

Cedar Waxwings

These svelte and lovely, quiet birds can be seen during most of the year in Newton. During the winter they associate in loose flocks and dine on ripe fruits, including those on juniper (red cedar) trees and crabapples. During the rest of the year they will eat insects as well as berries and fruit. The pictures in this article are from February 20, 2011 in Newton.



— Pete Gilmore

The picture above shows a first year bird, which has no brilliant red edges to the secondary feathers on its wing. It does have the bright yellow ends to its tail feathers. These two flashes of brilliant color, together with the bird's habit of eating cedar berries, give these birds their common name of cedar waxwing. The striking black mask around the eyes, together with the smooth beige, gray and yellowish plumage on the body and wings, creates a very appealing look. The birds' silky smoothness gives them their Latin name, *Bombycilla cedrorum*, in which "cilla" translates as "tail," "cedrorum" as the "cedar tree" and "bombycinus" as "silken." The birds have a feathered crest on their heads, like Cardinals and Tufted Titmice. The crest might give them a wacky appearance, except for the black mask. The mask begins over the beak, runs through the eye, and curves up into the crest. It has a white border and gives a mysterious nuance to the bird's appearance.



— Pete Gilmore

The second picture shows the red tips of the secondary wing feathers on a full adult bird. The longest wing feathers are called "primary" feathers, and the next group of shorter wing feathers are called the "secondaries." The birds in this picture are dropping down onto the snow for a drink. You rarely see only one Cedar Waxwing. Notice the interest in one of the birds for the bird below it. These birds are quite social and you will occasionally see them passing fruit from one to the next down a line on a branch, until one eats the fruit.

There are only three species of waxwings in the world, one being local to eastern Asia and wintering in Japan while the other two are residents of North America. These are our Cedar Waxwings and the rarer Bohemian Waxwings, which are larger and similar to our Cedar Waxwings. The Bohemian Waxwings are more western and northern breeders and also are found across Eurasia. They visit us during some winters. They were seen this winter in western Massachusetts, and a few were on Plum Island in January. The Cedar Waxwings are the ones that are endemic to North America.

Cedar Waxwings share in all aspects of parenting. During courtship, the male and female will sit next to each other on a branch and pass berries back and forth. "Oh, no, dear, I insist," seems to be the generous and affectionate mood. They also will bond by bringing their beaks together. Both parents construct the nest. The two parent birds care for the feeding of the chicks in the nest. Cedar Waxwings do not have a song but do make a distinctive, high-pitched sound, which we can verbalize as "zzzeeee," staying mostly on the same pitch as the sound proceeds. This sound may help establish a small territory. But Cedar Waxwings will also nest in loosely associated groups of several couples. Thus, territoriality is much less pronounced than in most other songbirds.

Cedar Waxwings are among the species of birds that are doing well in proximity to humanity. We plant berry trees around our places. We create the edges of fields and woodlands, which these birds like. So the population of Cedar Waxwings has been increasing, unlike the populations of other songbirds. Cedar Waxwings nest late in the season like goldfinches. Starting a nest in July has the advantage of avoiding parasitic egg-laying by cowbirds. The young cowbird would end up being the sole survivor in the brood. Human alteration of the landscape has also increased the population of Brown-headed Cowbirds in North America, a big problem for many species of songbirds. But this is not so for Cedar Waxwings.

These exquisitely plumaged birds are around in Newton's open spaces. Nurture your spirit and take a slow walk outside in your city's open spaces when you can arrange some time to do so. Beauty is right there.

— Pete Gilmore