



BERRY BINGING: Known for its gluttony, the Cedar Waxwing packs 'em in.

if pigs could fly

AS THE SUN SINKS LOW and the world grows quiet on a summer evening, a sociable group could swoop in suddenly and put you in the company of Cedar Waxwings. These industrious food gatherers make the most of every hour of the day, chasing dragonflies and emergent insects over the water, fluttering in mid-air along the shore while plucking berries from bushes and trees, and exchanging their soft, high-pitched buzzings.

Among the most beautiful of North American birds, Waxwings are sleeker and more compact than American Robins, with a yellow belly, a dark crest, and a handsome black mask rimmed with white. Waxwings get their name from a most unusual feature, the bright red, waxy droplets that appear on the ends of the secondary feathers of more mature birds. Their tails are usually tipped with a yellow band though the Cedar Waxwing's growing reliance on the fruits of non-native honeysuckles has brought about a change in this trait. Waxwings with an orange, rather than a yellow, tail tip feed on these honeysuckles as fledglings when their wings are developing.

Cedar Waxwings may be striking in appearance, but few people recognize them because Waxwings rarely frequent backyard feeders. Instead, homeowners should check their ornamental plantings where Cedar Waxwings forage for the fruits of crab apples and dogwood. They are one of the few temperate birds that eat mostly fruit, and they time their reproductive cycles to coincide with summer months when fruits ripen. The dark purple berry clusters of the American Elder

are a favorite late-summer treat. Courting pairs have been spotted feeding apple blossoms to each other, and they hunt insects in the summer to add protein to their hatchlings' diets.

Rather than establishing and defending a territory as many bird species do, Waxwings nest in loose colonies and travel together year-round in small, nomadic flocks in search of food. Waxwings can eat voraciously since they have the ability to store food in their esophagi. They have been known to gorge themselves to the point of being unable to fly, and they can become drunk on fermented fruit. The 19th century naturalist, John James Audubon, reported gathering incapacitated Cedar Waxwings by hand.

Their numbers are growing as agricultural lands are reforested, a process that Cedar Waxwings have helped establish. They are one of the few birds that do not regurgitate the seeds of the fruits they eat. Instead, they swallow seeds and thus disperse them some distance from the parent tree or shrub. For example, Cedar Waxwings are thought to be largely responsible for the spread of juniper and many pioneer species such as pin cherries, which are among the first to take up residence in abandoned pastures.

A related species is the Bohemian Waxwing, which is found in more northern forests, though they occasionally visit Central New York. The white stripes on the wings of Bohemian Waxwings and their slightly larger size distinguish them from Cedar Waxwings.

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