

## **Birds: The Wren**

by Sally Cureton

The best known wren in this part of Virginia is the Carolina Wren, with its loud and clear song. Many of us have also seen or had resident house wrens. There is another, very secretive member of this family known as the Winter Wren. This little bird likes to creep around on the forest floor in brush piles, fallen logs and dense tangles of vines. They generally breed north of here in moist coniferous forests and, but will winter throughout the southeast United States, from southern New England to Florida. They are also found in the western United States.

The official Latin name of the winter wren is *Troglodytes troglodytes*. The first part (trogl) comes from the German for cave dweller. The ending (dytes) is German for a diver, due to this bird's penchant for diving for cover. This wren is the only one found in Europe where it is called simply a wren. It is a very small bird, about 3.5 inches long with a wingspan of 5-6 inches and weighs about .28 to .42 ounces. A winter wren's plumage is a uniform dark brown, which helps it to blend in to the forest floor. The bill is short and thin, and as an aid to identification, it has pink legs.

One of the most interesting things about this drab little guy is that his song is incredibly elaborate and energetic. Taking its weight into account, the Winter Wren delivers its song with 10 times more power than a crowing rooster. This song is a continuous stream of notes and trills, lasting 5 to 10 seconds. When recorded and played back slowly, it is possible to hear a blend of halftones and overtones all sung at the same time.

They feed methodically along the ground near the bases of trees and fallen wood. A winter wren's primary food is insects, insect larvae, millipedes and spiders. Nests are built in natural cavities, usually within six feet of the ground. Males may nest with more than one female at a time and he may also build several dummy nests. All that energy has to go somewhere, I guess. During cold spells, they have been known to roost together communally. In one case, there were 31 of them seen together in a nest box in western Washington.