

“Birds: Cedar Waxwing” by Sally Cureton

One of the most striking birds to be found throughout the United States is the cedar waxwing. Cinnamon colored with grayish wings and tails, the tips of their tails are yellow. They have a very distinctive crest on their heads with a black mask around their eyes. The name wax wing comes from the unusual red, waxy deposits at the tips of their secondary feathers on their wings. No one knows exactly what the purpose of these deposits is, but there is one theory that they have to do with mate selection. The male and the female are nearly identical and as a result it is very difficult to distinguish between them.



Cedar waxwings are very social birds and with flocks being common in all seasons, especially in the fall and winter. They even nest in small colonies. Their primary food source is fruit. During the winter this is generally their only food as they rely on the berries of trees such as juniper, wild cherries and dogwood. During the fall months they will also be found in orchards, especially cherries. Because of this preference for fruit, they are susceptible to the consequences of eating fermented fruit - that is alcohol intoxication, and even death. In the warmer months they will add insects to their diets and will consume many beetles, caterpillars and ants.

This preference for a fruit diet influences many other aspects of their lives. For instance, they are among the latest nesting birds, which allows them to take advantage of the abundance of fruit in late summer and early fall. They are also somewhat nomadic since they continually wander in search of food sources. As a consequence they do not undertake what we think of as a typical migration. The availability of fruit becomes more important in the winter months than temperature or latitude.

Cedar waxwings generally avoid the interior sections of forest preferring more open areas such as streams, forest clearings, wetland edges or even residential areas. I have seen them along the ridge area near the overlook in Massanutten. This is a gorgeous bird that is around much of the year and one that anyone with a fruiting tree has a good chance to find.