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## Birds of Barrington: CEDAR WAXWING—THE BERRY BIRD

If there were a prize offered for the most elegant among songbirds, the Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) would be a serious contender. Sleek, crested, black-masked, suavely-toned in fawn and yellowish plumage with red and yellow details, the waxwing can look almost porcelain instead of feathered.

Mid-to-late summer is a good time to be on alert for Cedar Waxwings. They nest later than many songbirds and are busy feeding their not-so-elegant offspring. Most likely they nourish the young with insects, but before long that diet will change largely to berries and other fruit. In fact, Cedar Waxwings are often known as “cherry birds” or “berry birds”.

Since many local trees and shrubs—black cherry, dogwood, viburnum, shadblow, choke cherry—come into full fruit by late July, that’s when the berry birds live up to their name. They descend on the bushes and trees and devour the fruit, sometimes stuffing themselves to the point

they can’t fly. The most interesting behavior occurs when several perch on a branch and pass a berry from one beak to another and back again, until one bird swallows it. I have witnessed this behavior on several occasions. It is riveting—and almost comical—to watch.

For the last several years, waxwings have nested in the oaks around our home, at the edge of Spring Creek Forest Preserve. They are what I would term social nesters; usually there are several pairs nesting in adjacent trees. This year I first noticed nest-building on June 19. What intrigues me about the birds and endears me to them is that both male and female fully synchronize their efforts: they fly to the ground together to gather twigs and plant material, they fly to the chosen branch junction to deposit and position the load, then repeat the routine over and over until the cup-shaped nest is complete, a process that takes several days. All the while they vocalize, but unless your ears are attuned to the thin, shrill notes,

you’re liable not to notice them.

The Cedar Waxwing’s name derives from a fondness for cedar berries and from the waxy, red appendages at the tip of many adult wings. Besides that unusual field mark, the bird also looks like it dipped its tail into bright yellow paint. Both markings are fun to spot on this species.

The good news is that it is possible to find Cedar Waxwings during all seasons in Barrington. While many may migrate short distances southward, a good number will hang around even during winter, usually in large flocks, wheezing their shrill calls as they fly en masse in search of persistent fruit and descend on a tree or bush to gorge on the berries they prize. U



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