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Birds of the Rocky Mountains—Species Accounts, pages 287–297: Creepers & Wrens

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Brown Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*)

Identification: This well-camouflaged bird is aptly named; it creeps upward on tree trunks in woodpecker fashion, but has a long, narrow and slightly decurved bill unlike that of any woodpecker. Its vocalizations are high-pitched notes that are easily overlooked.

Status: Resident in forested areas almost throughout the region, and present in all the montane parks, probably breeding in all. Breeding status in eastern Wyoming is uncertain but probable, since nesting is known to occur in the adjacent Black Hills of South Dakota.

LATILONG STATUS

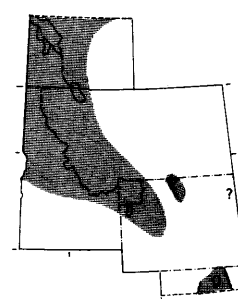
R	r	R	
	M	r	R
R	r	r	r

r	R		R
r	R	R	
s	R	r	M

r	M	r	M
	M	M	M
	V	R	R

Habitats and Ecology: Associated with forests throughout the year, including both deciduous and coniferous forests. Virtually all foraging is done on the trunks of fairly large trees, where the birds forage for insects in bark crevices and grooves.

Seasonality: A permanent resident throughout. There are few definite nesting records for the area, but in Rocky Mountain N.P. nesting usually occurs in June and July. The estimated nesting period for the Black Hills is from mid-May to mid-July.



Comments: Nests of this species are very hard to find, as they are hidden behind a piece of fairly loose bark, and thus very difficult to discover. One nest in Rocky Mountain N.P. was found at an elevation of 11,000 feet, only about 200 feet below timberline, but they have also been found as low as 7,000 feet in that state.

Suggested Reading: Davis, 1979; Braaten, 1975.

Rock Wren (*Salpinctes obsoletus*)

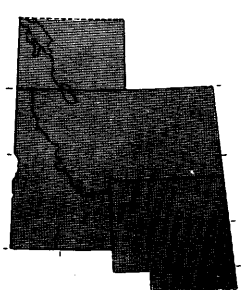
Identification: This is a large and rather grayish wren, with conspicuous buffy tips on its outer tail feathers, a pale eye-stripe, and faint breast-streaking. It is always associated with rocky outcrops, and its loud and distinctive song consists of a complex mixture of buzzes and trilled notes that usually opens with two or three loud, challenging notes.

LATILONG STATUS

s	S	M	
s	S		s
S	s	s	S

S	S	s	S
s	S	s	S
s	S	s	S

S	S	S	s
S	S	S	S
S	S	s	S



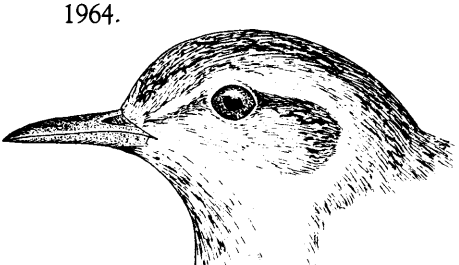
Status: Locally present throughout the region in rocky areas, especially in dry sagebrush dominated localities. Present in all the U.S. montane parks and possibly breeding in all; abundant in Dinosaur N.M.

Habitats and Ecology: Closely associated with eroded slopes, badlands, rocky outcrops, cliff walls, talus slopes, and similar rock-dominated habitats at generally rather low elevations, but sometimes occurring to 12,000 feet in Colorado. Crannies in cliffs are favorite nesting sites.

Seasonality: Records in Colorado are from March 3 to November 13. In Wyoming the records extend from April 2 to December 30, but with migration peaks in early May and September. In Montana the birds usually arrive in late April and depart in late September. Colorado egg records are from May 25 to June 28, while from Wyoming to Alberta there are egg records from May 27 to July 15, and nestling records from June to July 23.

Comments: One of the interesting features of this species is that the entrance to its nest is often "paved" with small, flat pebbles, for reasons still somewhat obscure.

Suggested Reading: Kroodsma, 1975; Tramontano, 1964.



Canyon Wren (*Caltherpes mexicanus*)

Identification: This wren occurs in similar habitats as the preceding species, but is especially associated with canyons. Unlike the rock wren it has a clear white breast, an almost uniformly rust-colored tail, and dark brown underparts. Its song consists of a series of descending and decelerating liquid notes sounding like *tee-you.*

Status: Largely limited to arid canyons south of the Snake River in Idaho, adjacent areas of southern Wyoming, and also western Colorado, with apparent areas of local distribution farther north and east. Absent from the montane parks except for Rocky Mountain N.P., where it is a common breeder; also common at Dinosaur N.M.

LATILONG STATUS

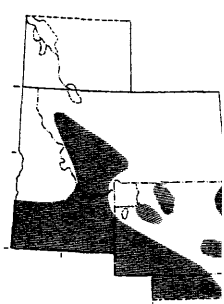
	s	S	
s	s		

S		s	S
	?	M	M
		S	S

M		M	s
S	s	M	M
S	R		R

Habitats and Ecology: Rocky canyons, river bluffs, cliffs, rock-slides, and similar topographic sites are favored, especially those offering shady crevices. Often found in canyons with streams at the bottom, but sometimes well away from water. Nesting usually occurs in rocky crevices, but at times buildings are also used.

Seasonality: Resident in parts of Colorado, but migratory farther north, and in Wyoming the records extend from April 17 to December 29. In Montana the birds usually arrive in early April and leave in late August. Colorado egg records extend from May 8 to July 10.



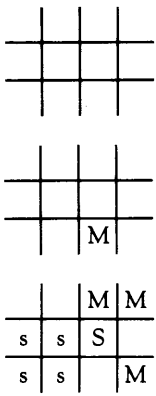
Comments: This species has an overlapping niche with the rock wren, but one study indicated that the canyon wren favors more secluded or covered habitats than the rock wren, and also tends to forage on cliff or canyon walls rather than on slopes of loose rocks.

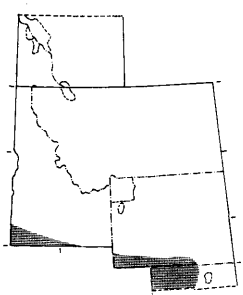
Suggested Reading: Tramontano, 1964; Bent, 1948.

Bewick's Wren (*Thyromanes bewickii*)

Identification: This dark brown wren has a distinct white eye-stripe, a white-edged and long tail that is often jerked from side to side, and a song that usually consists of a variable number of introductory notes followed by a trill. Often found in brushy areas.

LATILONG STATUS





Status: Limited to the drier areas of extreme southern Idaho, southwestern Wyoming, and western Colorado, at fairly low elevations. Present only as a vagrant in Dinosaur N.M. and Rocky Mountain N.P.

Habitats and Ecology: Broken and rather low brushy areas, especially where heavier cover is present overhead, seems to be this species' favorite habitat. It occurs from riparian areas through sagebrush to pinyon–juniper and oak–mountain mahogany habitats in the region, but is perhaps most common in pinyon–juniper woodlands. Nesting is often done in natural tree cavities, but old woodpecker holes are sometimes also used, as are cavities in manmade structures.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from February 12 to November 17. In that state eggs have been observed from May 13 to June 10, and in Washington egg records extend from March 29 to June 27.

Comments: This species is rarely common where the house wren also occurs, as it seems to be at a competitive disadvantage relative to that species, and apparently is prevented from breeding in areas that are used by house wrens. In general it has a much more southerly range than does the house wren, and is less migratory than that species.

Suggested Reading: Kroodsma, 1973; Cogswell, 1962; Miller, 1941; Bibbee, 1947.

House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*)

Identification: This most widespread of wrens has a rather uniformly brown color, lacking the white eye-stripe and white underparts of the Bewick's wren, and a longer tail as well as a larger size than the winter wren. It has a loud and bubbling song of whistled notes that is often repeated many times per minute.

Status: Present almost throughout the region, although more common southwardly in the Rocky Mountain region, and rare or lacking in the montane parks of Alberta.

Habitats and Ecology: Generally most common in the lower elevation forests, but occasionally reaching timberline. In this region the birds favor riparian woodlands, aspen groves, and the lower and more open coniferous forest zones, as well as areas of human habitations. Nesting occurs in natural tree cavities, old woodpecker holes, artificial cavities such as birdhouses, and the like.

Seasonality: In Colorado these birds arrive about the first of May, and usually depart by the end of October. A similar schedule occurs in Wyoming and Montana, with migration peaks in May and September. Egg records in Colorado range from June 3 to July 17, and in Wyoming from June 1 to July 15. Double-brooding is common in many parts of this species' range.

Comments: This is one of the most familiar species of songbirds, and also one of the most conspicuous. Males are highly territorial, and at least in some areas tend to be non-monogamous, with frequent mate-changing prior to the second brood of the season.

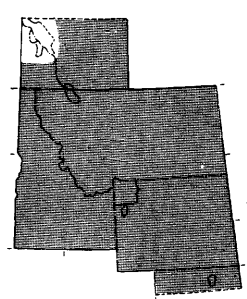
Suggested Reading: Kroodsma, 1973; Kendeigh, 1941; Bent, 1948.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	s
s	S	S	s
S	S	S	S

S	S	S	S
S	S	S	S
s	S	S	S

S	s	S	s
M	S	S	S
S	S	S	S



Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

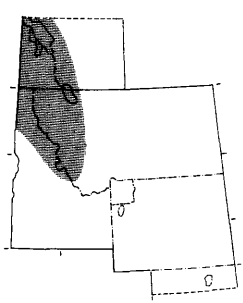
Identification: This tiny wren is only about 4 inches long, and has a very short tail as well as extensive flank and belly striping. Its song is very high pitched and greatly prolonged, often lasting more than 5 seconds. Usually found in very heavy cover, often near water.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	M
s	s	s	S
S	S	S	M

	M		
	s		

		M	M
		M	M
			W



Status: A summer resident in the northern parts of the region, south to about central Montana, and rarely farther south (one Wyoming breeding record). Generally a common breeder in the montane parks south to Glacier, but only a vagrant farther south.

Habitats and Ecology: This species is typically found in heavy forests, usually coniferous, and often occurs in moist and shady canyons where brush-piles and tangles of vegetation cover the ground. Root-tangles or cavities in or under logs are favorite nesting locations, especially where there are undercut banks.

Seasonality: A winter resident in Colorado, present from late September to late May. In Wyoming a migrant, and in Montana a summer visitor, reported from April 23 to October 9. There are nesting records from Montana from early June to early July, and recently fledged young observed in late June and July. In a single Wyoming nesting (Freezeout Hills) young ready to fly were observed on July 15.

Comments: This rather mouse-like bird might well be overlooked if it weren't for the marvelous song of the male. Johnston Creek is one of the areas where it can be readily seen in Banff N.P., while in Glacier N.P. it is common along McDonald Creek.

Suggested Reading: Armstrong, 1955, 1956; Bent, 1948.

Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*)

Identification: Closely associated with marshy wetlands, this species' presence can often be detected by looking for its football-shaped nests in cattails or similar vegetation, and listening for its rattling and reedy song. If observed, the strong white eye-stripe and white striping on the back serve to identify it.

Status: Locally present, mostly at lower altitudes, throughout the region. Rare or absent in the montane parks except Grand Teton N.P., where occasional.

LATILONG STATUS

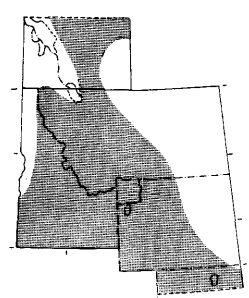
S	S	M	
	S	s	S
S	s		M

S		s	s
S	S		M
S	S	M	B

M	s	M	
M	s	s	S
S	s	s	R

Habitats and Ecology: Restricted to marshy or swampy areas having an abundance of emergent plants such as reeds and cattails. Slow-moving waters, such as the inlets of reservoirs, are sometimes also used. Nesting is always done over water, usually from 3 to 5 feet above the substrate.

Seasonality: Wyoming records extend from March 30 to October 15, although the birds have also been known to winter rarely in the state. In Alberta they usually arrive by the third week of April and remain until about mid-October. Eggs have been found in Idaho as early as May 30, and in Montana nest construction has been observed as late as July 26. Probably two broods are normally raised in this region.



Comments: Males of this species build a number of "courting nests" that serve in part to advertise their territories, and provide females with a choice of nesting sites. After obtaining a mate, the male continues to court females, and may acquire up to three mates that nest within his territorial boundaries.

Suggested Reading: Verner, 1965, 1975a, 1975b; Kale, 1965, Welter, 1935.

American Dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*)

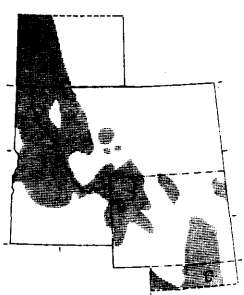
Identification: Easily identified, this species is confined to mountain streams and resembles an overgrown gray wren, with a cocked tail and a melodious, bubbling song. Foraging is done underwater, usually in rushing streams.

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	
r	R	R	R
R	R	R	R

R	R	R	r
R	R	R	M
s	R	R	M

R		R	M
		R	R
S	M	R	R



Status: Found in suitable habitats throughout the region, and a relatively common breeder in all the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: Rapidly flowing mountain streams, often with waterfalls or cascades present, are this species' prime habitat. Nesting is sometimes done on rock walls or overhangs near or even sometimes behind waterfalls, but more often the nests are constructed under bridges that cross suitable creeks or rivers. The birds are highly territorial, and pairs tend to be well separated.

Seasonality: A permanent resident in the region, although the birds tend to move to lower elevations in winter as their foraging areas freeze over. Eggs in Colorado have been observed from April 4 to June 10. There are few Wyoming records, but in the adjacent Black Hills of South Dakota eggs have been noted as late as July 5. In Glacier N.P. nest-building has been observed as early as April 21.

Comments: These birds often share their habitat with harlequin ducks, and both species feed on similar insect foods captured at the bottom of fast-moving streams by probing in the cobble. Unlike the harlequin, this species uses its wings to remain under water and to propel itself against the current as it searches for food.

Suggested Reading: Hann, 1950; Bakus, 1959a, 1959b.

Golden-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus satrapa*)

Identification: This tiny and inconspicuous bird is identifiable by its very short and sharply pointed beak, its strong white stripe above the eye, and a black-bordered crown that is yellow (in females) to yellow and orange (in males). The calls and songs are extremely high-pitched and inaudible to many.

Status: Present in coniferous forests throughout the region, mainly at higher elevations. An abundant to rare breeder in all the montane parks.

Habitats and Ecology: During the breeding season primarily associated with spruce–fir forests, but otherwise generally present in the coniferous zones and sometimes extending out into riparian woodlands. Nesting occurs in dense and fairly tall coniferous trees, usually spruces, and nests usually are placed rather high in the tree.

Seasonality: Resident in Colorado, and some wintering occurs as far north as Alberta, although seasonal movements are evident throughout the region. In Colorado nestlings have been seen from June 25 to August 26, and in Montana nest-building has been seen as early as late March.

Comments: This and the following species are members of an Old World group of birds sometimes called "Old World warblers." The kinglets are closely associated with rather dense coniferous forests throughout their range, and seem to compete very little with the New World warbler group.

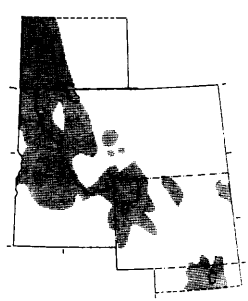
Suggested Reading: Bent, 1949.

LATILONG STATUS

R	R	R	
r	r	r	s
R	r	R	r

r	s		s
s	R	R	
	r	M	M

			r
r	r	M	M
V	W	R	R



Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*)

Identification: Similar in general appearance to the preceding species, but lacking a white eye-stripe, and with a white eye-ring instead, and usually with no evident crest (males have a small red crown). The calls and songs are very high-pitched and surprisingly loud for such a small-sized bird.

LATILONG STATUS

S	S	S	
s	S	s	S
S	s	S	s

S	s	s	s
s	S	s	
s	S	S	S

s	s	s	s
	S	S	S
M	R	S	S

Status: Present in coniferous forests throughout the region, more widespread and generally more numerous than the golden-crowned kinglet. Present in all the montane parks, and probably breeding in all of them.

Habitats and Ecology: Breeding occurs in coniferous forests from the lower zones almost to timberline in the subalpine zone, but is usually in taller and denser forests of medium altitude. During winter the birds often move toward lower elevations, including prairie stream bottoms and sometimes into cities.

Seasonality: More migratory than the golden-crowned kinglet, but some wintering occurs as far north as Colorado. Wyoming records extend from April 14 to November 12, with peaks in May and October. In Alberta they are usually present from early May to September or early October. Egg records in Colorado range from June 3 to July 11, and in Montana eggs have been noted from June 18 to the latter part of July.

Comments: Surprisingly little fieldwork has been done on the kinglets in North America, but they typically breed well up in coniferous trees nearly out of sight from the ground, and are often almost completely hidden from view.

Suggested Reading: Rea, 1970; Bent, 1949.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*)

Identification: This is a slim-bodied, long-tailed bird, with a generally gray color but with a white-tipped, black tail and a pale eye-ring. The song is a series of thin, insect-like notes, and the call is also thin and buzzy.

Status: Limited to the southernmost part of the region, mainly western Colorado and adjacent southwestern Wyoming (breeding known only for Green River latilong). Common at Dinosaur N.M. and probably breeding there; absent or a vagrant in the montane parks.

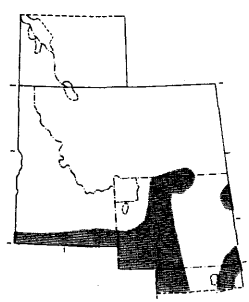
Habitats and Ecology: Breeding in the region occurs in pinyon–juniper and perhaps also adjacent oak woodland or sagebrush areas, up to about 7,000 feet elevation. Arid and park-like areas, with only scattered thickets, seem to be preferred for foraging, and nests are usually placed in low junipers.

Seasonality: Colorado records extend from April 27 to November 14. Nesting occurs from late May to late June.

Comments: These birds forage for insects among the branches of trees and shrubs, and build tiny felt-like nests on the branches of dead pines or junipers that blend almost perfectly with the bark of the tree. The outside is lined hummingbird-like with lichens and plant down, held together with spider webs.

Suggested Reading: Root, 1967, 1969; Fehon, 1955.

LATILONG STATUS

	V		M

		s	
s	s	M	M
S	S	s	S