

6-27-14 For the Birds: A Good Thing

Bird Brained? Not so Bad!

Nesting Instincts for Humans

I've been watching a pair of Carolina house wrens for some weeks now. I first met the father to be last summer when he built several nests and sang his heart out for a mate, to no avail. The females might have known what they were doing, though, I must say. You see, his main nest (for they might build several) was in a decorative iron garden object looking something like branches of a tree with a bird house on top. The bird house had a nice perch, I will admit, but the house was way too big and deep for wrens. All spring long, as I listened to him call for a mate, I kept advising him, "You'd better fill that or else your babies won't be able to fledge!"

The male's work of twig gathering was not a waste, though, for this year, he began where he left off. To his credit, he continued his work and this year, the twigs reached near the opening of the metal house. By the way, an iron house is a rare find for the wren. It will serve them well against the predators, such as the hawks. A few weeks ago, a female decided it was looking pretty good and she chose him to be his mate for life and chose the sturdy metal house filled with twigs to finish off with soft materials for her eggs and future babies.

When the wren begins to build a house, it is built upon a framework of twigs. They often choose places close to human homes, thus the name "house wrens", even potted plants and window boxes. If you are fortunate enough to welcome these amazing tiny creatures, you can continue to water the plants around the nest, for the twigs lift the nest and allow for drainage. A French drain designed by a Carolina house wren: brilliant!

I think about this family of smart wrens as I house hunt myself. I am looking to down size and wherever I go, I look with the critical eye of the health agent. Not only can I not help it, I think of the female wren; I want to choose carefully rather than emotionally.

As with the wrens, drainage concerns me. Does the land slope away from the house? That is a good thing. I hope the gutter down spouts are not tied into underground pipes leading to the septic system leaching area, as I saw at a recent septic repair. That extra water from the large roof could have led to the failure of that leaching field, for it was not designed to handle that additional water.

Is the ground water high? That might not be obvious with an existing onsite septic system (as opposed to city sewerage) and a "passing Title V report". Just last Sunday I was looking at a house and the realtor told me enthusiastically, "It has the passing Title V!" I asked if she had the septic system plan. "Oh, yes. Let's see, it is here somewhere." She found the plan and to my surprise and delight, it was installed in 2011, in sandy soils, and was a gravity system (no pump required). I pointed out to her what great news this was because a recently installed, up to code system, in good soils, with no ground water issues, was all great news! It meant that down the line, many years from now, the repair would be the easiest, least expensive possible. Let me just say that she was happy she had brought the plan to the open house!

When it comes to these questions regarding the house's septic system, don't hesitate to contact the local board of health with questions. It is best to go in person and it is suggested that you ask when you might speak to the health agent. If your question is a basic one such as the year the system was installed or the bedroom capacity, then the administrative assistant can answer that over the phone for you. However, if you need to review the plan in detail or want to understand questions about groundwater and soils, it is recommended to make an appointment with the health agent.

My office receives lots of those calls and more recently than ever, for the housing market has changed. There's a housing buzz in the air and I am busy with perc tests and inspections of new systems. One factor seems to be a generational switch with baby boomers like myself looking to downsize and young couples looking to upsize. If we could only match up, we might be able to switch places!

My Carolina house wren babies will soon fledge, for they mature in only 12 to 15 days! How time flies and soon they will fly. The parents will downsize, as I am, and the young ones, they will start scoping out their future prospects. I hope they think like health agents and learned from their parents: location, location, location, good drainage, protection from the elements and choose well!

Watching these wrens raise their family gives me reason to rethink the phrase "bird brain". I am thinking bird brained sounds pretty good when it means choosing well and building well.

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