First Documented Nest Record of Bohemian Waxwing in Ontario

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Introduction

The Bohemian Waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*) is familiar to most of us as an irregular winter visitor throughout much of Ontario. This ephemeral species usually arrives in groups of varying sizes to feed on berries and other food sources, often until the tree or bush is stripped of fruit, and then quickly moves on (Pittaway 1990, Elder 2002). They breed in northern boreal forests throughout Europe, Asia and western North America. In Canada, their nomadic winter irruptions extend their range south and east of their breeding grounds, covering much of the southern half of the country.

Bohemian Waxwings have been confirmed breeding throughout much of the Yukon, British Columbia, western Alberta, North-west Territories, northern Saskatchewan and northern Manitoba (Witmer 2002). Breeding has not been confirmed in Nunavut (Richards et. al. 2002), and the distribution in Manitoba remains poorly defined, with most of the records coming from Churchill (Bouchart and Taylor 2003). Their breeding range in eastern Canada remains unclear. In Quebec, there have been several recent summer sightings but, as yet, no confirmation of breeding (Letourneau 1996). The easternmost summer sighting is a June record from Sable Island, Nova Scotia (Tufts 1986).

The first evidence of breeding in Ontario was in the early 1960s near the junction of the Sutton and Warchesku Rivers (Schueler et al. 1974). Since then, there have been summer records from Kapuskasing (Speirs 1985) and several sightings of family groups during the first Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (OBBA) from the extreme northwest of the province (Cadman 1987). Provisionally, the second OBBA (2001-2003) has reported a number of scattered sightings and one confirmation of fledged young throughout the Hudson Bay Lowlands (Donald A. Sutherland, pers. comm.). Confirmation of breeding in Ontario took place in 1984 when George Fairfield photographed young birds being fed by adults along the Winisk River (Peck and James 1987), but a nest of this species was still awaiting discovery east of the Manitoba border. The purpose of this paper is to document a nest of Bohemian Waxwing found on 12 June 2003, north of the Swan River, Kenora District.

Nest Record

From 9-19 June 2003, the authors, as

volunteers for the second OBBA, camped 25 km north of the Swan River on the coast of James Bay (17U 425558 5966359 – North American Datum 1983; 53° 50' 25.47" N, 82° 7' 52.89" W) and surveyed the surrounding environs. There were three major habitats in the area: coastal beach ridges and mudflats with minimal vegetation; extensive sedge meadows mixed with networks of small, shallow ponds; and narrow, treed, gravel beach ridges (Figure 1). Moving away from the coast, the treed ridges changed from willow thickets to mature coniferous woodlands composed mainly of White Spruce (*Picea glauca*) and Tamarack (*Larix laricina*) with a willow (*Salix* sp.) and Speckled Alder (*Alnus incana*) border. Ground cover also increased on the ridges, culminating in a thick lichen/moss bed.

On the morning of 12 June, a pair of Bohemian Waxwings was observed at the edge of a sedge meadow feeding in a small bush, low to the ground. The birds were seen several times in the general vicinity during the next several hours, hawking for insects or feeding on berries or cones. They appeared to concentrate their foraging in one specific area and a careful search of the location eventually revealed a suspected nest (nest location: 17U 423171 5965427 – North American Datum 1983; 53° 49' 54.07" N, 82° 10' 2.62" W). We kept the nest (ONRS card #175433) under observation for 15 minutes, but the birds did not return in our presence so we left to avoid any further disturbance.

This nest was located within 300 metres of the first documented nest of Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*) in Ontario (Peck et al. 2004). Other birds found in the area with confirmation of breeding included Green-winged Teal *(Anas*

Figure 1: Aerial view of forested beach ridges and sedge meadows along James Bay coast north of the Swan River, Kenora District. Photo by *Karl R. Konze*.

Figure 2: Bohemian Waxwing nest tree and surrounding habitat located in the middle of an open-canopied woods with White Spruce, Tamarack, willow and alder on 13 June 2003. Photo by *Mark K. Peck*.

crecca), American Robin *(Turdus migratorius)*, and Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*). Also found nearby were Red-tailed Hawk *(Buteo jamaicensis)*, American Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides*

Figure 3: Nest and eggs of Bohemian Waxwing on 13 June 2003. Photo by *Mark K. Peck*.

dorsalis), Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (*Empidonax flaviventris*), Boreal Chickadee (*Poecile hudsonica*), Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*), Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*), Blackpoll Warbler (*Dendroica striata*), and Dark-eyed Junco *(Junco hyemalis)*.

We returned on 13 June and found the birds in the same area, but not on the nest. A check of the nest using a mirror and pole revealed it contained four eggs. The nest and the eggs matched the general description for those of Bohemian Waxwing. The nest was located 3.2 m high in a 7 m tall White Spruce with a 24 cm diameter at breast height (DBH), and was located in the middle of an open woods with White Spruce, Tamarack, willow and alder (Figure 2). The tree was climbed and photographs and nest measurements were taken. The nest was on a horizontal branch with some additional branches supporting it along the side. It was loosely constructed and poorly concealed but it blended in well with the moss and other twigs at the site. The edge of the nest was 15 cm out from the trunk. It had an outside depth of 100 mm, inside depth of 54 mm, an outside diameter of 150 mm and an inside diameter of 90 mm. It was constructed using spruce and Tamarack twigs, lichens and moss, and lined with grasses, black and green mosses, lichens, plant fibre and down. The nest contained four oval, pale blue eggs, randomly spotted with black and grey blotches (Figure 3). The eggs were not measured due to safety concerns.

Our final visit to the site was on 17 June. A Bohemian Waxwing flew

off the nest as we approached and did not return while we remained at the site. The nest contained four eggs when checked with the mirror. Both birds were seen in the general vicinity of the nest during this visit.

Discussion

At present, this represents the easternmost nest record of Bohemian Waxwing for North America. Whether or not this is a reflection of an eastern range extension or simply enhanced range definition of another poorly documented northern breeding species in Ontario is not easily answered. Avian surveys throughout the Hudson Bay Lowlands prior to the first and second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlases were rare and of limited duration. The OBBAs have no doubt provided critical information on the distribution of northern species, unavailable historically. Difficulty in assessing the distribution of erratic species like Bohemian Waxwing may be further compounded by their annual movements in response to regional climatic conditions and/or seasonal ripening of fruit. The numerous sightings from the second OBBA and the recent work summarized in the Quebec Breeding Bird Atlas (Letourneau 1996) certainly suggest that this species is now established as a summer resident in both Ontario and Quebec.

The circumstances of the nest and eggs of the Bohemian Waxwing described above match the descriptions throughout this species' range with two minor exceptions: nest commencement timing, and propensity for semi-colonial breeding. Witmer (2002) states that Bohemian Waxwings may begin nesting later than other species, possibly because of late ripening of new-season fruits. Based on this nest and the breeding records of Fairfield and Sutherland, we find no evidence to suggest later nesting by this species. The previous records of fledged young were both recorded in mid-July. Working back from those dates, and assuming a 13-14 day incubation period and a 16-day nestling period (Baicich and Harrison 1997), nest commencement would have begun in early to mid June. The Swan River nest had a complete clutch of four eggs on 13 June, similar to a number of other tree-nesting passerines we found in the area. The behaviour of the birds around the nest and the amount of time both birds were seen together, away from the nest, suggest that incubation had been initiated recently. According to Lyle Walton (pers. comm.) of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, 2003 was an average spring with regard to temporal weather pattern. Berries were abundant in the area and there is no reason to suspect that there were insufficient food resources in the area to delay nesting. Finally, despite spending several hours over a three-day period in the vicinity, we did not observe any additional Bohemian Waxwings and we do not suspect any semi-colonial breeding in this instance, as has been previously doc-

umented in other areas (Cadman 1987).

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