

Conservation Corner

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Last week I was working quietly at my desk when suddenly a loud thunk broke my concentration. I glanced out my window just in time to catch a Cedar Waxwing beating a fast retreat from its reflection. And then I noticed the lively addition of a small flock of Cedar Waxwings amongst the bright red fruit of the flowering crabapples north of our office building. And while flying into windows isn't the best idea for anyone, including waxwings, it did give me an idea for this week's article.



Fall here in Iowa is not only harvest season but also moving season for many of nature's creatures. With our recent mild weather, many migration schedules have been delayed. We trust the Monarch Butterflies, including the 21 we banded here in Pocahontas County, are well on their way to Mexico along with many other insects, songbirds, waterfowl, and bats.

Migrating birds are somewhat like us when it comes to traveling plans. Some fly almost nonstop across the continent. Others take their time, stopping along the way to rest and feed, including the Cedar Waxwings who had stopped for a snack of crabapples.

Cedar Waxwings are members of the Passeriforme Order which contains over half of all bird species. Passerines are also known as the perching birds. One of their distinguishing characteristics is the arrangement of their toes, 3 forward and one back. A tendon pulls and tightens the toes, causing the foot to curl and become stiff and allowing the bird to sleep without falling off its perch.

Cedar Waxwings are sociable birds, gathering in flocks year round. In this case, birds of a feather really do flock together. Because they stay in flocks pretty much all the time, they do not defend individual territories. So, while many passerines are wonderful singers, the waxwing is not. A tree filled with waxwings is quiet, far different from a noisy tree filled with Red-Winged Blackbirds or American Goldfinches.

Cedar Waxwings are named for their fondness for cedar berries and the bright red waxy tips that adorn their secondary feathers. These tips are rather unique in the bird world but their function is not known, although they do help in sexing and aging the birds. Another colorful plumage detail that also helps in aging and sexing waxwings is the yellow on the tips of their outer tail feathers.

Cedar Waxwings are strong, direct flyers, and it was fun to watch them battling the wind currents north of our office building. Perhaps you've also watched foraging flocks of waxwings feeding on dogwoods, serviceberries, junipers, hawthorns, or winterberries. In the spring and early summer, before many berries ripen, waxwings add cottonwood catkins and insects to their diet. And if the berries are clustered at the end of the branch, Cedar Waxwings will line up along the branch and pass the berries down the row so everyone gets a chance to eat. Sharing and taking turns, sounds like another good idea.

