

Nesting Cedar Waxwings

On August 1st, a caller to the Fish and Wildlife Division requested identification of a "brown bird" nesting in a backyard, and being available, I duly proceeded to Brackley Pt. Rd. with binoculars in hand. Of course I was expecting it to be a House Sparrow so it was with delight that I beheld instead a cedar waxwing. Waxwings are relatively common here in some years but it is not often that nests are located, and indeed there are only 2 records for P.E.I. in the Maritime Nest Records repository. The first of these was reported by Stanley Vass about 15 years ago.

The female waxwing was on the nest when I arrived and would not budge when I stuck my face about a foot from hers. Further visits had the same result so I relied on the owners of the backyard, Mr. and Mrs. Joe Paquet to report on the progress of the clutch. The Paquets inspected the nest in the rare moments when the female absented it. (According to the Field Guide the female rarely leaves the nest until the young have hatched, and is fed by the male throughout this time.) On August 15 the Paquets were able to ascertain that 4 young and one egg were present.

This brings us to a curious fact about cedar waxwings. While it is well known that raptors begin incubation when they lay the first egg, it is not often that passerines or "dickey birds" use the same nesting strategy. The cedar waxwing is one that does, and the end result

is that the young hatch out in series, the oldest in this case being over 5 days older than the youngest. Joel Carl Welty in The Life of Birds reports that loons, grebes, pelicans, herons, many gulls, swifts and hummingbirds incubate with the first egg, but when listing passerines which do so he mentions only "a few passerine species."

The only advantage of incubating with the first egg seems to be a better protection of the eggs. Welty says that the longer eggs are exposed to danger from enemies or storms the less chance for survival. For example, a robin which waits until 4 eggs are laid before incubating, has exposed the first 3 to danger by not covering them with her body. The disadvantage of using the waxwings' strategy involves the fate of the last few eggs. When the first-hatched young require food, the parents may not be able to properly incubate the remaining eggs. Welty notes that barn owls may eat the youngest nestlings, producing the same end result.

On August 26, the condition of the waxwings nest indicated an untimely end for at least two of the young waxwings. The nest was found on the ground, feathers were scattered about and two young were found dead. There were no signs of live young in the immediate area.

During this same week, a second cedar waxwing nest with two dead young was reported to Nelson Hurry. The nest was located in Sherwood not far from Paquets.

Rosemary Curley
Fish and Wildlife