

The Wren



The tiny wren, *troglodytes troglodytes* is not only one of the smallest, it is also one of the commonest birds in Britain. It occurs in woods, copses, hedgerows and gardens, wherever there is plenty of low cover. Certainly in rural west Dorset most gardens will have resident wrens. It is a sedentary species, rarely straying far from its birthplace.

In proportion to its size the wren has the loudest song of any British bird. The male sits high in a bush to deliver his potent phrase, a piercing burst of whistles and trills. This powerful melody is the declaration of territorial ownership. A less noisy rendition of the song is used to impress his mate, helping to cement the pair bond in the early stages of courtship. During brief encounters with his hen, he adopts a boasting posture by raising his short tail, and fluttering his wings as he delivers his masculine melody. In these intimate moments, the volume of song is relatively quiet as he only needs to impress the hen close by him. The alarm note of wrens for ground predators (including humans) is a harsh, rapid rattle, persisting long after the intruder has gone. Or for a passing stoat, weasel or domestic cat the bird emits a loud, continuous, slow ticking sound.

The male wren is polygamous. In early spring he sets out to construct a number of nests. He builds six or more dome-shaped structures, using mainly deciduous leaves and moss. After completion, he may populate more than one of them with different females. Once a nest is selected by a female, she lines it with feathers before laying her clutch of 5 to 8 glossy-white eggs. Hatchlings have bright yellow gapes, acting as stimulating prompts for adults to return with more food. The male helps with the feeding of nestlings, but he may share himself with other female members of his

harem. Or he may be committed to one brood of chicks while other female partners are still incubating eggs.

Wrens are strictly insectivorous. Throughout the breeding season there is a super abundance of potential invertebrate prey. But in winter, times can be hard for wrens. During the short hours of daylight, they will visit stream-sides, deadwood or leaf-litter, constantly foraging for sufficient prey to sustain them through the long, cold nights. In periods of extreme cold, wrens may gather to roost overnight communally in a tree hollow or nestbox. Such shared roosts of a dozen or more tiny birds huddled together for warmth, gives at least some of them a chance to survive harsh, freezing conditions.

433 words

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