THE HOUSE WREN—AN APPRECIATION: BY HARVEY WHIPPLE

The wren—as the Seedsman would say in his catalogue, and of many varieties with less pretext—"is indispensable in any garden." A garden without wrens may be productive; it may be fragrant; it may be colorful and various and beautiful, yet it will lack the spirit to give it voice. In fact the garden may even be less productive; for, from the gardener’s analysis, the wren is ninety-eight per cent. "pure," because that part of the bird’s food is animal, and only two per cent. vegetable.

The house wren is the most industrious of birds in the backyard. And for all its plainness it is the most likable bird in the garden. In spite of its thumping animation, and the expansive spirit to burst its small prison, or perhaps because of it, the wren has plenty of time in which to be joyous. When you go at sunrise to pull weeds and stir the earth a bit among the vegetables and flowers, the wren is there before you, perhaps woke you to your task with sweet dawn songs. At midday, when other birds have sought leafy covers, the wren’s song is full and strong. Throughout the whole day the wren glorifies the garden with its song and ceases only when shadow shapes are pointing out the place where the sun will come tomorrow. Its song, like its industry, is far greater than its small person can well contain, and thus its melody issues with a maximum of vigor from a minimum of throat, its breast swelling with a cataract of song, and the full notes, too many for their overflowing channel, run, liquid as they are, in a bubbling torrent, tumbling one upon another in a measure of gladness too rich for the order of their expression. Mating, nest-building, catching and devouring garden bugs, are all occasions for the garden wren to burst into song.

The first of our wrens came May seventh—at least on that day its song was first noted—and it began at once to prepare its home in the place which had been provided, working diligently from ten o’clock in the morning until two o’clock in the afternoon with, of course, necessary intermissions for song. This song was as joyous when a twig could not be put through the hole in the bird house
AN INDISPENSABLE BIRD

(purposely made small to exclude the English sparrow) as when the
nesting material, after much juggling and careful engineering, was
deposited inside. Next day the bird was not seen, perhaps because
of the rain or because it had gone to meet its mate. But May ninth
the pair of wrens arrived, one doing most of the building and the
other more active foraging in the garden.

Often the home-builders digressed; time and again it seemed
they had changed their minds about the place in which they would
make their home. A large, seven-apartment bird house, intended
for the occupancy of purple martins, must at first have escaped the
attention of the wrens, for they suddenly stopped work on the nest
in the little house which was meant for them, and made a thorough
inspection of each room in the big house, going from basement to
attic and from one side to the other, interrupting their tour to sing
while perched on the porches of the martin house or on its conical
roof of bark. This, they must soon have found but poorly suited
to their requirements for they left the big house. Yet their industry
must have exceeded the tasks on which it could be expended, for
they worked with great diligence, not only on the little house which
they had first selected and which they finally decided to occupy,
but they also worked intermittently for a whole day at a time on five
nesting sites. From morning to afternoon and from one day to the
next, they kept us in doubt as to the place where they proposed to
make their home. There was a double house on top of a concrete
clothesline post which received much serious attention. Here there
were two apartments between which to choose, and nesting material
was first taken into the east side and then into the west side. This
house is restricted for wren occupancy, both its doorways being made
too small for sparrows. The wrens also looked with favor upon and
carried nesting material into a larger, single dwelling, made of bark,
and with an opening big enough for a blue bird—and therefore big
enough for a sparrow. This house was soon abandoned. For several
days work was confined almost entirely to a little house, built into
and made a part of a large concrete post at the alley line; and several
times we thought the wrens would desert our garden altogether and
make their home in a hollow of a big tree across the alley.

And even as late as August ninth, with every evidence that a second
brood was almost ready to leave the nest, the old pair was still carry-
ing twigs first to the east side and then to the west side of the little
double house on the clothesline post. Whether all summer they
were wavering and indecisive, or grasping, in an effort to monopolize
all the nesting sites, or sought shrewdly to confuse their interested
audience and make the scene of their real domestic ambitions less
obvious, can, of course, only be guessed at. It is likely though, that to mystify their real or supposed enemies was their object, for their cousins, the long-billed marsh wrens, build many nests among the reeds, thus supposedly to divert their foes and multiply the chances of escape. It is possible that our house wrens were only working off their surging industriousness and through the eagerness of unnecessary, yet pleasant labor, bubbled the more with their necessary song. Like many human affairs, with neither the dignity of state nor the seriousness of necessity, but with the richness of simple pleasures—who shall say that these labors are unproductive or these duties only imagined, if the zeal of their fulfillment adds quality and volume to a song!

It was on June twentieth that we first became assured that there were young birds in the wren household to which the old birds were taking food and one morning I timed these trips and they were much more frequent than one a minute. It was only three days after the discovery of the young birds, although the young must have been there for several days before we knew of them, that one of the old birds again began carrying nesting material into the “double house.” The two similar apartments in this house and the two doors only a few inches apart must have confused the energetic home-builder, for it would first go into one side and then into the other and sometimes enter half way with a twig and back out again and carry its material into the other side.

The young birds left their home July first, and so well had they been fed from the garden’s crop of bugs, that in but an hour or two after being marshalled out of the nest, they flew to the peak of the rustic arbor on one corner of which their home was erected, and then to the garden fence and in a short time to the tall branches of a nearby tree. In a few days the young were no longer seen. For a week they fed with their parents among the garden things and then the three young birds disappeared.

Though very small the wrens are very capable. It is inspiring to see them debate a situation on a cross-beam of an arbor, with a martial-
looking woodpecker in a red helmet. Head thrust out, tail high, the wren speaks assertively and compellingly and follows an ultimatum quickly with forward charge and vigorous flap of wings. The red-head has been seen to take flight before such masterly courage. It was good to see the care the wrens gave the young birds in the short time before the brood went away. In the week or so in which the young birds remained about the garden they were escorted each night to the big martin house, twenty feet above the ground. This became their citadel, where the old birds more than once defended their young against a vigorous siege of sparrows and other winged marauders.

Contrary to what I believe is the usual custom of the wrens—at least as stated by some writers—they did not disappear from the garden in the middle of August, nor did their song seem to change decidedly after the breeding season. It may be that this song was heard with such regularity until the early part of September that its change was not noticed, but it did retain a certain characteristic, which is unlike other birds, to the very last. I think the song was shortened a little toward the end of the summer and was given perhaps with a little less of the impetuous fervor of the mating season, although the distinctive wren song was there. In September it was not frequently heard, yet the wrens remained until October tenth.
GIVING

By all means, the garden should have its wrens and once having them, it is almost sure to have them year after year, because the young birds are believed to prefer a nesting site near the place where they were reared.

They are cheerful companions—not only industrious and valorous and active, but sprightly and vivacious. One moment a parent bird hangs head downward from the projecting roof of the wren home and then darts into the doorway by a somersault movement. Out again it comes and perches on the highest part of the arbor, and flaps its wings as though this were a necessary pumping up of its throat with the air out of which it makes its melody. Over and over again the song is sung. Approach the wren closely as it sings, pouring out its joy and it seems to take no notice; come within a few feet and it still disdains to show what fear it may feel, but repeats its song, seeming to have no thought but for that perfect song which it has in its heart. Then turn your head a moment and promptly the wren takes advantage of your inattention and dives from its perch to its suddenly remembered tasks among the bugs on the garden things.

GIVING

THE Sun flings glittering wealth upon the wold:
Croceous! not for that I thank him much;
But that he stoops with warmth like human touch
And gives himself—a glory more than gold!

Edward Wilbur Mason.