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The Carolina Wren, taken at Congressional Cemetery.

Spotted on the Hill: The Carolina Wren

ARTICLE AND PHOTO BY PETER VANKEVICH

Let's take a look at one of the more robust and at times feisty songbirds that may be seen on Capitol Hill, the Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*). This bird may be identified by its rusty brown upperparts, strong white eye line and typical of most wrens, a prominent tail that is often held straight up.

Whereas its little cousin, the House Wren, will return in the spring in neighborhoods such as 5th and A St. SE to nest, that species will have pretty much left the area by late August. The Carolina Wren, however, may be seen and heard throughout the entire year. Vocally it makes a long buzzing chatter and a harsh scold note reserved for intruders in its territory, but it is perhaps most famous for its loud song that you may hear all year round. Walking along the C&O Canal on a midwinter's day, and hearing a loud melodious song,

you could volunteer "sounds like a Carolina Wren," and gain a nodding respect from your fellow hikers.

So what does a Carolina Wren sound like? To lead up to the answer, let's look at how bird sounds are often described. A mnemonic device is a learning aid -something that can help someone remember, e.g. the first letters of the phrase "every good boy deserves fudge" for the lines of the musical staff, egbdf. Mnemonics can be helpful in remembering a

bird's song or call. One of my favorites is for the Olive-sided Flycatcher, whose call has been described as "Quick three beers!" This is a bird rarely spotted on the Hill, but its call may be frequently heard, especially along the Pennsylvania Avenue corridor. I found it interesting that in the 1906 Bird Guide: Land Birds East of the Rockies by Chester Reed, he described the Carolina Wren's song as "loud and tinkling, and utterly impossible to describe." But there has been progress, A.C. Bent in his 1948 publication Life Histories of Familiar Landmark Birds, used the mnemonic "tea-kettle, tea-kettle, tea-kettle" as a helpful description and that has been adopted in many field guides as the best way to remember this song.

Carolina Wrens are non-migratory though they may wander after breeding season. As with many song birds, Carolina

To hear a recording of the Carolina Wren's song, go to
http://identify.whatbird.com/obj/677/_/Carolina_Wren.aspx

Wrens have been expanding north over the past century or so. This is not without consequences, though, as they may undergo large mortality rates when extended periods of cold, snow and ice occur. Something on our minds this season may be the year of the pandemic influenza in 1918. It turned out to be not only a year of high casualties for humans, but also for Carolina Wrens, for the win-

ter of 1917-1918 was unusually cold throughout much of North America. Writing in the ornithological journal *The Auk*, future Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Alexander Wetmore noted in 1923:

Since the winter of 1917-1918, when the Carolina Wren was greatly reduced in numbers in the Washington [DC] region, this species has increased gradually until the fall of 1921 (after four breeding seasons) it was again fairly common, though still somewhat below its normal abundance. . .

Carolina Wrens may nest in urban areas provided there is enough suitable habitat in the yards, i.e. bushes and trees for both protection and providing a food source. Some times people are pleasantly surprised to see them nesting in a hanging plant on the porch. It is the state bird of, appropriately enough, South Carolina.

Late Summer Bird Notes: These days I usually make my half-mile walk across the Hill to work around 6:30 a.m. On September 1, I observed a male Sharp-shinned Hawk chasing after a female Cooper's Hawk. Without binoculars I based my identifications on the obvious size difference. Although similar in appearance, the Cooper's Hawk is slightly larger and the males of these two species are smaller. Several people contacted me to say they have seen American Goldfinches in the area. This is a good time to observe them and good locations are the Botanical Gardens and wetlands area of the National Museum of the American Indian. Several mornings and evenings in early September I have seen and heard migrating Common Nighthawks. They have a very distinctive "peent" call that repeats usually after a few seconds.

If you have any comments or interesting birds visiting a feeder on Capitol Hill that could be a possible feature for this column, or would like to join me for a stroll on the Hill with your binoculars or camera on a weekend morning, feel free to contact me, pete-vankevich@gmail.com. ★

Lower 8th Street, SE Vision Process Public Community Meetings



Source: Historical Society of Washington, DC



Attend one of two meetings each day
All meetings at:

**The Peoples' Church
535 8th Street, SE
Washington, DC 20003**

October 20, 2009; 8:30am and 7pm
November 17, 2009; 8:30am and 7pm
December 15, 2009; 8:30am and 7pm
January 19, 2010; 8:30am and 7pm

The Lower 8th Street, SE Visioning Process Advisory Committee invites the public to attend and participate in a four part series of community meetings regarding a vision process for the Lower 8th Street, SE corridor (also known as Lower Barracks Row). These meetings will serve as a community participation process to gain consensus on a vision for the area and to address issues that might impact achieving the vision while respecting the historical fabric of the neighborhood.

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