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LIVING



From left: a blue jay, a male goldfinch and a cedar waxwing. All are among the species that take centre stage during August.

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

Birds of August

Each month of the year has its characteristic birds that take centre stage. In August, one of the most visible and often-heard species is the cedar waxwing. Flocks of these black-masked berry lovers are common right now along roadsides, water courses and even in suburban backyards, especially if there is fruit available for them to feed on. Their behaviour, too, is very predictable. If you see a small group of birds perched high in a dead tree at this time of year, the chances are very good that they are waxwings. Listen for a very high-pitched, sibilant "seeee-seeee-seeee." It is especially noticeable when the birds take wing. Like the drone of the cicada, the call of the waxwing is a characteristic sound of hot, languid August days.

The waxwing's flocking and nomadic movements are typical of animals that feed on patchily-distributed foods such as berries. The fruits of pin cherry trees and red-osier dogwoods are among their most popular summer foods. However, both flying and vegetation-borne insects also form a large part of their diet. If you are at the cottage, out paddling or even driving alongside a body of water, watch for waxwings making aerial sallies from exposed perches to catch species such as dragonflies and mayflies emerging from the water. This behaviour is referred to as hawking. Flying ants are also a popular prey item, especially when the ants form mating swarms in early September. In the fall, waxwings also rely on wild grapes, ornamental fruits such as crabapple and mountain ash, and the berries of red cedar trees — hence the "cedar" part of their name. The red cedar is a member of the juniper family that produces berries rather than cones.

As for the "waxwing" part of their name, this refers to the red, waxy tips of their secondary wing feathers. Apparently these markings once reminded people of the sealing wax that was used on envelopes. The



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

red tips, which are lacking in young birds, may be a sign of age and even social status.

Cedar waxwings are also different from most other birds in that they are very late nesters.

In fact, some individuals do not begin egg-laying until early August. Lateness in breeding has probably evolved as a result of the species' dietary reliance on fruits that don't ripen until summer. In other words, breeding takes place when the most food is available for the young. Red-osier dogwood berries, chokecherries and blackberries are commonly fed to the nestlings. However, when

the hatchlings first emerge, they are fed an insect mash that provides the necessary fats and proteins for quick growth. It is at this time that the adults are most often seen making short flights from tree perches to snatch insects in the air. They have been particularly common in recent weeks along County Road 32 (River Road) between Peterborough and Lakefield.

Waxwings are highly nomadic birds that range widely during the late fall, winter and spring as they search for food. Some end up as far south as Costa Rica. When there is sufficient natural food crop available, some flocks will overwinter in Canada.

The American goldfinch is another quintessential bird of August. It is the common yellow and black "wild canary" of gardens and weedy fields. In late summer and early fall, goldfinches can often be found dining on the seeds of cosmos, coreopsis and other common garden flowers. They are also regular visitors to niger-seed feeders. Many people are familiar, too, with the goldfinch's undulating, rollercoaster-like flight pattern. A few rapid wing beats provide the ascent followed by a brief descent on closed wings. The upward part of the pattern is almost always accompanied by a contact call.

Like the cedar waxwing, goldfinches are

late nesters. They don't begin nest-building until late June or July, about the same time as bull and Canada thistles go to seed. Thistle seeds provide food for the nestlings and the downy fibres attached to the seeds are used for lining the bottoms of the nests. Thistle down acts as a tiny parachute which catches the summer winds and disperses the seed great distances.

However, the real reason for the late nesting may have more to do with how the goldfinch gets its fresh, bright new feathers each spring than with seed availability or material to line the nests. The American goldfinch is the only finch in its genus (*Carduelis*) to acquire its breeding plumage by moulting. Moulting refers to the act of shedding old feathers and growing new ones. In other closely related finches such as siskins and redpolls, there is no spring moult at all. The tips of the feathers grown in a previous moult are simply worn down through use, revealing a generally brighter, more colourful appearance by the time the nesting season arrives. The snow bunting is another example of a species that acquires its breeding attire in this manner.

In the case of the goldfinch, however, there is a complete spring moult lasting many weeks. The particularly long moulting period may be a result of the goldfinch's strict seed diet, which is poor in the proteins needed to produce new feathers. The high physiological demands of this long spring moult may simply mean that the bird does not have the necessary energy resources to begin nesting until later in the season.

As mentioned above, goldfinches consume very little insect matter, even when feeding nestlings. This is bad news for brown-headed cowbirds, a parasitic species that lays its eggs in other birds' nests. If a cowbird lays an egg in a goldfinch nest, the young cowbird almost always dies. It simply cannot survive on the Spartan seed diet.

Late summer and early fall are also syn-

onymous with the clamorous calls of blue jays. They can be heard boisterously advertising their presence throughout the Kawarthas. A member of the crow family, blue jays make a huge variety of sounds. In addition to the loud, familiar "jay! jay!" call, a musical "queedle-queedle", and a variety of chattering, harsh notes and growls may be heard.

These brash opportunists have adapted very well to city life. They dine on everything from ornamental shrub berries and lawn grubs to sunflower seeds and peanuts at the feeder. Right now, however, it is their vocalizations that attract the most attention. After a self-imposed silence during the spring and early summer nesting season, family groups of jays are once again calling loudly to each other as they fly low over trees and rooftops. These flocks consist of a mated pair, accompanied by several fledged offspring. Parent blue jays will sometimes feed their young for up to two months.

Surprisingly enough, most blue jays will make a mass exodus from Ontario in September and October. As birds from further north stream southward through the Kawarthas, their familiar calls become even more common. Along the north shore of Lake Erie, you can sometimes see thousands of blue jays in a single day in late September, as they follow the lake shore towards Michigan and then points southward.

For anyone interested in travelling a bit further afield to see August birds, a day trip to Presqu'île Provincial Park on Lake Ontario can be very productive. At least a dozen species of sandpipers and plovers are migrating through right now.

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