

Winter Wren *Troglodytes hiemalis*



Folk Name: Wood Robin

Status: Winter Resident

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Forests with fallen logs, uprooted trees, streambanks

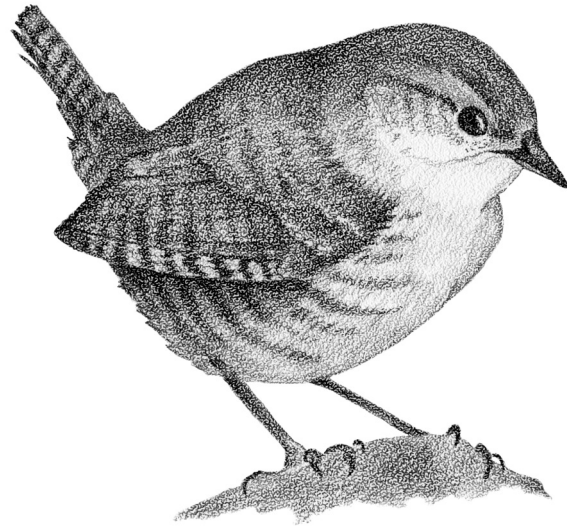
“But we have yet to hear the marvelous rhapsody of a winter wren—called also the ‘wood-robin’—who dwells apart from men and sings to himself in the lone silence of the wood.” —*The Charlotte Democrat*, June 21, 1895

The Winter Wren is a breeding bird of boreal forests in northern latitudes and high elevation spruce-fir forests in the mountains of North Carolina. None of our other wrens breed in this type of habitat. After breeding, northern wrens head south each year to find food and shelter. For us, the common name Winter Wren is an apt designation for this bird as it is truly only a winter resident in the Carolina Piedmont.

Fortunately, Central Carolina birders need drive only a short distance to observe the Winter Wren on its breeding grounds in the mountains of North Carolina and listen to its melodic breeding song echo throughout the dense evergreen forest. On New Year’s Day 1916, *The Greenville News* carried an essay on the Winter Wren which described its song:

Few if any, of our birds have sweeter notes than those that seem to gush and bubble from the tiny throat of this chocolate brown mite. He seems so full of himself, so glad that he is living in this beautiful world of fern shaded springs, fat worms, and glorious sunshine—so glad to be the proud possessor of a dear little mate, four babies, and a home as big as a peck measure, that he just can’t hold back the joyful, exultant notes that tumble over each other in their efforts to get out in the air, where they can be heard!

The Winter Wren averages only 4 inches in length and is the fourth smallest bird regularly found in our region. Along with its small size, it is known for its undersized “stubby” or “stumpy” tail and its moderate barring below, from its belly on back. In our region, it is usually found skulking quietly around a fallen log or uprooted tree stump, a root ball, or stick pile, in the forest interior. It searches the forest floor for bugs, spiders and other invertebrates, which places this bird in a foraging guild which ecologists have dubbed “terrestrial gleaning insectivores.”



We have no reports of Winter Wren in the Central Carolinas from June through August and there are just a few acceptable reports from May and September. Most Winter Wrens arrive in our region in October and depart by the end of April. Our earliest fall arrival date is 11 September, and our latest spring departure date is 5 May. Several are usually found on each Christmas Bird Count conducted in the region. Our peak one-day count is a total of 12 birds counted on the Pee Dee Christmas Bird Count in January 2003.

Some early records of note: Leverett Loomis collected a specimen of Winter Wren near the Chester Courthouse on December 18, 1889. This specimen is still housed in the ornithological collection at Harvard University. E.M.



Winter Wren after being banded. (MCPRD staff)

Hoffman and Elmer Brown reported this winter visitor in Salisbury on December 26, 1923. In Charlotte, Julian Meadows and H. Lee Jones encountered Winter Wrens almost daily from March 25 through April 17, 1962, and Jones reported a late date of 26 April that year. A lingering Winter Wren was a pleasant and unexpected “surprise” for participants on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count on May 1, 1982.

On November 15, 1970, South Carolina birder Jay Shuler reported:

A cold front rolled over the foothills and broke with the rumble of thunder and the splash of rain. By morning many leaves, wet and heavy, had fallen. Those that weathered the autumn storm seemed,

against black limbs and trunks, more colorful than before. For the tiny Winter Wren who hopped under the dripping sweetgum, the front was a surfer’s wave. He may have ridden it all night from as far north as Ohio before it set him down safely in my yard, the last leg of his journey south complete. ... Something across the yard caught his eye. From a low perch he pumped up and down and chattered aggressively. I hoped he would break into song as birds often do in a time of stress. His reputation as a singer is worldwide, but he is seldom heard in South Carolina. ...Abruptly he gave up gesturing and flew away...the Carolina Wren who claims my yard as his year-round home made his way to the vacated perch.