

## Wrens and Humans

You may remember that last month I wrote about wrens, and about the fact that many people claim never to have seen one?

In times gone past this would never have been true as wrens have quite a close relationship with man. They are one of the few birds which do not panic inside a shed or garage, and even when they get trapped in our conservatory they just poke around in the corners looking for dead flies until they find their way out. This affection for buildings also extends to using them for roosting sites. We have a friend who lives in a remote and rather primitive cottage in the Preselis, and he shares his home with about 20 wrens on cold winter nights. I have images of them perched in rows on the back of chairs but I suspect that they are actually in the log basket and behind the curtains! And, no, I have no idea how they get in and out!



They also often nest inside buildings – we have a regular nesting wren in our pumphouse. The nest is a beautiful oval mossy construction with an entrance in the side. It is often crammed into a cavity in the side of a tree or bank, or on a suitable ledge in some ivy, or in an old bird's nest (our pumphouse wren once built its nest up high in a old swallows nest) or in a logpile. The usual nest site in our pumphouse is a circular indentation in the wall, which the wren packs with moss. They have a number of ways of getting in and out of the building including one high up in the eaves which they use to slip away when humans get too intrusive!

Not all wren nests are used for breeding – the male will often build several nests and the female chooses which one to use for laying her eggs, at which stage she finishes off the construction with a soft lining. Both adults feed the young birds - hard work for the male as he may have several females with nests in his territory! A female wren will lay up to 9 eggs, and this large clutch size means they can bounce back after cold winters, in which many wrens perish.

Another mark of people's past affection for wrens is that they have a nickname - Jenny Wren - and that they appeared on the reverse of the farthing coin (which I suspect many of my readers will still remember!)

There is a considerable amount of folklore concerning wrens – most of these concern “Hunting the Wren”. This takes place on 26 December, St. Stephen's Day, in a number of countries across Europe. There appears to be absolutely no consensus at all as to where this custom came from and why it is so widespread!

Apparently “Hunting the Wren” has been carried out in Pembrokeshire in the past – I have found this reference: “As the name suggests, Hela'r Dryw or ‘Hunting the Wren’ perhaps isn't the nicest of Christmas rituals. An ancient Celtic custom, it took place anywhere between Boxing Day and Twelfth Night and featured a hapless wren that had either been captured, or if it was really unlucky, killed. The wren was said to bring good luck and would be taken from door to door in a box or cage. An offering of food, drink, money (or all three) in return for a look at the bird was sure to bring luck into your home. A lucky tradition for the villagers but often not so lucky for the wren.”

*Rosemary Royle*