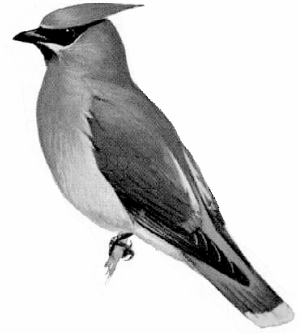


Cedar Waxwing

Have you ever witnessed a marauding band of cedar waxwings? I remember a loquat tree at our previous home in Florida. If I was fortunate I would be home at the right time to see the cedar waxwings come in a big flock and feast on the fruit. This was a noisy affair reminding me of an all-you-can eat buffet. All waxwings have a silky-textured earth-tone plumage, a velvety black face mask and throat, and a long pointed crest. The end of their tail feathers are yellow. Mature birds have bright red waxy tips that can be seen on their inner wings (primaries) and rarely on their tail feathers. I've always thought they looked like they were "dressed for dinner."



Why were these birds given such a bizarre name as "waxwing"? The bright waxy tips are found on both cedar waxwings and bohemian waxwings. An old Eskimo word for waxwings literally means "killer of small birds". Eskimo lore has it that the red tips were the clotted blood of the waxwing's victim. But waxwings diets are not carnivorous. Studies have shown that fruit, flower petals, and dripping sap makes up 80% of the waxwings diet. Insects, caught "flycatcher" style, make up the other 20%. No one is sure of the function of the red waxy tips that gave these birds their name. They may be repositories for the indigestible wax coating of many red fruits. Studies have shown the color may be altered by diet. The bright tips may serve a function as a signal saying, "stick with me and I'll show you where the red fruits are". Some researchers think the red tips are "badges" of old age and success, identifying the best mate prospects.

Waxwings are very social, moving from place to place to feed. They also tend to nest with several other pairs. For the waxwings "safety in numbers" is a real advantage. Since they feed on fruit laden bushes and trees, a predator could lie in wait in the bushes. With so many targets, he might be confused and unable to focus on a single bird. Also, more birds means many more eyes to watch for trouble. The name "cedar" waxwing suggests a strong association with cedars. Actually, today these birds feed on a large variety of fruits. Understanding the history of cedars helps explain this name. The tree associated with the bird is the eastern red cedar. It is really a juniper, not a true cedar. The eastern red cedar at one time was very abundant, and trees were much larger than they are now. Three centuries ago the trees were 40-50 feet tall. They would have played a big role in provided food for waxwings at that time, therefore leading to the name "cedar bird". These big cedars were slow growing. The wood was resistant to rot making it perfect for fence posts and rails. It also repelled many insects. You have heard of cedar-lined closets and cedar chests because of this trait. The pencil industry took the heaviest toll on the red cedar. Today the big trees are gone, and the pencil industry has moved west to take advantage of western red cedars.

Cedar waxwings have adapted well to human landscapes. They were made for suburban yards and parks. The fruit laden trees and bushes we plant provide lots of food. You can attract cedar waxwings to your feeder with raisins, bits of fruit, or peas. The best way to attract them however is to plant appropriate food plants. Planting native trees and shrubs that produce berries and fruits will draw cedar waxwings to your yard.

By Linda Vanderveen

Jerome Jackson. Birder's World, Galloping Gourmands. August 1997

Hernando Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society, P.O. Box 921, Brooksville, FL 34605. © Feb 2000
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