

Cedar Waxwing *Bombycilla cedrorum*



Folk Name: Carolina Waxwing, Cedar-bird, Cherry-bird

Status: Winter Resident and sporadic Breeder

Abundance: Common

Habitat: Scattered trees in open woods with fruit-bearing trees, urban areas with ornamental berry crops

Flocks of hundreds of Cedar Waxwings can be found each winter wandering throughout the Central Carolinas. Some regional Christmas Bird Count tallies have estimated close to 1,000 birds in the count circle in one day. Most waxwings are found in the Piedmont between August and May; some linger here into early June. Elizabeth Clarkson reported them leaving on 27 May in 1943 and remarked:

They usually stay with me until about June first, because I have so many berries and they won't leave till every mulberry is gone, but my crop failed this year—the late freezes got them.

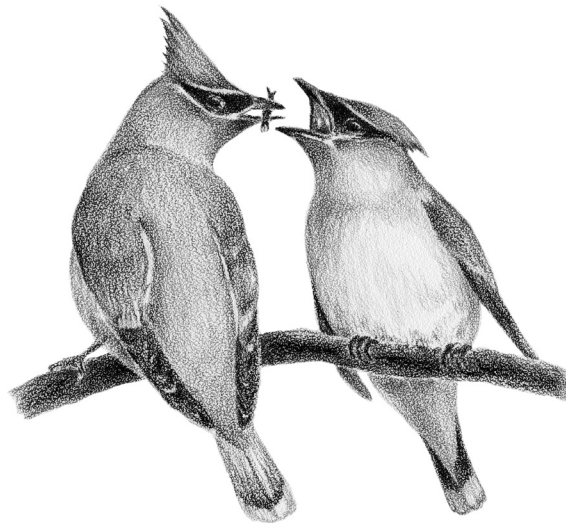
Small flocks of non-breeding birds have been recorded here as late as 14 June.

Cedar Waxwings are often described as “nomadic,” because they are so irregular in their seasonal numbers and distribution throughout the Carolinas.

“During the winter of 1877–1878 these birds were very abundant; so numerous did they become that even the casual observer noted their unusual numbers; but the following winter they were not abundant. Not observed in summer.” —Leverett Loomis, Chester, 1885

“I am sure of a flock of 25 or 30 cedar waxwings. They delight in the privet berries and the little brook is a favorite watering place. The day before, I saw a flock of waxwings fly over my house in Dilworth. These birds are especially common this spring.”

—William McIlwaine, Charlotte, 1929



“Especially plentiful this winter.”

—Charlie Sellers, Charlotte, 1940

Flocks of waxwings are often heard before they are seen, as members of the flock make a characteristic high-pitched, piercing whistle. They commonly perch in the tops of trees, or land down amongst the branches to feed on berries:

“When a wandering flock of waxwings alights in a tree, its members often sit so close together that a single discharge of a shotgun might bring down thirty of them; in fact, we have seen this occur in the old thoughtless days before the laws and public sentiment came to protect this well-groomed, genteel bird.”

—Pearson, Brimley, Brimley, 1942



Juvenile Cedar Waxwing. (Lee Weber)



Cedar Waxwing showing red “waxwing” field mark. (Jim Guyton)

In our area, waxwings seem to prefer cherries, cedar berries, mulberries, holly berries, hackberries, and the fruit of the privet bush and the black gum tree:

“I wish you bird lovers could see a large native cedar tree in my backyard this last day of February. It is blue with berries and many kinds of birds are trying to gobble them up. I’ve counted over 150 Cedar Waxwings which make a beautiful picture with their silky plumage glistening in the sunlight. It seems they gather in groups when feeding.”

—Mrs. Olin Griffith, Fort Mill, March 1949

Many waxwings supplement their diet of fruit by eating insects. A brood of periodical cicadas, also called “17-year locusts,” emerged in the North Carolina Piedmont in the spring of 1945. Archie Shaftesbury noted they “have been emerging by countless thousands after nearly 17 years spent underground, and are furnishing food for many birds. I have watched flocks of Cedar Waxwings feeding on these insects, and several other observers have reported seeing Waxwings and Scarlet Tanagers joining the feast.” In 2011, another 17-year brood emerged around Charlotte, creating quite a stir. Many thousands emerged en masse in some areas. Once again, birders reported observing flocks of Cedar Waxwings enjoying this rare feast.

Cedar Waxwings breed in both Carolinas, but their breeding status was poorly understood until the end of the twentieth century. Nest evidence was scant in North Carolina until the 1980s, and only one nest was known from South Carolina prior to 1982. In 1998, Herb Hendrickson of UNC Greensboro and Dave Lee of the North Carolina State Museum published a paper describing an expansion in the breeding range of the waxwing in North Carolina, and in 2003, results from the *South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas* provided nesting data

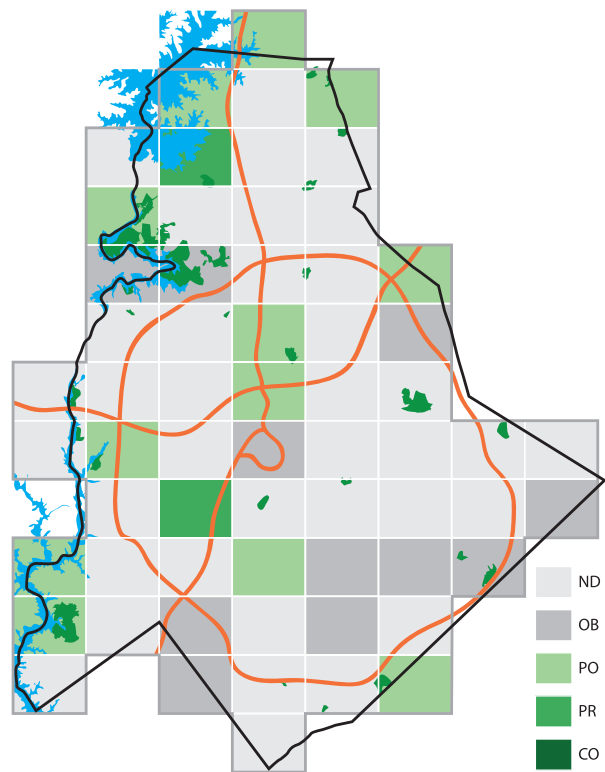


Cedar Waxwing at nest at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge. (Peter Quadarella)

for that state. The presence or absence of berries appears to be one limiting factor for nest sites, and consequently—in contrast to many passerine birds—the nest site fidelity of Cedar Waxwings is very low, as crops of berries fluctuate from year to year.

Breeding reports in the Central Carolinas are summarized below. Direct evidence of nesting is limited. The peak of nesting in this region appears to be between mid-June and late July. Some birds may be found nesting into early August. In the Piedmont, nests have been found built 30–70 feet up in sweetgum, cedar, white pine, or mulberry trees. In a letter to C.S. Brimley, Davidson’s Elmer Brown shared one of the earliest records of the nest of a Cedar Waxwing ever recorded in North Carolina. He found it in Watauga County on June 10, 1925: “It was about forty feet up in a hemlock tree, and about five feet out from the main trunk. The nest was rather bulky, was lined with wool, and contained four fresh eggs.” A few weeks later, Brown watched three Cedar Waxwings flying over Salisbury on July 5, 1925, and considered nesting in Rowan County a distinct possibility.

William McIlwaine shared this account of suspected breeding in Charlotte about 1930: “On one occasion I saw the young of this species in company with what I took to be their parents. They flew perfectly well, but they had funny, short tails. I assume, though I cannot say with positiveness, that these birds were born not far from



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Very Local (PR/2, CO/0)

Charlotte. I saw them in the Steele Creek section.”

On June 27, 1932, Elmer Brown discovered two Cedar Waxwing nests in Iredell County “at Dr. L.E. Kiser’s place at the end of East Broad Street” in Statesville. He reported “This bird is an irregular summer visitor, rare in this section of the state.” A third nest was found near this spot later that July. Grace Anderson found an early Cedar Waxwing nest in Statesville in May 1943.

Joe Norwood watched a Cedar Waxwing, “apparently in courtship behavior,” feed another waxwing buds from a maple tree in Charlotte on the very early date of February 27, 1961. Jeff Lemons reported an adult feeding a berry to another adult in Cornelius on June 9, 2012.

A pair of Cedar Waxwings with young in a nest was discovered in a white pine tree in Cleveland County on June 12, 1990, and a pair was observed building a nest in Lattimore in early June. Paul Hart found two at Crowders Mountain in Gaston County on June 18, 1984, and Bill Hilton Jr. spotted two in York County on June 22, 1984—dates which also were suggestive of breeding. Lex Glover found a pair at Carolinas Sandhill NWR on June 7, 1991, and saw a bird carry food to a nest on 26 June.

The most recent report was of a nest found at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in Anson County. Matt Janson observed a pair of waxwings building a nest along the boardwalk on Wildlife Drive on June 6, 2016.