

A BREEDING TRIANGLE—WREN STYLE

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In June of 1979, on the lower Chenango River, in Broome County, a male Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) tested the strict segregation of species. He consorted with a female House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*). Those parental duties he was seen to perform, he performed well. But his role (and probably his aspirations) were flawed. He seemed to have missed the first act.

I found this odd pair on the 23rd of June at the northern limit of the village of Port Dickinson, on a section of river bottom whose top soil and underlying gravel had not yet been stripped away, and where the meadow rue, jewelweed and dame's rocket still crowded beneath the black cherries and silver maples. Their nest was in an old woodpecker hole in an elm blighted when yet young. The hole was about 15 feet up. I was looking for nests that day and was drawn to this one by the singing of the Carolina Wren.

Right away it seemed strange that a Carolina Wren would sing so close to a hole (within 30 feet of it) where a House Wren was nesting. At first I thought the Carolina Wren was harassing the House Wren, for she would stick her head out and scold. The Carolina Wren finally fled. Shortly after, the House Wren flew out, apparently to spell herself. While she was gone, the Carolina Wren reappeared on a stub below the hole. He held green larvae in his beak. This returned the House Wren to a perch just below the Carolina Wren's. Neither scrapped, but the Carolina Wren left, still carrying the larvae. Then the female reached into the hole and flew off with a fecal sac. In her absence the Carolina Wren returned again with the larvae. This time he fed them to a fledgling whose head appeared in the hole. Before he flew off, he, too, reached into the hole and picked up a fecal sac.

I watched their comings and goings for perhaps an hour. Little changed. Sometimes the Carolina Wren came without food and left without taking a thing. Sometimes it was the House Wren who fed a fledgling. And always it was so tantalizing to see those fledgling heads bobbing in and out of that hole and not know what they were. A male House Wren was singing in the same woods, but in another territory, for though he moved from perch to perch in the distance, his singing never came closer.

The fledglings acted as if they could scarcely contain themselves in

their hole, so I decided to return the next morning to see if they'd scramble out.

June 24th. Well before I entered his neck of the woods, I heard the Carolina Wren again singing above the noise from nearby Rte. 81. He sang from where I saw him first, perching on a low branch of a silver maple. As I listened, I heard two more wrens chattering to one another from deep within a nearby tangle of grape vines and briars. These were the fledglings. When they finally edged out into the sunlight, I saw that there were four—all look-alikes and none resembling a Carolina Wren. For two-and-a-half hours I watched them, or tried to watch them. They spent much of the time hidden in the tangle. Fifteen feet was about as close as I approached. Studying them at this distance through 7 x 35 binoculars, I could see no markings or coloration suggestive of a hybrid.

Both the Carolina and the House Wren made trips to feed them, usually bringing larvae but sometimes small moths or other insects. The House Wren did the bulk of the feeding. She made more than twice as many trips. Occasionally, though it was now vacant, the Carolina Wren returned to the nest-hole with insects.

When not busy with feeding, the Carolina Wren sang. This morning he limited himself to two songs and one call, a recurrent trill, sounding like Cheer, Cheer, Cheer. Sometimes he darted after another bird, a small brown one that never intruded within 50 feet of the fledglings. Since this bird always vanished with the Carolina Wren in hot pursuit, I never identified it, but in light of later events, I suspect it was a male House Wren. Once a Gray Catbird came to the tangle, poked near the fledglings, then left without either adult wren threatening it.

I returned in the evening to see how the fledglings would spend their first night out. They had broken into an abandoned tent caterpillars' nest, but being young, they squirmed a lot. Too much. For squirming in a caterpillars' tent has its hazards. The fibers split apart and the nest disintegrated. Five fledglings tumbled from the tatters. They scattered at first but quickly regrouped in another black cherry, for it was nearly dark now. Some wormed themselves into another abandoned caterpillars' tent, one much smaller than the first. Those left out squeezed into an abandoned bird's nest no larger than a Yellow Warbler's. When they quieted, I left them in the cool darkness of their black cherry.

June 25th. I was delayed until mid-afternoon. A male House Wren was now singing. He sang from the same low branch of the silver

maple as the Carolina Wren sang from. I soon discovered that when the House Wren wasn't singing, he was being chased by the Carolina Wren, and that when the Carolina Wren wasn't chasing, he was singing near the fledglings who hid in another thicket. They responded at times to the Carolina Wren's song by chattering but ignored the House Wren's.

June 26th. 10:30 a.m. The male House Wren was singing from the coveted branch. A grackle swooped onto the truncated top of the dead elm. The House Wren ceased singing and began rattling. From somewhere under the dame's rocket and the meadow rue, another wren also began rattling. The grackle clacked and flew away.

When the grackle was gone, the male House Wren darted down after the rattling wren in the meadow rue. This other wren was the female House Wren. The male chased her several times, and after each chase he returned to the silver maple perch to sing.

Intermittently throughout this chasing and singing, the Carolina Wren, about 100 feet distant, was shouting his *seawarr* song. At last he approached the singing House Wren. With his most troglodytic threats (low rattles) he drove the male House Wren from perch to perch until both wrens were outside the nest-hole territory.

But within three minutes the male House Wren was back to sing. Between bursts of song he searched for twigs and dried grass which he carried to the nest-hole. Sometimes the female interrupted his lusty song by announcing her presence beneath the flowers. Then he would chase her, often out of sight.

For an hour-and-a-half the Carolina Wren only entered the immediate nest area the one time he chased the male House Wren. The reason for his restraint may have been the fledglings, for I saw two close to where he consistently sang. This was the last day I was to see the fledglings.

June 28th. 11:30 a.m. While the female House Wren brought twigs and grass to the nest-hole, the male House Wren alternated his perch between the elm's jagged top and the silver maple branch. He sang very little. Perhaps he had no peace of mind, for the Carolina Wren repeatedly drove him from the vicinity. Whenever he approached the male House Wren, he did so with a peculiar hissing rattle.

The exigencies of life intervened before I could determine the outcome of this conflict between the two male wrens. I suspect I had already seen, though in disjointed segments, the full sequence of events. The fledglings of the first brood were probably fathered by a House

Wren, most likely by the same one whom I saw trying to assert his right to the female. After the House Wren mated, the Carolina Wren succeeded in driving him out of the nesting territory. Then while the House Wren lurked around the boundaries, occasionally whisking in to check on the proceedings, the Carolina Wren took over his parental duties. Both the female and the immature House Wrens accepted the Carolina Wren's apparent usurpation.

Later that summer I searched in A. C. Bent's *Life Histories* and elsewhere for studies on the behavior of House and Carolina Wrens *vis á vis* each other. I found only a brief description.¹ This was by Grant Henderson who, writing nearly 50 years ago from Greensburg, Indiana, reported that each spring the Carolina Wrens that wintered in his woods would drive the returning House Wrens from his yard. One spring in particular, he says, when the Carolina Wrens were late in coming out of the woods, a pair of House Wrens had already begun to nest in a rick of wood. With the appearance of the Carolina Wrens, the House Wrens abandoned their incomplete nest and left the premises.

Though his observations are quite different from mine, they are nonetheless helpful. They lead me to consider territoriality as a means of explaining why the events I observed unfolded as they did. The Carolina Wrens on the lower Chenango River are resident, wintering in the same woods and tangles where they nest. This fact alone makes it reasonable to assume that they establish their territories well before the migrating House Wrens do. When you add to this the fact that male Carolina Wrens can be heard singing on the warm days of March and April, and that both adults can be seen feeding fledglings by the 15th of May, it is almost certain that the House Wrens enter staked-out territories. Since the Carolina Wrens are not as numerous here as House Wrens, they cannot divide up the entire woods among themselves, nor can they always pair the sexes. As a result the two species can and do nest side by side in these same woods. Clearly, in the case of one presumptuous male Carolina Wren, unpaired but in possession of a coveted nest-hole, the two species can even cooperate in raising a brood.

¹ Grant Henderson, "Incompatibility of House and Carolina Wrens," *Wilson Bulletin*, 43 (Sept. 1931), 224-25.

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