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## Birds of the Great Plains: Family Troglodytidae (Wrens)

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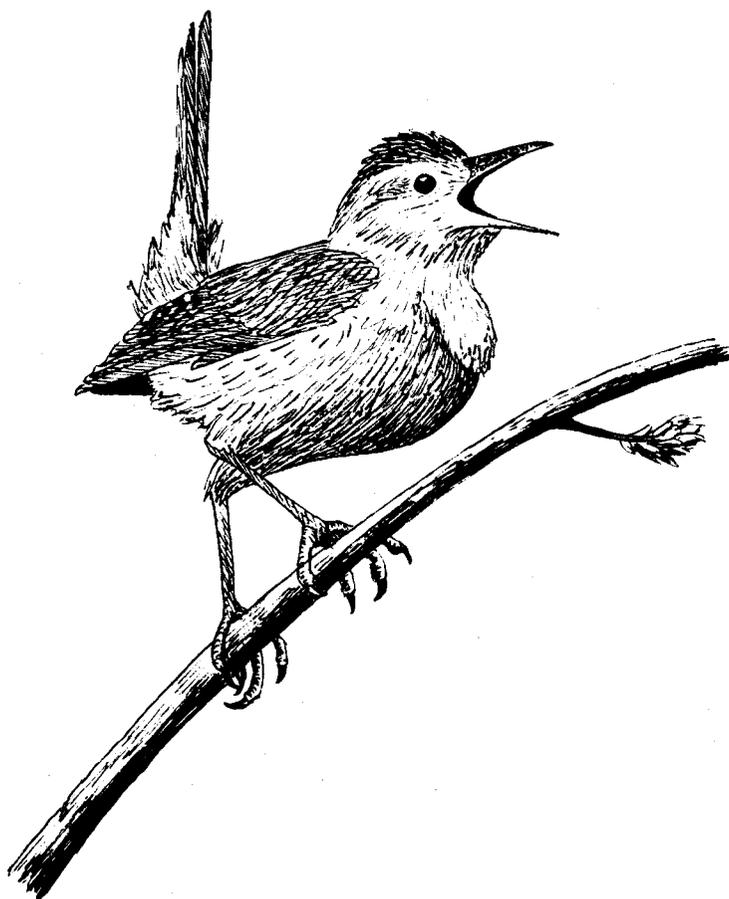
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FAMILY TROGLODYTIDAE  
(WRENS)



Long-billed Marsh Wren

## House Wren *Troglodytes aedon*

**Breeding Status:** Breeds commonly throughout the region from the Canadian border south to Oklahoma, where it reaches its southern limits in the panhandle (Cimarron County), south-central area (Cleveland County), and northeastern parts of the state. There is a single breeding record for the Texas panhandle (Randall County) but none for northeastern New Mexico.

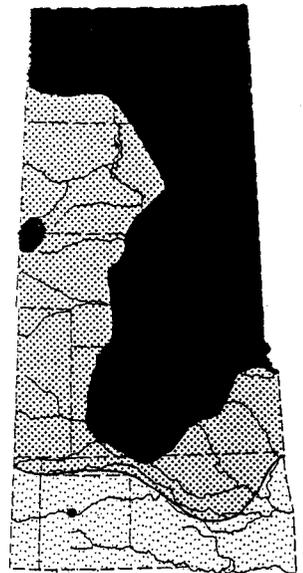
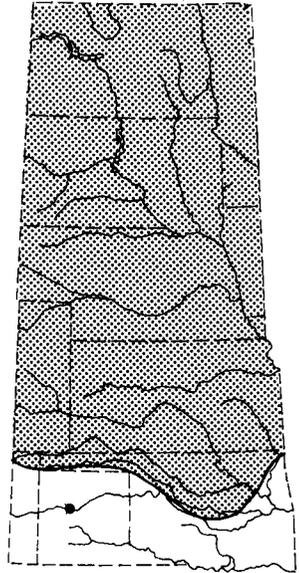
**Breeding Habitat:** The house wren was originally associated with deciduous forests and open woods but now it is also city-adapted and nests in artificial structures.

**Nest Location:** Birds use natural cavities in trees, fenceposts, or stumps, as well as birdhouses or other artificial cavities with openings of the appropriate size (about 1 inch in diameter). The nest cavity is mostly filled with twigs, and the nest cup is formed of grasses, plant fibers, feathers, and other soft materials.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 3 to 8 eggs (20 Kansas clutches averaged 5.8; 13 North Dakota nests had a mean of 6.5). The eggs are white with a fairly extensive covering of reddish to cinnamon dots. The incubation period is 12-15 days. Normally double-brooded.

**Time of Breeding:** Egg dates in North Dakota are from May 29 to July 22, and in Kansas they extend from April 11 to July 31. In Kansas, about 45 percent of the eggs are laid between May 11 and May 31.

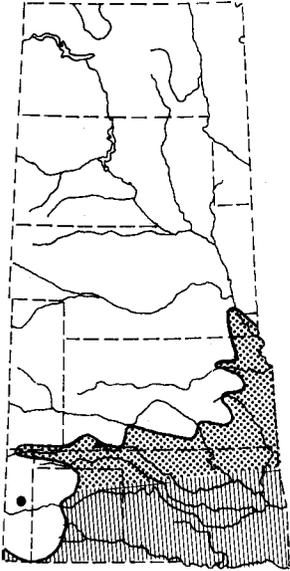
**Breeding Biology:** As house wrens arrive on their breeding grounds in the spring, adults tend to precede immature birds, and males arrive about 9 days before females. An adult male that has nested previously returns to its old territory or establishes a new territory adjacent to it, and females also have a strong tendency to return to previous nesting areas. Males sing three kinds of songs, including a "territory song," a "mating song," and a "nesting song," and both sexes have a variety of call notes. Males typically have 2 or 3 possible nest sites within their territories and may have as many as 7, thus allowing the females considerable choice. When establishing nest sites, house wrens often destroy the eggs, nests, or young of their own or other species, and there is a good deal of territorial shifting owing to nest-site competition and to the frequent changing of mates between broods. The nestling period is approximately 15 days. In addition to mate-changing at this time, a second female may mate with a male and nest within his territory. In one study it was found that about 6 percent of the matings are polygynous and that about 40 percent of second matings are with the same mate. There is likewise about



a 40-percent incidence of mating with the same individual in the following year, when both birds return to the same locality.

**Suggested Readings:** Kendeigh 1941; Bent 1948.

## Bewick Wren *Thyromanes bewickii*



**Breeding Status:** Breeds from extreme southeastern Nebraska (one old nesting record for Otoe County, breeding also reported from Gage County and erroneously from western Nebraska) and presumably adjacent Iowa southward through northwestern Missouri (rare at Squaw Creek N.W.R.) and eastern Kansas, extending into western Kansas only south of the Arkansas River. It breeds locally in southeastern Colorado (Baca County), in the Oklahoma panhandle to Cimarron County, and in the eastern panhandle of Texas (west to Randall County). In northeastern New Mexico it breeds locally (Union and Quay counties).

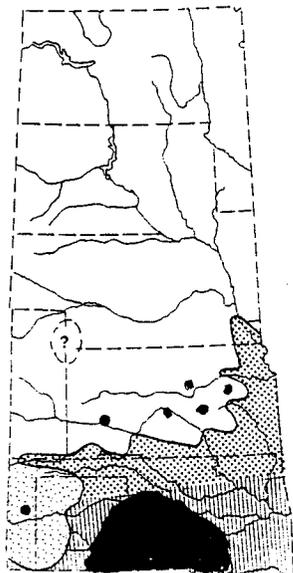
**Breeding Habitat:** The Bewick wren is associated with open woodlands, brushy habitats, farmhouses, and towns.

**Nest Location:** Nests are in natural tree cavities, sheds and deserted buildings, old woodpecker holes, birdhouses, and similar cavities in manmade structures. Nests and nesting sites are like those of the house wren, and the two species usually conflict when in the same area. The house wren is dominant and can evict the Bewick wren.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 4 to 8 eggs (averaging 5.5 in 12 Kansas clutches). The eggs are white, with dark spots and dots especially at the larger end. The incubation period is about 14 days. Double-brooded.

**Time of Breeding:** Kansas egg records are from March 21 to July 10, with first and second clutches usually in mid-April and mid-June. Active nests have been seen in Oklahoma from April 10 to June 25.

**Breeding Biology:** Bewick wrens are less migratory than house wrens and may move into areas used by house wrens when they leave in the fall, only to be forced out again in the spring. In some areas they avoid intense competition by breeding somewhat earlier and in thicker habitats than house wrens. Males establish breeding territories containing several potential nest sites, and some males appear to be bigamous or polygynous. Males advertise territories by singing, and pairing seems to occur rapidly after territories are established. At least in most instances, nests are not built until the female is present, and although both sexes may



work on the nest the female does most of the construction or may even build alone. The nest is built in about 10 days, and the female does all the incubating. At this time the male apparently feeds her, and both sexes feed the young during the 14-day nestling period. For about 2 weeks after the young birds leave the nest they are cared for by the parents.

**Suggested Reading:** Miller 1941; Bibbee 1947.

## Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

**Breeding Status:** Breeding is limited to northern Minnesota, Clearwater County being the only proved area of breeding; in Itasca State Park the birds are locally common and are known to have nested (*Loon* 49:85).

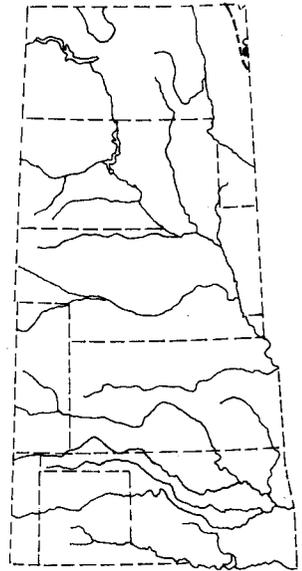
**Breeding Habitat:** The species is associated with heavy forests, usually coniferous. In Minnesota it is especially numerous in spruce and white cedar bogs.

**Nest Location:** Nests are most often in the upturned roots of a fallen tree but may also be amid the roots of a live tree or under a stump, in a rocky crevice, or rarely in an old woodpecker hole. However, they typically are not in an enclosed cavity like the nests of other wrens.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 4 to 7 eggs, usually 5-6. The eggs are white, with reddish brown dots and spots often forming a wreath around the upper end. The incubation period is from 14 to 20 days, most commonly 16. Frequently double-brooded.

**Time of Breeding:** Egg dates are not available for Minnesota, but fledglings have been seen at Itasca Park as early as June 10, and parents with young have been seen in Minnesota as late as August 1.

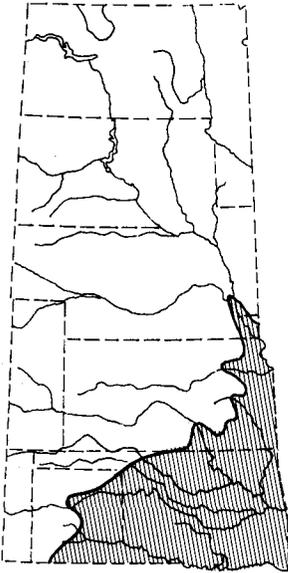
**Breeding Biology:** This tiny wren is highly territorial, and in some areas males defend territories practically throughout the year. Territories are advertised by intensive singing, which is prolonged and melodious, frequently lasting more than 7 seconds and having remarkable acoustic complexity. The song consists of two similar major portions, each of which is terminated by a trill and totals well over 100 separate notes. Singing occurs from spring until as late as mid-August in northern Minnesota. Males are frequently polygynous and may have up to three mates simultaneously. They build several nests, averaging (in the European race) about 6 per bird, and may build as many as 12. Females



rarely participate in building, but they do bring in lining materials. They apparently perform all the incubation, but males participate in feeding the young. In the European race, males help feed young in about 40 percent of the nests. The young remain in the nest for about 2-3 weeks, averaging about 17 days. A second clutch may be begun within 2 weeks of the fledging of the first brood.

**Suggested Reading:** Armstrong 1955; Bent 1948.

### Carolina Wren *Thryothorus ludovicianus*



**Breeding Status:** Breeds in extreme southeastern Nebraska (periodically or locally north to Douglas County and west to Lancaster and Nuckolls counties), extreme northwestern Missouri (occasional at Squaw Creek N.W.R.), eastern Kansas (east of a line from Doniphan, Riley, and western Reno counties), Oklahoma west to the panhandle, and locally in the Texas panhandle (Randall County).

**Breeding Habitat:** Brushy forests, forest margins, cutover forests, cultivated areas with brush heaps or old buildings, and suburban parks and gardens.

**Nest Location:** Nests are in natural tree cavities, in woodpecker holes, under rocks, in overturned root cavities, in birdhouses, and in building crevices. They are rarely more than 10 feet above the ground, and the cavities are filled with a variety of soft, pliable materials. The lining is of fine grasses, hair, feathers, and the like.

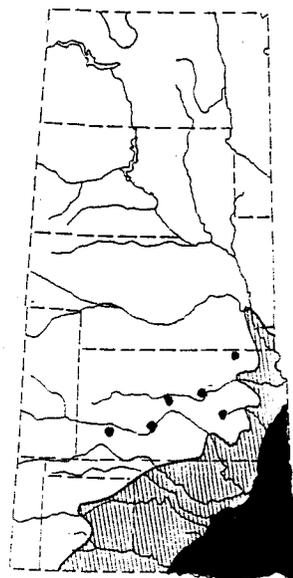
**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 3 to 8 eggs (9 Kansas nests averaged 4.2). The eggs are white, with heavy brown spotting around the larger end. The incubation period is 12-14 days. Normally double-brooded and sometimes raises three broods.

**Time of Breeding:** Kansas egg records are from April 11 to August 10, with a probable peak in mid-April and a possible initiation of nesting as early as late March. Oklahoma egg records are from March 18 to August 1.

**Breeding Biology:** The Carolina wren overlaps to some extent with the house wren in its breeding range but apparently does not conflict with it to the extent that the Bewick wren does. Being larger than either of these two species, it is probably socially dominant where contacts do occur. Males become territorial and sing persistently from late winter onward, although some song may occur almost throughout the year. Males apparently do not

begin to build nests until they become mated. When mating occurs the pair begins to seek out suitable nest sites, and in one observed case they began building a day after a suitable nest basket had been hung. Both sexes build, and within 2 days the nest may be nearly completed. About 5 days after the start of nest-building the first egg is laid, and subsequent eggs are laid at daily intervals. The male feeds his mate to some extent during nest-building, incubation, and brooding, but the female is off the nest a surprisingly small amount of time during incubation. The nestling period is 13-14 days. The extent of double-brooding and polygyny or mate-changing between broods is still unreported in this species, but the male sometimes takes charge of the newly fledged brood so that the female can begin a second clutch in a new nest that the male has prepared.

**Suggested Reading:** Nice and Thomas 1948; Bent 1948.



## Long-billed Marsh Wren (Marsh Wren)

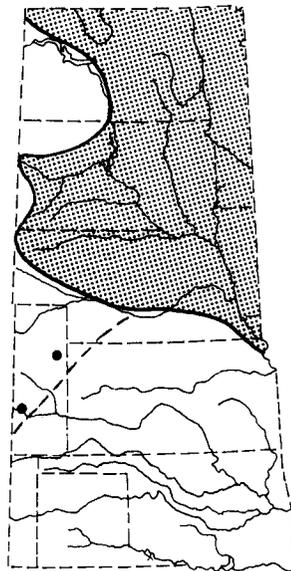
### *Cistothorus palustris*

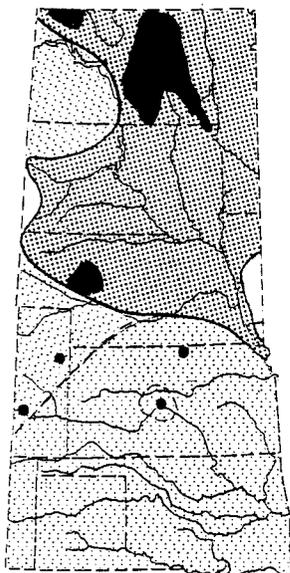
**Breeding Status:** Breeds throughout western Minnesota and North Dakota east of the Missouri, the eastern half of South Dakota, and most of Nebraska north of the Platte River, with local or infrequent breeding south of the Platte (*Nebraska Bird Review* 39:74). It also breeds locally in extreme northwestern Missouri and northeastern Kansas (Doniphan County, possibly others).

**Breeding Habitat:** Freshwater marshes or brackish tidal marshes with extensive tall emergent vegetation represent prime habitats, but the banks of tidal rivers, reservoir inlets, and similar habitats are also used.

**Nest Location:** Most nests are 3-5 feet above the marsh substrate, with early nests being lower and later ones higher. The nests are built in emergent vegetation (cattails, bulrushes, etc.) and are domed elliptical structures about 7 inches high and 5 inches across, with a lateral opening about 1 1/4 inches in diameter just above the equator. They are constructed of grass strips and lined with cattail down. In North Dakota, water depth at 19 nests averaged 12 inches, and 23 nest entrances averaged 16 inches above the water.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 3 to 7 eggs (23 North Dakota clutches averaged 4.7). The eggs are cinnamon to brown with darker spots. The incubation period is 13 days. Double-brooded.



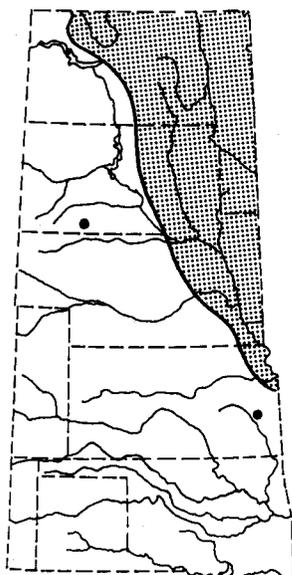


**Time of Breeding:** North Dakota egg dates are from May 26 to August 10, and nestlings have been reported from June 16 to August 6. In Kansas eggs are also laid between May and August.

**Breeding Biology:** Shortly after they arrive on their breeding areas males establish territories, which they advertise by persistent singing from all parts and by aerial displays above them. After a territory has been established, each male begins to build a number of "courting nests" (up to 5 or more), which are complete except for a lining. When a female selects a male as a mate she either accepts one of these nests for breeding and lines it or begins a new one, which is chiefly constructed by the male. After egg-laying has begun, the male moves to a new area in his territory and begins to advertise for additional mates. He may obtain as many as three mates, each of which incubates alone but is fed by the male. The male's role in feeding the young is often small or nil; instead, he continues to maintain the territory. The young leave the nest when about 14-16 days old but may be fed by adults for nearly 2 more weeks. Nest-building by the male increases during the nestling and fledgling period, in preparation for a second clutch.

**Suggested Reading:** Verner 1965; Welter 1935.

### Short-billed Marsh Wren (Sedge Wren) *Cistothorus platensis*



**Breeding Status:** Breeds through the western part of Minnesota and North Dakota east of the Missouri River southward through eastern South Dakota, western Iowa, and eastern Nebraska. It is uncommon in extreme northwestern Missouri, and in Kansas it is rare and irregular, with breeding records limited to a few eastern counties. There is a single breeding record for Oklahoma (Harper County, 1936).

**Breeding Habitat:** Wet meadows, especially those dominated by sedges, cottongrass, mannagrass, and reedgrass, are primary habitats in the northern plains, but the birds also utilize emergent vegetation associated with marshes as well as retired croplands and hayfields.

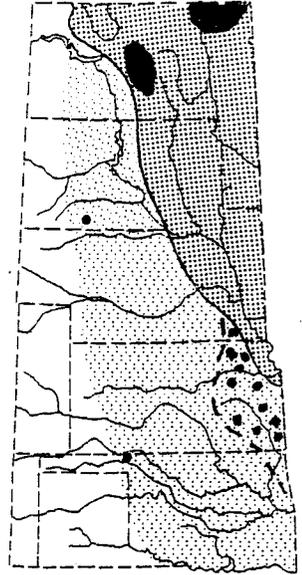
**Nest Location:** Nests are constructed over land or water in dense growing vegetation and are usually 1-3 feet above the substrate. They are globular structures about 4 inches in diameter, with a lateral entrance above the equator, lined with plant down, hair, or similar materials.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 4 to 8 white eggs, often 7. The incubation period is 12-14 days. Reportedly double-brooded, but single-brooded in an Iowa study.

**Time of Breeding:** North Dakota egg dates are from June 7 to August 10. The few Kansas records indicate that eggs are laid in late July and August at that latitude.

**Breeding Biology:** Although this species is not nearly so well studied as the long-billed marsh wren, it is known that males regularly build numerous "dummy" nests, and thus a comparable pattern of pair-formation and evidently polygyny prevails. In favored habitats such as large meadows, the birds concentrate in high densities; about 35-40 singing males were counted in a Michigan meadow of only 10 acres. At the peak of the nesting period the male may spend as much as 22 hours a day singing, generally from 6-12 songs per minute. When a pair bond is formed the female selects or initiates a brood nest, which tends to be lower and harder to find than the courting nests. The female does all the incubating and most of the feeding of the young, with only occasional visits by the male. The young remain in the nest about 13 days, and presumably a second brood is often initiated shortly after the first one fledges.

**Suggested Reading:** Walkinshaw 1935; Crawford 1977.



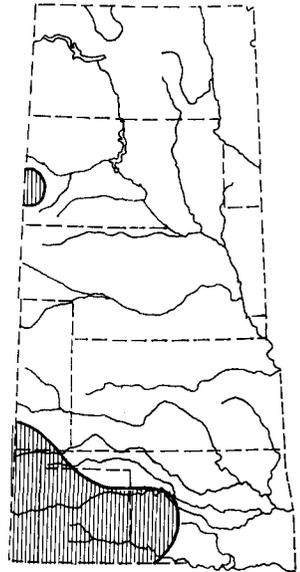
## Canyon Wren *Catherpes mexicanus*

**Breeding Status:** Breeds locally in western South Dakota (Black Hills), southern Colorado (at least Baca County), the western panhandle (Cimarron County) and the southwestern corner of Oklahoma (Woodward to Caddo and Comanche counties), the Texas panhandle, and northeastern New Mexico.

**Breeding Habitat:** The species is associated with rocky canyons, river bluffs, cliffs, and occasionally cities.

**Nest Location:** Ledges in shallow caves or rocky crevices are favored, but birds also nest in buildings, utilizing rafters, chimneys, eaves, and similar locations. The nest is a haphazard accumulation of materials (in one case totaling 1,791 countable objects as well as half a pound of filling materials), lined with wool, feathers, or other soft material.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 4 to 6 eggs, white with faint brownish spotting. The incubation period is about 12 days. Apparently double-brooded, at least in some areas.

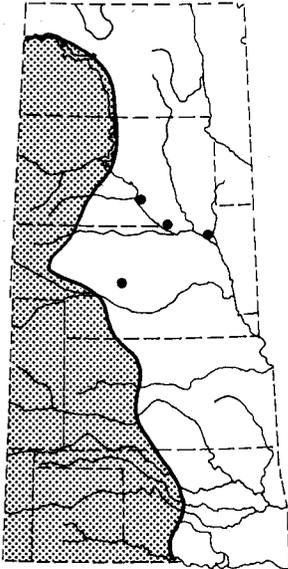


**Time of Breeding:** In the Black Hills the nesting period is from late May through July, with fledglings observed as early as June 13. Active nests or eggs have been reported in Oklahoma from April 26 to July 5, and nestlings or fledglings have been seen from June 6 to July 14. Texas egg dates are from March 4 to July 7.

**Breeding Biology:** These birds are somewhat migratory in South Dakota and Colorado, arriving on their Black Hills breeding grounds in early April. By that time they are already actively singing and defending territories in southern Colorado, and females have begun to carry nesting material into crevices that may be the same sites as used in previous years. Males do not assist with incubation and have not been reported to feed incubating females. But when the nestlings are very small the male does feed his brooding mate, and soon both sexes begin to gather food. In one observed case the nestling period was at least 13 days. At least in Colorado, there seems to be a migration away from the nesting areas shortly after the young have fledged, although the birds are likely to return by early December.

**Suggested Reading:** Bailey and Niedrach 1965; Tramontano 1964.

## Rock Wren *Salpinctes obsoletus*



**Breeding Status:** Breeds in western North Dakota along the Missouri and Little Missouri drainages, southward through western South Dakota, western Nebraska (east to Cherry, Custer, and Lincoln counties), western Kansas (east to Decatur, Rooks, and Comanche counties), and western Oklahoma (east to Woods, Blaine, and Comanche counties and irregularly to Sequoyah County). It also breeds widely in eastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, and the Texas panhandle.

**Breeding Habitat:** Eroded slopes and badlands, rocky outcrops, cliff walls, talus slopes, and generally arid environments are preferred.

**Nest Location:** Nests are typically among rocks, in crevices of canyon walls, or sometimes in tree holes or cutbanks. There is often a small runway of stones leading to the nest, which is constructed of twigs and grasses, usually with a lining of hair or wool.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** From 3 to 10 eggs, usually 4-5. The eggs are white with slight brown spotting. The incubation period is 14 days. Double-brooded at least in some areas.

**Time of Breeding:** North Dakota egg dates are lacking, but the probable egg-laying period is late May, since nestlings or dependent fledglings have been seen from June 19 to August 11. Kansas egg dates are from May 11 to July 20, with a mid-June peak. Active nests in Oklahoma have been seen from April 22 to June 13, and egg dates in Texas are from April 2 to July 3.

**Breeding Biology:** In Arizona, where rock wrens occur with canyon wrens, both species feed in a generalized fashion on similar foods, but rock wrens forage almost exclusively in open or relatively unvegetated situations, while canyon wrens forage mostly in secluded or covered habitats. The species also differ in favored nest sites, with this species using slopes of loose rocks and boulders rather than cliff or canyon walls. Eggs are laid at the rate of one a day, with incubation starting when the clutch is complete. Only the female incubates, but she is usually fed by the male, and both sexes feed the nestlings. When the young leave their nest (after about 14 days) the adults soon begin gathering nest material for their second brood or may begin a second clutch in the same nest.

**Suggested Reading:** Tramontano 1964; Bent 1948.

