The cactus wren: State bird is most personable desert dweller

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by Bert Edises

On March 16, 1931, the Arizona State Legislature enacted House Bill No. 128, naming the cactus wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus)* the state bird of Arizona.

Why did they pick the cactus wren? Surely not because of the beauty of its song: it is a cacophony of harsh and strident sounds, delivered with the rapidity of a machine-gun.

Surely not for its physical beauty. Not that the cactus wren is a homely bird. Eight-and-one-half inches — twice the length of most wrens — its back brown with narrow white streaks; its wings and tail heavily barred; its eyebrow a broad white band; its breast densely spotted; its crown solid brown. The cactus wren might even be called distinguished looking, but for a certain lack of dignity in its manner. But beautiful he is not.

What, then, made the legislators award the palm to the cactus wren? My guess, and it is only a guess, is that they were attracted by the bird's personality. Those of you who have observed the cactus wren at close range will know what I mean.

He is the most engaging of birds, seemingly quite unafraid of man, and even fond of him. He has a big bump of curiosity about those huge two-legged creatures, their houses and their possessions.

More than once I have watched him enter the house through an open door, march jauntily around the living room, paying no attention to the figure sitting quietly in the armchair, then exit the way he came in. Sometimes he will stand 8-10 feet away, his head cocked on his shoulder in a characteristic pose, and cast an inquisitive look at the observer before resuming his walk.

It is a charming performance by the friendliest and most personable of birds — and I'm sure the legislature in 1931 must have been captivated, as I was.

In preparing this article I came across a valuable book called **The Cactus Wren**, by Anders H. Anderson and Anne Anderson, husband and wife. The book is considered an ornothological classic, but the interesting thing is that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Anderson is a professional ornothologist. He is an electrician and she is a schoolteacher.

The book embodies 30 years of observations of the cactus wren, a great many of them made through the window of their Tucson residence. The Andersons point out that the male and female cactus wrens are identical in appearance, size and color.

The authors seem to be bothered by this circumstance, feeling that it might cause difficulty for the birds in identifying the opposite sex for the purpose of courtship and mating. They suggest that the female recognizes the male by the latter's display of aggressiveness, and the male recognizes the female by her display of timidity or "cowering."

They reach the somewhat bizarre conclusion that "the male [cactus wren] cannot recognize his mate at the beginning of the season except by threatening her each time they meet."

I don't know about that. I suspect that the cactus wren recognizes the opposite sex on sight by means which are unknown to us humans but very plain to the cactus wren. And that the "aggressiveness" and "cowering" behavior follow rather than precede the recognition.

But to get on with the story: The life of Arizona's state bird is bound up with cholla cactus, whose deadly needles make it dangerous to man and many forms of wildlife. How the cactus wren builds his sturdy, stocking-like nests in those formidable cactuses, how he manages to make his exits and his entrances at full speed with never a slowdown to avoid impacting the threatening needles, how the helpless fledglings learn to leave the nest and fly without committing suicide upon the vicious spikes, all this is one of nature's best-kept secrets and a puzzle to ornothologists.

Less puzzling, but still unclear, is the reason why the bird builds not one nest but several. Those so-called secondary nests are usually placed fairly close to the original breeding nest in the cholla. Some of the secondary nests are used by the male for roosting while the female is incubating her eggs. Some are used by the fledglings when they grow larger and need more roosting space. Some are chosen by the females to be their next breeding nest.

One thing can be safely said: Cactus wrens' nests are for keeps. The birds mate for life and never migrate. Both males and females share the work of feeding the nestlings, with the male assuming the heavier burden. The pair cooperate well in the business of survival: Which means that the wren who sings his metallic song in your patio today will probably be there all year and perhaps the next.

Does the cactus wren have any enemies? The Andersons mention hawks, roadrunners, snakes and owls as possible predators, but stress that in their quasi-residential area in Tucson the wren's most deadly enemies were little boys and house cats.

But there is one bird which the cactus wren is in constant, sharp and sometimes lethal competition, namely the curve-billed thrasher. They fight each other for nesting sites in the cholla and for insect food on the ground surface as well as certain vegetation. Each species defends its breeding nests fiercely and successfully. However, the thrasher frequently destroys the wrens' roosting nests, which are not defended.

The cactus wren has been an undoubted success in the evolutionary struggle for survival. Part of that success must be attributed to his unique nest-building capacity. The nest is in the form of a stocking or, perhaps more accurately, a pouch, with the entrance at one end. the pouch effectively conceals the nestlings from enemies.

And after the nestlings have fledged it becomes their "safe-house" for the first critical weeks while the young birds are learning the skills necessary for survival.

The bird shows great ingenuity in choosing the materials from which the nest is made. In the desert the basic construction material will probably be grasses. In proximity to man, it can be a miscellany of items such as bits of newspaper, tissue paper, cotton, string, rope, rags, fur, lint, and above all, chicken feathers.

And now, one last oddity of this remarkable desert bird: The cactus wren prefers bathing in dust to bathing in water. In these days of grave water shortages, conservationist behavior such as this seems to me to prove conclusively that the legislature was right on target in its choice of the official bird.