

The Flight of the Wren

In any given morning between May 5 and May 10, I can step out in the garden and hear, for the first time in a year, the incessant, even frenetic, trilling of the house wren. They come in with the south wind, usually on a clear sunny morning, and go out, with far less flourish, on the northwest wind five months later.

The male is the first to arrive, and he goes around “his” land (which according to twenty-first-century legal documents is actually “my” land) stating his ownership in no uncertain terms. He’s been here before, and he knows his way around.

The female arrives a few days later. And after a certain amount of ritual, and restatements of territorial boundaries—none of which I can follow—she will begin work on a nest in a palatial birdhouse I have set up in back of the garden. The two of them spend the spring and summer there. Flitting around, getting angry, and hunting through the shrubbery for spiders and caterpillars.

Bird aficionados are not supposed to like wrens. They’re noisy little devils, for one thing, and they have some very nasty habits. Once they’ve crammed their bulky stick nests into whatever convenient crevice they can find, they range around their property pecking the eggs of other nesting birds, almost out of spite, it would seem. Furthermore, they are not—how shall I say—the most beautiful bird in the backyard. They are patterned with a few dark stripes against a dull wood-colored brown background, their belly is whitish, and they have a mean little decurved bill that looks like it was designed for surgical purposes. Nor are they loyal mates. Once they have set up housekeeping, and the female is incubating the eggs, the male patrols his territory seeking other females. Given all this, they have not endeared themselves to those who seek wholesome metaphors from the world of birds—even their semi-musical trilling becomes tedious when you hear it every minute or so throughout the daylight hours.



In spite of all this, I am partial to wrens. I like their spunk. I like their cocky little tails and beady eyes, and the way they get mad at anything in their path and begin whispering and chattering at cats and dogs and even people.

But mostly what I like about wrens is their predestined willingness to undertake marathon flights from the cold gardens of New England and Canada, south to Florida, and even beyond into Central and South America. It seems somehow unfathomable that these tiny packages can summon the energy to fly all the way down a continent and back up in the course of a year, select mates, and then go about the business of raising children, only to turn around and go back south again in autumn.

Sometime in the summer, I don't know when exactly since they slip out quietly, the wrens leave my garden. They fade from the sunny borders and move back into the shady woods, where they spend the late summer and early autumn feeding low to the ground, no longer singing and assuming a certain hardworking, businesslike effect. Perhaps they need to lay low in this manner. They have a long trip ahead of them.

Although a few individuals may hang around the northern woods until November, most house wrens begin their mass exodus in September. Like many land birds, they move south in fits and starts; and, like many migrants, they run into hardships all along the way. Storms carry them far out to sea. Headwinds batter them, cats eat them, and, along with a growing number of birds nowadays, wrens crash into things at night. Fifty years ago these obstacles were radio towers, water towers, and the skyscrapers of cities. Now the birds have to contend with the proliferation of cell phone towers as well.

Somehow, through all this, through pure atavistic drive and that unstoppable wren energy, they make it.

Wrens are not long-distance migrants in the manner of swifts and nighthawks, or even warblers and hummingbirds. They generally only go as far south as Florida. But it is that lack of limelight, that commonplace, dogged manner that I like about them. They're energetic little sparks of life in a hard rock world. I daresay they will never become extinct.

Fall 2003