

WAXWINGS- A WINTER'S DELIGHT

OCCURRENCE, SEXING AND AGEING

By Ian McKerchar

OCCURRENCE



Above: One of the true pleasures of the winter season; a Waxwing influx in full flow. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)



Above: Waxwings are certainly unmistakable on views as good as this and they remain the sole species in the Western Palearctic to be of their size, display waxy tips to the secondaries and such a distinct crest. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)



Above: There is nothing to confuse them with here, their crests visible as they are but note also their broad bills appearing almost conical in shape and their generally upright stance. (Photo by Paul Cliff)



Left: Unmistakeable even in silhouette, note their very square looking tails. (Photo by Mark Rigby)



Above: In flight, their ringing calls (which are of course also given whilst perched) are often compared to the ringing of a small bell but are both distinctive and unmistakeable either way! They are often compared to and occasionally mistaken for Starlings in flight but note Waxwing's short, thick neck and short blunt bill giving rise to a subtly distinct profile; also the white tips to the primary coverts are plainly visible as a short white 'bar' on the outer wing on most of the birds. (Photo by Paul Cliff)



Above: Whilst berries are their first and foremost food during their winter invasions, their diet is remarkably varied with insects making up the bulk of their summer diet particularly consisting of mosquitoes and midges, whilst flower buds, beetles and fruit are also on the menu. In winter though their diet remains predominantly of berries, chiefly Rowan and Hawthorn but can also include a wide variety of other species when and where available. In hard winters they will also visit bird tables and consume scraps with bacon rind, bread, cold porridge, orange, banana and carrot being noted, apple a particular favourite and the drinking of tree sap has also been uncommonly observed. The bark of some trees will also be eaten as will stones and earth although it is likely these are taken for roughage and to aid digestion. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)



Above: Waxwings have been noted to consume up to two to three times their own body weight in berries a day and their ability to reduce large berry crops to nothing but an empty tree in no time at all is remarkable. Not surprisingly, this volume of consumption produces prolific quantities of faeces, with birds making their typical short visits to berry trees and feeding with such intensity that they appear to be consuming and excreting in equally large proportions at the same time!

Unsurprisingly, they also consume large quantities of water or even snow and the Greater Manchester County record flock of 510 Waxwings on the 8th of March 1996 used the roof of a Poundstretcher store in Stockport to drink from pooled water there. (Photo by Paul Cliff)

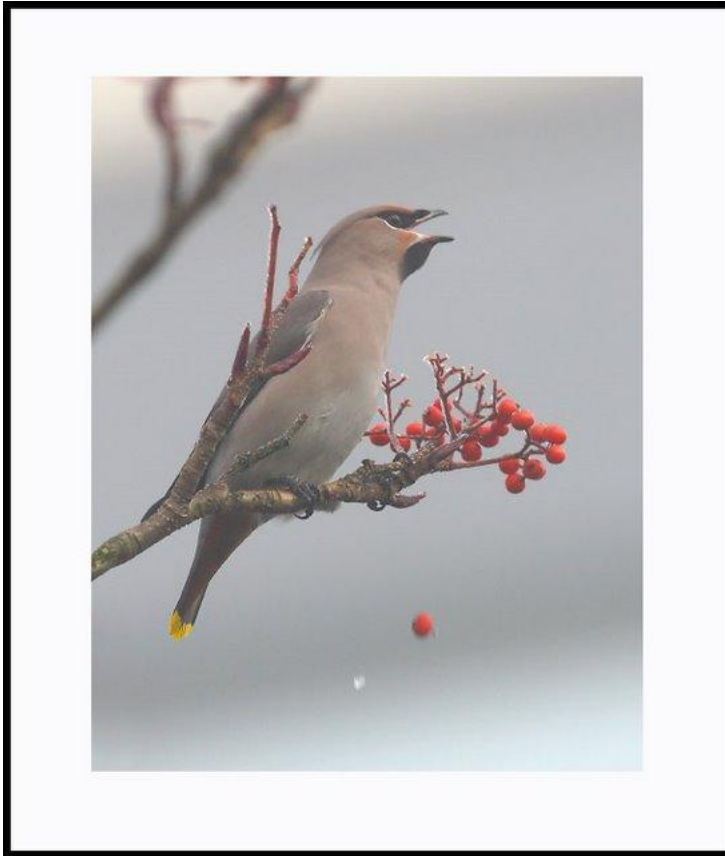


Above: In recent years Waxwings have been intensively ringed at various locations in the United Kingdom and more often than not, flocks contain one or two of these colour-ringed birds which gives us some idea of their movements. The bird above (left) was originally ringed in Aberdeen on the 9th November 2008 and was re-sighted in Edinburgh on the 3rd December 2008 before been seen and photographed at Woodley Precinct, Stockport on the 2nd January 2009. (Photo by Ian Worsley)



Above: It is all too obvious to see their appeal for birders but often their occurrence in large flocks at ornamental berry trees in housing estates, town centres, retail parks and the like draws the attention of the non-birding general public who are equally enamoured by their bright plumage and the close quarter observations they often allow. (Photo by Jill Islam)

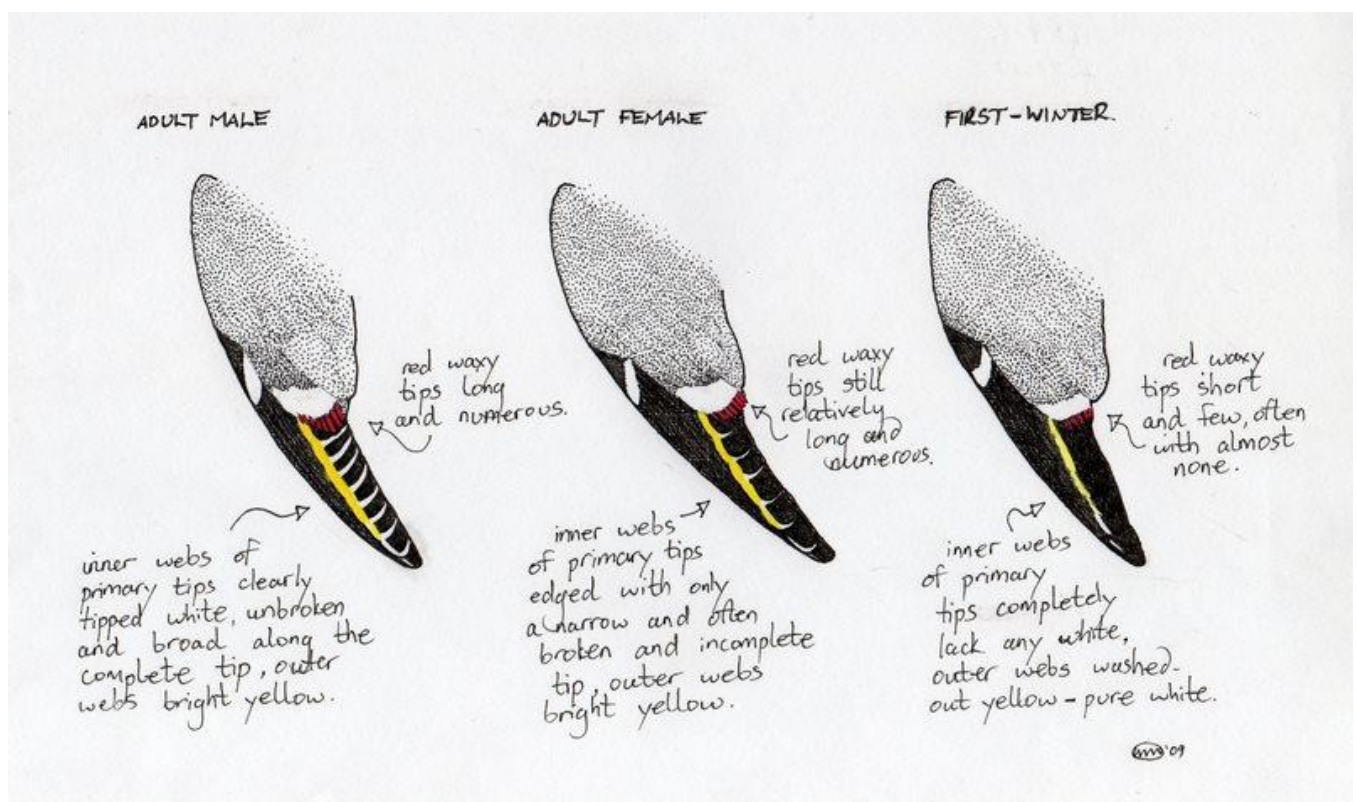
SEXING AND AGEING



Whilst their identification remains pretty much trouble free, interest can be had in ageing and sexing at least some the birds we come across and with good views of the primaries especially it's a fairly simple process, although a view such as in the photograph above wouldn't necessarily assist such matters! (Photo by Adrian Dancy)

It is important to indicate at this point, that some adult Waxwings can show overlap between the sexes. Some males can show a poorly demarcated lower edge of the throat similar to that of females and some females can show white on the inner webs of the primary tips similar to adult males, so care should be taken using a full suite of characters and any intermediate birds are best left unsexed.

Below: A plate summarising of the key features of the wing, helpful in the sexing and ageing of Waxwings. (Ink and watercolour by Ian McKerchar)



ADULT MALES



Left: A very handsome bird indeed, this edifying portrait amply displays the distinctive broad and complete white inner webs of the primary tips with both sexes of adults having bright yellow on the outer webs of the primary tips so obvious here. (Photo by Paul Hackett)



Above: Not the very sharply demarcated lower edge of the black throat against the upper breast. (Photo by Paul Hackett)

ADULT MALES



Above: Pretty much all the features requisite of an adult male Waxwing are evident here; the sharply demarcated lower edge of the black throat; the very long red waxy tips on the secondaries; the broad and conspicuous complete white inner webs to the primary tips; and the very broad yellow tips to the terminal end of the tail feathers. The waxy tips to the secondaries in adult males range from 6-9.5mm and in adult females from 5-7mm, but of course judging this accurately enough in the field is practically impossible! (Photo by Paul Hackett)



Above: This wonderful depiction allows us to study those beautifully marked wing feathers of this adult male in detail, especially the secondaries and their unique red waxy appendages. (Photo by Paul Hackett)



Above: The full broadness of the yellow terminal tail band on this adult male is clearly apparent here and his crest is outstanding! (Photo by Paul Hackett)

ADULT FEMALES



Left: This immaculate female demonstrates typically narrow, weak and incomplete white inner webs to the primary tips; obviously rather shorter red waxy tips to the secondaries than in the above males; and the lower edge of the black throat is diffuse and poorly demarcated against the upper breast. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)

ADULT FEMALES



Above: The yellow terminal tail band is still relatively wide but the weak white inner webs to the primary tips and rather short waxy tips to the secondaries are indicative of an adult female. (Photo by Paul Wilson)



Left: The white inner webs to the tips of the primaries are typically inconspicuous on this individual although the waxy tips to the secondaries appear relatively long. (Photo by Paul Wilson)

ADULT FEMALES



Above: This close up of the head shows the diffuse lower edge to the black throat to maximum effect. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)



Above: Despite her remiges and rectrices lacking the more blatant markings of the male of the species, her crest is clearly up to the job and equal to that of his. (Photo by Paul Wilson)



Left: This female not only shows the prerequisite features of an adult female but also just how big a rose hip they can swallow! (Photo by Paul Wilson)

FIRST WINTERS



Above: There is still no doubting it's eye-catching appearance but this first winter typically portrays the complete lack of white on the inner webs to the tips of the primaries with just the appearance of a straight 'washed-out' yellow line running down the closed primaries. (Photo by Rob Smallwood)

FIRST WINTERS



Above: Again the lack of any white on the inner webs on the primary tips is evident and the red waxy tips to the secondaries are clearly very short indeed. In first winter males the longest waxy tips measure 3.5-5.5 mm, whereas on first winter females they measure 0-3.5mm, but clearly only the very extremes of the two should be attempted at being sexed in the field due to the inherent difficulties in accurately judging their lengths. (Photo by S.Wood)



Above: The 'washed-out' yellow line running down the closed primaries and complete lack of white of their inner webs is delightfully portrayed here. This apparent straight line is actually made up of colour on the outer webs of the primary tips and varies from white to this rather washed out yellow and on this individual, there are only three extremely short waxy tips evident on the secondaries. First winter Waxwings are said to show 4-8 waxy tips in first winter males and 0-5 (perhaps occasionally 6) in first winter females and so we can be fairly confident this is indeed a young female, especially given the shortness of those tips. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)

FIRST WINTERS



Above: In this depiction, although the wing is closed, the primaries are spread slightly and so the pale tips to their outer webs do not appear as a continuous straight line but the lack of white on the inner webs is clearly still palpable. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)



Above: Similar to the adult female, the lower edge of the black throat in first winters is diffuse and poorly demarcated from the upper breast. (Photo by Rob Smallwood)

FIRST WINTERS



Above: This 1st winter virtually lacks any red waxy tips to the secondaries at all and is very likely a first winter female. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)



Above: These two first winters display the full suite of features; no white on the inner webs of the primary tips; pale and weak yellowish/white line running down the primaries; virtually no red waxy tips to the secondaries (indicative of young females); and a rather narrow yellow terminal tail band (especially prominent on the left bird). (Photo by Adrian Dancy)

FIRST WINTERS



Left: This stunning depiction displays an obvious white line running down the primaries which lacks any yellow, archetypal extremely short red waxy tips to the secondaries and a narrow yellow terminal tail band. (Photo by Adrian Dancy)



Above: The bird in the foreground again displays the full suite of first winter characteristics but the bird behind appears to have a sharply demarcated throat and broad yellow tips to the tail and is likely an adult male. (Photo by Paul Hackett)

Acknowledgements

As usual the focus of my sincere appreciation is to the photographers within this article, whose photographs (all taken during November and December 2008 or January 2009) capture the true beauty of Waxwings and were often taken in freezing cold conditions and yet still they persisted, some even answering my call for specific details and plumages. The photographs within this article are both a credit to the species and to the photographers, so my thanks to you all, Jill Islam, Paul Wilson, Adrian Dancy, Rob Smallwood, S.Wood, Ian Worsley, Paul Cliff, Mark Rigby and Paul Hackett.

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manchesterbirding.com



Photo by Adrian Dancy