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Summer 2005

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### Recommended Citation

Chu PC. 2005. First confirmed breeding of the Rock Wren in Minnesota. *The Loon* 77(2): 59-62.

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# First Confirmed Breeding of the Rock Wren in Minnesota

Philip C. Chu

On 8 May 2004, Bill Marengo found a Rock Wren (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) in the Felton Prairie area (Budde *et al.* 2004) — specifically, Section 6 of Keene Township, Clay County. When the wren was discovered it was singing, indicating that it was a male (so far as is known, only male Rock Wrens sing, Lowther *et al.* 2000).

Sporadic observations of the wren were reported on the MOU's internet list-service through 6 June. Then on 13 June, Herb Dingmann found two birds there. On 2 July, Craig Menze observed a chick, thereby confirming that breeding had occurred.

This Rock Wren record is Minnesota's twentieth, and is also the state's first confirmed-breeding record (Minnesota Ornithologists' Union Records Committee 2004; Svingen 2004); here, I describe my own observations as they pertain to the record in question.

On 17 July 2004 from 9:20 A.M. to 10:30 A.M., I visited the Felton site and quickly located two adult Rock Wrens. I recognized them as wrens by their shape, which was roughly House-Wren-like, and by the barring on their remiges and rectrices; having recognized them as wrens, I identified them as Rock Wrens because of the following.

(1) For each, the bill was proportionately longer than that of a House Wren.

(2) For both, the crown, hindneck, back, and scapulars were marked with fine dusky spots or short bars.

(3) On both, the pale underparts were unmarked except for fine, dusky streaks on the breast and bold black bars on the under-tail coverts.

(4) For each, the tail had a blackish subterminal band and a pale tip.

The two differed slightly in appearance, with one (hereafter, adult A) having brighter, more rufescent rump-sides, a weaker buff tinge to the underparts, and more heavily barred under-tail coverts than the other (adult B).

The area in which the wrens were located is mainly dry tall-grass prairie. Within this prairie, multiple gravel-pits have been excavated, and the wrens were in the western-most pit, repeatedly visiting a rock pile in the pit's northwest quadrant. This rock pile is roughly teardrop-shaped, being about 100 feet long, 60 feet wide at the broad end of the teardrop, and 12 feet high. It is composed of coarse gravel together with larger rocks one to three feet in diameter (P. Beauzay, pers. comm.).

On this rock pile, I eventually observed not only the two adults but also four chicks. The chicks were smaller than the adults, their bills had conspicuous yellow flanges at the gape, and their tails were very short, just barely projecting beyond the upper-tail coverts. Given that chicks as young as 14 days may leave the nest (Merola 1995), and that a chick was first observed on 2 July, 15 days before my observations, when I saw the chicks the oldest was at least 29 days old.

For the first ten minutes of my visit, I saw only adult B, carrying a moth in its bill and acting in a way that seemed rather agitated — moving from rock to rock on the rock pile, and never standing in one place for more than a few seconds. Even when standing it was in motion, occasionally bobbing by bending at the tibiotarsal-tarsometatarsal joint — a movement that adult A also performed occasionally.

For the next five minutes, adult B was joined by adult A and by two Vesper



**Rock Wren, 30 June 2004, Felton Prairie, Clay County. Photo by Sparky Stensaas.**

Sparrows (*Poocetes gramineus*). While adult B continued to move agitatedly about the rock pile, carrying the moth in its bill, adult A repeatedly displaced one or another of the Vesper Sparrows until the sparrows left the rock pile altogether.

Finally, about 15 minutes into the observation period, adult B disappeared into a space between rocks low on the east side of the rock pile; a few seconds later it emerged without the moth. Then, both adults vanished.

About ten minutes later, adult A appeared again, and shortly thereafter I saw one chick, standing in the same area to which food had been taken previously. The chick begged every time adult A came near it, even though adult A was not carrying any food.

Within the next 10 or 15 minutes, adult B appeared, and I gradually saw additional chicks — first a second, then a third, and finally a fourth — until all four chicks and both adults were visible simultaneously.

The area of the rock pile in which chicks were observed may not be the area in which the nest was located. According to Lowther *et al.* (2000), once chicks leave the nest they move as a group from one sheltered location to another, not only within but also outside of the parents' territory. The chicks may stay at each location for up to an hour, but eventually one moves to a new location, and the others follow shortly thereafter.

During the 70-minute observation period, I saw the adults bring three food items to the rock pile. Adult B brought two insects, one the aforementioned moth (*Lepidoptera*) and the other a cricket (*Orthoptera*); adult A brought just one item, a caterpillar (*Lepidoptera*). Items fed to young in Kansas (Matiasek 1998) included not only lepidopterans and orthopterans but also beetles (*Coleoptera*) and spiders (*Araneae*).

On the single occasion when adult A brought food to the rock pile, it passed

the food item to adult B; adult B then moved a few yards to where the chicks were and stuffed the item into a chick's mouth. This observation suggests that adult A was the male of the pair, and adult B the female. Male Rock Wrens sometimes pass food to females — Merola (1995) recorded males feeding females during both courtship and incubation — but there is no published account of females passing food to males. Moreover, males of other wren species have been recorded delivering food items to females, who then give the food to a chick (Carolina Wren [*Thryothorus ludovicianus*], Laskey 1948, Haggerty and Morton 1995; Bewick's Wren [*Thryomanes bewickii*], Kennedy and White 1997; House Wren [*Troglodytes aedon*], Johnson 1998).

The 17 July observations described above are the last for the Felton Rock Wrens (Kessen and Svingen 2005). Whether this is because they left the area or because no observers looked for them after the 17th is uncertain.

The Rock Wren was first documented in Minnesota on 13 May 1922, when an individual was collected in Pipestone County (Peterson 1923). Presently it is considered to be Casual, with accepted records from five years during the ten-year period from 1995 through 2004 (Tustison 1998, Svingen 1999, 2002, 2004, Budde and Svingen 2003, Budde *et al.* 2003, 2004, Monson Geerts 2004, Dunlap 2005). Minnesota has one previous record of attempted breeding, from Beltrami County, in which a pair exhibited behavior consistent with nest-building but disappeared after the presumed nest-site area was disturbed (Schmierer 1984).

### Acknowledgments

Patrick Beauzay graciously provided general information about the Felton Prairie area and specific information about the rock pile on which the Rock Wrens were observed.

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