

The Wren

When asked which is the most common breeding bird in the UK, most people never consider suggesting the Wren – perhaps Woodpigeon, Starling, House Sparrow, even Chaffinch but the Wren just seems to, almost literally, fly under most people’s radar. However, there are about 8.5 million pairs of Wrens in the UK which makes it the most common bird by far (next is the Chaffinch with 6.2 million pairs). The reason why it is the most common bird is that you find it everywhere. From seashores to moorlands, gardens, woodlands, stream-sides, industrial sites and the centre of towns, all a Wren needs is plenty of cover and lots of nooks and crannies in which to search for food. They manage to find spiders, woodlice, flies, beetles and ants in such places all the year round, though they can struggle in very cold winters and the population famously plummeted after the very cold and snowy winter of 1963.



In many respects they resemble a small mammal rather than a bird – most of the time they are out of our view, ferreting and fossicking around in low-down hidden places. And although they are slightly reluctant fliers, they can sometimes be seen whizzing along on short flights, especially when feeding young. All you see is a small brown oval shape, flying directly and fast, with a brown blur of wings either side.

Stephen Moss has just written a book about Wrens and he found that when he mentioned the subject of his book to non-birdwatching friends, most of them claimed never to have seen one. This is pretty extraordinary as there are Wrens in pretty well every garden in the UK. You just have to keep your eyes open and look away from the bird feeder as Wrens rarely come to artificial food, even when you try to put out suitable food (e.g. mealworms) in cold weather.

Those people who claim never to have seen a Wren must certainly have heard one. It is pretty well impossible to avoid hearing Wrens! They have a ridiculously loud song for the size of bird, and it is a fast, musical warble with a trill in the middle (the trill often sounds to me a like a machine gun firing!). If you want to hear an example, just Google “RSPB Wren” - there is a soundtrack and video on the RSPB Wren page. Wrens are singing in our gardens now but once they reach their peak of enthusiasm in the Spring it is a good time to look for them – sometimes they will sing from a perch right out in the open and give us a chance to get a really good view.

Our British Wren is the single example of its family in the “Old World” and it is common all through Europe and across northern Asia. Strangely, all the other members of the Wren family are in the Americas, where there are 92 more species, some larger and more colourful than ours but all with similarly musical songs.

There are masses more interesting things to say about Wrens but I have run out of space. If you want to know more you could always buy the book referenced above “The Wren: A Biography” by Stephen Moss. Or maybe I’ll do “Wrens part II” next month by which time our garden Wren will be singing at full volume!

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