

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Article & Photos by Jeannie Marcure

SUMMER VISITORS

Because we live in such a desirable tourist destination, many of us have frequent visitors during our beautiful short summers. In fact, a common joke around the Flathead describes our climate as nine months of winter and three months of relatives!

At our home south of town, we've been privileged to have the same couple return to a small guest space just outside our back door for several years now. Typically, the male arrives first and announces his arrival with joyous song. This year that arrival happened on May 5th and shortly afterward we watched as he checked out several guest "cabins" that we had cleaned and readied in anticipation of his visit. To prepare for the arrival of his spouse, this industrious little fellow staked out a territory and readied several of the "cabins" by carrying stick after stick to each of them until he deemed them suitable for his partner. This activity lasted several days and during this whole time, our yard and garden were filled with his singing. When the female finally arrived about a week later, this industrious little fellow took her from house to house, proudly displaying his handiwork and allowing her to choose the one she wanted to use for the summer.

Well, by now I'm sure that most of you have



House Wren delivering a morsel to the babies!

guessed that our visitor is not one of the human variety, but rather one of our feathered friends and that our guest "cabins" are the many bird houses that dot our property!

The guest that returns so faithfully year after year to our yard is the tiny but dynamic House Wren. Breeding from Canada through the West Indies and Central America and southward to the tip of South America, the House Wren has one of the largest breeding ranges of any songbird, so it is certainly not a rare bird to see. Because of this abundance and its rather drab brown appearance, this small (5 inches and 0.4 oz.) bird may not seem very interesting at first, but I think that after a season of observing its behavior and listening to its almost constant singing, it just might become one of your favorites and that you, like I do, will regard its return as one of the landmark events of spring.

Once the male House Wren has taken the female on the tour of available nesting places, she chooses one and adds a small cup of grass, feathers and hair to the twigs that the male has placed. At our house, all the nests that he had prepared were in nest boxes, but House Wrens will also use old woodpecker holes or almost anything else around your property

that contains a cavity. According to my research at Cornell Lab—www.birds.cornell.edu/, wrens often add spider egg sacs to their nesting materials. It is thought that once these spiders hatch, they help combat the mites and other parasites that would otherwise endanger the baby wrens.

"Our" wrens choose the nest box closest to our house, an east facing location that is directly above one of my flower beds and close to several 10-12 foot Douglas Firs. It is amazing to see how quickly the wrens could go to these trees or the ground directly below the nest and return with a mouthful of delicious bugs!

After the nest has been chosen and completed, the 5-6 white and brown eggs are laid and incubated for 12 to 15 days by the female. The success of the hatch is very dependent on temperature and my sources at Cornell report that if a sun-drenched box warms up to about 106 degrees Fahrenheit for an hour, the eggs will begin to die. Since wrens begin nesting in May, a more common problem in the Flathead is the cold, as temperatures below 65 for more than a day will also kill the eggs. During the time of incubation, the male feeds the female with regular deliveries of a variety of insects which it forages from the ground or the lower canopy. Once the eggs hatch, both parents share the feeding duties and the 16 to 17 days before the babies fledge is my favorite time for observing the activity; there is an almost constant delivery of all sorts of delicious looking bugs to the nest. One day when some black beetles had infested my Blanket Flower plant, the wrens cleaned them off within hours. No insecticides were needed!! I also saw the parents removing waste sacs from the box regularly. As they mature, the babies can be heard demanding more food as the parents approach the box.

Last year I was lucky enough to be watching with my camera on the day when the baby wrens fledged and not only did I get some good pictures, but I also learned that they were not allowed to return to the nest even once. I saw the female wren take her position on the roof of the house and actually chase the babies away as they tried to return. Now that's what I call TOUGH LOVE!! Within days, the reason for this behavior became apparent, as the parents began a second nest in the same box. The juveniles seemed to adjust to this rather abrupt entry into the ...

Bird of the Month, continued on page 6 ...



Male House Wren checking out guest accommodations soon after arrival.

Bird of the Month, continued

... real world quite well, as I frequently saw them feeding around the yard and garden.

This year "our" wrens fledged in early July and I thought they were going to set up a second nest, but after a few days the female disappeared. I'm not sure whether she was just tired of the whole parenting thing or if something happened to her, but the male continued to sing for a couple more weeks and when he didn't attract a partner he left as well. Our yard has seemed very quiet without his joyful songs during this last part of the summer. Hopefully they'll return next spring!

To attract a pair of House Wrens to your yard next summer, provide a nest box or two and consider using some native plants as ground cover. Leaving a small brush pile the next time you prune your trees might also be helpful, as wrens will be attracted to this as a source of protection and food. We have a small grassy area edged with perennial beds, but most of our property has been left in native plants such as Oregon grape, snowberry, kinnikinnick, and serviceberry. This type of landscaping not only attracts birds and other wildlife, but also requires fewer chemicals and less water than the normal grass lawn. Besides the satisfaction of having an earth-friendly place to live, perhaps you too will get to watch a nesting pair of House Wrens!