

Wildlife Express!

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Waxwings

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Meet the Waxwings

Have you ever heard a lot of high thin whistles coming from birds feeding in a fruit tree? If so, you have probably met a waxwing. They are a type of songbird. Only three species of waxwing are found in the entire world! We are lucky in Idaho because we have two of these species. They are the cedar waxwing and the Bohemian waxwing. The third kind of waxwing lives in Asia.

Waxwings are very beautiful birds. They are light-brown with gray on their sides. They have a black mask across their eyes and a little crest on their heads. The end of a waxwing tail has a yellow band. It looks like it was dipped in yellow paint. The tips of their wing feathers have small red spots. These markings give waxwings their name. Many years ago, people sealed their letters using sealing wax. The red spots on the waxwing feathers reminded people of sealing wax, so people called the birds, waxwings.

Cedar waxwings are about seven inches tall. They are our most common waxwing and are found all over Idaho. They live in open forests often along streams. Bohemian waxwings are winter visitors to Idaho. They are our

largest waxwing, almost nine inches tall. These waxwings are more colorful than cedar waxwings. They have white and yellow tips on their wing feathers as well as red spots. The feathers underneath their tails are rust-colored. Bohemian waxwings are very nomadic and move around a lot, especially during the winter. They do not come to Idaho every winter. When they are here, large flocks can be seen all over the state.



Bohemian waxwing wing

Both species of waxwing are very social. They form flocks in the winter and even nest together in groups. Nests are open cups built on a branch near the trunk of a tree. Female waxwings do most of the nest-building. One cedar waxwing female was seen making 2,500 trips to bring materials to her nest. The nest is often camouflaged with mosses and lichens. Waxwing eggs

are pale blue-gray with a little bit of dark spotting. Both parents take care of the nestlings.

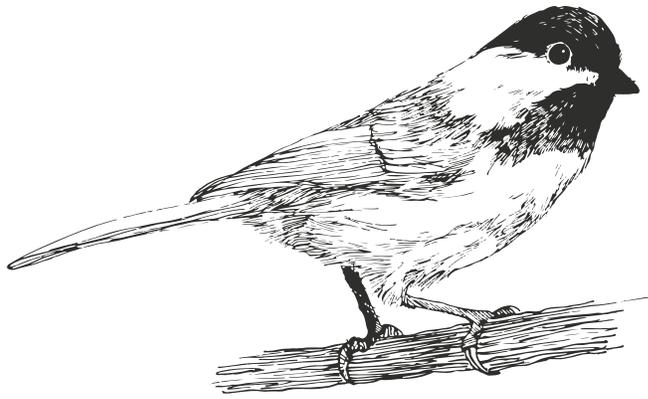
Waxwings eat mostly fruit. In fact, they eat more fruit than any other bird in North America. Fruits from serviceberry, chokecherry, dogwood, crabapple, mountain ash, juniper, strawberry and blackberry are all eaten by waxwings. Because they move around in a flock, one group of birds can quickly eat all the fruit off a tree. One birdwatcher saw a flock of 2,000 Bohemian waxwings clean all the crabapples off a tree in less than one hour! During the summer, waxwings also eat insects such as dragonflies, mayflies, beetles, and spruce budworms.

If you hear high-pitched whistles coming from fruit trees, take a close look. You may see cedar waxwings munching on berries. If it is winter, perhaps you hear Bohemian waxwings visiting us for a winter food break.

Songbirds

Songbirds are a large group of birds with around 4,600 different species. Idaho has about 165 different kinds of songbirds. They range in size from tiny birds, like kinglets, to the large raven. Birds like robins, finches, sparrows, blackbirds and orioles are all songbirds. What sets songbirds apart from other birds is their ability to sing. While many birds make different sounds, singing is more complex.

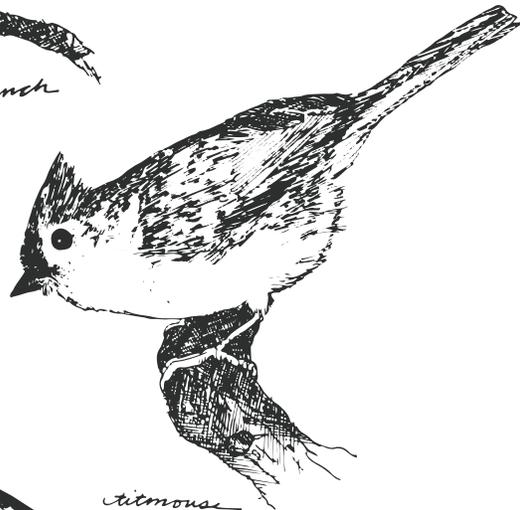
Every kind of songbird has its own song. Some birdsongs can be simple. The “cheeseburger” song of the black-capped chickadee is an example of a simple song. Some songs can be very complicated. Members of the wren and thrush families are known for their beautiful, complicated songs.



black-capped chickadee



goldfinch



titmouse



nuthatch

Exactly how birds sing is still a bit of a mystery. Part of the mystery has to do with the bird's voice box or syrinx (SEAR-inks). The syrinx is a unique structure found only in birds. It is made up of two chambers along the trachea, the tube that brings air into the lungs. Special muscles of the syrinx control all the details of a bird's song. Because the syrinx has two parts, a bird can make two different sounds at the same time! It can also sing by using only one side of its syrinx.

So, what is all this singing about? Birds sing for two main reasons. The first is to defend a territory during the nesting season. Having a good territory with plenty of food, water and shelter helps parent birds raise their babies. When a male bird finds a good territory, he sings. This tells other males that he has claimed that territory. Other males will know to look someplace else.

The second reason that birds sing is to attract a mate. It is the bird way of saying “Hey, baby, wanna nest in my territory?” If the male is a good singer, the female will come and check out the territory. Males will sing throughout the nesting season to defend their territory. Singing also keeps the parent birds together as they raise their babies.

Spring is the nesting season and the best time to hear birdsongs. Birds often begin singing right before dawn. This time is often called the dawn chorus. It is a favorite time for bird watchers to enjoy listening to many singing birds. This spring, take some time to listen to the birds. You will be amazed at what you hear!

Bird Irruptions

A volcanic eruption is an impressive display of fire, smoke and lava. A bird irruption is an impressive bird migration. These birds usually do not migrate. What makes them migrate is a lack of food. Many of these birds live in the forests of Canada. They depend on seeds or fruits to survive the winter. When plants do not make enough seeds or fruits, the birds migrate to find food.

Many birds that migrate to find food are small songbirds called finches. During an irruption year, bird watchers can see large numbers of finches at their feeders. Large flocks might be found all over the United States or just in one area. Bohemian waxwings are birds that migrate when food is difficult to find. They move down to Idaho and the northern United States. They are attracted to trees like crabapples and mountain ash that still have fruit in the winter.

Songbirds are not the only birds that make irruptive migrations. Snowy owls moved south into the United States in 2011. Many of the owls were young birds. Because of a very successful nesting season, there were more owls than food. While adult owls stayed on their territories, young birds had to leave to find food. Idaho was lucky to have many sightings of these beautiful white owls.

Birds of a Feather Flock Together

A group of birds is called a flock. Often, birds form flocks during migration. Some birds, like waxwings, spend most of their lives in a flock. Flocks of waxwings are usually smaller in the summer and larger in the winter. As it turns out, being part of a flock is helpful for survival.



Being in a flock can help with finding food. Since the fruit waxwings eat is often found in clumps, a flock can find food faster. With more eyes looking for food, it is easier to find.

Birds in a flock also have more eyes to watch for predators. This gives the flock an early warning system in case of danger. A flock of birds flying together makes it harder for a flying predator to catch one bird. The flock is able to quickly change direction, bunch up and swerve away. This can confuse a hawk or falcon. Birds in a flock can also eat more. When all members of the flock are alert for danger, each bird can spend more time finding food. Sometimes it helps to be one of the crowd.



Food Coloring

One of the many things we enjoy about birds is their beautiful colors. These colors are due to pigments. A pigment is a natural substance that makes colors. The pigments that give birds their bright reds, oranges and yellows are called carotenoids.

Birds get pigments from the plants they eat. Birds can also get pigments by eating something that eats plants, such as insects. Pink flamingoes are pink because of their food. If they do not get the pigment, they turn white! We also get pigments by eating colorful fruits and vegetables, like carrots or beets. If a person ate enough carrots, her skin could actually turn a yellowish-orange color!

What animals eat may cause their colors to vary. For example, cedar waxwings in some parts of the eastern United States have orange tail bands. Everywhere else, the tail bands are bright yellow. It turns out these waxwings were eating the berries of a honeysuckle shrub. This plant has an unusual red pigment. It mixed with yellow pigments and turned the waxwings' tail bands orange.

Pigments are also responsible for the red spots on waxwing's wings. The spots are actually concentrated droplets of pigment. Waxwings are the only birds that are able to produce pigment droplets. It is thought that the red droplets are used to impress other waxwings during the nesting season.

Backyards for Birds



Creating a bird-friendly yard is a fun family project. It is important to remember what makes a good habitat when planning. You should make sure your yard has food, water, and shelter.

Brush piles, trees and shrubs will provide shelter and nesting places. You may want to put up a nest box for birds that like to

nest in tree holes. You can offer birds water from a birdbath, water feature or small pond. Even something as simple as a pie plate full of water will be used by thankful birds.

Putting up a bird feeder is a great way to offer birds the foods they need. You will want to offer a variety of different foods. Different foods will attract different kinds of birds. American goldfinches love nyjer thistle. Woodpeckers and chickadees will eat suet. Most birds love sunflower seeds. A feeder placed on the ground with mixed seed will attract juncos, doves and quail. Remember our smallest birds, hummingbirds. They will appreciate a feeder full of sugar water during the summer.

Adding native plants will increase the food birds find in your yard. Conifers like pine, spruce or cedar will give birds both food and shelter. Grasses are important foods that birds also use for nesting materials. Fruiting trees and shrubs attract many birds, like waxwings. A tree or shrub, like mountain ash or juniper, will have fruits in all seasons. Don't forget flowers for nectar feeders like hummingbirds.

A bird-friendly yard is a beautiful yard that your family and the birds can enjoy all year long. For information on native plants, contact your local greenhouse or native plant society chapter.

What's a Frugivore?

You have heard of carnivores and herbivores and maybe insectivores. How about a frugivore? This is an animal that is specialized to eat fruit. While many animals will eat fruit, a frugivore eats mostly fruit. Waxwings are good examples of frugivores. They do eat insects in the summer, but from fall to early spring, waxwings eat nothing but fruit. Bohemian waxwings can eat two to three times their weight in fruit every day!

Many frugivores live in the tropics of Central and South America. The tropics have large areas of forest filled with plants that produce a lot of fruit. Birds like toucans with their large bills are specialized to eat these fruits.

Frugivores are very important, because they spread seeds around an ecosystem. Some frugivores spit out the seeds as they eat. Animals may eat some of these seeds. Other seeds get buried in the soil and grow into trees and shrubs. Some frugivores, like waxwings, do not spit out fruit seeds. Instead, the seeds pass through the waxwing's digestive system and get pooped out later. While that may sound gross, animal poop is good fertilizer. It gives the seeds more nutrients to grow quickly. Since birds move around a lot, seeds are spread into new places. This is called seed dispersal. It is one of the most important ways for plants to be spread throughout an ecosystem.



Be Outside—The Great Backyard Bird Count

February 14 – 17 is the 17th annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC). During the bird count, people all over the world will be observing and counting birds. They count in yards, parks, trails, just about anywhere birds can be found. You can join in the fun!

The GBBC is free and open to anyone interested in birds. It is a great family activity! Many families count the birds in their yard or at a favorite park. In 2012, Idaho birdwatchers turned in 648 checklists. They saw 141 different species and 88,483 individual birds. The world list in 2013 tallied 3,610 species and 34,512,432 individual birds!

All this counting helps to answer important questions. It gives scientists an idea of the number of birds found around the globe. It documents irruptions of species. It shows how weather influences birds. Migration patterns can be seen. This data can help answer future questions that we have yet to ask.

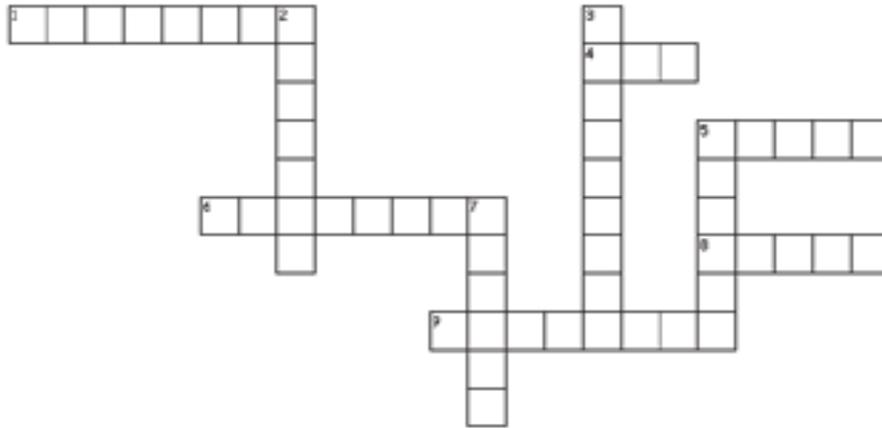
You do not need to be a bird expert to join the GBBC. Check out the GBBC website at www.birdsource.org for information and directions. It is easy and fun!



BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE



Waxwing Puzzle



Words

Bohemian

Cedar

Flocks

Frugivore

Fruit

Nomadic

Pigments

Red

Syrinx

Whistles

Waxwing Words

Across

1. This waxwing is a winter visitor.
4. Waxwing wing feather have _____ spots.
5. Waxwings eat more of this than any other bird in North America.
6. Waxwings make high pitched _____.
8. This waxwing this found living all over Idaho.
9. These are often responsible for the colors on bird's feathers.

Down

2. Bohemian waxwings are _____.
3. An animal that eats mostly fruit.
5. Waxwings like to live in _____.
7. This is believed to help birds sing.

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

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