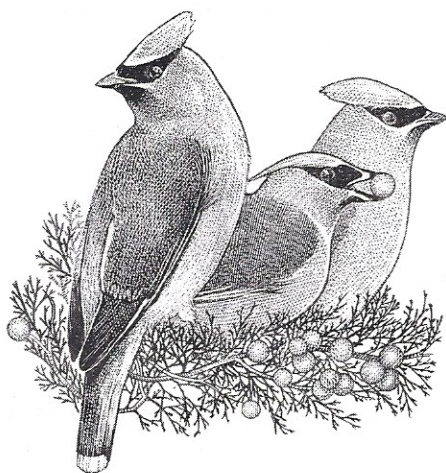


## What's In a Name? The Case of the Cedar Waxwing

On a bitterly cold December morning, I stared out my office window looking for signs of life in a dormant garden. Before me was a palette of browns and greys, the last few leaves hanging like dried frozen tissues pinned to the branches. The only green plants left were the evergreen crossvine and the Eastern red cedar.



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*Cedar Waxwings on an Eastern Red Cedar branch*

I went back to the note I was writing on the most beautiful songbirds of North America. I had just attached a photograph of a Cedar Waxwing, the loveliest of them all in my opinion. I started to describe it: a starling-size bird whose plumage is a subtle mix of brown, grey, and warm yellow, set off by a stylish crest and a narrow black mask outlined in white, all accessorized by bright red “wax-like drops” at the edge of its wing feathers and a yellow tip to the tail. I noted how the Cedar Waxwing had evolved such sophisticated plumage, but was stuck with the unassuming first name, “Cedar.”

That sentiment set me thinking about birds that, unlike our waxwing, are splendid not only in appearance but also nomenclature. For example, there is an African bird named the Superb Starling that sports a gorgeous medley of iridescent blues, greens, violets, and orange-red feathers. Then there is the Marvelous Spatuletail—a rare hummingbird native to Peru that shows off its long tail plumes tipped with blue “racquets.” Did the ornithologist who named the Waxwing even consider the

possibility of the Wonderful Waxwing or the Elegant Waxwing, or the Stunning Waxwing as a more accurate alternative? Why such a drab name for such a beautifully marked bird? Even its close relative, the less handsome, slightly more robust northern version, the Bohemian Waxwing, conveys an image of a species higher on the hip-meter.

I was interrupted from my musings on the naming practices of unimaginative taxonomists by a flock of birds alighting in the cedar. I saw a few European Starlings tugging at the fleshy blue cones, also known as juniper berries, but they were outnumbered by a throng of Cedar Waxwings. You never see just one Cedar Waxwing; they almost always move in large, often nomadic flocks in search of their favorite food—fleshy fruit. They clung to the cedar branches like it was a Christmas tree studded with living ornaments.

Perhaps it was one of life’s coincidences, or a naturalist’s good fortune, that I was writing about waxwings and *voilà!*—they suddenly appeared. But they are frequent visitors to my backyard, the high thin whistles of the flock announcing their approach as they descend to feed on the fall and winter fruits scattered about the garden. In the bird literature, several ornithologists have observed waxwings gorging on fermented overripe fruits and becoming intoxicated. There are even reports of waxwings dying from what must be a kind of alcohol poisoning. “Too much of a good thing” applies to overindulging birds as well as to us.

One risk of dependence of a heavy fruit diet is simply finding enough of it, especially for these birds that overwinter. There is a silver lining, however: the brown-headed cowbird, the notorious native bird that is a frequent nest parasite of other songbirds, sentences its young to starvation if they stash their eggs in a waxwing nest, hoping the mother waxwing will raise a cowbird chick instead. Wee little waxwings do fine on a diet of berries, but the young cowbirds need more nutritious fare and perish on the same fruit regimen. Waxwings are not exclusively fruit eaters; during the spring and summer they will swoop and twirl like chubby swallows, chasing flying insects over a flowing river.

One of the mysteries surrounding Cedar Waxwings is the bright red tips found on the wings of some birds, male and female alike. In fact, the name “waxwing” comes from these waxy red secretions. Why would both males and females be marked so, and other waxwings not at all?

The answer, discovered in the mid-1980s, in a moment, but first a useful preamble: there is a common unwritten rule in biology that when you cannot explain the presence of a strange growth on an animal—such as horns, antlers, or wattles—invoke sex. Specifically, that the presence or variability of that physical trait, however odd it seems to us, is exactly the cue the female is looking for to find the most vigorous male (genetically speaking). Another variation on the animal romance theme, one that waxwings seem to practice, is known as “assortative mating”: animals of a particular phenotype (appearance) choose partners of a similar phenotype more frequently than would be expected by chance. In the waxwing’s case, sexually mature birds pair up with another having an equal number of red tips on the feathers and proceed to breed. The maximum known age of a Cedar Waxwing exceeds a little over 7 years, and assortative mating ensures that more mature birds choose a mate within their own age group or year. There are no Hugh Hefner-like waxwings in nature, or at least there seems to be selection against old lechers gaining access to pretty young birds.

Watching the waxwings pluck cedar berries for about a half hour, stripping the branches of the blue cones, the name becomes obvious to even a non-ecologist. The tree is their namesake: on a frigid day, a female red cedar full of fruit is an irresistible draw. Cedar waxwings are also fond of eating the fruits of dogwood, holly, serviceberry, hawthorn, and winterberry. When they eat a lot of invasive honeysuckle berries, the pigment contained in them turns the yellow tips of their tails a glowing orange.

To me the Honeysuckle waxwing or the Serviceberry waxwing is no more exotic a name than the Cedar’s. But maybe that is the point. Birders, or naturalists of any stripe, often become so hung up on names that it detracts from the beauty in front of their eyes. If the Cedar waxwing is the most elegantly plumaged songbird bird in North America, does it really matter what you call it? —