FOCUS 49

Wrentits of the World

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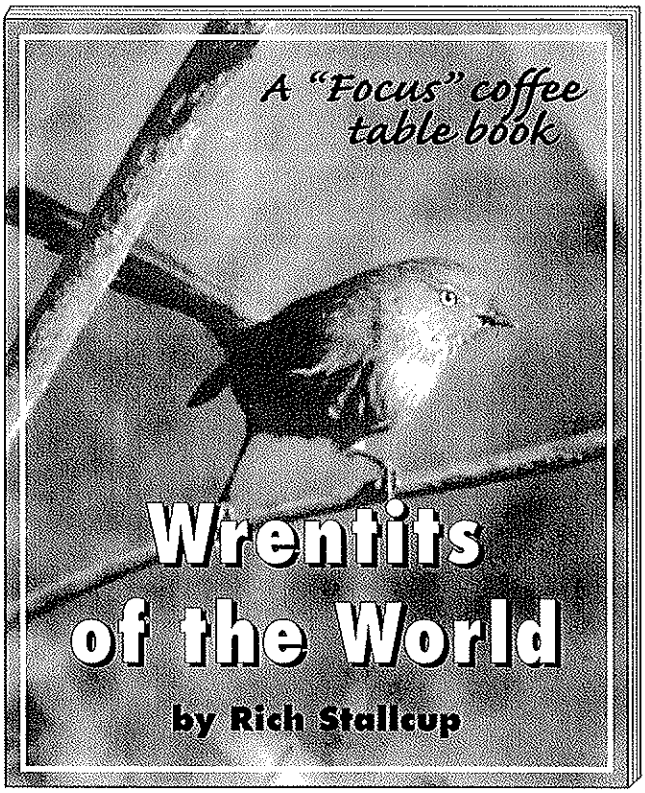
There was a time in the late 1970s and 1980s when it seemed that every month a new coffee-table book of birds would appear. Each was devoted to a planet group: "Parrots of the World," "Rails of the World," "Herons of the World" and the like. They were big, colorful, thick, and expensive.

I remember kidding then about publishing my own treatise—"Wrentits of the World." It too would be big—maybe 14 by 20 inches—and beautiful, with a blackberry/coyote bush/poison oak patch embossed over the entire cover and a cryptic Wrentit glaring sassily from within the tangle. The difference would be that "Wrentits of the World" (there is only one) would be really thin—maybe eight pages including contents, frontispiece, and index.



Wrentits (*Chamaea fasciata*) themselves are thin, with bodies made for lacing through thorny scrub, and they have long, narrow, stand-up tails that pump out their bouncing ping-pong ball songs. They stay inside cover and, unless you can trick them into thinking you are a Wrentit invading their turf, are hard to see. A good imitation of Wrentit song is usually enough to bring both male and female into view, the teed-up male answering back defiantly. After much practice and study, I have been become fluent in Wrentit and, when crouched and frozen next to or under the briar patch, have sometimes had the little beauties land on my shoulder or outreached fingers.

With a world range from coastal Oregon to northwestern Baja California, the Wrentit is mostly a California bird, but its taxonomy (placement on the avian family tree) has always been in question. The name itself suggests confusion—is this a wren or chickadee?—and no absolute genetic lineage has been proven. Suggestions have been made that Wrentits are descended from such diverse groups as neotropical tanagers and old-world babblers. Nobody knows; thus, Wrentits remain in a monotypic family (Chamaeidae).

Nonmigratory, some Wrentits range no farther than one-half mile from their fledging nest during their entire lives. Their spread wing is the shape of a silver dollar, not long and pointy like long-distance migrants'. Pair bonds are solid: couples stay within conversational distance of each other throughout the year for as many years as both stay alive; besides foraging together and preening each other's feathers, they roost together, leaning against each other on a limb near the crown of a bush, with feathers interlaced and inner legs drawn up, appearing as one ball of feathers. Dispersal of young results in a platoon of "floaters" that try to colonize secondary habitats or replace missing individuals from established territories. Mostly insectivores, Wrentits eat a variety of invertebrates that includes a lot of arachnids —spiders, ticks, and mites—but they cannot resist a ripe salmonberry.

There are six recognized subspecies, with the one inhabiting the California fogbelt north of the Golden Gate channel, *Chamaea fasciata rufula*, being most colorful. These have gray caps, unstreaked mouse brown bodies, and throats of pale peach. The Wrentit's iris is milky white (not yellow as some books say), giving this bird a defiant expression that is its alone.

Wrentits of the World have been around a long time. The one and only species in the genus and one and only genus in the family left clues that it was present in California during the Pleistocene. Like all good-citizen Native Americans, the only threat to its continued well-being is destruction of its homeland by the onflow of "civilized" humanity.

Much of what is known about the Wrentit's life history strategy and breeding biology has been learned through ongoing studies at PRBO's Palomarin Field Station. See, especially, Observer *94, Fall 1992.*

PHOTO BY RICH STALLCUP