

# Home & Garden Education Center



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EXTENSION

## The Magnificent Cedar Waxwing

By Pamm Cooper, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Cedar waxwings have been one of my favorite birds since childhood. I used to climb a tree near the swamp and sit quietly while small flocks of these birds would launch from nearby alders and swamp maples to capture the insects that flew above the water. They were so intent on pursuing the smorgasbord of insects that abound in wetlands that sometimes they would almost land on my head, veering away at the last minute. Like most birds, that fly-catch, they may seem unaware of your presence since all their focus is directed to catching these quick flying insects.

Waxwings have beautiful form and coloring. Their body is a combination of a rich light brown and some gray with a lemon yellow underbelly. Some birds are accented by bright red, wax-like tips on their wing feathers. Tails of adults are tipped with bright yellow while fledglings may have an orange band. If they eat enough fruits from an introduced honeysuckle species, the tail tips of both adults and juveniles may turn orange. Dapper with a crest like a cardinal and a black mask through the eyes, the waxwing is a striking bird. And, their high pitched, thin whistles tell you when they are nearby or flying overhead.

Some of the best places to find cedar waxwings are around water including ponds, rivers, waterfalls and lakes in the spring and summer where insects are abundant, or around trees and shrubs that provide fruits and berries to eat from summer through winter.



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Cedar waxwings get their common name from the cedar trees from which they obtain fruit and from the red wing accents. They are mainly fruit eaters and ingest both the seeds and pulp, unlike many other birds that regurgitate the seeds. They will also catch insects on the fly, especially near streams, bogs, lakes and other water bodies. They do seem to switch to a more protein rich insect diet in summer, then return to fruits as they become more abundant in late summer and fall. In winter, look for waxwings wherever there are winterberry, cedar, inkberry, crabapples and other fruits still remaining, especially after snowstorms. Sometimes waxwings and even robins can become intoxicated from eating berries or crabapples that have started to ferment.

Image by Pamm Cooper, UConn.

Waxwings have an endearing habit of sharing food, sometimes even passing a berry down to the last bird in line. They are social, and seldom found alone. Sometimes their numbers can be so large that they can strip a tree of all its fruit in a matter of hours. The one thing I have noticed is that they take turns when in large groups. For example, one group will settle in to feed on crabapples, and another group will settle in to a treetop nearby. All of a sudden, the ones feeding will start whistling and fly off and the group that was patiently waiting without a peep will fly in to take their turn. This can go on all day, especially in the winter when food is scarce after a good snowstorm. Of course, they will still carry on this way even during the middle of snowstorm, making for a good photo opportunities as they are not particularly shy birds.



Image by Pamm Cooper, UConn.

Keep your eyes and ears open, and look for cedar waxwings near water features this time of year and check out any trees or shrubs that still have fruit remaining in the fall and winter. You may be rewarded with a great opportunity to observe these beautiful birds.

If you have questions about cedar waxwings or on other home and gardening topics, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at (877) 486-6271, check out our [website](#), or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.