

Focus on the Wren

Cryptically coloured and secretive in its movements, the Wren is more often heard than seen. This stocky little bird is not in fact the British Isles' smallest species but actually quite a heavyweight for its compact size.

Upon hearing the loud and incisive song of this tiny and often invisible bird, one might be forgiven for thinking it comes from a much larger species, with enormous lungs! The explosive and characteristic song of the Wren can be heard all the year round and all over the country. It is produced by the males who are defending their territories, which some of them manage to retain the whole year round and which can be very large for such a small bird. Many Wrens, however, do abandon their summer territories if they become cold and inhospitable during the winter, preferring to move into warmer and cosier habitats such as reed-beds where quite large groups of these birds can sometimes be found roosting together in hard weather.

In the garden the compost heap tends to be the Wren's domain, a seething heap of small creatures providing endless feeding opportunities and a general warmth which they much appreciate when the weather is cold. And it is cold weather that largely determines the population levels of this bird from year to year. Famously cold winters, like that of 1962/63, may knock our population of Wrens back from seven million to as little as one million in a single bad season. Despite this vulnerability however the Wren maintains its numbers over the long term, thanks to their ability to fledge large numbers of young in a good summer. Clutches of seven or eight eggs are common and a second brood is normal in most favourable seasons. Given a couple of mild winters, the population recovers by as much as 50% each year to regain the previous level fairly quickly.

The Wren eats all sorts of insects and spiders but many garden nesters favour moth larvae in particular, destroying huge numbers of pests such as the dreaded winter moth and the smaller kinds of cutworm. Away from gardens, a few Wrens have learned quite bizarre feeding strategies, for example at some trout hatcheries they have managed to get into the buildings where the fry are reared and make themselves very unpopular by gobbling up huge numbers of the tiny fish! Not all that surprising really, since Wrens are distantly related to Dippers. In the winter, when they are extremely stressed and hungry, they can be helped in two easy ways. The first is by stirring up the compost heaps or other sheltered areas where they forage, to expose small invertebrates that would otherwise be hidden and inaccessible to the birds. The second is by sprinkling the area with fine high energy food and one of the easiest to use



Wrens are widespread throughout Britain and Ireland but often overlooked. They prefer the densest undergrowth for feeding and nesting, only emerging in the coldest weather to take small scraps of food from the ground. Wren photograph by Tommy Holden © BTO

and most welcomed is grated hard cheese. In heavy weather Wrens may spend several days feeding invisibly inside snow covered vegetation, where it can be much warmer than outside and their invertebrate prey may still be active.

The Wren is very successful as a species and has quite a cosmopolitan distribution. Dozens of different races inhabit temperate Europe, Asia and North America. In Northern areas the Wren is a migrant with many records of seasonal movements of a thousand or more miles. However only a handful of distant movements into the British Isles (from France, Sweden and Germany) have been recorded and the Russian bird recently recovered (see BT 10) is definitely a record-breaker. Only the single familiar species of Wren occurs across the Old World but there are more than 50 others to be found in the New World.

Chris Mead

Wren

Fascinating Facts

Not the smallest

The Wren has the smallest wing of any resident British bird and, with its tail cocked, is much the shortest overall. However a Goldcrest or Firecrest will be around half the weight of a Wren and the average weights of several species will also be less — Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Coal and Long-tailed Tit for instance. The Wren adorned our smallest coin, the farthing, some time before decimalisation. Inflation has taken its toll and who can really imagine there being a coin worth 0.1p now?

Building a bundle

The Wren will nest in all sorts of nooks and crannies. In rocky areas it lives up to its name *Troglodytes*, the cave dweller. In gardens the nest is most often in ivy, creepers or other dense vegetation. Ordinary tit nestboxes are sometimes taken but the nest is very different. Instead of a neat pad and nest cup the Wren builds a complete ball which occupies the whole box and which one cannot see into without parting the top. If you find a Wren nest without a feather lining this will be one of several built by the cock. Later, it may be accepted by the hen, lined and used — so don't remove unused Wren's nests. In particular, do leave any found after September undisturbed for winter roosting.

Packing them in

In the mid-1970s the population in Britain alone may have reached 10 million pairs. Many people find this very peculiar as they see far fewer Wrens than Blackbirds, Blue Tits, Woodpigeons and Starlings but these are conspicuous birds whereas the Wren is a cryptic skulker. Pugnacious Wrens tend to try and defend quite large territories for such a small bird, but will often retreat if challenged and in fact pairs can breed successfully in a home area only about 50 yards square.