

House Wren Odyssey *by Coralee Bodeker*

For all of the nine years that my family has lived here, north of the Iowa town of Vinton, there has always been an old bluebird box located in our front yard. Every year one or more pairs of birds, from House Sparrows to Eastern Bluebirds to House Wrens, have tried to nest in it, but only rarely are they successful. Last year both the wrens and bluebirds were unsuccessful in their nesting attempts, but this year has been a different story.

On May 7th a pair of House Wrens began building in the bluebird box, filling the bottom with a few small twigs. For about a week these wrens continued adding twigs, some longer than the birds themselves! By the 15th of May the pair finished filling the box



with sticks and had built a small bowl in the top lined with grass and feathers. When I next checked the box the wrens had laid three pink-with-brown-speckles eggs that looked like the bottom of the egg had been dipped in paint. Unfortunately, one of the eggs was broken and lay crushed in the bottom of the nest. This could have been a result of clumsiness on the part of the wren parents or an attack by another bird trying to take over the nest. Whatever the cause was, the wrens didn't seem satisfied with their two remaining eggs and a day later the nest was empty again.

The female then replaced those eggs with seven more in the ensuing weeks. On June 17th every egg hatched and the nest was full of altricial chicks with little wisps of feathers on the tops of their heads. They didn't stay that way for long--by four days old they began growing feathers and after roughly a week they were fully clad in brown barring from head to tail.

When the time came for the chicks to fledge they perched on the top of the box and clumsily fluttered about until they found familiarity with their new wings. After that,

they flew in circles around the box and could be seen flying after one another across my front yard. Their nesting season seemed to be all wrapped up, but the wrens weren't done yet! Weeks later the same wrens laid six more eggs in the box. This past weekend four of those eggs hatched, followed by the other two a day later. Sadly, when I checked on the nest earlier today, there were only five chicks and one of those appeared significantly smaller than the others.

Strolling back to the house following the nest box check, I reflected on how random nest success stories seem to be, at least in my own yard. Just last year two pairs of birds tried and failed at using our nest box, but this year just one pair of birds successfully hatched two broods! The success of a nest seems to depend a good deal on sheer luck. And yet, birds have adapted to this kind of unpredictability and the perfect showcase of this adaptation is these wrens. When the wrens laid their first clutch, the female laid one egg every day. Once she had seven eggs, she, along with her mate, started incubating. This strategy, though somewhat time consuming, paid off in the long run, when all of their healthy chicks fledged this summer.

During brood number two's development, the female laid four eggs in a row and then must have started incubating the quartet while she laid the last two (based on the eventual differing hatch dates). This resulted in a mixed brood of different aged chicks, four older and two younger, otherwise known as asynchronous hatching. This occurrence is much more common in larger birds, like hawks and egrets, but the wrens have adopted it, too, it seems. This kind of hatching develops a hierarchy between the oldest and youngest chicks, causing the adults to feed the older and more aggressive chicks first which sometimes leaves the youngest chick to starve. This may have happened with the smaller sixth chick of the second clutch that disappeared. Perhaps since it is later in the nesting season and thus harder to find food, the wrens traded the opportunity to raise all their chicks for a guarantee that at least the healthiest would survive.

Although my thoughts are obviously only conjecture, the habits and secrets of nesting birds present new opportunities for discovery every season. I look forward to the next chapter in this House Wren odyssey.