

## THE GREAT BOHEMIAN WAXWING FLIGHT OF 1994

by Richard A. Forster

Each year one or two avian events eclipse all other happenings by such orders of magnitude that their significance is overwhelming. More often than not, the event is a sighting of an extraordinarily rare bird whose presence serves as a benchmark for future sightings. Less often the event involves an influx of a species that by its sheer magnitude makes all previous sightings pale in comparison. An example of such an invasion was the well-chronicled flight of Great Gray Owls (*Strix nebulosa*) in the winter of 1979. The influx of Bohemian Waxwings (*Bombycilla garrula*) into New England this past winter rivaled that of the Great Grays in its surprising magnitude and, at least in Massachusetts, far surpassed any previous flight.

The Bohemian Waxwing breeds predominantly in the vast coniferous and mixed forests of western Canada and Alaska. When not breeding, the Bohemian Waxwing is extremely gregarious and forms sizable flocks that wander from location to location in search of a reliable food source that in winter consists of a wide variety of persistent fruits and berries. In this regard the species is similar to the Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*), which is familiar to most New Englanders. The winter movements of both species are extremely erratic and unpredictable, but these wanderings are more obvious with the Bohemian Waxwing due to its more restricted range and its appearance in areas far removed from its normal range where these birds constitute a species highly sought after by birdwatchers.

The historical occurrence of Bohemian Waxwing in Massachusetts is somewhat a matter of conjecture. Since the only prior pronounced flight into Massachusetts in 1969, the Bohemian Waxwing has appeared almost annually in winter, but at no time has the total aggregate of birds exceeded a hundred



*Bohemian Waxwings*

*Photo by Blair Nikula*

individuals. Although Forbush (1929) stated that Bohemian Waxwings were possibly annual in occurrence in New England at that time, many of his contemporaries were skeptical. Even Griscom and Snyder (1955) debunked Forbush's statement largely because of their very conservative reliance on specimens and verifiable sight records. In retrospect, their approach seems conservative in the extreme, especially given the often ephemeral nature of the sightings (as some observers in this winter of waxwing abundance can sadly attest).

There was little indication or advance notice that the 1993-1994 winter would be an unusual winter for Bohemian Waxwings. Apparently, they moved into northern New England on a broad front beginning in early November. This movement was not particularly noteworthy because Bohemian Waxwings are more routinely found in northern New England, particularly at the University of Maine campus in Orono, where they occur annually and often in appreciable numbers. In eastern Massachusetts a single Bohemian Waxwing in Hingham and a group of four in Wellfleet were present in late November. These sightings were not unusual nor were they necessarily precursors to a subsequent invasion. December brought only a single elusive Bohemian Waxwing to Amherst, where it was present for the better part of the month. The lack of sightings was real because an army of binocular-toting observers scoured the state on the annual Christmas Bird Counts during the last two weeks of the month without detecting a single Bohemian Waxwing. As we entered the new year, prospects of seeing so much as a lone Bohemian Waxwing seemed remote.

Meanwhile, to our north in New Hampshire and Vermont, flocks numbering into the hundreds were being found during December, and in Maine a flock at the traditional Orono site was estimated at over a thousand birds. In southern Maine at Lewiston twelve hundred were counted on December 30. The night of January 4-5 brought extremely strong winds out of the north with the strongest gust of wind recorded at 65 mph. Just after noon on January 5, an observer visiting High Head in North Truro near the tip of Cape Cod found a group of approximately sixty waxwings, twenty-four of which were definitely Bohemians, and the remainder were thought to be Bohemians. These birds were still present the following day. A different observer searched for the Bohemian Waxwings on Saturday, January 9. En route to Truro he stopped at the Bound Brook area of Wellfleet to check for Bohemian Waxwings because some Bohemians had been found there the previous November. To his amazement he encountered a flock of 140 Bohemian Waxwings that he watched and photographed the remainder of the day. Remarkably, a group of eighty Bohemian Waxwings was observed in Rockport that same day. The presence of these flocks at outlying coastal points is strongly suggestive of an over-the-ocean flight of Bohemian Waxwings originating from southern Maine across the Gulf of Maine, following a strong front with north winds. The apparent lack of



*Bohemian Waxwings*

*Photo by Blair Nikula*

reports from other areas supports this hypothesis. However, a report of three hundred Bohemian Waxwings in Montague in western Massachusetts indicates that a movement from some other region, either Vermont or New Hampshire, occurred at about the same time.

For the next two weeks interest in Bohemian Waxwings focused on outer Cape Cod with a few small groups found in widely scattered locations. Then a second major influx occurred from January 21-24. This movement centered around northern Worcester County and the Merrimack River valley. A glaring exception was the presence of three hundred birds in Wakefield on January 22. This report was unusual because it was one of the largest flocks reported during the duration of the flight and one of only a handful from the Greater Boston area. The Merrimack Valley group was centered around West Newbury, where over 320 birds were seen on January 23. A group of three hundred birds seen the same day in Amesbury may actually have been the same flock because only the Merrimack River separated the two sightings. Reports of birds in this area lasted little more than a week.

After the onslaught, groups of Bohemian Waxwings both small and large were widely scattered, but concentrations continued to be reported from Charlemont/Heath, Amherst, northern Worcester County (primarily in the Hardwick/Athol area), Halifax, outer Cape Cod, and Nantucket. The Nantucket birds may have been present as a result of the presumed over-water flight that reached Cape Cod. They were very scarce in southern portions of the state and completely absent on Martha's Vineyard despite active searching. Rhode Island

had none, and they were present in Connecticut apparently only in the northwestern corner of the state. Reports during March came predominantly from Berkshire County. The predominance of reports in the western portion of the state at this time suggests a general departure toward their home range. However, a group in Halifax proved reliable into April.

The Bohemian Waxwings showed a strong preference for ornamental crab apples, multiflora rose hips, and winterberry, a wild native holly found commonly on Cape Cod. Bittersweet and mountain ash were also taken when available. In areas where they were especially sought, it appeared that small flocks would amalgamate into one large flock before splitting up again into smaller flocks of varying sizes. The birds were highly mobile, often present for only a short period of time in any given area. The waxwings had a voracious appetite and would soon deplete a small food resource and then abandon the area. Locating them often seemed a very frustrating experience even though they had been present in a given area half an hour earlier.

The largest previous flight of Bohemian Waxwings into Massachusetts occurred in late winter 1969, when approximately 335 birds were seen, two-thirds of which were present at Worcester airport. It is virtually impossible to put a precise figure on the number present from January to March 1994, but certainly several thousand appears to be a realistic estimate.

Bohemian Waxwings are superficially similar to Cedar Waxwings in many respects. However, closer inspection reveals that they are larger and gray in overall coloration with a pinkish blush about the face. The wings sport obvious white patches, and some show prominent yellow patches as well. The long undertail coverts are chestnut. The sleek crest often appears longer and bushier than in a Cedar Waxwing and more prone to blowing in the wind. In sum, they have an understated yet elegant beauty that must be seen to be appreciated, as those who successfully sought these scarce Westerners can attest. For those who were unsuccessful in their searches, we can only hope, for their sakes and ours, that the Bohemian Waxwing flight of 1994 will be repeated soon.

#### References

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