
THE BASIC BIRDER BACKYARD BIRD NEWS OCTOBER 2016

Cedar Waxwing



Bombycilla cedrorum

Cedar Waxwings are not a regular backyard bird that comes to our birdfeeders, but what a treat when a flock appears. They can usually be recognized by their soft call (a thin high pitched *tsee*) before actually being seen. They call often, especially while they are flying, to communicate with each other that they are afraid, hungry or that all is well. They are a sleek, mostly cinnamon colored bird with grayish colored wings, a crested head and a black mask. They are sized smaller than a Robin, usually 6 to 8 inches in length. When seen with binoculars, their beauty is more appreciated with lemon yellow tips seen on squared tail feathers and brilliant red waxy tips on secondary wing feathers. The red coloration comes from the type of fruits they eat.

Cedar Waxwings can be seen in the Midwest almost any time of the year, but their breeding and wintering areas may change from year to year, depending on food supplies. They are a very social bird that is nomadic and irruptive as they search for food, rather than doing a typical migration. Their diet consists mostly of

berries and insects like caterpillars, ants, mayflies, dragonflies and beetles. They will also eat some flowers and drink oozing sap. They are one of the few North American birds that specialize in eating fruit. The birds' name comes from their appetite for Cedar berries in the winter, and Waxwing comes from the red waxy tips on the wing feathers.

Cedar Waxwings spend most of their time in flocks, as they search for berry-bearing trees and scrubs. Their habitat includes open woodlands, hedgerows, orchards and suburban gardens. Hundreds of Waxwings can suddenly appear in an area to feed on fruit like they are at a banquet. Then, just like that, they disappear when the crop is exhausted. Here in the Midwest, they will visit our crabapple, cherry, honeysuckle, mountain ash, cedar, serviceberry, mulberry, chokecherry, elderberry and raspberry trees and bushes. In the summer, they can be seen hovering over rivers catching bugs as well as taking protein rich insects from foliage.

Water is another attracting feature for Waxwings, especially moving water. One winter, my heated birdbath with a water wiggler attracted a flock of 30 or more Cedar Waxwings. What fun to see them all drinking and bathing!

Nesting season for Cedar Waxwings is later than other spring birds, June thru August. In courtship, the male will do a hopping dance for the female. If she is interested, she will hop back. After that they will perch close together, touching bills and



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passing a flower petal or insect back and forth. They wait until the summer ripening fruits are available to feed to the young. At first the young eat mostly insects, and then more berries after a few days. The female usually constructs the nest in 5 to 6 days in a forked branch of a tree 3 to 50 feet tall. She lays 4-6 blue gray eggs that hatch in 11-13 days and fledglings leave the nest in a couple weeks. They may have up to two clutches of young a year.

Because Cedar Waxwings eat so much fruit, occasionally overripe fruit that has started to ferment can cause the birds to become intoxicated. One of their most amusing habits is when a berry is passed from one bird to the next, beak to beak, like they are playing a game. One bird will finally claim the prize and eat it. Sometimes they will even toss the fruit up in the air and catch it.

A similar bird is the Bohemian Waxwing which breeds farther north and west in Washington State, Canada and Alaska. They can occasionally be found in a flock of Cedar Waxwings and are larger and grayer in color.

If you have fruit trees or bushes, pay special attention to them if you see a flock of birds flitting around or eating fruit, they may be Cedar Waxwings. You may even consider planting fruit bearing trees or bushes in your yard to attract them as well as the Robins.

OCTOBER BIRD NOTES

Our summer birds have mostly left for warmer climates, so now we can welcome our fall and winter birds. These include the Dark Eyed Junco as well as possible Winter Finches such as Pine Siskins, Crossbills and Redpolls. There have also been sightings of Red-Breasted Nuthatches already this fall. Goldfinches will be turning color into their winter plumage, yellowish brown to gray.

Our year-round birds will be checking out our feeders now that the nesting season is done. You may want to consider switching or adding different seeds to your backyard feeders. Black oil sunflower seed is an excellent cool weather seed eaten by more birds than any other birdseed. Shelled peanuts and suet will supplement the bird's diet in protein since the insects will be disappearing. A heated birdbath will supply your birds with water, which can be hard to find in freezing weather.

Thank you to Paulette Lugg for writing this month's newsletter.

As we begin our 22nd year in business, we want to thank all of you, our loyal customers and friends for making this possible. We love sharing the joy of feeding and watching birds with you and plan to continue helping feed North Iowa's birds.

Thank you from our flock to yours!

Ellen, Kelly, Paulette and Doris

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