that spring after spring it is the same old story for a score of years, even for fifty years, except that the story grows worse as the years advance; this is true not only at Olney, Illinois, but wherever the placing of boxes has contributed to an undue increase in the numbers of this species. It is neither desirable nor practical to quote all the evidence that has been recorded. In a rapid trans-continental survey only a few records can be mentioned. In Litchfield, Connecticut, more than twenty-five years ago the House Wren was denounced as a despoiler: "not a robber but

a spoiler. He does not take other birds' eggs and eat them. He pierces them with his sharp little bill and throws them out of the nest. My direct knowledge of this fact comes from his treatment of the Chipping Sparrow. I have seen the wren throw the eggs of the latter out of the nest." From Saint Johnsbury, Vermont, came the message, "We have seen them drop the Bluebirds' eggs from the house door and take possession; which is more than the English Sparrow has done!" Similar offenses against the Bluebird were reported from Bristol, Connecticut; Hackettstown, New Jersey; Troy and Collins, New York, to mention only a few. In the magazines have been reported instances of his destruction of the eggs of the English Sparrow from Canton, Pennsylvania; of the Flicker and Robin from London, Ontario; of the Cardinal from Noblesville, Indiana, and from La Grange, Missouri; of the Texas Bewick's Wren from Wichita, Kansas; and of his usurpation of the boxes of Tree Swallow and Bluebird from Okanagan Landing, British Columbia.

Many people have seen him throwing from the nest the eggs of his own species. In fact, egg-throwing throughout the summer seems to be his main diversion. Egg-shells will answer if the whole eggs are wanting. An instance of this kind happened in my building erected to support a chimney for Chimney Swift occupants. Birds are excluded from its lower portion in which are stored various things, among them a Shrike's nest, containing the shells of eggs that had been blown. By accident a House Wren gained entrance to this room and was found there. Every shell of the Shrike's eggs had been carried from the nest and thrown to the floor. Some of the shells were not badly broken and all were returned to the nest. A few days later the wren again entered, again was found there, and again the egg-shells were scattered over the floor. The gentle Phoebe not infrequently is a victim of the wren's viciousness: her eggs are pierced and thrown out and her nests are torn down. One of her nests, not in use, built on top of a porch post was completely destroyed by a House Wren. He carried off the material but made no use of it. In a similar manner has he been seen tearing to pieces the nest of an English Sparrow, also to enter one of these nests and steal the feathers of its lining.

Mr. Widmann laid stress on the destruction of open nests by this wren, and Mr. Ridgway has given an account of the great decrease of several small species of birds, such as the Baltimore Oriole, Yellow Warbler and Warbling Vireo in his neighborhood. He does not say that two minus two leaves nothing, but I have the hardihood to say that it does: that two birds minus their two eggs leaves nothing for annual

increase or replacement; that this loss repeated year after year soon brings a species to the verge of extinction. One has but to recall how soon the English Sparrow has nearly wiped out the Cliff Swallows and the Barn Swallows in places where formerly they were exceedingly numerous. He does not declare, as does Mr. Widmann, that much of this damage can be traced to the door of Jennie Wren, but I have the boldness to declare that I know it to be the truth. The state of things about Olney, Illinois, parallels so closely that of a deserted village, that something other than a coincident must be the explanation for it. This decadent hamlet twenty-five years ago, before the coming of the House Wrens, was a paradise for many birds; Baltimore Orioles and Warbling Vireos swung their nests in the trees, Chipping Sparrows built in the bushes, and the Maryland Yellowthroat nested in the dooryards. Gradually people moved away, taking with them their cats and their bad boys; for eight summers not a Blue Jay was seen; chicken yards having been abandoned the English Sparrow went off to the farms; no doubt, all would have continued well with the little birds if the House Wren had not arrived; he took possession of the boxes placed for Chickadees and Bluebirds as well as numerous holes in old buildings; he flourished mightily, and as his tribe increased the other little birds decreased as summer residents, until very few of them could be found. In solving a problem of this sort it is well to have a large workable acreage under observation and to study it intensively. No person can witness the despoliation of every nest by the House Wren, yet by the process of elimination taken together with a knowledge of his character the correct answer can be found.

That the gentle admonitions of Mr. Ridgway have influenced the editor of one Audubon publication is attested by his magazine, which has ceased to advocate the placing of wren-boxes; but most of us seem to have needed the club. Speaking for myself it must be confessed that I may have sinned against my small bird neighbors, when for purposes of study, there has been tolerance, years ago, of two nestings each of Screech Owls and Sparrow Hawks. But there is only one sin that causes constant mourning in sackcloth and ashes, that causes me to lie awake nights visioning the future condition of our country with its bird population consisting mainly of those undesirable aliens, the Starling and the English Sparrow, together with Screech Owls, Bronzed Grackles, and House Wrens: that sin was the putting up of bird houses and allowing them to be occupied by House Wrens. It may comfort some people to learn that for this sin full punishment is being meted out in this world: except the Traill's Flycatcher, whose

vigilance and pugnacity protects his nest, and the Goldfinch, whose nesting comes after the wren's frenzy has abated, can any other little birds hatch their eggs, since the House Wrens became numerous; the successful breeding here of small species is ended, they are becoming scarce as has been reported from Olney, Illinois.

The cheerful twitterings of the Wren are pleasing, but no more so than the songs of the Warbling Vireo, the Yellow Warbler, the Maryland Yellowthroat, and other small birds that he has robbed and routed. Some of these by second trials in more remote sports are still perpetuating their species, but in greatly diminishing numbers, wherever the House Wren has largely increased. For corroboration of this statement the regional lists of birds given in the ornithological magazines are cited. Some of the reports give the Chipping Sparrow as now rare where formerly it was abundant. To be sure the species has other enemies; in some places the Blue Jay as well as the Bronzed Grackle, the latter a bird, that, most unfortunately, is increasing in many places. Bad as it is it does not sneak through all the small bushes and into bird houses. As for injury done by the English Sparrow one would do better to choose twenty of these rather than one House Wren.

Again the ornithological magazines are the authority for the statement that the House Wren is extending its range. Reports of its recent appearance on Cape Cod and in the vicinity of Quebec have been given. In the WILSON BULLETIN for December, 1919, the late Dr. N. Hollister wrote of bird life about Delavan, Wisconsin, compared with what he had known there twenty to thirty years earlier. In speaking of former years he said, "House Wrens were reported by ornithologists as breeding now and then in other portions of the state and some few may have been present in my region, but as a summer resident the bird was certainly rare in the vicinity of Delavan. Now I found it, in July, one of the most conspicuous and generally distributed of town birds." With only one change, that of the town, this would read true of every place in the Upper Mississippi Valley it is confidently believed. When a nesting area becomes over-crowded with certain species, as for example the Flicker or the Brown Thrasher, they fight among themselves (each within the circle of its own species), and break up nests by destroying the eggs. This sort of race suicide may be continued for several seasons until over-crowding ceases and normal life once more holds sway. No such happy adjustment happens among the House Wrens. In this species it is the females that fight until one is killed, thus leaving an excess of males. Among a

dozen of the species it has been found that there are two to four males that can not find mates. Never has it been discovered that these were the more destructive of the two classes of males, it may be the other way about; that the evil spirit is stirred in them by the presence of the unmated males ready to take away their partners. Whatever is the true explanation it is a matter of belief that the destructive habit has increased disproportionately with the increase of the species.

The reason for this great increase must be clear to every one. It is the result of the campaign for erecting boxes for wrens; boxes with small openings that protected the wrens from their natural enemies and enabled them to breed in undue numbers. That the species needs no such protection, but survives in plentiful numbers in the remote portions of its breeding range is another fact proved by the regional lists printed in the bird magazines. How many persons have searched for such records? Those who have done so, have read of the House Wren having been found breeding "abundantly" in the wild portions of Pennsylvania and of West Virginia, in the mountains of Virginia, in the northern woods of Michigan and Wisconsin, in South Dakota, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Washington, Montana, Colorado, and in the higher altitudes of New Mexico and Arizona. Certainly enough instances to prove that this bird needs no special protection.

This protection has been given by some unwittingly, by others obstinately, those who refused to believe the emphatic warnings of Robert Ridgway and Otto Widmann spoken twenty years ago. An example of one open-minded searcher for truth was afforded by a conscientious and learned ornithologist, who could not quite accept the words of Mr. Widmann, hence set the men of his state to seeking proof. How long they sought was not stated, but it was considerably less than seven years. It calls up the picture of a woman bent on vindicating her wren, who takes her tatting, sits in the shade of her apple tree in sight of her wren-box, and while she tats an entire afternoon she sees no eggs destroyed, consequently declares that there is nothing but malicious lies in the whole story. Such zeal on the part of one investigator might provoke a smile if the subject were not so serious; but those of us who for twenty to fifty years have studied thoroughly and carefully the life of the House Wren know the difficulty of catching him red-handed. More often than otherwise the detection comes accidentally. Fingerprints are deemed trustworthy evidence against the human criminal. One "fingerprint" of this wren is the dropping of the egg, its contents uneaten, outside the nest; but this evidence is

lacking at times. It may be said, in brief, that the collecting of evidence is not rapid work; it takes years, yes, *years*. A man who begins this work today, possibly, may know as much a score of years hence as does the man who began twenty years ago, but no more. However, it is very doubtful if he will know as much, since he begins in a world crowded with House Wrens, whereas the other man had a nearly wrenless background. And will the word of the beginner of today be any more reliable than the words of the eminent men who have spoken erstwhile?

The word of a truthful, competent, observant man can be trusted *seemingly* about most things, but not about the destruction done by the House Wren. He may tell of a dozen or more things seen in this wren's life that very few besides himself have ever witnessed, and all his statement will be accepted if he does not mention the menace of the wren to other bird life; on this subject he can not be trusted. It is not because the menace is a new idea to them nor because its workings have not been seen by them that they are obstinate, for they readily accept new truths about things that they have not seen, such as statements about vitamins, endocrine imbalance, sex-linked inheritance, chromosomes, the atomic world, and relativity.

Were a criminal belonging to the human race on trial, had his trial dragged along for many years during which he had time and again been confronted by the testimony of witnesses who were expert, competent, and veracious, it is certain that public sentiment would demand that a verdict be given and a sentence be passed. In the case of the felonious House Wren have not numerous jurymen pronounced him guilty? Capital punishment has not been demanded, though if no steps are taken to stop his unrestricted breeding it is safe to predict that the time will come when all true bird lovers will wring his neck as cheerfully as they now wring the neck of the pestiferous English Sparrow. By no means is it asked that the death penalty be exacted; instead of that drastic measure a mild sentence is urged—merely that the wren-boxes be taken down, thereby returning this wren to the place in nature that he occupied before man's interference destroyed the natural balance. In order that this restoration be not short-lived it is hoped there may come a true appreciation of his disposition, so that no one will suffer a breeding House Wren on his premises any sooner than he would tolerate vermin on his person.

Bird-Lore has a splendid motto: "A bird in the bush is worth two in the hand." But if we are to have that bird in the bush in future years, and if it is to be any other than a House Wren, then we need

the slogan, "Down with the House Wren Boxes." The stand we take on this question will affect more than present interests, and each one should so act that a kind Providence need not protect his memory from the just execrations of future generations.

NATIONAL, VIA MCGREGOR, IOWA.

OWL NOTES FROM OHIO

BY CHAS. R. WALLACE

Nesting records of the Long-eared Owl in Ohio seem to be scarce enough to justify reporting our observations on this species in Tuscarawas County, Ohio. About eight miles south of Uhrichsville the Stillwater and Laurel valleys join, and between these valleys, for several miles, a rather flat topped ridge, from 150 to 250 feet high, forms the divide. This ridge has numerous sharp spurs and the slopes are rather steep and rocky and mostly covered with brushy timber. The drainage has cut many deep ravines and rocky gulches, where brooks flow down to the valleys, making ideal environments for the Louisiana Water Thrush, the Kentucky Warbler, and the Blue-winged Warbler. On June 13, 1921, a pair of Worm-eating Warblers (*Helminthos vermivorus*), was noted in one of the ravines. The thick bushy woods and rocky gulches make good nesting associations for the Owl family and the Turkey Vultures. May 6, 1921, on a visit to two nests of the latter, we discovered the Long-eared Owls. When near the bottom of a wide ravine, one side covered with a rather open growth of timber, we saw an owl sitting on a fallen tree that had lodged several feet from the ground. A glance through the binocular proved it to be a young one. Cautiously stalking it we were able to get within a few feet without being discovered. Its immaturity showed that it could fly but little, so we stepped out in front. The transformation from a sleepy owlet to a scrapper on the defensive, was sudden and complete. With feathers fluffed and mandibles snapping he bid defiance to all intruders.

But no sooner had it assumed the belligerent attitude than a feathery ball struck the ground near our feet and started down the slope with a broken wing. A moment later another one dropped near and the same performance repeated. Their distressing cries were much like the Cooper Hawks, when their nest is disturbed, but with a much accelerated tempo. This was something new in our experience with owls.