

ABOUT THE COVER: BOHEMIAN WAXWING

The Bohemian Waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*) is truly a bird of mystery. We know very little about its breeding biology and general natural history. It is an erratic and rare winter visitor to Massachusetts, sometimes suddenly appearing in small numbers in flocks of Cedar Waxwings or wintering American Robins, only to disappear the next day. Behaviorally, Bohemian Waxwings can be skittish or absurdly tame, especially if they are mildly intoxicated from eating overripe berry juice.

Noticeably larger and grayer than Cedar Waxwings, Bohemian Waxwings may be distinguished from their smaller relatives by their lack of yellow on the belly, rusty undertail coverts, and the presence of both yellow and white in the wings. Its name, waxwing, is derived from the red waxy material that is secreted at the tips of its secondary feathers. While the sexes are similar, juvenile birds may be separated from adults by their streaked underparts and whitish rather than black throats.

Bohemian Waxwings are circumpolar in their breeding distribution. In North America, they breed from Hudson's Bay, west across northern Canada into Alaska, and south to northern Washington, Idaho, and Montana. Their breeding biology is surprisingly poorly known. They are generally solitary nesters, but occasionally a few pairs breed in loose aggregations, typically in boreal coniferous and mixed forests and in muskeg. They tend to be erratic in their choice of breeding areas, with the location apparently influenced by local food abundance. The few reports of courtship displays mention strutting by the males, sometimes with drooping wings and spread tail. The song is reportedly a variation of the sibilant trill used as a flight call. The nest is a cup constructed of twigs, grass, and moss, and lined with fine plant fibers. It is often located close to the trunk of a tree, and is sometimes on a horizontal branch, at heights of four to eighteen feet above the ground. The black-spotted bluish eggs are four to six in number. It is not known if both sexes participate in incubation or feeding of the young, and the duration of both the incubation and fledging periods are also uncertain, although both are probably about two weeks. Young waxwings are fed both insects and berries.

Bohemian Waxwings are nomadic and irruptive, and their winter incursions south and east are probably triggered by food shortages. They occasionally invade the United States in large flocks and occur irregularly in southern California and northern Arizona. Their irruptions eastward and southward into Massachusetts have become more frequent in the past thirty years, with thirty-three individuals recorded in the winter of 1961-1962, and more than 300 in 1968-1969. Since then, Bohemian Waxwing sightings have been reported nearly every winter, including a number from Cape Cod and the islands off the coast of Cape Cod.

Bohemian Waxwings, like Cedar Waxwings, are opportunistic foragers that utilize a wide variety of food types. In the summer they feed on insects, berries, fruits, and flowers, but in winter, berries are their preferred food. They also have been reported eating tree sap, bugs, and seeds. In summer, similar to flycatchers, they hawk insects from perches. They are reputed to be exceptional gluttons, often filling their crops to capacity and, between meals, eating large quantities of snow. One report claims that they may eat two or three times their body weight in berries in a day!

When the cold winter winds sweep down from Canada, watch those flocks of Cedar Waxwings and robins closely, and check out any local patch of shrubbery with a good supply of berries. Eventually you may be lucky enough to find a Bohemian Waxwing, a species of striking beauty and a rarity worth searching for.

W. E. D.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

We are delighted to have another Barry Van Dusen drawing appear on *Bird Observer's* cover. Barry is a wildlife artist with a growing reputation. He was recently named the Audubon Alliance Artist of the Year for 1992, and his work was included in the important international show, "Birds in Art," at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin, in October 1991.

Barry lives in Princeton, Massachusetts, and has been an independent professional artist for nearly fifteen years. For the past eight years, he has worked closely with Audubon societies and conservation organizations throughout New England. His work has been featured in books, magazines, posters, and brochures involving many aspects of natural history, although his favorite subjects are birds. Among the titles Barry has illustrated is *Birding Cape Cod* (1990) and the forthcoming *Birds of Massachusetts*, authored by Richard Veit and Wayne Petersen.

Barry prefers to work from life, and spends many hours studying and drawing his subjects in the field. In November 1991, Barry spoke at the Third Annual Massachusetts Birders' Meeting in Shrewsbury on sketching in the field. His field work is an inspiration and reference for more finished pictures. "After an outdoor experience fills me with wonder and excitement," he says, "I try to determine the essentials of what I've seen and felt. I try to recreate the scene directly and economically, doing my best to preserve the spark and power of the original moment."

Barry currently has an exhibit of his artwork (through January 1992) at the Broad Meadow Brook Wildlife Sanctuary, 414 Massasoit Road, Worcester, Massachusetts. Some of Barry's pieces are also exhibited at least through January 1992 at the Sterling Mill Works, 15 Washacum Street, Sterling, Massachusetts. For future scheduled exhibits or additional information, Barry can be reached at 13 Radford Road, Princeton, Massachusetts 01541. M. J. S.