

### Notes on the Bohemian Waxwing

BY REV. S. H. GOODWIN

IT is the lamented Frank Bolles, I think, who has somewhere called attention to the resemblances that may be traced between birds and men. Among our feathered kin-folk he finds the farmer, the artizan, the mariner, the fisherman, the preacher, the auctioneer, the dancing-master, the confidence-man, the pick-pocket, the scoundrel, and others whose habits or modes of life afford a suggestive, if somewhat fanciful means of classification. Cedar birds on account of the military precision with which their companies and battalions execute certain maneuvers, find their counterpart in the gay soldiery of the parade ground. Doubtless the writer referred to would include in the dashing cohorts of this division, the cedar bird's more distinguished and interesting cousin, the Bohemian waxwing (*Ampelis garrulus*). If, however, we are to take into account some of the chief characteristics of this bird it will not be difficult more fittingly to place him in a list of "representative birds." His trim, neat, well-dressed figure, his pleasing, dignified bearing, his gentle peace-loving disposition, his gracious, courtly manners and other admirable traits of character leave no room for doubt concerning the class he represents. He stands for the well-bred, cultured, considerate man—the man of large nature, noble instincts, and high ideals—he is the "gentleman in feathers."

In appearance, the Bohemian waxwing is decidedly prepossessing. He is always faultlessly attired, the prevailing colors of his suit being quiet shades of brown and gray, relieved by a few deft touches of brighter hues. Especially dainty are the small, wax-like dots which form a narrow sash of scarlet across each wing, this being succeeded by a bar of white, and that by one of yellow. The tail, above, shades from a delicate steel blue, through black, and is terminated by a broader band of yellow. The crest, accentuated by the black bridle at its base, which passes through the eye and meets on the upper portion of the head, gives a distinguished air to this bird. The voice of our "gentleman in feathers" is in perfect accord with his appearance and character. There is nothing harsh or boisterous in his notes; he does not shout to attract the attention of the neighborhood, but, like all gentle folk, expresses his feelings and opinions in quiet, well-modulated tones. To me there is something peculiarly pleasing and sweet in this waxwing's notes, due, largely, to what may be termed their elusive quality. When the bird is quite near its call sometimes sounds

"Far off and faint, and melting into air,  
Yet not to be mistaken."

As the first part of their name indicates, the movements of these birds are not easy to forecast. A flock will appear in a given locality during a certain season, remain till the food supply is exhausted, or some instinct of their vagrant nature bids them move on, when they will disappear—possibly not to return for several years—without any formal leave-taking, and with no member of the company left behind to explain the abruptness of their departure, or to inform waiting friends of their whereabouts. So far as I am aware, this is the only trait which is not in perfect accord with the "character" I have given them, and for this the waxwings are not responsible; their movements are determined by a law—"a migration memory," according to Maurice Thompson—to which these birds have been subject through countless generations.

The Bohemian waxwings come into this part of Utah (Provo, Utah Co.) early in December and remain till the last of March, and first week of April. When they first arrive, they usually remain in the tops of the tallest poplars that line our city

streets and they are encouraged to keep well above the ground by the small boy—to whom they are known as “cedar quails”—who hunts them with his vicious “flipper.” Later in the season, however, they come lower. Three years ago on several occasions numbers of these birds fed on crab apples that had been buried by the snow in our front yard. As the snow melted, leaving the apples in sight, the birds ate them with great relish. Many times during the winter just past, waxwings have come into our back yard and fed on the apples which were left on the trees for just such visitors. As I write these words, a flock of thirty-five waxwings are feeding in the apple trees, less than two rods from my study window. There must be something about these apples that produces thirst, for the birds will feed for a time, and then drop down to the irrigating ditch nearby, drink, and return to the apples. Back and forth they fly—from food to water—many times in the course of a half hour. Nor are these birds restricted to dried up apples, seeds of locust trees, and tender buds of the poplar trees. Not infrequently during the sunny days of winter, I have seen these “chatterers” dash out from fifty to a hundred feet from the tree tops where they were congregated, and return directly to the point of departure. On such occasions, one after another—a half dozen or a dozen at a time—will dart out and up, with the rapid wing stroke and straight flight of the kingbird, snap up the insect of which they were in pursuit and return to their places in the poplars. Usually, unless the chase carried them too far from the starting point, they describe a graceful circle and sail back to the tree, in this respect also reminding one of the kingbird. Upon the return of these hunters to the tree they never failed to receive from their waiting comrades, “burring” words of commendation, elicited, no doubt, by their cleverness and success. I have seen the cedar bird in New England, late in August, indulging its flycatching proclivities, but to find its rare and beautiful relative doing the same thing in Utah, in January, was a novel experience to me.

The Bohemian waxwings are gregarious; they move about only in flocks, large or small, save in breeding time. I have seen flocks, here in the city, numbering from 150 to 300 birds. On one of the coldest days of the winter of 1903-'04 I happened upon a flock, which occupied the tops of several poplars, and in which there were nearly 320 birds. Often fifty to one hundred are to be seen. Toward spring, they seem to break up into smaller flocks. When one of the larger flocks takes possession of the bare tops of some of our tall poplars, and are seen from a distance, the birds appear like some strange “slugs” clinging to the branches.

These birds are of a quiet, gentle disposition and appear to be possessed of the instincts, tastes, and refinement which always characterize well-bred folk. They love the society of their kind—and soon learn to know their human friends—and are sociable and well disposed in their relations one with another. When not feeding, they sit quietly, all facing one direction, and appear to be looking about them, as if in intelligent appreciation and enjoyment of their surroundings. They never indulge in unseemly squabbles, and, with rare exceptions, always conduct themselves with dignity and propriety. In fact, their politeness, and seeming consideration of one another is really remarkable, surpassing in these respects, the cedar bird. In this connection is suggested the rather amusing statement, made by at least two writers on ornithological subjects, concerning the cedar bird. Neltje Blanchan, in “Bird Neighbors,” quotes Nuttall as saying that he “has often seen them (cedar birds) passing a worm from one to another down a whole row of beaks and back again before it was finally eaten.” Wm. Rogers Lord, in his “A First Book upon the Birds of Oregon and Washington,” evidently following the writer just quoted, uses almost precisely the same language, making Nuttall responsible for this incident. The only trouble with these statements is that they

are not true! Nuttall says nothing of the kind. He *does* say, "an eyewitness assures me that he has seen" this take place—which is a very different matter. Nuttall does not commit himself! On several occasions I have seen a young or inconsiderate waxwing demand the apple from which a comrade was feeding, and the bird thus deprived of his rights moved aside with no indication of either haste or fear, and, from a nearby twig, looked on in silence, as though all the apples in the county were not worth a display of temper, or a breach of waxwing etiquette. Often in the course of my observations, I have met with incidents which led me to feel that the basis of the waxwing's code of morals is not unlike the injunction—slightly modified—of him who said "Render to no creature evil for evil." Certainly our "gentleman in feathers" is not to be placed with those who say, "I will do so to him as he has done to me, and more also." Several years ago I was greatly interested in noting the unfailing good humor, and remarkable self-restraint under great provocation, exhibited by a small flock of waxwings that was feeding in an apple tree. For some reason best known to himself, a robin was making himself particularly obnoxious to these quiet well-behaved birds. In a loud, harsh voice, the tones of which were made more shrill by the anger which seemed completely to master him, he severely berated the inoffensive waxwings. He would bluster and scream out his denunciations till he seemed unable longer to restrain himself when, to all appearances, absolutely beside himself with rage because the objects of his wrath paid no attention to his railings, he did the catapult act—hurling himself straight at the intruders. Several of the waxwings, in order to avoid an actual collision, left the places where they were feeding, and alighting on twigs nearby paused for a moment, as if to observe the antics of the furious robin, when they would resume their feeding. Their indifference to the loud, bullying protests of the robin, and their persistence in remaining on the premises after he had ordered them off, so exasperated Mr. Redbreast that with screams of defiance he dashed from group to group without stopping to alight until, exhausted quite as much by the heat of anger as by the unusual exertions he was making, he was glad to drop on a branch and pant for breath. When the robin came directly at them, the waxwings would give way and fly a few feet and alight in the same tree, so that when their enraged assailant had gone the rounds and had tired himself out in a vain attempt to drive them away, they were feeding as quietly and unconcernedly as before. The robin showed pluck, and a determination that was worthy of a better cause, for no sooner had he recovered his breath than he would renew the attack. But each time he was met by the same tactics, the same good nature and dignified silence and indifference which, in view of his excited condition, must have been extremely exasperating to him.

While the breeding grounds of these birds are far to the north, Utah has a fairly well established record of their nesting within her borders. On June 26, 1904, Robert G. Bee of this city found a Bohemian waxwing nesting six miles east of Sunnyside. The nest was in a low bush on the side hill, the eggs but slightly incubated. Mr. Bee, who for some years has collected "singles", took one egg, and that egg lies before me as I write. Rev. Mr. Martin, of Manti, this State, reports finding the nest of this waxwing at Springville, Utah, four years ago, and another nest of the same species in Six-mile Canyon, in the summer of '04, but as he took neither eggs nor bird, his records have practically no value.

Many interesting birds spend the winter with us, but a seven years' acquaintance with the Bohemian waxwing leads me to feel that among our winter birds there is none quite so attractive to me as this well dressed, genial, lovable, aristocrat and gentlemen in feathers.

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