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NORTHEASTERN BIRD-BANDING ASSOCIATION

NOTES ON THE CEDAR WAXWING

(*Bombycilla cedrorum*)

BY CHARLES J. MAYNARD

As is well known, this species belongs to a group which has been a puzzle not only to systematists, but also to ornithologists at large. The three known species of Waxwings, distributed as they are over a wide section of the world—one, the Cedar Waxwing, peculiar to temperate North America, the Bohemian occurring both here and in Europe, and the Japanese inhabiting Japan and, somewhat sparingly, eastern Asia—would appear to indicate that they may be remnants of a larger group. This, and the fact that I had been familiar with our Cherry-bird, as I knew it, from early childhood, led me to make a rather close study of our species later in life, including habits and structure, both external and internal.

As bearing upon the points to which I wish to call especial attention at this time, I will first speak of the vocal organs. In dissecting a number of specimens, I found that these organs, as compared with those of other singing perchers, were poorly developed, but somewhat variable in this respect, some individuals being better equipped than others; yet although all were apparently in a degenerating condition, I concluded that it might be possible for some still to be able to utter louder and perhaps more musical sounds than the ordinary lisps. This appears to be true, for Mr. William Brewster in his "Birds of the Cambridge Region" (1906), page 308, speaks of hearing loud, mellow notes on several occasions.

One other account I find of other notes than the lisps, written by Mr. N. S. Goss in his "History of Birds of Kansas" (1891), where on page 514 he speaks of occasionally hearing these birds give low warbling notes.

As expressed in the conclusion of my article on the Cedar Waxwing in my "Vocal Organs of Talking Birds and Other Species" (1928), page 378, I consider such notes vestigial and unusual, for in all of my sixty years' observations of thousands of Cedar Waxwings I have never heard other than the lisps with their slight variations. Therefore, I should like to ask

readers of this article who have had different experiences kindly to inform me of well authenticated instances.

Another thing I learned in dissecting Cedar Waxwings was that the intestines were much shorter than in any other bird of a like size that I had ever examined, and I wondered what effect this would have in digesting food. Not long after, however, this question was answered. Two young Cedar Waxwings which had not long been out of the nest were brought to me alive but in an exhausted condition, having been nearly drowned during a heavy shower. I succeeded in reviving them by drying them and feeding them with bread and milk. They became very tame almost at once, and when I brought a branch of rum cherry covered with ripe fruit into the room where they were, both flew to meet me uttering their lisps louder and rather more hurriedly than usual.

After eating their fill of this fruit, and resting a short time, they began to regurgitate the cherry-pits, which fell to the floor quite rapidly, one after the other. Soon I noticed that the excreta had changed color, having been stained crimson with the cherry juice. Wishing to see how long the food was in passing through the alimentary canal, I re-fed the birds with bread and milk, then, when the stains had passed away, gave them cherries again and timed the passage of the food. I found that the stained excreta appeared in just twenty minutes after the first cherries had been eaten. This brief digestive passage did not give sufficient time for all of the nutritious matter to be absorbed from the food. The adult birds appear to be aware of this and have acquired the peculiar habit mentioned in the preceding article of eating the excreta of their young.

The closely allied Bohemian Waxwing (*B. garrula*) also has short intestines and, judging from the following quotation from a translation from the German of Dr. J. M. Bechstein's work on "Cage and Chamber Birds" published in London in 1853, only imperfectly digests its food. Speaking of some caged birds of this species on page 334, he says:

"It is easily tamed,—and is the greatest eater of all birds with which I am acquainted, as it consumes every day almost its own weight of food. This it soon voids in a half-digested state; and if fresh food is not speedly supplied, eats its own excrement. When juniper berries have been given it, I have known it to do this three times in succession."

In spite of the fact that the Cedar Waxwing has been an abundant species, and thus there must be a large number of specimens in collections, the sequence of the plumages is not

well known. The sexes are similar. The young in the first dress are dull-colored and obscurely streaked with dusky. The adult in its beautiful clothing is also well known, but whether the peculiar scale-like, horny expansions to the shafts of the secondaries (sometimes also appearing on the tips of the tail-feathers) are always assumed as one of the adjuncts of the perfected plumage appears to be somewhat uncertain. I have seen them on the young when they were in the nest, but the number of birds which are adorned with them in any stage of plumage appear too small, when compared with the Cedar Waxwings in existence, to suppose that all will receive them as a final gift. I base this opinion not only on general observation, but on the following:

In late March, 1900, I came across a flock of at least two hundred Cedar Waxwings which were feeding on the exceedingly bitter fruit of the inkberry (*Ilex glabra*) that were growing on low bushes in the pine woods near Enterprise, Florida. The birds were exceedingly tame and allowed me to walk within a few feet of them, so near that I could easily see the red tippings of the secondaries, when these were present, and by cautiously circulating about I could easily count the members of the flock. This careful count enabled me to estimate that there were only about ten per cent of the birds marked with red.

As intimated, it is difficult to define the successive intermediate plumages between the young and adult; it will be necessary to know the ages of the birds to do this properly. Here, then, is a good field for the bird-bander. Has any one ever banded Waxwings? They are usually so tame that they ought to be easily trapped. The young, even when out of the nest, can easily be taken without trapping, as shown by the following instance:

In the late summer of 1908 I was camped with two boy pupils on the borders of Hay Lake, some twenty-five miles north of Mt. Katahdin, Maine, when we were visited by two adult Cedar Waxwings, both with red-tipped secondaries, accompanied by four well-grown young. The adults were gathering ripe raspberries, which were abundant all about. Four berries were brought in succession by the parents and distributed to their offspring, one to each. They opened their mouths wide, and the berries were pushed well down into their throats. Four raspberries, no more nor less, were brought so constantly by the adults that we wondered whether they could count!

All were photographed by the boys several times, when,

wishing to get a picture of a group of three young that were perched in a small, slender tree, we bent it over to a level by passing a rope around the top without disturbing the birds. After the picture was taken two of the little fellows flew away. I approached the remaining one slowly, and, after standing beside it a moment, stroked it gently, then, putting my forefinger beneath its feet, lifted it off the branch. It flew back once, but remained on my finger after I lifted it a second time.

It remained on my finger about half an hour, readily taking the raspberries I offered it, even taking one from my lips. When the parents called, it was a little excited, but soon began to feed again. At length it flew to the tree where the rest of the family sat, and soon all were dashing through the air in pursuit of the adults.

Later in the day our pet appeared again and readily came to me for berries. I carried it into the tent, but it appeared somewhat frightened, flew about a little wildly, and perched on a tree near. It soon came to one of the boys who had a red handkerchief around his neck, then followed the handkerchief as it was passed from one to the other, possibly connecting its color with the red of the berries. These young birds gave low buzzing or crackling notes. The family all left at night and did not appear again.

Two or three years later, when with my class at the Summer School of the Amherst Agricultural College, we saw a good-sized young Cedar Waxwing sitting on a branch of shrubbery that grew on the campus. I asked some of the class if they did not want to have a near view of the bird. I then stepped up to it, put my finger beneath its feet, lifted it, and carried it to a member of the class, who took it in the same way and after a moment passed it to another. Thus it was passed from hand to hand without making any attempt to fly.

Judging from records of the status of the Cedar Waxwing, it is far less common now than it was in the past. At the present time it is one of the species that we, at least in this section, see far less of than many others. It is single-brooded and nearly a perfect nomad, wandering from place to place where it can best find suitable food. It is a degenerate remnant of what is probably a degenerate group. All of these things would appear to warn us that if we would know the entire history of the Cedar Waxwing we had better study it now. To my present regret, I allowed the Florida Paroquet to pass nearly or quite out of existence with much of its internal structure unknown, when once I had the birds in abundance all about me.

457 Crafts Street, West Newton, Mass.