

Bohemian Waxwing

Bombycilla garrulus

By Ted Brewer

Few encounters with birds stand out in my memory as strongly as the time a flock of several dozen waxwings possessed a mountain ash in my family's yard. It was a snowy winter day, and within minutes the "ear-full" (as groupings of waxwings are sometimes called) denuded the tree of its berries, plucking and then gobbling them whole. Almost as quickly as they mobbed the tree, they fled, true to the thief's mask that outlines the bird's eyes.

I don't know for certain if they were Bohemian or cedar waxwings. Since it was winter, they likely were Bohemians. These birds are strictly wintertime visitors to Montana and other western and midwestern states (migrating as far south as central California and northern Arizona). They begin arriving here from northern Canada in late October.

Cedar waxwings breed throughout the northern-tier states, including Montana. They aren't nearly as abundant in winter as in summer because the majority migrates to southern states and Mexico when the weather cools. Most cedars leave Montana by mid-October and don't return until May.

Identification

All waxwings are medium-sized, brownish-gray birds with a black face mask, feathered head crest, and tail tips that look like they were dipped in yellow paint.

Figuring out whether a waxwing is a Bohemian or a cedar can be difficult without binoculars. The Bohemian waxwing's belly is grayish rather than yellowish, and its undertail is cinnamon, unlike the white of the cedar's. Another identification tip is to look at the upperwings. The Bohemian has white markings and the cedar does not.

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Scientific name

The generic name *Bombycilla* is from the Latin *bombyx* ("silk") and *cilla* ("tail") and refers to the bird's silky-soft plumage. The species name *garrulus* (Latin for "chatter") is related to the English word "garrulous," meaning "extremely talkative," and refers to the bird's incessant, high-pitched trill—especially when in large flocks—which has been compared to the sound of a field of baby crickets.

Averaging 8 inches, Bohemians are also longer than cedars by about an inch.

Males and females of both species are nearly identical. The female is slightly smaller and has a smaller black chin patch. She also has fewer of the red waxy beadlike tips on her secondary wing feathers (for which the birds get their name).

Diet

Though a waxwing eats many insects in summer, berries rule the bird's winter menu, accounting for roughly 95 percent of its diet then. Both the Bohemian and cedar eat the berries of just about any tree or bush, especially mountain ash, juniper, holly, winterberry, sumac, and crab apple. It's not unusual to see their beaks smeared with berry juice.

Waxwings occasionally get drunk on fermented berries and then fly erratically, sometimes even crashing into windows.

Breeding

Bohemian waxwings nest in open conifer and mixed-conifer forests, especially the taigas of northern Canada and Alaska. True to the wandering connotation of its English name—Gypsies were also known as Bohemians, or people who had roamed westward from the central European region of Bohemia—the species does not defend breeding territory. That's why Bohemian waxwings have no territorial call. Because the birds depend on berries, a food source only temporarily available wherever waxwings happen to be, they are always moving and have no territory to protect.

Females lay four to six eggs. Incubation lasts about 14 days. The young are able to fly from 13 to 16 days after hatching.

Movements

Bohemian waxwings are an irruptive species, meaning they move in unpredictable migration patterns from year to year, often in huge numbers, depending on berry supplies. The birds gather in large winter flocks and will descend on a mountain ash or other tree. The noisy birds feed voraciously until nearly all berries have been consumed, sometimes within just a few hours, before heading to another tree. 🐼