

BAD HABITS OF THE HOUSE WREN

BY MRS. CHARLES F. WEIGLE

Miss Althea R. Sherman who, in the WILSON BULLETIN for March, has come valiantly to the aid of our song birds by telling the unvarnished truth about the House Wren, should not be left to wage the battle alone. It is a situation which concerns us all, and which will vitally affect those who come after us.

We who have learned for ourselves the real nature of this miniature *le diable*, about which so much fake sentiment has been woven by the alluring name "Jennie Wren", should rally to Miss Sherman's support; not only that her statements may be verified, but still more that a last stand shall be taken to protect the remnant of our bird heritage against the most insidious, most treacherous, and most persistent enemy that it possesses—the common House Wren.

Common is the exact word. No other birds, except the English Sparrows and the grackles, exceed it in numbers and general distribution; none, except the Robin, is so widely known and so little understood. "Having eyes, we see not", continuing to take it at its face value—apparently a busy little housewife, a tireless destroyer of noxious insects, a fearless, little, feathered friend, (and how that word "little" always appeals to our sympathies!) that accepts any hospitality offered it; is equally at home in an old shoe, or an elaborate bird box; eats no fruit, and fills the livelong day with a vibrant, bubbling song, which seems the very embodiment of cheering good-will. The children's friend, too! How much that means to each one of us! They can easily make wren boxes; and prizes are offered for these boxes by schools, societies, newspapers, and department stores. And every child can be reasonably sure that one pair of wrens will take possession of his handiwork. But have you ever noticed that only one box is occupied, no matter how many you put up? The rest are partially filled with sticks; or, if the box is intended for another bird, the larger hole is skillfully occluded with projecting sticks, so as to prevent the entrance of other birds. The territorial demands of the House Wren include the whole neighborhood. "The cute little thing", you say. "He doesn't intend that anything shall drive him out." Or, failing in the stick scheme, have you noticed how he daily inspects the other boxes, darting in and out, as you think, in a most friendly fashion, bent on a neighborly visit?

It is tragic to shatter an illusion. Necessity alone should impel one to do it; but let us go a little farther, and watch these cunning traits on our own account. Suppose, by some happy chance, a pair of

Bluebirds, the most Heavenly of all created things, have come to nest with you. You watch their joy at finding a house suited to their needs, their exquisite home building, mingled with soft love notes, as the male calls to his mate in ecstatic, warbling tones, "Here, my dear, right here, right here"; then she answers in low minor tones (D flat and C on the musical staff), "dearie, dearie", and you think never were birds so appealing, so beautiful.

After a few days you cautiously lift the hinged lid of their box, while they are absent—unfortunately the parent bird, unless taught by bitter experience, leave the eggs unguarded before incubation and later, when the female goes to feed—and look in, and there they are, a soft blue, as dainty and delicate as the breast of the mother bird, and you take comfort in thinking how safe they are, for you have no cats, or known dangers, about. What then, are your feelings, when perhaps in a day or two you notice the Bluebirds in apparent distress, warbling anxious notes; going in and out of the box, sitting quietly nearby, then in and out again, until finally you decide to investigate. There on the ground are the precious blue eggs, not eaten—just smashed, or pierced with a tiny, round hole. And at last the unhappy birds fly slowly away, never to return. Then you feel the real sadness of the whole tragedy.

What could have done it—this work of destruction? The secrecy of it, the mystery, is uncanny, it haunts you. Such an experience came to us, on our own premises, for three consecutive summers, before the perpetrator was discovered. There was no one to tell me, and I had not then read the authorities to whom Miss Sherman refers. How many have? There are still many bird lovers, ardent conservationists, who harbor the House Wren, many who, having read, will not believe, or who will not observe for themselves.

During those seasons the eggs of five pairs of Bluebirds, the fledgelings of two, and the eggs of a pair of titmice, were thus destroyed on our premises. Two of the fledgelings had their eyes gouged out. Three friends reported similar experiences—one found a deserted Cardinal's nest with pierced eggs in it. A professor at Purdue University, a bird lover, came over to investigate. We decided that blackbirds had done it, or possibly the English Sparrows, though they were kept down by constantly trapping. It was not until the following summer, my common sense and suspicions being now thoroughly aroused, and on constant watch, that I *saw* a House Wren fly from a titmice's box with an egg in its beak. There were no wrens nesting on our place, so the House Wren's "territory" is not limited to one's own premises. Since that time I have *seen* the fledge-

lings of Bluebirds torn from the nest by the House Wren, which then flew down and thrust its sharp beak into the eyes of the young birds. I have a friend who has seen the same thing happen on her grounds. The cruelty and wide range of destructiveness of this bird can not be overestimated. Unless a crusade against it is effectively carried out, not merely by taking down the wren boxes, but by materially reducing the numbers, the cavity nesting birds are doomed, and open nests are endangered. The truth must be faced, and then acted upon. A passive love for our birds amounts to little more than the words which so ardently express it. True affection for any object manifests itself in action, self-sacrifice, and service. It is not enough to provide food, water, shelter, and nesting places, now so rapidly disappearing; birds must be given absolute protection, militant protection, when they are invited to our premises, and we are obligated to acquire an accurate knowledge of all their enemies.

Three years ago we purchased an old homestead of ten acres, long unoccupied, neglected, and run down; but beautiful in situation, with hills and hollows, giant hickory and walnut trees, vines and shrubs, pastures, and a decaying orchard. Here we expected to find our native birds in abundance. But we found it inhabited almost exclusively by squirrels, rabbits, owls, jays, and wrens. They nested in the crevices about the old buildings, in holes in rotting fences and trees. No other species, except Robins, were breeding upon the place. But today, as I look from the window, it does not altogether belie its name, "Birds Acre".

As I write a pair of Cardinals are bringing one of their young (the other was a Cowbird, caught in a trap) to the sunflower seed on the window shelf; titmice, with three young, are also darting to it in frolicsome flight; two pairs of Catbirds are carrying graham and corn bread crumbs to their fledgelings; and the brilliant Carolina Woodpecker,* with his zebra stripes, is initiating his drab-colored young into the pleasures of the suet tree, where the downy, the hairy, and the nut-hatch revel in winter. And in the gravel bottomed pools on the hillside, fed by running water, the Goldfinch, the Indigo Bunting, the Mourning Dove, the Flicker, the Song Sparrow, and the Chipping Sparrow are bathing; while at the farthest one a Yellow-billed Cuckoo raises first one wing, then the other, as he dips his creamy breast in the clear water. In their box on the sycamore tree Great-crested Flycatchers are busy with their young. Bewick's Wrens are established on the back porch, a Meadowlark walks briskly to the pool, and in

*Butler gives this as a synonym for the Red-bellied Woodpecker.—Ed.

their box on the rose trellis a pair of Bluebirds are rearing a belated brood. Will they all raise their young? They will! For not a squirrel or cat is to be found, not a wren or an owl is to be heard over the length and breadth of this place, and never again will be, if daily vigilance can prevent it. It has not been an easy task, and is not, now. At times it seems as if I could not go on with the burden; but we are here to provide a refuge for the remnant of song birds that is left; and to leave, when our days are over, at least as much as we have enjoyed of the spiritual, mystical beauty of the birds, of the flash of jewelled wings, of the choral songs at dawn that call us out of sleep, and of the clear, elusive notes of the Wood Thrush, as evening comes, and darkness falls.

LAFAYETTE, INDIANA.

BIRDS OF FULTON COUNTY, KENTUCKY

BY DR. L. OTLEY PINDAR.

[Concluded from the WILSON BULLETIN, June, 1925, page 88.]

Pine Grosbeak—*Pinicola enucleator leucura*. Was seen in February and March, 1888. (See the *Auk*, Vol. V, 1888, page 321).

Purple Finch—*Carpodacus purpureus purpureus*. A rare migrant.

Redpoll—*Acanthis linaria linaria*. A common winter visitant, coming only in the coldest weather, usually in January.

Goldfinch—*Astragalinus tristis tristis*. A common resident.

Pine Siskin—*Spinus pinus*. A common winter habitant.

Lapland Longspur—*Calcarius lapponicus lapponicus*. A rare and irregular winter visitant.

Vesper Sparrow—*Pooecetes gramineus gramineus*. A common migrant.

Savannah Sparrow—*Passerculus sandwichensis savanna*. A common migrant.

Grasshopper Sparrow—*Ammodramus savannarum australis*. A rather common migrant, and possibly a summer habitant.

Henslow's Sparrow—*Passerherbulus henslowi henslowi*. A rare migrant, and possibly a rare summer habitant.

Lark Sparrow—*Chondestes grammacus grammacus*. A rare summer habitant.

White-crowned Sparrow—*Zonotrichia leucophrys leucophrys*. A rather rare winter habitant.