



Canyon Wren

Catherpes mexicanus

August 2017

Field Notes



Canyon wren (*Catherpes mexicanus*). Note flat head, long beak, and rusty tail feathers. Photo: NPS/Sarah Stio.

General Description

Canyon wrens are best known for their outgoing, ear-catching song. One cannot help but notice the masterfully whistled, sometimes piercing, string of cascading notes produced by this tiny, rusty colored wren. This species plays a vital role in the character and spirit of our public lands that feature cliffs, caves, canyons, and boulder fields.

Identification

This tiny songbird is part of the Troglodytidae (wren) family, whose members are characterized by long, narrow beaks and cocked tail feathers. In particular, the canyon wren boasts a longer, narrower beak than other wrens, with the addition of a graceful curve. Its flattened skull, in conjunction with its unique beak, allows for efficient food gathering in cracks and crevices. The canyon wren has a snowy white throat and breast, reddish-brown body, and distinguishing rusty barred pattern on its tail feathers. Juveniles look very similar to mature canyon wrens; however, their coloring is muted. The rock wren is a similar species, but lacks the distinctive song and rufous coloring of the canyon wren.

Distribution and Habitat

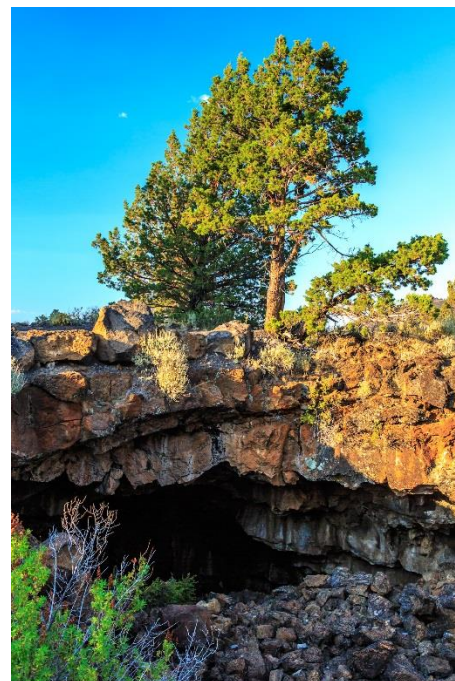
Canyon wrens can be found as permanent residents from southern British Columbia down through southern Mexico and from the coast of California to as far east as Texas. This species prefers arid, high elevation locations with steep, rocky outcroppings, but is sometimes found nesting in cavities within stone buildings around populated areas. Canyon wren populations have generally stayed stable, but some locales may have experienced decline due to competition with invasive cavity nesting birds, like the ubiquitous house sparrow.

Behavior

The canyon wren is a fidgety creature that creeps around rocks, popping in and out of view, searching for insects and spiders in cracks and crevices. This species tends to build nests in those same hard-to-get-to openings. Using building materials like twigs, lichen, plants, spider webs, and feathers, they weave a safe nest cup in which to lay an average of five eggs. While the mother canyon wren is the primary egg incubator, the father focuses on defending the nest territory with song. Both parents share the responsibility of feeding and caring for their young. In the winter, canyon wrens often seek nearby lower elevations with more vegetation for shelter.

Where to See

Within the Klamath Network, canyon wrens can be found in Lava Beds NM, Crater Lake NP, Lassen Volcanic NP, and rarely in Whiskeytown NRA and Redwood National and State Parks.



The canyon wren's jubilant, cascading song is amplified by the acoustics of caves and lava flows in Lava Beds National Monument. Photo: Murray Foubister, Creative Commons.

Fun Facts

- Instead of drinking water, the canyon wren gleans sufficient hydration from its diet of insects and spiders.
- The oldest known canyon wren was a female found in Arizona of at least 4 years and 10 months old.
- Male canyon wrens prefer defending their territory by singing on a pedestal of exposed, prominent rock.

More Information

www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Canyon_Wren/id

www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/canyon-wren

www.birdnote.org/show/song-canyon-wren