



the Sand Bluff Birder

the official newsletter of the Sand Bluff Bird Observatory—online edition

August 2020

President's Message

In all the 25 years I have volunteered with SBBO, I can't remember the station being closed to the public for this length of time. It's unprecedented. Unfortunately, there is no certainty in how things will go with the virus this coming fall season. Currently things are looking somewhat grim. COVID-19 is on the rise in the South and Southwest, and although Illinois is making progress, positive cases are again rising in neighboring Wisconsin. Sadly, for the safety of volunteers and visitors alike, we may have to continue to remain closed. SBBO wants you to know that we appreciate your continued support and good will. Stay with us. Eventually, this too will pass.

In the meantime, I recommend for those not already having done so, get out and enjoy nature. It will soothe your soul and revitalize your strength. I, myself, will continue to be amused by the antics of a feisty pair of House Wrens that have chosen my yard to raise a second brood.

Ivy Otto
President of SBBO

The House Wren

by Ivy Otto

The day is the 28th of April, spring of 2020. Winter has been long and stressful, but on this day, I receive a gift that truly lifts my spirits. I am greeted with the perky song of an old friend.

It is May 9. I watch as he awkwardly maneuvers sticks into a nest box in my yard. You may have noticed this little brown bird skulking around your garden in search of insects. This feisty summer resident is the House Wren, who for such a tiny bird, has a surprisingly loud, vibrant and bubbly song. The Chippewa Indian name for this bird translates as "a big noise for its size" (Bent, 1964). His song is difficult to describe, but tsi-tsi-tsi-oodle-oodle-oodle comes close. When he scolds a trespasser, one hears a loud trrrr and harsh buzz.

The House Wren breeds in low shrubby cover and thickets and can be found in open woodland and suburban yards. The natural nest-site may be located in a tree cavity or stump. Cavities are valued real estate in the avian world and House Wrens compete vigorously for ownership with other wrens, bluebirds and Tree Swallows, and will often destroy a competitor's nest and eggs. In addition to nesting in cavities, they have used deserted nests of other species including the Baltimore Oriole, Eastern Phoebe, Barn Swallow and American Robin. Since the swallow and robin nests were observed to be new, it was believed the wrens had appropriated them from their original owners.

Natural cavities need not be present in our yards to attract nesting House Wrens, as a nest box will do just fine. To discourage the nonnative European House sparrow from using wren boxes, the boxes should lack perches and the hole should be small enough to exclude the larger sparrow. Houses should be constructed with drainage and ventilation holes and a door that allows for yearly cleaning.

Even without our assistance, House Wrens are quite adaptable and have been known to nest in odd places. These include rusty cans, cow skulls, pockets of scarecrows, a coat hung up at a camp site, old boots and shoes, and a fish creel. Bent reports of a pair nesting on the rear axle of an automobile that was used daily. The birds went along with the car when it was driven and, surprisingly, managed to hatch their eggs (Bent, 1964).

The male House wren builds a nest consisting of a mass of dry coarse twigs, some as much as 8 inches long, that fill the nest box. After mating, the female lines the nest with feathers, hair, wool, spider silk, or rootlets. Unusual building materials have been documented including chicken wire, rusty bent nails, tacks, staples, hair pins and safety pins. One nest was recorded as being entirely constructed with metal objects (Bent, 1964).

While both birds contribute to nest building, the male House Wren may start several nests before one is approved by the female. Last year a raucous debate ensued as the pair discussed taking up residence in a small red decorative house I had hanging on a trellis. Ultimately it was rejected. This year, without fuss, they chose a box mounted 20 feet from my back door.

On May 16, the male was in the process of building a nest of sticks and I wondered if he'd ever find a female partner. Happily, May 23 confirmed a pair. House wrens lay four to eight eggs and on rare occasions as many as twelve! The smooth glossy eggs may vary from white to a densely speckled pink or buff (Harrison, 1978). Eggs are laid daily, with the female beginning incubation when her clutch is complete. This ensures that they all hatch at approximately the same time. Thirteen days after the start of incubation, the real work begins. Nestlings are born naked, blind and helpless and so are completely dependent on the adults for food and warmth. At first the male brings most of the prey to the nestlings, perching at the nest hole and passing food to the brooding female. Later both parents will contribute.



Caterpillars were common prey items delivered to the nest.

As this pair was extremely tolerant of me and my activities, I was able to observe and photograph the prey they brought to the nest. I recognized an Ebony Jewelwing, crane flies, earwigs (yay), spiders, caterpillars, flies, pupa, moths and centipedes. An extensive 1897 diet analysis included cabbage and gypsy moth caterpillars, stink bugs, grasshoppers, ticks, aphids and snails (Bent, 1964).

In my yard, I watched a wren chase and successfully capture a small white butterfly and then deliver it to the nestlings. After feeding, the parents often left the box carrying a fecal sac, the easily disposable, neat package of nestling waste, to be dropped away from the box, on say--my garage roof. This task helps to keep the nest clean and make it less attractive to predators. (continued, p3)



The male House Wren maneuvers an unwieldy stick, to be used as foundation material, into the nest box. One nest contained 33 such sticks.



An adult removes a white fecal sac, indicating the presence of nestlings.

Spring 2020 Banding Report

Spring of 2020 was one of those seasons where everything that should be normal, wasn't.

Starting out, we set out our nets in good time and then the wheels fell off and the Covid-19 virus struck. Technically everything came to a halt on March 15th. At Sand Bluff we shut our doors to all visitors (all Forest Preserve facilities were closed including out-houses).

Everything stopped until April 9th when banding restarted, (I needed my fix of banding birds). With a skeleton crew of a few volunteers, (some real bird nuts) the station was cleaned, and sanitized and social distancing was practiced.

Banding in the mornings on selected days we managed to catch a total of 1,141 new birds. Some species were a surprise with high count totals and a few species that were expected were a complete no-show. The list of 82 species is included in this issue.

Weather again did influence migration like last year when storms south of us stopped bird movements. Cold snowy, rainy, windy weather stopped banding for a few days.

On the weekend which we planned our first Open House (normally Bird Fest weekend) and Important Birding Area ceremony would have been a complete washout. On May 9th we opened nets and only caught 39 birds and Sunday the 10th it rained all day.

Now that the season is over, we need to plan for the fall and hope that the virus allows us to function in a new norm.

To all volunteers and everyone who supports Sand Bluff please stay safe and hopefully see you in fall.

Mike Eickman, Station Master

SPECIES	COUNT	SPECIES	COUNT	SPECIES	COUNT
BLACKBIRD, RED-WINGED	5	PEEWEE, EASTERN WOOD	9	VIREO, WARBLING	10
BLUEBIRD, EASTERN	18	PHOEBE, EASTERN	1	VIREO, YELLOW-THROATED	2
BUNTING, INDIGO	13	REDSTART, AMERICAN	3	WARBLER, BLACK AND WHITE	5
CARDINAL, NORTHERN	20	ROBIN, AMERICAN	25	WARBLER, BLACKPOLL	1
CATBIRD, GRAY	84	SPARROW, AMERICAN TREE	14	WARBLER, BLACK-THROATED BLUE	2
CHICKADEE, BLACK-CAPPED	10	SPARROW, CHIPPING	7	WARBLER, BLACK-THROATED GREEN	1
COWBIRD, BROWN-HEADED	5	SPARROW, CLAY-COLORED	4	WARBLER, BLUE-WINGED	2
CREEPER, BROWN	3	SPARROW, FIELD	33	WARBLER, CANADA	4
CUCKOO, YELLOW-BILLED	1	SPARROW, FOX	1	WARBLER, CHESTNUT-SIDED	1
FLICKER, YELLOW-SHAFTED	2	SPARROW, HENSLOW'S	2	WARBLER, GOLDEN-WINGED	1
FLYCATCHER, GREAT-CRESTED	2	SPARROW, LINCOLN'S	33	WARBLER, HOODED	1
FLYCATCHER, LEAST	20	SPARROW, SONG	14	WARBLER, MAGNOLIA	7
FLYCATCHER, OLIVE-SIDED	1	SPARROW, SWAMP	37	WARBLER, NASHVILLE	23
FLYCATCHER, TRAILL'S	27	SPARROW, WHITE-CROWNED	8	WARBLER, ORANGE-CROWNED	9
FLYCATCHER, YELLOW-BELLIED	7	SPARROW, WHITE-THROATED	26	WARBLER, TENNESSEE	1
GNATCATCHER, BLUE-GRAY	6	SWALLOW, TREE	23	WARBLER, WESTERN PALM	20
GOLDFINCH, AMERICAN	94	TANAGER, SCARLET	5	WARBLER, WILSON'S	10
GROSBEAK, RED-BREASTED	22	THRASHER, BROWN	3	WARBLER, YELLOW	18
JAY, BLUE	5	THRUSH, GRAY-CHEEKED	4	WARBLER, MYRTLE	5
JUNCO, SLATE-COLORED	37	THRUSH, HERMIT	5	WATERTHRUSH, NORTHERN	15
KINGBIRD, EASTERN	1	THRUSH, SWAINSON'S	1	WAXWING, CEDAR	2
KINGLET, GOLDEN-CROWNED	5	THRUSH, WOOD	5	WOODCOCK, AMERICAN	1
KINGLET, RUBY-CROWNED	87	TITMOUSE, TUFTED	10	WOODPECKER, DOWNY	2
MEADOWLARK, EASTERN	1	TOWHEE, EASTERN	2	WOODPECKER, RED-BELLIED	2
NUTHATCH, WHITE-BREASTED	3	VEERY	5	WREN, HOUSE	44
ORIOLE, BALTIMORE	18	VIREO, BELL'S	1	WREN, WINTER	3
ORIOLE, ORCHARD	12	VIREO, RED-EYED	5	YELLOWTHROAT, COMMON	59
OVENBIRD	11				

PLEASE HELP US ... in any way you can

Our non-profit organization survives because of private contributions of time and money from friends just like you. Please examine the list below and help us continue our important banding program by making your contribution!

- | | |
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On June 8, my suspicion that the young had hatched was affirmed when a wren flew out of the box with a fecal sac. By June 13, I could hear quiet cheeping. While the adults essentially ignored me, not so when a Sharp-shinned Hawk flew over. The adults sounded the alarm and the young at once became silent.



An adult delivers a centipede to a hungry nestling. As they neared fledging, they poked their heads out of the entrance hole.

As time went on the begging of the nestlings increased in urgency and volume, alerting me to feeding sessions. At this point, the parents didn't waste any time and flew directly into the hole with the food. With chicks rapidly growing and nearing fledging (when they leave the nest), the adults began searching for prey in the flower bed below the nest box. Sometimes there would be a log jam as one adult was in the box and the other was trying enter.

On the morning of June 18, I counted 15 feedings by both parents within 10 minutes time! Bayless (in Bent, 1964) observed a hard-working lone male, his mate most likely having been killed, make 1,217 feeding visits from the time of first feeding at 4:15 a.m. until last at 8 p.m.! By June 20, tiny faces with huge gaping maws became visible behind the entrance hole. June 23, the hungry chicks were poking their heads out, hoping to be first in line for that juicy bug.

June 24, fledging day! At 08:30 the process began. I was standing by the box (next to my garage door) when the first one simply popped out and flew to the nearby apple tree. I backed off, not wanting to interfere. Number two followed. Three and four left in quick succession. Number 5 was very reluctant and popped in and out many times before venturing to join its siblings in the apple tree. I was pleased as to how well they could fly, having been worried that a mishap would land them in my pond. Parent wrens have been observed to round up their entire fledgling brood at the end of the day to spend the night in a roosting platform, such as dense foliage or an unused robin's or chipping sparrow's nest. They may use these roosts for a week or more until the family disperses (Bent, 1964).

An hour after all the young had fledged, an adult returned to the box and with a quiet chitter looked in – my guess—checking that everyone had left. This behavior was repeated several times throughout the morning with the adults sometimes returning with food. Finding no takers, they either ate it or carried it off.

The “chit – chit – chit” begging calls of the young were heard in my yard for several days before they drifted into my neighbor's territory. I took down the box, cleaned it and remounted it in the same spot. To my pleasure, on June 28, the wrens began investigating the nest box. The male, with markedly improved dexterity over his first nesting attempt, began building a new nest. Instead of landing on the box and clumsily manipulating sticks twice the width of the hole in an attempt to get them in; during this round, he flew nonstop through the entrance.

On July 3, the fledglings returned to my yard, presumably to be closer to the adults, who were still constructing their 2nd nest. At first wren parents provide most of the fledglings' food. Near the end of the two-week period following fledging, the young birds are more independent and capable of feeding themselves.

These inexperienced youngsters will face many challenges besides finding food. While in the nest, they managed to cope with ectoparasites such as feather lice and blowflies that often plague nestlings, and escaped predation by mice and chipmunks. Now on their own, they must watch for predators such as fox, owls, and hawks seeking to feed themselves and their own families. And on my block, they must be ever vigilant for their most dangerous of enemies, the neighbor's lovable, yet marauding house cat.

It is July 13. The male has been singing and I observe a pairing in the apple tree. And so, I look forward to the lively activities of these spunky little birds as they raise a second batch of demanding youngsters into this world. Come fall I will wish them safe travels as they leave for the southern United States and Mexico where they will spend the winter months in relative warmth.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been tough on all of us. Although I greatly miss my volunteer activities at the station and the unique natural beauty of Sand Bluff, the House Wrens remind me that nature can be observed and treasured in the most familiar of places, our own back yards.

At Sand Bluff Bird Observatory, House Wrens are a commonly banded species. During spring migration, they begin to arrive at the observatory in late April and during the fall, late July to early August. The year of 2019 brought 207 of these delightful creatures our way.

References:

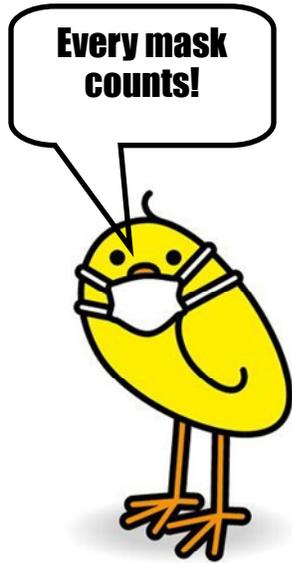
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All photos provided by Ivy Otto.



Just prior to fledging, a nestling surveys the world outside its home. A young bird can be told from an adult by the fleshy edges of its gape (the corner of its mouth).

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EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLASSES AND GROUPS

It is with regret, SBBO must suspend group visits and fall events until the COVID-19 virus is brought under control. When it is possible again, you will be welcomed with open arms.

Weekdays or a weekend group of 10 or more can schedule a "group presentation" with a suggested donation of \$5 per person. Smaller groups may join the general visitors.



Photo by Thelma Bottum

Call Kathy Hoel (pictured), 815-877-2938 or e-mail kathyhoel6@gmail.com/subject: SBBO group visit, for details and to reserve your spot. Allow 1½ hours to watch the banding process and visit the nets.

Here's How To Reach Us!

During Operating Hours: 815-629-2671

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P. O. Box 2
Seward, IL 61077

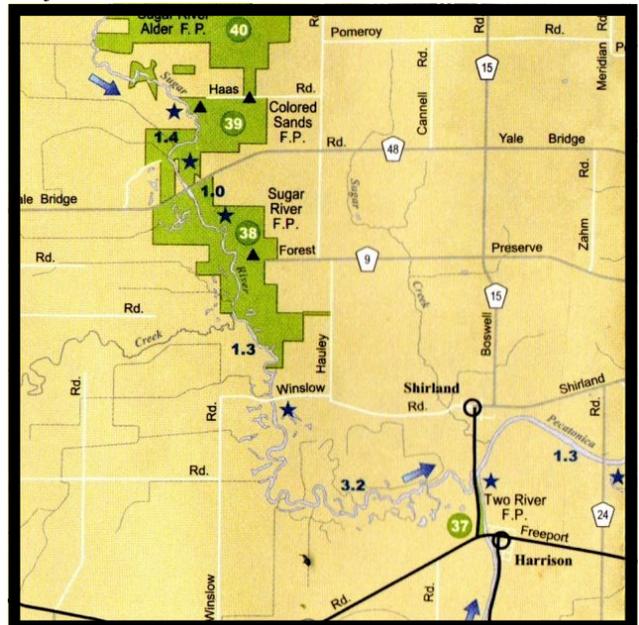
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