

# FIRST SIGHT RECORD OF THE CACTUS WREN IN SASKATCHEWAN AND CANADA

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On 15 June 1982, the authors and Linda Lahey were vacationing in the West Block of the Cypress Hills in southwestern Saskatchewan. We visited the home of Bob and Dixie Black, whose ranch is located approximately 42 km (25 mi.) southwest of Maple Creek. While discussing the local bird-life, we asked if there had been any unusual bird species in their district recently. Bob described the following incident.

Between the hours of 1100 and 1130 on 30 May 1982, during the height of a freak blizzard which struck southern Saskatchewan, Bob was sitting at their kitchen table when he noticed an unfamiliar bird perched outside on the patio. Calling Dixie and two other storm-bound visitors to view the bedraggled and obviously disoriented bird, they noted the following field marks:

size was slightly smaller than a Robin; the head was brown with a

wide white eye-stripe; the back was brown with white streaks; the bill was long and down-curved; the breast was densely spotted and the tail barred, with white spots on the outer feathers.

For about 2 minutes they studied the stray from less than 2 m (6 feet) before the bird took flight and struggled off into the storm. No binoculars were necessary, as the bird was much too close for them to have been of any use. Totally baffled by the 'mystery' bird, Bob and Dixie began leafing through the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds — Western Region*, attempting to locate its picture.<sup>9</sup> When they arrived at picture number 532, the Blacks were amazed to discover that the bird in question had been a Cactus Wren! Bob said the photograph was an exact replica of their bird. When questioned by the authors on 15 June, there was no doubt in the Blacks'



Looking north to Blacks' ranch in Cypress Hills

G. J. Wapple

minds as to the wren's identity. When shown similar species in *Robbin's, et. al.*, they stated it was much larger and more densely spotted below than the Rock Wren; the streaked back and barred tail ruled out both Brown and Sage Thrasher.<sup>7</sup> After the storm subsided on 31 May and on succeeding days Bob and Dixie kept a lookout for the wren, however, it was not seen again.

According to the *A.O.U. Check-List of North American Birds*, the Cactus Wren is a resident of southern California, southern Nevada, southwestern Utah, western and south-central Arizona, southern New Mexico, and central Texas south to southern Baja California, Michoacan and State of Mexico.<sup>1</sup> Based on the northern-most localities given in the text, Toquerville in southwest Utah and the Sheep Range in southern Nevada, the wren was displaced at least 1370 to 1450 km (850 to 900 mi.) north of its desert haunts. A further search of the literature, including reports in *American Birds* since 1967, failed to turn up even a single extralimital record of the Cactus Wren.<sup>2 3 4 5 6 8</sup>

A study of available weather maps of the continent for 30-31 May by the junior author revealed a low pressure system situated over southern Idaho, while a corresponding high pressure mass was located over western Kansas. Our theory, which Bob Black originally proposed, is that after the storm-centre picked up the wren in the southwestern U.S., the resulting northerly flow of air carried it up to the Cypress Hills region. Since the blizzard was a fierce one — winds reaching velocities of over 100 km (60+ mi.) per hour and depositing nearly 2 m (5+ ft.) of snow on the Hills — the wren had no alternative but to follow along until it was able to set down somewhere to seek shelter. Conditions in the remainder of southern Saskatchewan were not as severe. The damage to the province's southwest corner was especially felt on livestock

herds. Many animals were buried alive as they sought refuge in coulees; the depressions themselves were then filled in with snow. When we arrived in the Hills on 14 June, there were still sizeable banks of snow on the northern slope and many roads remained impassable. Dixie commented on the lack of small bird-life around the yard after 31 May.

Even though this is a sight record by two relatively inexperienced observers, the senior author is especially confident of this record, having known the Blackbird since 1976 as careful and cautious birders. Both are familiar with local species in and around their ranch. As a result, we feel the Cactus Wren should be placed on the hypothetical lists for both Saskatchewan and Canada.

<sup>1</sup> AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1957. Check-list of North American birds. Fifth ed. Am. Ornithol. Union, Baltimore, Md. 691 pp.

<sup>2</sup> ANDERSON, A. H. and A. ANDERSON. 1973. The Cactus Wren. University of Arizona Press. Tucson, Ariz. 226 pp.

<sup>3</sup> BENT, A. C. 1948. Life histories of North American nuthatches, wrens, thrashers and their allies. Smithsonian Inst. U.S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 195. (1964 Dove Edition). 475 pp.

<sup>4</sup> GODFREY, W. E. 1966. The birds of Canada. Nat. Mus. Can., Bull. No. 203. Biol. Ser. No. 73. Queen's Printer, Ottawa. 428 pp.

<sup>5</sup> PETERSON, R. T. 1941. A field guide to western birds. Second ed. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, Mass. 309 pp.

<sup>6</sup> PETERSON, R. T. 1980. A field guide to the birds. Fourth ed. Houghton Mifflin Company. Boston, Mass. 384 pp.

<sup>7</sup> ROBBINS, C., et al. 1966. Birds of North America. Golden Press, New York, N.Y. 340 pp.

<sup>8</sup> TERRES, J. K. 1980. The Audubon society encyclopedia of North American birds. A. A. Knopf. New York, N.Y. 1109 pp.

<sup>9</sup> UDVARDY, M. 1977. The Audubon society field guide to North American birds — western region. A. A. Knopf. New York, N.Y. 854 pp.