

# Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

## Description

The Cedar Waxwing is a member of the waxwing family. A sleek bird with a large head, short neck, and short, wide bill, waxwings have a crest that often lies flat and droops over the back of the head. The Cedar Waxwing is a brown bird with a black mask bordered narrowly by white. It has yellow tips on the short square tail feathers, and red wax-like tips on secondary wing feathers (Figure 1). The purpose of the waxy red secretions—which gives them the name “waxwing”—is unknown. The belly is a pale yellow; under tail coverts are white. The Cedar Waxwing is smaller and browner than the Bohemian Waxwing and lacks the Bohemian's yellow wing spots. The Cedar Waxwing is usually seen in flocks, which sometimes number into the hundreds. Males and females generally look alike, with the exception of darker colored chins on the males. Cedar waxwings are 6 to 8 inches long with a 12-inch wingspan. Adults weigh about an ounce. Their flight is characteristically strong and undulating. Their long wings enable them to reach speeds up to 29 mph.



Figure 1: Cedar Waxwing Rick Leche, “Cedar Waxwing” 05/22/2008 Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

## Diet and Feeding Behavior

The Cedar Waxwing mostly eats fruit (frugivorous). Most of its diet consists of berries, especially in the winter. Berries play a large role in the Cedar Waxwing's breeding, social and migratory behavior. Cedar Waxwings pluck berries while perching, hanging upside down, or briefly hovering in midair (Figure 2). Cedar Waxwings sometimes pass berries to one another as they perch in a line on a tree branch. The Cedar Waxwing also eats sap, flowers and insects. In the summer Cedar Waxwings may wait for an insect to fly by and then take off after it and catch it in the air. In the northern part of their range, cedar berries are an important food source. While most fruit-eating birds regurgitate seeds, Cedar Waxwings digest the entire fruit, and eventually disperse seeds in their feces. Occasionally they consume too much over ripened fruit, which may lead to intoxication and even death. Cedar Waxwings are often tame enough to feed near the feet of people.



Figure 2: Cedar Waxwing feeding on berries. Menke, Dave. USFWS.

## Reproduction

Both males and females mature at 1 year and live up to 8 years in the wild. Nesting coincides with summer berry production, putting the Cedar Waxwing among the latest of North American birds to nest. Cedar Waxwings defend only a small territory, so birds may nest in small colonies. In courtship, two birds may perch close together, posturing, touching bills, and passing food items back and forth until the female eats the item. Afterward, the female takes the lead on choosing a nest site and constructing the nest. The nest is on a horizontal tree limb or in a fork, usually 6-20 feet high, but can be lower or much higher (up to 50 feet). While the female incubates the eggs, the male brings food to the female and guards against predators. The 3-5 pale blue or blue gray eggs (finely spotted with black or gray), rest in a rather loosely built open cup of grass, weeds, twigs, and plant fibers lined with finer materials such as moss, rootlets, fine grass, or hair. With one to two broods from June to August each year, the naked, blind, helpless, yet quiet hatchlings weigh a little more than one-tenth of an ounce. Incubation is probably by female only, averaging about 12-13 days. Both parents feed the nestlings and the young leave the nest about 14-18 days after hatching, at which point they form flocks of their own.

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## Distribution and Habitat

Cedar waxwings live year round in the northern half of the United States (Figure 3). Non-breeding winter populations live in the Midwest and southern states south through Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, and the northwestern reaches of Columbia. Summer breeding populations are found from British Columbia, across Canada to Maine. The Cedar Waxwing occupies a variety of habitats from open woodlands to orchards and residential areas, especially those with fruit-bearing trees and bushes. In summer Cedar Waxwings are rather inconspicuous. In winter they travel in flocks of 40 or more, incessantly calling, turning and twisting in flight, and frequently alighting in the same tree. Cedar Waxwings use noises and physical displays to communicate with other flock members.

## Conservation Status

Cedar Waxwing numbers have been increasing for a number of years, partly due to the use of berry-producing trees in landscaping and the conversion of agricultural land to forest. There are currently no extraordinary conservation measures.

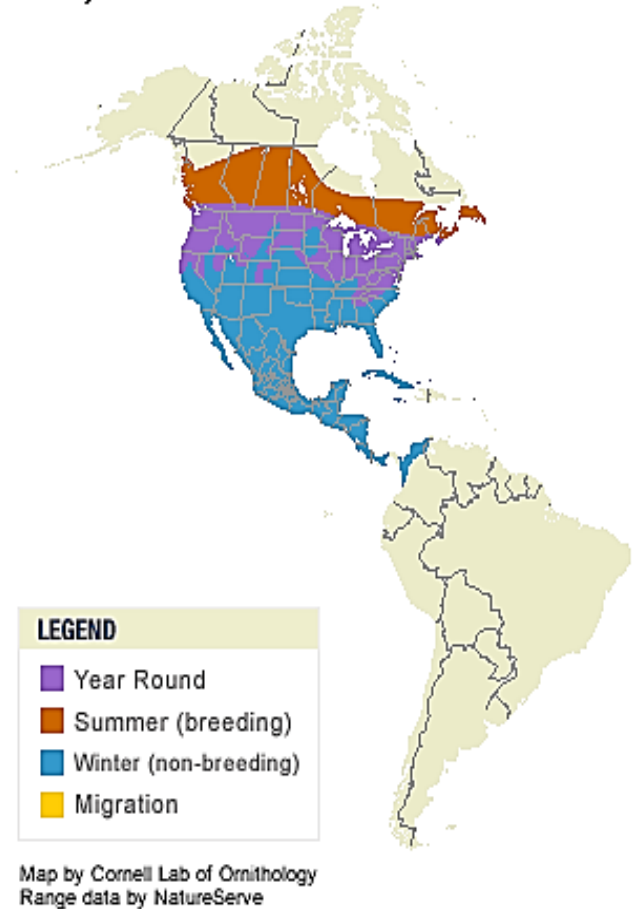
## Predation

Merlins (a falcon), hawks, and Common Grackles prey on adult Cedar Waxwings. Additionally, adults sometimes fall victim to bullfrogs when they drink from ponds. Jays and House Wrens eat juveniles and eggs. Brown-Headed Cowbird chicks in cedar waxwing nests typically don't survive, in part because the cowbird chicks can't develop on a high-fruit diet. (Cowbirds reproduce by laying eggs in the nests of other birds, with the cowbird chick outcompeting the chicks of the nesting parents.)

## Fun Facts

- Some Cedar Waxwings in the Northeast United States and Southeast Canada have an orange tip on their tails. This coloration is caused by berries of an introduced species of honeysuckle, (Morrow's honeysuckle), eaten while their tail feathers were growing.
- Adult Cedar Waxwings form monogamous bonds during each breeding season. The courtship ritual begins when a male dances for a female and gives her fruit, flower petals, or insects. If the female is interested, the gift is passed back and forth several times until the female eventually eats it.
- Building a nest takes a female Cedar Waxwing 5 to 6 days and may require more than 2,500 individual trips to the nest. They occasionally save time by taking nest materials from other birds' nests, including nests of Eastern Kingbirds, Yellow-Throated Vireos, orioles, robins, and Yellow Warblers.
- The oldest known Cedar Waxwing was 8 years, 2 months old.
- Waxwings do not seem to return to the same area every year so it seems that they lead a nomadic existence, probably governed by the availability of berries. This unpredictability was once thought to be a bad omen earning them the name of "pest-birds" in some parts of Europe.

Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum* Figure 3



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## References

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