

# The Carolina Wren: A Tiny Bird with a Huge Personality <sup>1</sup>

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## Overview

Carolina Wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) are year-round residents across the southeastern United States and frequently found around homes in Florida. Here we explore their fascinating natural history, including habitat preferences, feeding habits, nesting behavior, and unique adaptations, all of which make them a common backyard bird. Our objective in this publication is to educate homeowners about this conspicuous bird, which is common in suburban habitats.

## Appearance and Song

The Carolina Wren is a small, cinnamon-colored songbird that measures only about 5.5 inches long with an 11-inch wingspan (Figures 1 and 2). They have a pointed beak that curves downward and a white stripe that runs from above each eye to the back of their head. Like most North American wrens, they have a plump body and a stiff tail, which is often pointed upwards. Males and females are nearly identical in color and size, but the male is slightly larger. Carolina Wrens are energetic songbirds that pack a lot of personality into their tiny frame. The male is the most vocal and is known for its loud, cheerful songs, one of which sounds somewhat like “teakettle-teakettle-teakettle,” and can be heard year-round ([Video of a Carolina Wren singing](#) at AllAboutBirds.org). Although they are easily recognized by the common *teakettle* song, a single male may have a repertoire of 20 to 40 song variations, and, while females don’t sing, they produce sharp “churrs” and scolding chatters to communicate. In fact, a female Carolina Wren will often make a loud chattering call in response to a male’s *teakettle* song. These birds are fiercely territorial, using their songs to defend their space and stay in touch with their mates, with whom they often form lifelong pair bonds. They are one of the few birds where the male continues to sing outside of the breeding season. They do not migrate and can be seen at all times of the year.

## Habitat and Diet

Carolina Wrens thrive in dense woodlands, thickets, and suburban yards that contain shrubs. Their diet is primarily insectivorous, consisting of beetles, caterpillars, spiders, ants, and grasshoppers. They will also eat seeds and berries during winter when insects are scarce. They



Figure 1. Carolina Wrens are identified by a white stripe above the eyes that extends to the back of the head, cinnamon-colored feathers, and a curved bill. Credit: Steven A. Johnson, UF/IFAS



Figure 2. Carolina Wrens have a stiff tail and a plump body.

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sometimes eat small frogs and lizards as well. With their tails cocked upright and bodies low to the ground, they forage by flipping leaves and probing crevices with their beaks, searching for hidden prey. These birds forage alone or in pairs, often working together to thoroughly cover a patch of ground or vegetation. Their slightly curved bills are perfectly suited for probing into bark crevices, curled leaves, and soil to extract insects and for flipping over

leaves and small sticks to uncover hidden prey, which is uncommon behavior for songbirds of their size.

## Nesting and Reproduction

One of the most endearing aspects of the Carolina Wren's natural history is its nesting behavior. These birds are highly inventive when it comes to choosing nest sites. While they naturally nest in tree cavities or among dense vegetation, Carolina Wrens readily take advantage of human structures. Their nests have been found in:

- Hanging flower baskets
- Mailboxes and newspaper tubes
- Garages, sheds, and carports
- Boots, helmets, and even old flowerpots left outside
- Under hoods of parked cars (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Carolina Wren nest found under the hood of a van.

Credit: Steven A. Johnson, UF/IFAS

The male often initiates nest building, gathering coarse materials like twigs, bark strips, and dry leaves to form the outer shell. He will also collect discarded human trash, such as pieces of cloth and bits of string, for the nest. The female then adds softer materials such as feathers, hair, and moss to line the nest interior. The result is a bulky, dome-shaped structure with a side entrance, concealing the chicks and keeping them together. Nest building can be rapid, sometimes completed in as little as a few days. However, pairs often start several "practice nests" before settling on one to use for egg laying.

Carolina Wrens breed from March through August, sometimes raising multiple broods in Florida. A typical clutch (group of eggs) contains four to five creamy white eggs with reddish-brown speckles. The female incubates the eggs alone for 12 to 16 days while the male defends the territory and brings her food. Most Carolina Wrens live four to six years.

Once hatched, the chicks grow quickly under the care of both parents. The chicks are born with eyes closed and a covering of pale grayish down, and the edges of their bills are yellow (Figure 4). They are fed a steady diet of insects and soft-bodied invertebrates every few minutes

throughout the day. Adults may also capture small lizards and frogs to feed to their young. By 12 to 14 days old, the chicks are ready to leave the nest. Though still dependent on their parents for food, they quickly learn to forage and fend for themselves. Typically, parents help feed their fledglings for about two weeks after they leave the nest. The fledglings disperse in about four weeks to live on their own. In Florida, Carolina Wrens often start another brood soon after the first fledglings disperse or even when they still are in the same area.



Figure 4. Carolina Wren nest with five chicks. This nest was built in the bow of an upside-down canoe. Photo Credit: Steven A. Johnson, UF/IFAS

## Helping Carolina Wrens

If you want to welcome Carolina Wrens to your yard, provide dense shrubs, native plants, and brush piles for natural cover. If it is safe to do so, leave dead trees standing, as they offer nesting cavities and foraging sites for wrens and other birds. Carolina Wrens may also use various areas of your home or garage for nesting. If they nest in the garage, leaving your garage door open a bit (at least three inches) will enable the wrens to get in and out. You can close the garage door at night and open it during the day. From the beginning of egg laying to when chicks leave the nest, plan for about 30 days to allow access to the nest. Chicks are very vulnerable to predation and pet cats should always be kept indoors. Also, you should restrict the use of pesticides to avoid reducing the quantity of insects, a primary food source for Carolina Wrens. During winter, you can offer suet, mealworms, and peanut butter to supplement their natural food supply.

## Additional Information

### Online Resources

[Carolina Wren overview](#) at AllAboutBirds.org

### Field Guides

Sibley, D. 2003. *The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America*. New York.

Peterson, R. T. 2008. *Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America*. Houghton Mifflin Co. Chicago

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