

## Profile

# Carolina Wren

*Thryothorus ludovicianus*

Singing one of the loudest songs per volume of bird, the Carolina Wren's *tea-kettle, tea-kettle, tea-kettle* and *tweedle, tweedle, tweedle* are familiar across the Southeast. For most Floridians, the Carolina Wren is the common house wren that nests in and around houses and garages, and is more likely to nest in a hanging plant than in a birdhouse.

The Carolina Wren is a year-round resident and can be distinguished from other wrens that winter in Florida by its rust-colored, unstriped back and wings, a buffy underside rather than whitish, a prominent white eye stripe and white chin, and its exceptionally loud voice.

Three subspecies breed in Florida: *T. l. ludovicianus* in the panhandle; *T. l. miamensis* in the peninsula; and *T. l. nesophilus* only off the Franklin County coast.

While the Carolina Wren is a southern bird that does not migrate, some younger birds travel northward for unknown reasons and set up residence. As long as the winters are mild, they will build resident populations, but if winter becomes severe, they perish rather than return south. The next generation repeats the northward cycle.

Carolina Wrens tend to sing anywhere at any time. Unlike other wren species, only the male Carolina Wren sings the loud song. It can sing up to 40 different song types, singing one repeatedly before switching to a different song type, and it may sing up to 3,000 times in a single day.

Neighboring males frequently match song types, and male and female sing duets. Some song elements may be appropriated from other species, too.

Their melodic and loud voices are easy to hear, but the wrens are not al-

ways as easy to sight. When they sing, they are like ventriloquists. Their bills point upward, so birders typically look for the noise and bird 10 to 15 feet above where the wren actually is.

The Carolina Wren inhabits a wide variety of habitats from swamps to forest to residential areas. It prefers moist woodlands and needs moderately dense shrub or brush cover.

A pair bond may form between a male and a female at any time of the year, and the pair will stay together for life. Members of a pair stay on their territory year-round and forage and move around the territory together.

A female Carolina Wren cannot defend her territory alone if her mate dies, so when they forage together, she spends much of her time watching for predators; they forage close to brush where they can quickly hide. Likely predators are Blue Jays, hawks, and Barred Owls.

Food consists primarily of insects and spiders with occasional fruit and seeds. Caterpillars and moths comprise the majority of the insect diet.

They forage on or near the ground and hop along far more often than they fly. They probe into cracks in bark, turn over vegetation with their bills, and glean insects from ground, tree trunks,

and branches. Large insects are dismembered by hammering with bills and shaking until small pieces break off.

However, wrens sometimes ascend to the higher branches of trees by climbing along a grapevine searching in the leaves and chinks of the bark for hidden food, and by alighting sidewise against the trunk and creeping up the side. They creep and hop in nearly equal degrees.

Breeding begins in late February and continues occasionally into September. Typically two broods are raised per season although sometimes three occur in the South.

Male Wrens build several nests and the female chooses one. Nests are usually in secluded locations with partial sun and shade in the vicinity of thick underbrush. Once the best site is selected, both the male and female work on the final nest.

The nest is round and dome-shaped with a side entrance. It is bulky and made of grasses, cypress needles, string, feathers, dried leaves, and almost always a piece of shed snake skin, or something that resembles shed snake skin such as a strip of clear plastic.

In natural areas, the Carolina Wren nests in cavities, tree roots, and palm fronds and boots. Nests can be up to 10 feet above the ground, but rarely higher.

Around houses, Carolina Wrens nest in practically anything – hanging baskets, clothespin bags, and behind cans on garage shelves – but almost never in bird houses that have been installed specifically for their use.

Three to five white eggs speckled with reddish-brown spots comprise a clutch. Incubation takes 12 to 16 days. At hatching, the young are helpless with some pale gray down, but they grow quickly and leave the nest when about 12 days old. They can breed the first spring after their birth.

