

CEDAR WAXWINGS: BACKYARD JOTTINGS

by ARLEAN McPHERSON*

The excitement of having a pair of Cedar Waxwings nest this past summer in our backyard and of watching the day by day miracle of the young birds hatching and developing, prompted me to keep brief notes. When Dr. Bernie Gollop suggested publishing these observations my firm and immediate response was to decline, as the life history of Cedar Waxwings has already been well documented and as I have neither training nor experience as a bird-watcher. However, I reconsidered, and the following jottings are submitted with the hope that they may convey something of the wonder and the joy an amateur experienced in magic moments of "watching".

June 29, 1974: A pair of elegantly svelte birds perched in the yellow sunshine this morning on the power line which crosses above our garden. As I grubbed about pulling weeds below, their unusual throaty rasp caught my attention and, when I looked up, their playful and decorous ways held it. Side by side, hopping first to the right, then to the left, courteously passing a shining red berry back and forth, fluttering wings, rubbing bills and heads together, the two were evidently courting. They are beautiful birds with stiff crests on their heads and dark brown bands across the eyes; subtly greyish-brown in color with white underparts fading into a lovely clear yellow under the wings; and a bright paint-like flash of yellow across the tail. Particularly impressive was their impeccable elegance, their sleekness of plumage. A quick check in Godfrey's *Birds of Canada*³ identified them as Cedar Waxwings, similar in appearance to their larger, more aggressive relative, the Bohemian

Waxwing, which often flocks in to attack the dried fruit on our crabapple during the winter.

July 6: While mowing the lawn this evening, I accidentally flushed the female and discovered her nest in the large spruce tree by the sidewalk at the corner of the garage. It is almost at eye-level, between 5 and 6 feet from the ground, fastened to a solid, flat branch. It is sheltered by a second large, spreading branch growing parallel to the first about 6 inches above and is discretely hidden among smaller branches and needles. Constructed of twigs, string and bits of paper, from the exterior it appears ragged and flat. The interior, however, is lined with tightly-woven fine grasses and bits of other soft materials and is surprisingly deep, being shaped something like an old-fashioned bell-shaped tea-cup. At the bottom are three eggs — small, delicate turquoise in color, freckled with black spots.

Within moments the female returned to the nest to incubate the eggs despite the disturbance of lawnmower and gardener. Actually, we should have suspected that the waxwings were

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Newly hatched Cedar Waxwings.

building close at hand, for they have been much in evidence about the garden this past week. Favorite perches are on the power line crossing the yard and on the higher power line in the lane. A second pair often joins them.

According to Loren S. Putnam, nest-building takes from 3 to 9 days.¹ Male and female share the work, and together make over 2,500 materials-carrying trips while constructing a nest. Something of the industry and energy involved is indicated when he says, "To accomplish this in 5 days working 10 hours per day, each bird would be required to make 1 trip every 2.35 minutes." Putnam notes that from two to five eggs are usually laid, beginning almost as soon as the nest is completed. One egg is apparently laid early each day, usually between 5 and 8 a.m., and these are incubated for 12 or 13 days after the last egg is laid.

July 11: Such gentle, beautiful birds! The female is amazingly quiet, suffering us to approach quite near and posing prettily for pictures. This evening a strong wind rocks the nest—the branch on which she has built swings back and forth, sheltered by the parallel branch overhead.

A closer look discloses more details as to her plumage. She has a silk lustre to her smooth brownish coat, a neat dark brown band with fine traced white liner (like eye-makeup) across her eyes; delicate yellow under her wings; grey feathering on her wings with wax-like drops of red at the tip of the secondary feathers. These red droplets form a neat little row across the middle of her folded wings and from this, the name "waxwing" is apparently derived.

The male resembles the female — little larger, more wary, more ex-



Adult feeding 3-4-day old waxwings.

...citable if one approaches the nest when he is there — but so similar that it is difficult to tell the two apart at a distance or in flight.

Arthur A. Allen refers to the “perfect tailoring” of the waxwing, and to its characteristic poised dignity which, as he puts it, “bespeaks good breeding.”¹ The description seems apt as never, despite provocation, have our backyard pair appeared with mussed or disarranged feathers, nor flushed and noisy. Their sleek neatness is notable, as is their quiet genteelness and apparent self-discipline.

The two birds exchange nest-sitting duties, although the one assumed to be the female is there for much the greater part of the time. Last Saturday the eggs were a clear, clean color. Now the black from the freckles seems to be retaining the turquoise, giving it a smoky look, especially at the more rounded end of each egg.

Ordinarily, while one bird tends the eggs, the other scavenges for food or keeps watch from the power line or a nearby perch in the spruce. They signal back and forth — a distinctive throaty, rattle-like sound or a high, more prolonged cry. Only infrequently have I seen them come to the nest together. On one occasion before they had become used to me, the female flew away, leaving the eggs several times for brief periods as I moved about. Finally she returned to sit on the eggs. Her mate accompanied her, perching on the rim of the nest protectively shielding her with his body.

July 12: This morning when I went out to go to work, the strong gusting wind continued to pound the trees in the back garden, shaking the branches and whipping the leaves.

No soft little bird huddled on the nest but the eggs were still there. Then

a throaty hiss-like rattle, a slight flutter, and I saw them! The pair was perched on a far spruce branch, sheltered from the wind, near the ground. With wing fluttering, bill rubbing, head nudging they passed a red berry back and forth.

In a delightful passage written in 1927, Harriet McCoy describes her reaction to a similar exchange:

As we came up to some sumac and other shrubs, we saw a slight movement, as of birds, near the ground. Looking closer, we were delighted to see two Cedar Waxwings perched together on a branch in a little space clear of foliage. We saw after a moment, that they seemed to be engaged in a dance or game, and we watched, half doubting our eyes. One bird had a tiny flower or very new leaf in its bill. The other, standing perhaps 6 inches away, all at once hopped close, took the leaf, and with one hop came back to its position. There it stood, straight, its position being perhaps a cue to the other bird, who now approached and, to our wonder, received the leaf, gave one hop back and stood erect. There was rhythm and precision about the little exercise which made it appear a conscious performance on the part of the birds and one which they seemed to enjoy greatly. We thought we had never seen anything with such pretty grace and delicacy of movement and color. They repeated it several times and when they flew off at last, we were left with a feeling of having been audience to a scene in a fairy play.²

My reaction paralleled hers. Never have I seen anything "with such pretty grace and delicacy of movement and color" as the ceremonious passing of one red berry back and forth.

July 14: On returning from church, I paused to look over at the nest, saw

that the female was unusually restless and so, when she flew off a short distance, approached to look more closely.

Broken pieces of shell were pushed out of the nest and clung to a branch. Two little birds had just hatched. When I climbed up on the kitchen stool to look in, there they were. Tiny naked creatures with no feathers, not even a scrap of down. With eyes glued tight, the scrawny little bodies wriggled about in a tangle at the bottom of the nest. Yet when they felt the vibration created by my hand brushing the branch, up came long thin necks, mouths wide, gaping for food.

One egg was still intact. I took several pictures while the adult hovered. Within an hour the third hatchling had emerged. Each could have fitted nicely into a teaspoon and their pink translucent skin was so delicate that the throbbing blue veins beneath were clearly visible.

Having looked into the nest, I stepped back to watch. Almost immediately both adult birds returned. The male perched on one side of the nest, regurgitated red berries one by one into the expectant, gaping mouths. Within a short time, the female made several trips together to feed the newly-hatched young.

July 17: For the most part the female has brooded on the nest leaving only occasionally to return with food. The male devotedly fetches berries and sometimes a caterpillar. Now 3 days old, the demanding little birds have grown quickly, although they still lack feathers and their eyes are not open.

Both adult birds feed them. This morning I watched an entertaining bit of play when the male flew in with food. His mate was brooding the nestling and, as he customarily does at such times, he perched on the edge of the



Adult waxwing feeding young about 10 days old.

nest and offered her a berry before proceeding to satisfy the other gaping mouths. Suddenly becoming aware of my nearness, he cocked his head, elongated his body, held the berry in his beak, "froze" into what seems to be a characteristic alarm stance. There he stood, tense and immobile, alert to danger. She huddled in the nest but, looking about and deciding that one fascinated watcher posed no immediate threat, impatiently nudged his breast with her head to remind him that she was waiting. He courteously presented her with the berry, then fed the young.

July 18: The nestlings are growing and changing very quickly. Today their skin is turning black, and has a leathery, reptilian look. There are rows of pimples on their backs which suggest that pin feathers may soon erupt.

July 21: The garden is a delightful oasis of quiet this afternoon. I am sitting in the old lawnchair under a spreading tree — the sun is bright around my circle of shade, the sky a clear, clear blue and the wisps of breeze gently refreshing.

The baby waxwings have grown un-



Two weeks old.

believably during the past 2 days. Two days ago, when they were 5 days old, tiny points of feathers began to break through the black pimply patches of skin and their eyes cracked open. Today the three of them, with black pin feathers all prickly, bulging eyes and long stretching necks, completely fill the nest. They must have tripled in size! The parent birds leave them for much longer intervals. Here comes one now!

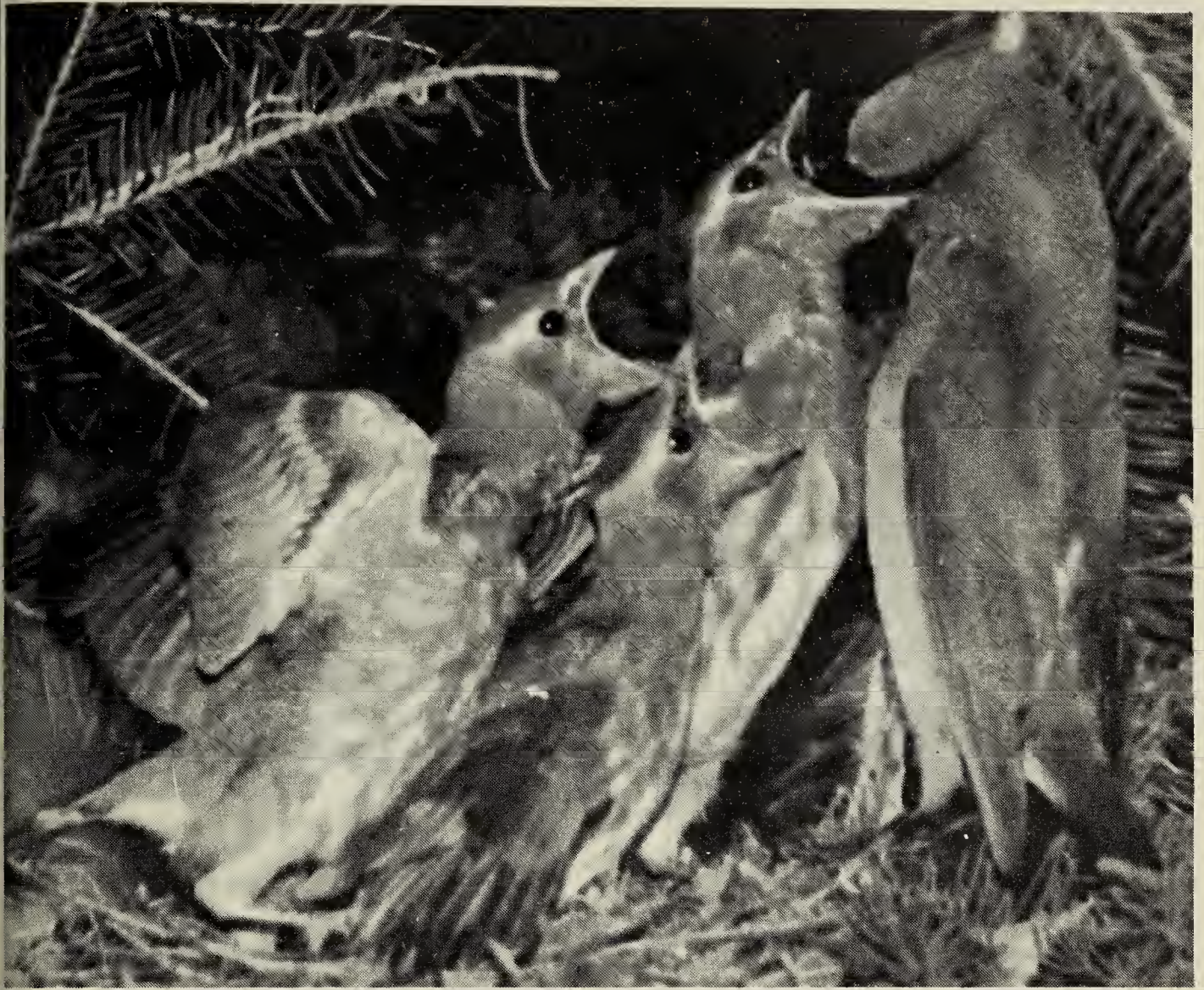
It is the male. He is much more nervous about bird-watchers than his mate, although quiet. When he flies in, he perches on the rim of the nest and, as the little ones reach beggingly for food, regurgitates as many as six or eight berries. He carries them in his crop and, in turn, brings up each bright red berry (about the size and colour of a pincherry) to hold it daintily in open beak, then push it down a gaping throat.

July 22: Spent the evening trying to

photograph the waxwings. There was sudden thunderstorm about 6 p.m. with heavy rain and deep purple sky but it cleared quickly. Now a strong wind tosses the big branches of the spruce tree and rocks the nest like cradle. The young birds have grown quickly. Today they have black pin feathers and a coat of soft, grey, fuzzy down. They doze, cuddled up together in the nest, except to wriggle about occasionally, and to stretch and beg for food when the parents approach.

It is a crowded nest now. At 7:30 the female returned to brood. She tucked the little ones under her wings like a setting hen — but they are so large that she looks most uncomfortable. In the wind a dry, dead twig scraped her so little body, threatening at times to dislodge her, so I cut it away with the scissors coming within 2 inches of her head as I snipped. She clung to the nest and watched me, conveying the impression that she trusted my good intentions.

July 24: Today, for the first time, the



Adult feeding 2-week old young.

nestlings truly look like little birds. They have soft, brownish-grey feathers on head and back, tinged with just a little white. They have clearly defined wing feathers and flap their wings in the nest when reaching for food. Still, their bodies are not yet maturely proportioned. Legs are comparatively undeveloped, heads large, and open beaks outline a gaping red vacuum.

One nestling seems considerably larger and more aggressive than the other two. Its head appears always to reach first for food, it has appropriated a choice spot in the nest and displays "fight" when one reaches out to touch the nest. This same bird is the only one of the young seriously trying to preen its feathers as yet.

Since I have begun to write, the parent birds have flown into the nest. One perches on its rim in the "freeze" position of watchfulness. The other is on a branch 2 or 3 feet away, equally immobile. Only a yellow flash of tail catches one's eye. Actually, this defensive reaction provides marvellous camouflage, as their subtle brown-grey feathering blends beautifully with the foliage, especially when sun and shade dapple them like leaves and needles.

They are quiet birds, especially when alarmed or cautious. Their approach to the nest just now was absolutely soundless. Frequently, only the flutter of a leaf hit by a passing wing or the breaking of a ray of sunlight by a quick-moving form alerts

one to their presence.

Already the young have learned the danger "freeze". When an adult gives a particular cry, they become motionless bundles of fluff in the nest and stay immobile for an amazing length of time.

July 27: During the past 2 hours the early morning sun has crept across the yard, bringing light and warmth. The three little birds are excitingly beautiful in a shaft of sunshine, preening themselves, advancing to the edge of the nest and trying their wings. Bright paint splashes of yellow mark their tails, their crests are clearly discernible, their beaks are beginning to look more like those of adult birds. At 2 weeks of age, they are presumably almost ready to leave the nest.

The parent birds have made a series of trips in to feed them since I came out. Usually they fly in together, although one usually perches nearby while the other feeds the nestlings. The second then flies to the nest to continue the feeding when the first leaves. Occasionally, however, they feed them simultaneously.

After every feeding the little birds tip up their bottoms, and the parent birds carefully clean them. This has been routine since they hatched and the nest is impeccably clean. Food this morning is varied with some white berries, similar in size to the usual red ones.

The little ones are very active today, calling loudly at the moment for breakfast. For the first time, I have identified the throaty, raspy-hiss demand-cry of the nestlings.

After this last feeding, the most active of the little birds teetered off the brim of the nest to a branch about 2 feet away where it now perches. A second bird is restless in the nest, moving about as if it intends to follow suit. The venturesome loner is tentatively moving about, flapping its

little wings, attempting to find a secure foothold. The branches of the spruce are sufficiently thick and interlocked there, that they support its body weight even though the bird does not seem to be securely anchored.

One of the adults has just flown in, went directly to the two in the nest and fed them, pointedly ignoring the outsider. With frantic wing flapping, great crying and desperate begging, it teetered back into the nest, where it was in turn fed and now preens itself.

July 28: All three young birds have seemingly been confined to the nest since the first one made its exploratory trip. This morning, though, when I came out, one of them took flight and flew awkwardly across the yard to the ornamental crab where it perched precariously.

There it clings. The parent birds saw its baptismal flight and hovered nearby, circling until it found a twig. Then they flew off, to return together within moments. And what a psychological study to watch them try to lure it back to the nest! One flies directly to the nest to feed the two young birds there. The other stops at the crab tree, gives the loner a single berry, then coaxingly flies slowly in a straight line to the nest, thereby showing it the way home. The little one begs and cries but seems paralyzed by the prospect of flying again. On their next trip with food, the parent birds are accompanied by a second pair of adult waxwings who join them in a repeat maneuver to persuade the stray to return. No luck. Late in the evening, the little bird is still absent.

July 29: The stray is back this morning. All three are in the nest — preening, teetering on its edge, flapping their wings, preparing to fly.

July 31: Today, 18 days after hatching, the young left the nest. The three fledglings flew awkwardly to an ad-



An 18-day old fledgling.

adjacent Manchurian elm, and are cuddled together in a single bundle of fluff high among its branches. Only at feeding time can they be seen, so well do they blend with the leaves.

August 1: The parent birds have continued to feed the young, making endless trips with berries. The fledglings have stayed in the elm, seemingly not ready for take-off. But this morning, just one day short of being 3 weeks old, they took flight with their parents.

August 8: Our waxwing "neighbors" have been nowhere in evidence and I had assumed that they were gone. I was therefore surprised at lunchtime to once again hear the distinctive begging cry of the young demanding to be fed and, when I checked, to see an adult feeding two of the fledglings in the Manchurian elm. A little later, saw the two adults perched side by side on their favourite power line.

August 14: While cleaning the rumpus room this evening, went out to shake the mop, heard a familiar throaty-hiss, and a longer higher-pitched whistle. Five waxwings, presumably our backyard family, were lined up on the power line and had signalled their presence. For the past week, I have missed them about the yard and tonight felt a burst of joy to see them again. Perhaps it is wishful thinking, but I fancied that they had dropped by to show me their grown babies, to share one last "magic" moment and, in their courteous way, to say farewell.

¹ALLEN, A. A. 1939. *The Golden Plover and other birds*. Ithaca, Comstock Publ. Co.

²BENT, A. C. 1950. *Life histories of North American wagtails, shrikes, vireos, and their allies*. Wash. D.C., Smithsonian Inst. U.S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 197.

³GODFREY, W. E. 1966. *The birds of Canada*. Ottawa, Natl. Mus. Canada. Bull. 203. Biol. Series 73.

⁴PUTNAM, L. S. 1949. *The life history of the Cedar Waxwing*. Wilson Bulletin 61: 141-182.