

1. Birds of Mystery

The cedar waxwing has always been a favorite bird of mine. It is a small, cinnamon-colored passerine with a crest and black mask. On the tip of its tail is a bright yellow stripe and on the wings are bright red droplets of wax.

My favorite bird guide says that the bird is "irregular in its wanderings." That, along with its exotic appearance, for me has always seemed to add a touch of mystique to the bird.

I was not alone in thinking this. I remember many years ago having heard them referred to as "birds of mystery." I remember, too, in the early seventies that the cedar waxwing came to mind when I saw my first demonstration of a database.

I had never heard of such a thing as a database but the man demonstrating it explained that with it one could, among other things, choose words or phrases and instantly find in the data corpus any instances where they corresponded. He asked for suggestions, and I immediately wanted him to search for the phrases "cedar waxwings" and "birds of mystery." Unfortunately, the demonstrator chose the suggestion of another audience member and then quickly moved onto another part of the talk.

I wasn't able to make a database search back then, but I can easily do so now by simply using Google. I have entered the phrases and the first results are the following:

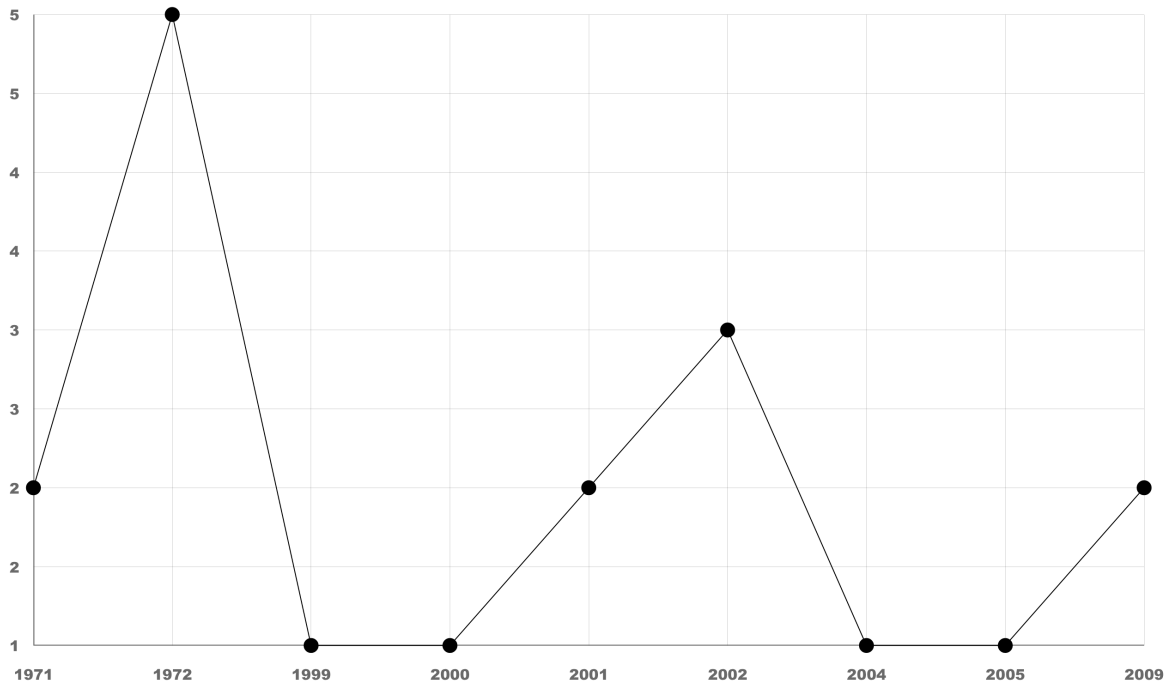
...Their conversations are more like whispering instead of the usual chirping or twittering expected from birds. This whispering adds to the mystery surrounding them. It isn't difficult to see why cedar waxwings are sometimes referred to as "birds of mystery."

I have my own database today and in it I find that I have only seen waxwings 18 times in 46 years. I also see that I first saw them on October 9, 1971 and made the following notes:

Cedar Waxwing 10/09/1971 Flagstaff Area Saturday We looked out the window of the Saga Foods cafeteria and beheld some cedar waxwings. They ate from a berry tree (bush) round blue-black berries (big ones). Then they ate some red berries from a neighboring bush. Some of these waxwings were immature and I think there were only 3 or 4 of them in all. They allowed us to get within inches of them.

As you can see from my notes, Cedar waxwings like to eat berries, and this fact is key to the story that I really wanted tell all along.

It happens that years and years ago the parents of a friend of mine went to the funeral of a relative in Montana. My friend's mother recounted part of what had happened there. She told of how she had seen cedar waxwings falling from a tree. The birds had apparently become intoxicated after eating berries filled with juice that had fermented on the bush. His mother said that she thought it was fitting as the departed relative was known to be a drinking man.



The Eighteen Sightings of the Cedar Waxwing

In 2007, my friend's father died and my friend asked me whether I thought it was unusual to see March cedar waxwings in the central Arizona desert.

"Well," I replied. "They are irregular in their wanderings and have been described as "birds of mystery."

At the funeral, my friend told the story of the drunken cedar waxwings in Montana and said that he had gone out in the back yard of the hospice where his father had died and saw the trees there filled with the birds.