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## Marsh Wren *Cistothorus palustris*

The secretive Marsh Wren calls attention to itself in the breeding season when its distinctive song is heard in salt and brackish marshes in Florida. The Marsh Wren breeds in southern Canada and the northern half of the United States, along the Atlantic coast to northeast Florida, along the Gulf coast to the central Florida peninsula, and as a resident in Mexico. It winters along the Pacific coast from south British Columbia to southern Mexico and in the lower one-third of the United States to south Florida.

**Habitat.** Two races of the Marsh Wren breed in coastal marshes of Florida. The dull grayish-brown Worthington's Marsh Wren (*C. p. griseus*) occurs in the cordgrass marshes of Duval and Nassau counties, and the dark brown Marian's Marsh Wren (*C. p. marianae*) is found in the black needlerush marshes of the Gulf coast, from Old Tampa Bay north to Santa Rosa County (Kale 1978b). Even though seemingly suitable habitat exists in the St. Andrews Bay systems of Bay County and the Hogtown Bayou marshes of Choctawhatchee Bay in Walton County, Marian's Marsh Wrens do not occur there. Unlike *C. p. griseus*, *C. p. marianae* tolerates the invasion of mangroves into its marshes, as long as suitable grass or rush habitat remains. They will even occasionally build their nests in the mangroves. On the east coast, Marsh Wrens nest in the taller grasses that grow along meandering creeks in the salt marsh, far from any trees or shrubs.



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The diet of Marsh Wrens consists almost solely of insects and spiders (Kale 1964).

Each male defends a linear territory of 84 to 167 m<sup>2</sup> (100 to 200 yd<sup>2</sup>) of cordgrass along tidal channels and builds 5 to 12 or more tightly woven nests out of marsh grasses. They are dome-shaped and have a side entrance. They are thought to be courtship nests used to impress a female, who selects 1 and completes it with an inner lining of fine grasses. Three to 5 light-to-dark brown eggs, sometimes speckled with darker brown, are laid and incubated for about 11 to 12 days. Fledglings leave the nest at 12 to 14 days of age (Kale 1965).

**Seasonal Occurrence.** The 2 Florida breeding races are resident in the state. They are joined in the winter by birds from farther north. Migration occurs in April and May and in September through November.

In Florida, Marsh Wrens raise 2 or possibly 3 broods per season (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Breeding dates (eggs) for Worthington's subspecies extend from 11 May to 15 August; for Marian's, dates range from 3 May to 26 June, and once fledglings were seen on 19 March (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

**Status.** This bird is listed as a Species of Special Concern by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission]. Worthington's Marsh Wrens formerly bred on the Atlantic coast south to New Smyrna Beach. However, their range contracted beginning in the 1920s, when mangroves began spreading northward and displaced the marsh habitat required by the birds. By the mid-1970s, Marsh Wrens no longer bred south of the St. Johns River in Duval County (Kale 1978b), even though suitable habitat still exists south to at least Matanzas Inlet.

"Possible" and "probable" Atlas records from inland quadrangles were undoubtedly sightings of late migrants, even though they were present within the safe-dates period for this species (1 Apr - 1 Aug). Without exception Florida, Marsh Wrens singing in freshwater marshes have not remained to breed. Hence, we have not included these records on the Atlas map.

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Sponsored by Carl and Carol Pforzheimer

# Marsh Wren

