



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Canyon wren

The canyon wren, (*Catherpes mexicanus conspersus*) is common in New Mexico throughout the year. Canyon wrens from the northern Rocky Mountains may winter in the southwestern United States and Mexico. The bird is predominantly brown dorsally, with a white breast and throat. The belly below the white bib is a dark reddish-brown, as is the tail. Variations in hue exist between individuals. Males and females are similarly marked, and adults are commonly five inches to 5 3/4 inches in length. The bill, as with all wrens, is long, slender and curved down at the end. The species is sometimes confused with the rock wren, which is grayer in color and has a streaked breast.

Although more likely to be heard than seen, the wren is commonly found perched on canyon walls, ledges and tree trunks. It is seldom still, characteristically bobbing up and down when not flying or creeping along rock walls. The wren feeds on insects and spiders, usually along rock surfaces,

and adults are aggressive foragers, especially when they have nestlings.

Nests of canyon wrens are formed as open-topped cups in rock crevices, caves, or along ledges, although buildings are sometimes used as nest sites. Adults first make a base of sticks and grasses, then line the four- to eight-inch nest with feathers, plant down, fur or other soft material. The female lays four to six oval to elliptical eggs, often tinted a pinkish white and marked with reddish-brown dots.

This little brown wren makes the sweetest sounds this side of heaven. Those who hear the canyon wren's resonant scale for the first time can't but wonder from what earthly creature it came. The song ordinarily has seven or eight primary descending notes, but often with a maestro's flourish of repeated notes at beginning and end. The chromatic scale sometimes is repeated twice. The quality of sound does have something to do with the acoustics in the great concert hall of a Southwestern canyon. A fisherman hears the song to the accompaniment of the rush and babble of a trout stream. Higher up, nearer the rimrock, hikers pause to listen to the reverberations of notes off canyon walls. The wren's

canyonland concerts have moved musicians to inspiration and made writers wax poetic. It's a canyon wren, not a flute, that opens Paul Winter's "Canyon Suite," and Page Stegner is but one Southwestern writer moved to rapture by the bird.

"Somewhere out there," Stegner writes in *Outposts of Eden*, "beyond the dun domes and the maroon mesas, the layered terraces, broken spires, Jurassic tide flats, a canyon wren practices his haunting scales against a shaded cliff deep in a sandstone gulch. Those clear, descending notes alone are reason enough to revere this vast wilderness." If you've been "out there," you know Stegner knows of what he speaks, that he and a mellifluous little brown bird aren't just whistling Dixie.

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