

CACTUS WREN - THE DESERT NOISEMAKER

A series of activities to introduce the cactus wren - Arizona's state bird.

ARIZONA SCIENCE STANDARDS SC01-S1C1-02, SC02 S1C1-01&02, SC00-S4C3-02, SC02-S4C1-02, SC03-S4C3-04, SC03-S4C4-01

MATERIALS

CACTUS WREN DOT-TO-DOT PUZZLE ONE FOR EACH STUDENT

CACTUS WREN-THE DESERT NOISEMAKER- ONE FOR EACH STUDENT

COLOR PICTURE OF CACTUS WREN

OBJECTIVES

Students should:

- Recognize that the cactus wren is Arizona's state bird.
- Describe a cactus wren's nest and how it may ward off predators.
- Discuss the natural history of the cactus wren.

GETTING READY

Prepare the materials as listed in the left margin of this page.

SETTING THE STAGE

- 1) Ask students if they know the name of our state bird (cactus wren).
- 2) Ask students what they know about a cactus wren.
- 3) Present the following vocabulary:
Cactus wren – Small, brown wren. Arizona's state bird.
Territory – The area a bird defends against another bird.
Breeding nests – Where birds lay their eggs.
Roosting nests – Where birds sleep at night when they don't have breeding nests.
Nestlings – Baby birds that cannot fly.
Fledglings – Young birds that have feathers and are ready to leave the nest.
Juveniles – Young birds that are old enough to care for themselves.

DOING THE ACTIVITY

- 1) Hand out the *Cactus Wren Dot-to-Dot Puzzle*.
- 2) Have students do the puzzle. Ask students what kind of bird this is. Ask students if they have ever seen a nest like the one in the picture. Why would this be a good place for a cactus wren to build its nest? (It helps protect the babies from predators.)
- 3) When students have completed the puzzle, hand out the *Cactus Wren - The Desert Noisemaker* information on the next page, then discuss the questions below.

DISCUSSION

- 1) **How can birds stand on cactus spines?** (Birds' feet are very tough.

Their feet and legs are covered with tough scales. Their feet have no fleshy muscles - only tough tendons and a limited supply of nerves and blood. Some birds do get stuck, however, by sharp spines.)

- 2) **Does the cactus wren make the holes in the saguaro cactus?**

(No. A woodpecker or flicker makes holes in the saguaro. The cactus wren prefers the spiny cholla cactus. The cholla is the cactus that gives this bird its name.)

- 3) **How do desert birds cope with the heat?**

(Birds have no sweat glands. To prevent overheating, birds pant. They open their mouth and breathe faster. Like an evaporative cooler, fresh air flows over the moist surfaces. As the water evaporates, it lowers the body temperature. Also, most birds avoid the sun in the hottest part of the day by staying in a shady spot or they escape the heat completely by flying to a cooler place.)

- 4) **How long does it take the cactus wren to build its nest?** (The breeding nest may take as long as six days to build. Roosting nests (the cactus wren may build several of these) can be built in one day.)

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STUDENT HANDOUT

CACTUS WREN THE DESERT NOISEMAKER

The cactus wren is a common bird of the southwest deserts. It is our state bird. Most wrens are small, brown birds. The cactus wren is the largest wren in North America. It is about 8 inches in length. It is almost twice as big as other wrens. It has a brown head, a white stripe above its eye, and a spotted breast. They have slender, slightly curved bills to probe for insects.

The cactus wren has a strange call. It makes a loud, low “chur-chur-chur-chur” sound and goes on for a long time. In Spanish the cactus wren is called “matraca grande” or big noise-maker. The male (boy) calls from a high perch to declare his territory. He defends this area against other birds. He also attracts a mate with his call.

Cactus wrens build their nests in spiny plants such as cholla cactus. That’s why we call it “cactus wren.” Some are breeding nests where the female will lay her eggs. Most are roosting nests where the birds sleep at night. The birds weave grasses and twigs among the spines. The spines protect them from predators.

The nest is large and domed. It is about the size and shape of a football. It has a tunnel-like side entrance. The birds line the inside with soft feathers and fine grasses. This shelters them from the cold and rain.

The female lays 4-5 cream-colored, finely spotted eggs. In about 15 days, the babies hatch. The tiny, helpless birds are “nestlings.”

Both parents feed insects to the nestlings. About 3 weeks later, the young birds have grown into “fledglings.” This means they are old enough to leave the nest or “fledge.” The parents still have to take care of their fledglings, however. Each night, the birds return to the protection of a nest to roost.

When the young birds are old enough to care for themselves, we call them “juveniles.” In the wild, cactus wrens may live 1- $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 years in the wild. They are “adults” when they are old enough to reproduce the following spring.

