

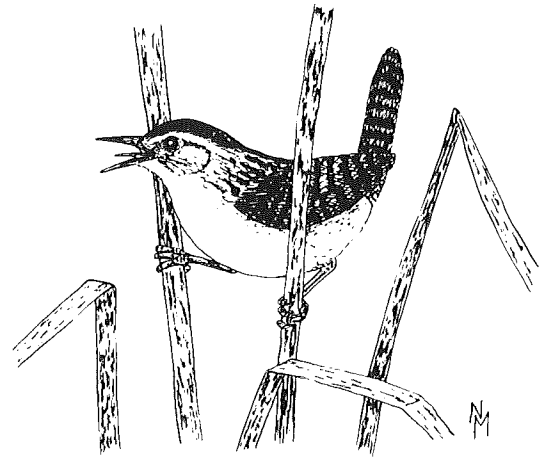
## Marsh Wren

*Cistothorus palustris*

The Marsh Wren (formerly the Long-billed Marsh Wren) is conspicuous in the cattail marsh ecosystem. Breeding from coast to coast throughout North America, wherever suitable habitat is present, the Marsh Wren is an abundant bird in many wetlands. Although highly territorial, the species occurs at high density in preferred habitat. Its incessant song—a scratchy assemblage of rattles followed by a musical trill—and its habit of building dummy nests make this wren seem all the more abundant.

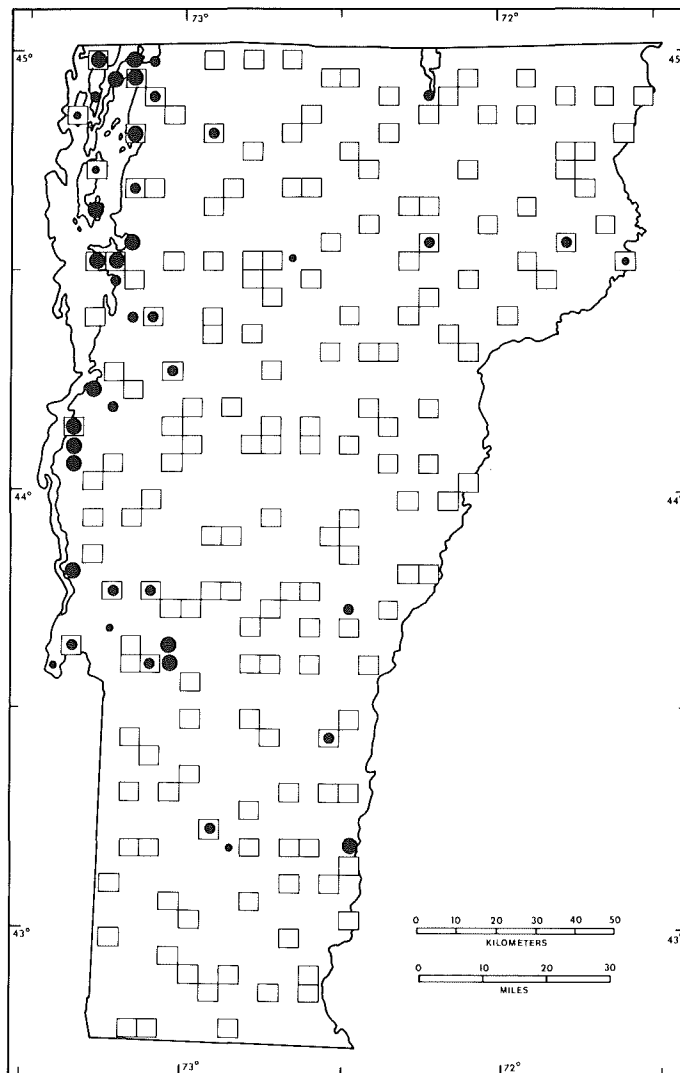
Although because of their habitat requirements they are quite local, Marsh Wrens are abundant in prime wetlands in Vermont. Few cattail marshes larger than 0.8–1.2 ha (2–3 a) lack this species. Small marshes, or those without open water, are usually not used. The Marsh Wren is well distributed in the wetlands of the Champlain Lowlands but elsewhere in the state its appearance is more rare. There are few occurrences recorded from the Connecticut River valley and marshes, although where present it is usually locally common to abundant. Seldom are Marsh Wrens found as isolated breeding pairs.

Marsh Wrens begin to appear in Vermont marshes during the last week of April and are common by mid May. The males are energetic imps, incessantly singing while perched on cattails or while on short fluttering flights above their territories. The male may build from 5 to 40 false nests within the 500 sq m (5,380 sq ft) territory (Welter 1935; Verner and Engelsen 1970). The actual nest, which the female may help to construct, is a spherical mass of interwoven wet cattails and sedges, lined with cattail down, fine plant matter, and feathers; access is by a side entrance. Nests are usually placed over water. False nests, which give every appearance of being real, lack linings and, often, entrances. Nests, dummy and real, may be built throughout the breeding season, since the males are polygynous and are continually seeking to attract new females to their



territories. Dummy nests attract females, serving as a courting center from which the male seeks to attract mates (Verner 1965). False nests may also serve to frustrate conspecifics and predators bent on destroying the clutch. Nests are easy to find and accounted for more than three-quarters of the Atlas Project confirmations, but specific dates are available only for a dozen, found on May 29 at Herrick's Cove.

The female typically lays 5 to 6 dull brown eggs evenly dotted with darker brown. Incubation takes 13 to 16 days, and the young may fledge at 11 to 16 days of age (Verner 1965). The male, busy defending his territory and courting new mates, pays scant attention to the incubating female, but may assist in feeding the young (Verner 1965; Verner and Engelsen 1970). Territorial defense is vigorous, however, and is directed at both other Marsh Wrens and larger cohabitants of the marsh. Marsh Wrens, like Sedge Wrens, may seek out and actively destroy their neighbors' eggs, including those of Red-winged Blackbirds and Least Bitterns (Bent 1948; Picman 1977a, 1977b). Fledglings may continue to receive food from the parents for up to 2 weeks. In the portions of their range where they are year-round residents, Marsh Wrens may raise up to three broods, each nesting cycle requiring 45 to 50 days to complete (Verner 1965). Second broods may occasionally be raised in Vermont, but there are no data to support this supposition.



**No. of priority blocks in which recorded**

TOTAL 22 (12%)  
 Possible breeding: 3 (14% of total)  
 Probable breeding: 13 (59% of total)  
 Confirmed breeding: 6 (27% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	14	45	63.5
Green Mountains	1	2	4.5
North Central	1	5	4.5
Northeast Highlands	2	12	9.0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	3	19	14.0
Eastern Foothills	1	4	4.5

Marsh Wrens become quiet and hard to locate during the postnuptial molt; consequently, their departure from Vermont's marshes is seldom noticed. Most are gone by the end of September, although individuals may linger into winter.

Early authorities (Minot 1895; Perkins and Howe 1901; Allen 1909) considered the Marsh Wren a rare breeder or visitor in Vermont. Whether this was a true reflection of its status in the entire state, or only of its local status around Lakes Champlain and Memphremagog is debatable, since Forbush (1927) considered it a common but exceedingly local summer resident in Vermont—a status it continues to hold today. Since Ver-

mont's wetlands have not changed significantly in the past century, and the Marsh Wren has not exhibited marked range extensions in other northeastern states, earlier assessments were probably based on insufficient knowledge of the Champlain wetlands. Interestingly, however, the only nesting records along the Connecticut River come from the marshes that resulted from the impoundment of the river at Bellows Falls. Perhaps before the establishment of these marsh communities, which now extend for miles along the Vermont shore, the Marsh Wren was indeed a rare visitor to eastern Vermont.

DOUGLAS P. KIBBE