

Bohemian Waxwing

Bombycilla garrulus

Waxwings of the family *Bombycillidae* (meaning "silky tail") are friendly, nomadic flocking birds known for their sleek plumage. The word "waxwing" refers to the colorful, wax-like substance exuded on the tips of their secondary wing feathers, reminiscent of bright-red sealing wax. All waxwings have black masks, long crests and yellow-tipped tails. Where berries are ripening, waxwings congregate to gorge themselves in amiable, noisy flocks. In flight, their silhouettes and flock formations resemble those of starlings. Although the Bohemian Waxwing occurs in the northern part of Czechoslovakia (Bohemia), it is actually so named for its wandering nature.

In tame and gregarious flocks, Bohemian Waxwings inhabit open, coniferous-deciduous forests and often perch atop black spruce. These 21cm birds are medium-sized, with small heads, round bodies, short tails and black bills and feet. Adults of both sexes are similar, displaying vibrant black, white, yellow and red wing-markings. A lustrous, solid-gray overall, the face, nape and undertail coverts of adults are washed in cinnamon while the throat is black. In flight, the white wing-patch at the base of the primary feathers is conspicuous. Juvenile birds are more brown overall and streaked on the breast and flanks.



The rattling song of the Bohemian Waxwing is an irregular series of slow, low-pitched "scree" notes, much like the hum of crickets. The constant, clamorous calling of the flock is a high and thin, "sreeee." A piercing "sceeeeeew" alarm call is given to warn the flock of aerial predators. The typical loud and social nature of these birds has earned them their specific Latin name, *garrulus*, which means "chattering!"

Bohemian Waxwings build their bulky, cup-shaped nests in conifers (spruce) at variable heights and positions. Constructed of grasses, twigs and mosses and lined with fine materials, the nest cushions the 2-6, 25mm eggs of the clutch.

Eggs are pale bluish-gray and marked with black, particularly at the larger ends. Little is known about the reproductive biology of this species. It is thought that the clutch is incubated for about 14 days and that the young birds fledge in 13-16 days post-hatching.

Bohemian Waxwings form large, non-territorial feeding flocks. Prone to gluttony, these birds are known to ravenously feast on berries, small fruits, flower petals, tree sap and insects gleaned from foliage. Young birds are reared on both insects and berries. Adults also hunt by pursuing flying insects from their perches (hawking). In winter, berries, fruit and tree sap compose the majority of their diet.

The Bohemian Waxwing wanders in winter flocks with Cedar Waxwings and American Robins in scattered locations throughout North America. Their winter range varies widely and unpredictably but probably follows the food supply. In summer, they span throughout most of Alaska, and Yukon Territories, Northwest Territories and British Columbia, Canada to northern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Canada.