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# Painted anemone consumption of a Pacific Wren on Vancouver Island

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**Abstract:** A deceased Pacific Wren (*Troglodytes pacificus*) was observed engulfed by a painted/Christmas anemone (*Urticina crassicornis*) within an intertidal pool in Esquimalt, British Columbia.

**Key words:** Pacific Wren, *Troglodytes pacificus*, painted anemone, Christmas anemone, *Urticina crassicornis*, marine invertebrate, consumption, predation

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## Introduction

Sea anemones are sessile, predatory marine invertebrates that feed on smaller marine animals that become entangled in their sticky tentacles. Typically, this includes organisms such as small fish, crabs, and shrimps that are immobilized by toxins injected via stinging cellular structures (nematocysts) within the tentacles (Kozloff 1983; Ruppert and Barnes 1994) that quickly envelope the prey item. For anemone species that occur in hydrodynamic environments such as intertidal zones, greater dietary opportunities may be available during shallow water conditions when terrestrial species may be exposed to an anemone's tentacles if there is enough water for the tentacles to remain open.

## Field Observations

On 12 March 2022 at 16:47, a deceased Pacific Wren (*Troglodytes pacificus*) was observed enwrapped in the tentacles of a painted anemone (also called Christmas anemone *Urticina crassicornis*; Figure 1) at Saxe Point Park (Lat. 48.422442, Long. -123.419696) in Esquimalt, near Victoria, B.C. It is not known if the wren was alive or in a weakened condition when it came into contact and was entangled by the anemone's tentacles, or if it was already deceased and happenstance fell or drifted into the anemone and was engulfed.

At the time, only the head of the wren was visible and it was left undisturbed upon discovery, so it is not known

if rigor mortis had set in which may have provided insight as to the time of death. The lack of evidence of scavenging by marine or terrestrial animals (e.g., crabs, gulls, crows) suggests a short time frame since capture (Guy *et al.* 2014). No follow-up observations were made so it is not known how long the anemone took to consume the wren or if it was fully consumed.

## Discussion

Painted anemones can grow up to 30 cm tall and 20 cm in diameter and occur in intertidal zones to at least 30 m depth (Lamb and Hanby 2005). Owing to their relatively large size, they are capable of capturing and holding a small bird such as a wren (Po 2023). While their stinging nematocysts are not strong enough to affect humans, it is not known whether the toxin would be sufficient to paralyze a small bird. It seems unlikely that the nematocysts would be able to penetrate through feathers, but this possibility remains to be validated.

It is not known how a typically terrestrial bird species would get close enough to come into contact with an anemone, or if it was alive upon first contact. As Pacific Wrens are insectivores, it is possible the bird may have been foraging during low tide conditions on small marine amphipods such as beach hoppers (e.g., *Traskorchestia traskiana*, *Maera* species, *Megalorchestia* species; Lamb and Hanby 2005) that commonly occur in the intertidal zone. While marine invertebrates were not specifically listed as food items, the species is considered an opportunistic or weakly selective



Figure 1. Deceased Pacific Wren in the grip of a painted anemone, Saxe Point Park, Esquimalt, B.C., 12 March 2022.

forager (Toews and Irwin 2020), and Pacific Wren has previously been observed feeding on beach hoppers in washed-up kelp during low tide in the Courtenay area of Vancouver Island (Wong 2023).

There are documented accounts of a gull chick, gull remains, and cormorant nestlings being engulfed by a giant green anemone (*Anthopleura xanthogrammica*) in Oregon, but similar to this situation, it is not known if the chicks were dead or alive when contacted by the anemone (Guy

*et al.* 2014). However, these observations indicate that non-discriminant predation or feeding on dead vertebrates or their remains may occur on an opportunistic basis by these carnivorous marine invertebrates given the appropriate conditions.

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Thanks to Nathan Hentze for reaching out to BM to have this observation published based on CH's posting of the photo on the Facebook group Field Naturalists of Vancouver Island. Thanks to Catherine Po, Marine Educator, for confirming the identification of the Painted Anemone. Thanks also to Catherine Po, and three anonymous reviewers for manuscript review.

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