

Birdlife in your Garden

The winter of 2012-13 has been what birdwatchers refer to as a “Waxwing winter”. These events, which occur in about one winter in ten, are characterised by the arrival in the UK of large numbers of Waxwings, a bird that breeds in the “taiga” forests of the far north, across Europe, Asia and North America.



A small flock of Waxwings. These birds will typically congregate in the tops of trees before descending on berry-bearing plants, which may then be totally stripped of fruit. (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)

These are magical events, not just because of their infrequency but also because of the beauty of the bird itself. Waxwings are Starling-sized, rather stocky, with a thick neck and immaculate, largely reddish-buff plumage, which is dense and with a soft and silky appearance. The tip of the tail is bright yellow, as are the edges of the flight feathers in the wings. A black “highwayman” mask and small black bib contribute to its exotic appearance, along with the large crest on the rear of the crown. The bird’s name comes from red appendages in the middle of the wings, which are actually highly-coloured feather shafts that extend beyond the feather barbs and which have the deep-red glossy appearance of sealing wax.

The appearance of these splendid-looking birds in the dismal days of the British winter, is largely a result of what ornithologists refer to as “irruptive migrations” (although they do visit with some regularity in northern Scotland). Waxwings are largely berry-eating birds, with up to 80 percent of their food intake consisting of fruit. Suitable food plants occur in the northern forests but their productivity varies markedly from year to year. In abundant years, Waxwings may remain in their breeding areas all winter. In average years, they will travel short distances out of their core areas, especially towards the end of the winter when fruit sources are becoming depleted. However, when berries are in short supply, thousands or even millions of Waxwings will move south in search of food, arriving first on the east coast of the UK and spreading westward shortly thereafter. This is an irruptive migration (although it is not a conventional migration in that it is not a regular annual occurrence).

Waxwings are particularly fond of Rowan (Mountain Ash) but also feast on other fruit-bearing trees and shrubs, including Hawthorn, Crabapple, Juniper, Whitebeam (Sorbus), Cotoneaster and roses. Many of these species are used for ornamental plantings in gardens, town centres, retail and industrial parks, supermarket car parks and suburban streets. In consequence, Waxwings are often quite easy to observe in urban locations, particularly since they often form large flocks and can be approachable while eating.



Waxwings are very elegant birds. Note the silky reddish-buff plumage, the unmistakable crest, the yellow tail tip and the wing-markings (including the wax-like red feather shafts that give this species its name). (Photo: Jill Pakenham, BTO Library)

They will visit gardens if suitable berry-bearing bushes are available or if apples are provided (hanging rather than on the ground). Typical behaviour while feeding, is for a tight flock to congregate in the top of a tall tree, from which they will descend en masse on the food plant, often voraciously consuming all of the fruit on all or part of it. (Waxwings eat 800-1000 berries a day, roughly twice their body weight.)

Have you seen Waxwings in your garden over the winter? If so, savour the experience as you may not get a repeat performance for many years.

John Arnfield

The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. If you are interested in joining GBW, why not request a free three-week “taster” pack? Please contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu to give it a go!