

(Jim Guyton)



Bombycillidae the WAXWINGS

Waxwings are the celebrities of the songbird world. When a flock shows up, all eyes turn to marvel at their sleek, streamlined, elegant figures. To call these birds beautiful is an understatement. When seen in good light, waxwings are simply gorgeous. From the peak of their stylish crests, to their dark eye lines, and down to their yellow-tipped tails; they are a sight to behold. They get their common name from the tasteful splash of red on the tips of their secondary wing feathers, which look like they were dipped in hot red wax.

There are two species of waxwings in North America, the Bohemian Waxwing, found mostly in western states and provinces, and the Cedar Waxwing which is widespread over much of the continent. The Cedar Waxwing is the only one that has been found in the Carolinas.

Waxwings have a dark secret that has been whispered about for years, but has only recently been fully exposed in the public eye. These birds occasionally get blind, stinking drunk—sometimes to the point of killing themselves. For years, Carolina birders have been reporting various accounts of Cedar Waxwings acting drunk, staggering around in their yards and flying into branches or windows. Now, scientists have figured out why.

Waxwings eat an average of 84% fruit in their diet; this is more than any of our other birds. A study published in the *Journal of Ornithology* in 2012 found that dining on overripe berries can result in too much ethanol in the bird's system, and the bird actually gets drunk. Compounding this problem is the fact that waxwings lack a sizable crop and uneaten fruit is stored in their esophagus, which allows it to continue to ferment, resulting in alcohol concentrations as high as 1,000 parts per million. Sadly, as is the fate of many celebrities, these out of control birds often meet an untimely end.

Waxwings aren't the only birds that can get drunk off berries. Bill Williams shared one account of a group of drunken birds, including a Cedar Waxwing, that he watched in Gaston County. He titled it "Some birds really dig that wild joy juice," and it was published in *The Gastonia Gazette* in May 1969:

Anyhow there I was in the backyard trying to build a patio, when these birds kept interrupting. They would come up out of the woods wide open, hit the open space between the trees and the house like it was a straightaway and zoom over my head like they were bombing the gold out of Fort Knox. Then, they would circle across the rooftop, around the chimney, and come back to land in the oak tree above my head. There they called me every name in the book, and it was fowl, fool, and flutter. I finally got the idea that these two guys (or girls...or one of each, I had no way of knowing) had been down in the wine cellar too long. They kept flapping around in the tree and would have fallen to the ground if their parents hadn't been birds.

Come to think of it, they kept going back to the wild strawberry patch, and by now some of those wild strawberries are so wild that it certainly isn't beyond reason that a bunch of birds could get soused on them in due time. ...Then they all came back to the oak tree above my head in a very schnozzed-up condition. I got to thinking that all this might have been illegal a couple of years ago before the citizens banded together and voted alcohol in. ...I have always suspected birds to have a weakness and it apparently is hitting the berries at all hours of the day.