The Rock Wren, *Salpinctes obsoletus*, Breeding at Churchill, Manitoba

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During the summer of 1988, a pair of Rock Wrens bred near Churchill, Manitoba, some 1000 km N of the normal breeding range of the species. Five young hatched, but at least three died before fledging. Possible explanations for the presence of these wrens in Churchill are their natural tendency to wander, accidental transportation in railroad boxcars, and the drought in the Prairies that summer.

Key Words: Rock Wren, *Salpinctes obsoletus*, Manitoba, breeding.

The Rock Wren (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) is a relatively common breeder in most of the western United States, in Mexico, and in Central America south to northwestern Costa Rica (A.O.U. 1983). In Canada, it is restricted to the southern part of British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan (Godfrey 1986). During the summer of 1988, a pair of Rock Wrens was found breeding near Churchill, Manitoba (58°45′N; 94°05′W), some 1000 km N of their normal range.

On 28 June 1988, a Rock Wren was found singing 5.5 km E of Churchill. The bird was frequently singing, making itself conspicuous to any observer, and, because the site is regularly checked by birdwatchers in the summer, it is unlikely that this wren arrived in Churchill much before late June. The bird was observed foraging among, and perching on, concrete blocks of diverse shapes and sizes that make up an embankment 1 — 2.5 m high by 200 m long. The wren was seen gleaning small insects from small Balsam Poplars (*Populus balsamifera*) and willow shrubs (*Salix* spp.) growing among the blocks. The numerous spruce trees growing at the bottom of the embankment were never used for foraging or perching. On 4 July, G.S. confirmed earlier reports of the presence of two individuals. At 10:00, a bird was seen carrying a white feather, closely followed by a second individual. An hour later, the pair was observed again with the trailing bird carrying a large, green unidentified caterpillar (about 15 x 4 mm).

On 27 July, G.S. saw both birds carrying insects in their bills and after 20 min of observation found the nest in a cavity under a large concrete slab. The entrance of the cavity was somewhat triangular, about 15 cm at the base and 8 cm high. The cavity was about 30 cm deep and was lined with small stones as is typical for the species but there was no lined approach to it as is sometimes the case (Harrison 1978). The nest, a thin cup of fine plant fibers lined with hairs and a few feathers, was 20 cm from the opening. Three nestlings were visible, but there may have been more. All had closed eyes and were almost entirely naked. When the nest was visited on 1 August, five nestlings were found and banded. They all had open eyes and showed extensive growth of down and flight feathers.

On 29 July, the adults were trapped using mist nets and banded with standard U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service aluminum bands. Plumages of both birds were moderately worn and showed no sign of molt. One bird had an extensive brood patch and was assumed to be a female. The second bird lacked a brood patch but showed no cloacal protuberance either; it was assumed to be a male. External measurements (wing chord, tail, tarsus, culmen and hallux lengths) did not differ statistically from samples of Canadian specimens housed in the National Museum of Canada collection (original data available from G.S.; *t*-test contrasting a single observation with a sample mean, Sokal and Rohlf 1981; $P > 0.05$ in each case). Because Rock Wrens show little morphometric variation throughout their North American range, these measurements are not informative about the origin of the Churchill birds.

On 7 August, 52 mm of rain fell on Churchill during a major thunderstorm. Strong winds, reaching 60 km/h lasted for several hours, and the lowest maximum (11.7°C) and minimum (4.5°C) daily temperatures for the first half of the month were recorded (Environment Canada 1988). That evening, B.C. found three dead young in the nest and no sign of the other birds. During the following weeks, the area was checked a few times by different persons, but no wrens were seen.

There is at least one previous record of the Rock Wren in Churchill. A pair, presumably breeding, was observed in 1956 carrying food near a pile of old timbers, and "on 3 August the bird [one of them] appeared to be in a state of great anxiety at

Beckett's approach, but no young were found" (Crosby and Beckett 1957). No birds were seen later that year, so breeding was never confirmed. Two wrens, possibly the same individuals, were observed the following spring in Churchill, but they were seen only once (Jehl and Smith 1970). There are two other summer reports of Rock Wrens seen far north of their normal breeding range (Stanton, northwestern Mackenzie, and Fort Chipewyan, northern Alberta; Godfrey 1986); both involve sightings of single birds.

The Rock Wren is also a casual vagrant in the eastern United States during migrations and winter (A.O.U. 1983). It was suggested that many of the eastern records pertain to individuals transported accidentally in railroad boxcars (A.O.U. 1983). This is a plausible explanation for the occurrence of Rock Wrens in Churchill, the northern end point of the Manitoban railroad network. Alternatively, the severe drought in the Prairies during the summer of 1988 may have prompted the wrens to wander. The Rock Wren is only one of many typical prairie birds that reached the Churchill region during the summer of 1988. The list includes first Churchill records for the Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*), Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*), Lark Sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*), and Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanochorys*), as well as observations of several species that have previously been reported less than ten times in the region (*see* Chartier 1988): the Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*), Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*), Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*), Le Conte's Sparrow (*Ammodramus leconteii*), and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*A. caudacutus nelsoni*).

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