

MARY HOUSTON: NORTH AMERICA'S PRE-EMINENT BOHEMIAN WAXWING BANDER



Mary Houston holding a Bohemian Waxwing she banded. Photo credit: Brent Terry

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My wife and banding subpermittee, Mary I. Houston, BA, BEd, SVM, holds the North American record for Bohemian Waxwing bandings (5,387, most recently including 80 in the spring of 2011 and 40 during March and April 2014 in her 63rd year of banding birds). Mary's precedence in totals of waxwings banded is eclipsed by an even more convincing leadership in numbers of their subsequent recoveries, most often when a waxwing met its death by flying into a picture window. Of the 66 recoveries from Bohemian Waxwings banded in North America between 1955 and 2003, 44 had been banded by Mary from among the 4,928 Bohemians she had banded to that time. The remaining 22 North American recoveries to that time resulted from banding by 168

different waxwing banders — among the roughly 2,000 banders in North America who had permits during that period.

Innocently, without aspiring to do so, Mary has monopolized the banding and recoveries/encounters of a single bird species to a greater degree than any other individual since North American banding began in 1921. No other bander has monopolized a common species to the extent that Mary has done with our winter waxwing. Banding history experts Chan Robbins (a bander for more than 75 years!), Professor Jerry Jackson, and Wilson Journal editor Mary Bomberger Brown, believe that this is so. What began as random banding alongside her husband with his silly slogan, "every bird needs a band," evolved into a 56-year project. Why have other banders banded so few Bohemian Waxwings? Most other banders live south of the Bohemian's usual winter range, don't have Mountain Ash trees in their yard — nor Mountain Ash berries in their

freezer — and don't own either top- or side-opening traps that are best for catching waxwings.

The Bohemian lives up to its Latin name, *Bombycilla garrulus* (genus name given it by Vieillot in 1807; species garrulus, given it by Linnaeus in 1758). It is garrulous, constantly trilling and chattering; it is bohemian, moving about erratically and unpredictably all winter, brightly arrayed (Houston 1968). The waxwings arrive for a few days, strip the trees clear of fruit and deposit their fecal stains on car roofs for blocks around as their memento — but in most localities, all head back towards their forest breeding areas without a band. Such a waxwing fate is best thwarted in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. In that city, a new continent high for a Christmas Bird Count (CBC) occurred on December 26, 1975 when 12,442 Bohemians were counted within the standard 15-mile diameter circle. Most years in Saskatoon, the Bohemian is the second most numerous bird species,



Mary Houston holds the North American record for Bohemian Waxwing bandings (5,387 birds banded).
Photo credit: Brent Terry

exceeded only by the House Sparrow (Wooding 2002). Of the northern Canadian cities with sufficient mountain ash trees, it now seems strange that only Saskatoon had a bander who seized upon the opportunity to band large numbers of North America's incredibly attractive winter waxwing.

Most backyard bird species are easy to capture and hence are banded by hundreds of birders every year. Why is the Bohemian Waxwing such a striking exception? First, because of its restricted and often unpredictable winter range, concentrated mainly in cities in western Canada during some winters, with extensions south into a few states including Colorado and North Dakota. Rarely a major invasion involved Idaho and Wyoming and once even New Mexico in 1962. Second, Bohemians don't come to feeders to eat standard fare such as sunflowers, peanuts, millet, and nyger. Paradoxically, the two northern fruits that attract large flocks of waxwings, mountain ash berries and crabapples, are already ubiquitous in many residential yards in most northern cities.

Only a handful of North American banders have ever possessed two or more productive mountain ash

trees in their private backyards, a freezer partly full of clumps of mountain ash berries garnered when a neighbour chose to cut down a berry-laden tree — and a dozen treadle-tripping traps. Mary also had the necessary ingenuity and patience. If the temperature is below zero Fahrenheit (minus 18 Celsius), traps must not be set for waxwings; we quickly learned that, totally different from chickadees and nuthatches, a waxwing eyelid may freeze to the metal trap and swell one eye shut — cold weather banding was not attempted by us again. In the winter of 2013-14, for example, Saskatoon had 30 days below minus 30 C. Mary's response was to wait a week or two for warmer temperatures, but by then mountain ash berries had already been stripped from our own trees. The only possible stratagem remaining is to hang multiple large clumps of frozen berries on the now berry-free mountain ash trees, fill the traps with berries, and cross our fingers. Mary went through five consecutive winters, 1980-1984, without banding a single waxwing and there were four years when only one solitary waxwing received its aluminum bracelet. In 20 of 59 Saskatoon winters, berries in private yards throughout Saskatoon

remained sufficient to satisfy every waxwing, which had no need to enter a trap!

Mary's only consecutive annual waxwing banding years lasted 13 years, from 1960 through 1972. Mary's best year was 1967, the heaviest-ever invasion winter, when Duncan Murray, a retired bank manager and sometime birder retired from the bank in Laird, Saskatchewan. He and his wife Marguerite bought their retirement home in Saskatoon, complete with mountain ash trees, just over a mile to the southeast of the Houston residence. Mary placed a dozen traps on tables in their backyard and banded 57 birds the first day, capturing 24 of them twice, while our four-year-old son played on the floor in Marguerite's kitchen. Mary's busiest waxwing banding day ever, March 12, 1967, was at Murray's where she banded 81 "new" Bohemians and recorded 190 "repeats" that had been banded during the previous month, thus handling 271 different waxwings in a single day, almost certainly a Bohemian Waxwing world record for one bander! Moving traps back and forth between the two sites, the top banding days at our home on University Drive were March 31, with 80 new waxwings and 51 repeats, and April 4 with the highest number of "new" birds of any day that winter — 91 new together with 84 repeats. Such days kept Mary busy banding from dawn until dark. Mary's total of 1,259 banded that one winter exceeded the lifetime totals of all three of her nearest runners-up, and still far ahead of the thousand-plus banded by biology Professor Arthur B. Mickey (exact totals unavailable) during the unique winter waxwing invasion of the mile-high University of Wyoming campus in Laramie in 1939 and 1942, before banding results became computerized. Mary's second and third best waxwing totals were

in 1978 with 704 banded and 1965, with 507.

Mary's waxwings have been caught in side- and top-opening traps, baited with Mountain Ash berries collected in the previous fall — but only in late winter after all the Mountain Ash berries on Saskatoon's residential trees have been eaten by birds, and the weather stays above minus 18 Celsius. Only in three years, between 1965 and 1972, did she have return captures of waxwings she had banded in previous winters: seven in the first winter after banding, and one each at two and three years after banding. She has had no additional recoveries or returns since.

Three other banders, Americans but now deceased, also mastered the art of catching Bohemian Waxwings, in North Dakota and Colorado. When Dr. Bob Gammel, a family practitioner in Kenmare, and his keen birder wife, Ann, visited us in Yorkton, Saskatchewan soon after our marriage, Mary was instrumental in persuading them to take up bird banding. Ann banded 991 waxwings between 1958 and 1969, with top years of 312 in 1963 and 333 in 1969. In Colorado, Eleanor Hough banded 904 waxwings at Boulder in 1962 and 1964. Allegra Collister banded 951 waxwings at Longmount between 1957 and 1977, including 226 in 1964.



Mary Houston weighing a captured Bohemian Waxwing. Photo credit: C.S.Houston

In answer to a logical question, Mary has never felt a need to use mist-nets for catching waxwings in late winter. The summer waxwing, the Cedar, gradually evolved into a very few staying over winter and joining much larger flocks of Bohemians. Only in 1987, March 20 to April 18, were 25 Cedars and in 2007, March 4 to April 7, were 22 Cedar Waxwings banded before the snow left. In the Beaver Creek valley south of Saskatoon, in fall and spring of four years when waxwings were caught in numbers, and eager helpers were available in warmer weather, she put up as many as 11 mist nets over an occasional weekend, dawn to dark, for four years. Her two best mist-net days were 101 birds of 17 species on September 19, 1965 and 100 birds of 15 species September 25, 1966. For five years, 1965 through 1969, her most demanding experience involved use of two mist-nets from dawn to dusk for Operation Recovery throughout most autumn days in our small residential 50 by 80 foot city lot. Two nets were open most days in the falls of 1965 through 1969. On October 6, in that final year, she banded a record 136 individuals of 16 species, including a remarkable 50 Hermit Thrushes! Mary has also placed leg bands on more than 19,000 Tree Swallows, 8,000 each of Mountain Bluebirds and Ring-billed Gulls, 4,000 California Gulls, 2,000 each of American White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants, and 1,000 Common Terns.

When Lieutenant-Governor Linda Haverstock presented Mary with the Saskatchewan Volunteer Medal (SVM) in the Saskatchewan legislature on May 1, 2006, and read out those banding totals, Mary received more "oohs" and "ahs" than any other recipient that day, each of whom also received the Saskatchewan Centennial Medal. At the banquet after the ceremony

the Lieutenant-Governor sat at the Houston family table. Mary was also placed at the head table with the Duke of Edinburgh, Royal Luncheon, Lumsden, Saskatchewan, May 18, 2005.

Mary's cv lists 105 published items: she is author or co-author of one book, 91 scientific papers, nine chapters and three miscellaneous publications. She edited Saskatchewan Christmas Bird Counts for all of Saskatchewan for 27 years. Mary was inducted into the Saskatoon Women's Hall of Fame, Saskatchewan Council of Women, 2011, and was named an Alumna of Influence, College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, 2013.

Mary and I chose Saskatoon as the ideal University city to live in, without guessing it might be the perfect place to capture waxwings. Today such a coincidence is termed synchronicity, the random occurrence of events which appear significantly related but have no discernible connection. She remains an active backyard bird bander. On August 12, 2016 we celebrated our 65th wedding anniversary, with all our children, grandchildren, spouses and fiancés present.

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