

694-01-1993

1412 Hawthorne Street
Natrona Heights, PA 15065
October 29, 1993

Barbara M. Haas, Secretary
Pa. Ornithological Records Committee
2459 Hammertown Road
Narvon, PA 17555-9726

Dear Barb,

Here are details on the waxwing observation for P.O.R.C. review. I hope they're not too long and overdone -- guess the excitement got my adrenalin going.

Can you let me know the committee's judgment? Maybe it will be in time for my report to Hall for *Am. Birds*.

Sincerely,



Paul Hess

P.S. I didn't cover in the documentation, but may have mentioned on the phone, something relevant to the whole waxwing situation: The berry crop on many plant species is outstanding here this autumn, perhaps the best I've seen in n. Allegheny or n. Westmoreland Co. in 30 years. This surely explains the unusually persistent presence of the big Cedar Waxwing flocks and may well account for the Bohemians' visit too. If such great crop abundance exists over a wide area, this may be a Bohemian winter for other birders too.

Incidentally, I haven't seen any of the waxwings feeding. Their foraging area must be somewhere over the hill out of view. The Cedars must feed first thing in the morning, because they spend about two hours every day from 8:30 to 10:30 sitting and busily preening in the same trees where the Bohemians appeared, alone, just after mid-day.

DOCUMENTATION FOR SINGLE-OBSERVER SIGHT RECORD -- P.O.R.C.

SPECIES: Bohemian Waxwng DATE SEEN: 27 October 1993

NO. OF INDIVIDUALS: 3 TIME SEEN: 12:45 p.m.

OBSERVER: Paul Hess

LOCATION: Natrona Heights, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

HABITAT -- GENERAL: Last street in suburban neighborhood at crest of a wooded hillside sloping down to wide, deep Little Bull Creek valley. Beyond the valley are undeveloped woodlands and fields.

-- SPECIFIC: A line of tall deciduous and coniferous trees at edge of hill; the birds were perched in the nearly bare crown of a 50'-tall silver maple.

LIGHT CONDITIONS: Overcast with medium clouds; moderately bright, with hidden sun at my back as I looked northward. Air was crisp, clean and dry. Light was sufficient for more than a silhouette but not to discern subtle plumage colors at the distance involved.

WEATHER: Sighting occurred amid passage of a weak cold front with light W to WNW winds; temperature 54 degrees F.

DISTANCE: 50 yards. TIME OF OBSERVATION: 1-2 minutes.

OPTICS: 7 x 50 binoculars

POSITION OF BIRDS RELATIVE TO OBSERVER: The birds were perched in the open at an angle perhaps only 20 degrees upward from the viewpoint of my elevated yard. All were facing west into the light wind, and seen in left profile. Then they were seen in flight for about 100 yards as they moved straight to my left toward the west.

BASIS OF IDENTIFICATION:

1) Larger size and more robust, "fatter" build than Cedar Waxwing were instantly evident by naked eye, even before I knew they were waxwings. The guides seem to minimize this as a criterion unless the species are seen together, but it was exactly what drew my immediate interest. I had been watching flocks of 30-70 Cedars in the same tree-line every morning for nine days. These 3 birds were alone, but it was clear at my first glance that they were not Cedar Waxwings.

2) Adult waxwing's prominent crest was clear on one bird but barely projected on the other 2. The adult crest seemed much larger proportionately than a Cedar's; the others' made about the same outline as would a first-winter Cedar.

3) The adult-crested bird had what appeared as a large white patch across the area where tips of secondaries would be, and a narrow bar sharply angled away from the patch on the small portion of upper primaries visible while perched. The large white area was much broader than the stripe-like narrow white markings often seen on Cedars. (See sketch) No such patches were noted on the two sub-adult birds, though part of a thin primary bar was barely evident on them as well.

4) All 3 birds had distinctly dark undertail coverts, not light as in Cedar (although I could not discern the actual color as Bohemian's deep rusty). This was not an effect of shadow; I find that Cedars' white-ish undertail is visible in similar light, same tree and distance. These 3 birds also appeared slightly darker and duller overall, both above and below, than Cedars.

5) Flight was conspicuously different from that of Cedars. My immediate notes say "strong and straight, with none of the buoyant twists and turns of Cedars." In Gabrielson and Lincoln's *Birds of Alaska*, I found a remarkably similar flight description: "straight, direct and swift course." Even while perched, these birds gave a different impression from Cedars. They sat quite unmoving, with none of the continual turning and other animation that give perching Cedars such a sense of nervous energy.

DISCUSSION:

As is my habit while passing my picture window, I scanned the treeline across the street. Three birds atop the big, nearly bare silver maple grabbed my careful attention, immediately striking me as somehow unfamiliar. They were a bit plump looking, roughly Starling-sized but clearly not Starlings, vaguely but not quite Evening Grosbeak-shaped, and an instant puzzle. It was enough to send me running for the binoculars.

Through the glasses, I first caught the large waxwing crest on one bird, then its conspicuous white wing patch. Now suspecting now what this might be, I studied the other two birds with less gratification. Their crests were barely noticeable and they had almost no wing-white visible. As mentioned, I could not discern subtle plumage color at that distance and light, but noted that the birds all seemed duller and darker than a Cedar. They showed none of the latter's warm, light-ish (or slim) appearance. Most notably, the undertail coverts were definitely dark, not light as in Cedar. No yellow on primaries or tail was evident (at that distance and light I don't usually see it on Cedars either).

After little more than a minute to study them perched, they suddenly flew westward at the same distance and disappeared. The last forceful impression they made was their straight, fast, un-fluttery, unswerving, un-Cedar flight-path.

OBSERVER EXPERIENCE:

This is a life bird. I have 23 years of intensive birding experience in western Pa., plus a lifetime of casual birding before that. I am a careful observer, try to be conservative in identifying rarities, and edited regional bird reports for the Audubon Society of W. Pa. *Bulletin* for 13 years.

COMMENTS:

I recognize that the lack of full plumage detail is less than optimum for such a rarity. I rely on the five points listed in combination, but primarily general appearance and jizz, to separate these birds from Cedars. As mentioned, flocks of 30 to 70 Cedars appeared daily in the same treeline since 10/19 on a regular schedule from about 8:30 to about 10:30 a.m. So watching Cedars in those trees has been a daily habit. This is why the larger size, "fatter" appearance and jizz were so immediately distinctive and meaningful.

A bit troubling is why the white wing markings were so insignificant on the 2 apparent first-winter birds. Current guides indicate that white is also prominent on juvenal wings. However Dwight, quoted in Bent, does say that adult birds after the first postnuptial molt have more extensive white than first-winter birds. In addition Kenneth Parkes at Carnegie Museum, comparing adult and first-winter skins for me, said the white on a December bird of the year was so much reduced compared to a full adult that it could well be consistent with my inability to see at that distance.

Conversely, I am aware that the presence of rather extensive white on wings does not always rule out Cedar Waxwing. A few Cedars show considerable white wing areas, which Bob Mulvihill suggests could be a recurrence of the ancestral waxwing trait. Or it could merely be a bit of albinism.

This date is rather early. A few notes on first-dates:

* Leberman, *A Field List of the Birds of Western Pennsylvania and Adjacent Regions*, cites an extraordinary 8/29-9/4 at Conneaut, Ohio, and one 10/19/80 at Butler Co., Pa., both single-observer sight records. His more typical first-date records occur in the period 11/11 to 11/17.

* Santner et al., *Annotated List of the Birds of Pennsylvania*, cites 11/3/80 at Hawk Mt.

* Bull lists 11/7 for New York, Hall 11/17 for West Virginia, and Peterjohn 11/29 as the first acceptable Ohio record.

* Interestingly, the first confirmed W. Pa. record listed by Todd (Dec. 24, 1897) came from Natrona, near the site of my current observation.

This account was written 29 October 1993. Descriptive notes & sketch made immediately after observation on 27 October.

Paul Felt

SHAPE OF WHITE ON WING(S)
OF BOHEMIAN WAXWINGS
(ONLY LEFT WING SEEN)



Prominent on
adult-crested bird;
present but much
thinner on the two
sub-adult birds.
(This bar's boundary
seemed clearly
defined, even at
that distance.)

Prominent on
adult-crested bird;
not visible at all
on the two sub-adult
birds.
(This patch seemed
rather diffusely bounded
at that distance.
This is only a generally
apparent shape.)

NOTE: The wing was actually a bit more
foreshortened than this from my
slightly lower angle of view,
but I can't seem to reproduce
the exact perspective.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: Bohemian Waxwing (*Bombycilla garrulus*)

Date of Sighting: 27 October 1993 to 27 October 1993

Location: NATRONA HEIGHTS

County: ALLEGHENY

Observer(s): Paul Hess

Date of Submission: 1993

Submitted by: Paul Hess

Written Description: YES Photo: NO Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas			X					
N. Pulcinella			X					
E. Kwater			X					
R. Ickes			X					
G. McWilliams			X					
P. Schwalbe			X					
J. Skinner			X					
TOTALS			7					
DECISION			X					

Comments:

Signature (Secretary): *F. C. Haas*

Date: 9-25-94