SHORT-BILLED MARSH WREN.

† TROGLODYTES BREVIROSTRIS, Nutt.

PLATE CXXIV.—MALE, FEMALE, AND NEST.

I hope, kind reader, you will approve of the liberty which I have taken in prefixing the name of my friend NUTTALL to the present species, which was discovered by his indefatigable and enthusiastic devotion to science, in a country where WILSON, BONAPARTE, BACHMAN, PICKERING, COOPER, SAY, and others had already exerted themselves to the utmost in their endeavours to complete its diversified and interesting Fauna. I hope, too, that you will allow me to present you with the history of this sweet little inhabitant of our freshwater marshes, as given by him.

"This amusing and not unmusical little species inhabits the lowest marshy meadows, but does not frequent the reed flats. It never visits cultivated grounds, and is at all times shy, timid, and suspicious. It arrives in this part of Massachusetts about the close of the first week in May, and retires to the south by the middle of September at farthest, probably by night, as it is never seen in progress, so that its northern residence is only prolonged about four months.

"Its presence is announced by its lively and quaint song of *tsh, tship, ā dāy, dāy, dāy, dāy*, delivered in haste and earnest at short intervals, either when he is mounted on a tuft of sedge, or while perched on some low bush near the skirt of the marsh. The *tsh, tship*, is uttered with a strong aspiration, and the remainder with a guttural echo. While thus engaged, his head and tail are alternately depressed and elevated, as if the little odd performer were fixed on a pivot. Sometimes the note varies to *tschip, tschip, tshia, dh, dh, dh, dh*, the latter part being a pleasant trill.

"When approached too closely, which not often happened, as he permitted me to come within two or three feet of his station, his song becomes harsh and more hurried, like *tship, dā, dā, dā*, and *de, de, de, de, d, d, dh*, or *tshe, de, de, de, de*, rising into an angry petulant cry, which is also sometimes a low hoarse and scolding *daigh, daigh*. Then again on invading the nest, the sound sinks to a plaintive *tsh, tship, tsh, tship*. In the early part of the breeding season, the male is very lively and musical, and in his best humour he tunes up a *tship, tship, tship, ā dee*, with a pleasantly warbled and reiterated *de*. At a later period, another male uttered little else than a

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1. Male 2. Female and Nest.

hoarse and guttural *daigh*, hardly louder than the croaking of a frog. When approached, they repeatedly descend into the grass, where they spend much of their time, in quest of insects, chiefly crustaceous, which, with moths, constitute their principal food. Here unseen they still sedulously utter their quaint warbling; and *tship, tship, a day, day, day, day*, may, for about a month from their arrival, be heard pleasantly echoing on a fine morning, from the borders of every low marsh and wet meadow, provided with tussocks of sedge grass, in which they indispensably dwell, for a time engaged in the cares and gratification of raising and providing for their young.

“The nest of the Short-billed Marsh Wren is made wholly of dry or partly green sedge, bent usually from the top of the grassy tuft in which the fabric is situated. With much ingenuity and labour these simple materials are loosely entwined together into a spherical form, with a small and rather obscure entrance left on the side. A thin lining is sometimes added to the whole, of the linty fibres of the silk-weed, or some other similar material. The eggs, pure white, and destitute of spots, are probably from six to eight. In a nest containing seven eggs, there were three of them larger than the rest, and perfectly fresh, while the four smaller were far advanced towards hatching. From this circumstance we may fairly infer that two different individuals had laid in the same nest, a circumstance more common among wild birds than is generally imagined. This is also the more remarkable, as the male of this species, like many other Wrens, is much employed in making nests, of which not more than one in three or four are ever occupied by the females!

“The summer limits of this species, confounded with the ordinary Marsh Wren, are yet unascertained; and it is singular to remark how near it approaches to another species inhabiting the temperate parts of the southern hemisphere in America, namely the *Sylvia platensis*, figured and indicated by BUFFON. The description, however, of this bird, obtained by COMMERSON, on the banks of La Plata, is too imperfect for certainty. It was found probably in a marshy situation, as it entered the boat in which he was sailing. The time of arrival and departure of this species, agreeing exactly with the appearance of the Marsh Wren of WILSON, inclines me to believe that it also exists in Pennsylvania.”

While in New Jersey, in the summer of 1832, after I had become acquainted with this species through NUTTALL, I spent several days in searching the freshwater marshes, often waist-deep in mud, in the hopes of procuring it; but my efforts, as well as those of my friend EDWARD HARRIS, Esq. and my sons, were unsuccessful. It is very abundant in South Carolina, where the Rev. JOHN BACHMAN, myself, and others, have often seen it. Nay, I am of opinion that it spends the winter there, as well as in the

Floridas, as I shot several individuals in February 1833, nine miles from Charleston, at a distance from any river, and on high, usually dry plains, at that season partially covered with water. They did not rise until we had almost walked upon them, and could be shot only on wing, as they flew directly off at the height of a few inches above the grass, and alighted on the first bunch as abruptly as if they had been shot. They then emitted a single rough grating note, quite distinct from that of any other Wren. About this time I received from NUTTALL a letter, which completes the history of this diminutive species.

“Concerning the Short-billed Marsh Wren of which you inquired, I have but little to add to what I have already published; but it is for you to fill up the history of its summer migrations. Did you find it in Maine or Labrador? This season they have been more than usually abundant. Last year (1832) I saw extremely few, and believe many were famished, or some way destroyed by the long continuance of our spring rains. This year (1833) also, several pairs of Marsh Wrens have been seen occupied in making their nests in the reeds, on the margin of Fresh Pond, in our vicinity. These nests are suspended; those of the *short-billed* species always repose directly on the surface of the sedgy tussock of which they are made. The young are easily approached, appearing, by the placid innocence of their manner, as if wholly unconscious of danger. Coleopterous insects are the principal food of the species. I heard once or twice this season, the anxious guttural bubbling sound attributed to the Marsh Wren, mentioned by WILSON. The Short-billed species and the Common, now near the time of their departure for the south, frequents the reeds by Fresh Pond, in little roving companies.—*Cambridge, September 12, 1833.*”

I found this small species very abundant in the Texas, where it breeds in such situations as are usually selected by it elsewhere. When within a few feet of them, I observed that whilst the males are singing, the tail is allowed to hang loosely. I mention this because the bird has been represented as elevating its tail while so engaged. Dr. TRUDEAU informs me that he found its nest in the Delaware marshes, and saw both the male and the female near it, but could not procure them, being at the time without a gun. The eggs were four.

SHORT-BILLED MARSH WREN, *Troglodytes brevirostris*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 436.

NUTTALL'S SHORT-BILLED MARSH WREN, *Troglodytes brevirostris*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. ii. p. 427; vol. v. p. 469.

Adult Male.

Bill of moderate length, slender, nearly straight, acute, subtrigonal at the

base, compressed towards the end; upper mandible with the dorsal outline slightly arched, the sides convex towards the end, the edges sharp, the tip narrow but rather obtuse; lower mandible also much compressed, with the dorsal line straight, the sides nearly erect and slightly rounded, the sharp edges inflected. Nostrils basal, lateral, oblong, with an arched membrane above, open and bare. Head rather compressed, neck and body short. Legs of ordinary length; tarsus compressed, anteriorly covered with six scutella, posteriorly with a long plate forming a sharp edge; toes scutellate above, the second and fourth nearly equal, the hind toe much stronger, with a much larger claw, the third and fourth united as far as the second joint; claws arched, much compressed, acute.

Plumage soft and blended. No bristly feathers about the bill. Wings short, broad, rounded, first quill about half the length of the second, which is considerably shorter than the third, fourth, and fifth, which are nearly equal, the fourth, however, being the longest. Tail of ordinary length, graduated, of twelve narrow rounded feathers.

Bill dusky above, pale brownish-yellow beneath. Iris dark hazel. Feet pale flesh-colour. The upper parts are blackish-brown, each feather with a brownish-white line along the shaft, and the outer edge towards the end reddish-brown. Wings dusky, the outer edges barred with pale yellowish-brown on the outer webs. Upper tail-coverts and tail similarly barred. Throat and central part of the breast greyish-white, the rest of the lower parts pale reddish-brown, the sides under the wings faintly barred with dusky.

Length $4\frac{3}{8}$ inches, extent of wings $5\frac{5}{8}$; bill along the ridge $\frac{4\frac{1}{2}}{1\frac{1}{2}}$, along the edge $\frac{6}{1\frac{1}{2}}$; tarsus $\frac{8\frac{1}{2}}{1\frac{1}{2}}$.

Adult Female.

The female resembles the male, and the young birds are distinguishable only by having the bill shorter, and the lower parts more tinged with red.

The Common Marsh Wren (Plate 123) is very closely allied to the present species, and the two form part of a group which VIEILLOT distinguishes by the name of *Thyrothorus*.

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1. Male 2. Female and Nest.

Audubon, John James. 1841. "Short-Billed Marsh Wren, Troglodytes brevirostris, Nutt. [Pl. 124]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 2, 138–141. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319237>.

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