

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

To the Editors:

In the Region 8 season report in the Winter 1983 issue (*Kingbird*, Vol. 33, p. 70), mention was made of two Cedar Waxwings banded in Greene County that "had orange tail bands like the Japanese race." This "record" was also mentioned in Robert Spahn's "Highlights of the Fall Season" in the same issue (p. 44), with the wording "Cedar Waxwings with the orange tail tips typical of the Japanese race." The cautious phrases "like..." and "typical of..." disappear in the Region 1 season report in the summer 1983 issue (*Kingbird*, Vol. 33, p. 187): "An alert bander discovered a Cedar Waxwing of the Japanese race with bright orange tail tips..." Mr. Spahn, too, abandoned his earlier tentative wording and stated "A Japanese race of the Cedar Waxwing (orange tail tips) was again recorded..."

I have no idea how the rumor got started that there is such a "Japanese race" of the Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*), which is a purely North American species. The Japanese Waxwing (*B. japonica*) is a highly distinctive species (see color plate in *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan*, Wild Bird Society of Japan, 1982, p. 235). It differs from both the Cedar Waxwing and Bohemian Waxwing (*B. garrulus*) in having bright red, not orange, tail tips; the black facial mask extends posteriorly to the back of the crown such that the longest feathers of the crest, which is proportionately longer than in the other two species, are black; and the black throat patch is more extensive than in either of the others. The under tail coverts are reddish brown, somewhat redder than in the Bohemian Waxwing. Like the latter species, the Japanese Waxwing has highly patterned wings, but the pattern is quite different. The primaries are tipped with white, forming a conspicuous row of white lines or v-shaped marks in the closed wing. In many individuals, some of these white marks are washed with pink. The secondaries are not boldly marked with white on the outer web as in the Bohemian Waxwing, but are gray with a broad black tip, on which there may be a small spot of pink and/or white. The greater coverts are tipped with dark red, forming a conspicuous band. About the only character in which the Japanese Waxwing resembles the Cedar more closely than the Bohemian is the yellowish abdomen, although this color averages paler and is generally less extensive than in the Cedar Waxwing.

For those who believe that the English names of birds should be diagnostic, that of *Bombycilla japonica* is rather inappropriate. The species is only a winter visitor to Japan (as well as to Korea and parts of eastern China), breeding in extreme eastern Siberia; and it *lacks* the waxy red tips found on the secondaries (and occasionally the rectrices and some wing coverts) of the other two species!

Orange tail tips have not been described for the Cedar Waxwing in any of the standard references that I have consulted. Nevertheless, this variation should be well known to those handling a large sample of this species. Of 207 study skins of non-albinistic Cedar Waxwings in the collection of Carnegie Museum of Natural History, six have orange tail tips, including both adults and juveniles. There are additional specimens of this color variety now in our freezer awaiting preparation. I do not know whether Bohemian Waxwings also exhibit occasional orange tail tips; of the 44 skins in our collection, none has anything richer than deep yellow on the tail tip.

The personnel of the Section of Birds of Carnegie Museum of Natural History have been collecting information about plumage variations in Cedar Waxwings for many years. As of the fall of 1983, we have banded almost 10,000 individuals of this species at our field station, Powdermill Nature Reserve, noting color variations such as number of wax tips and abnormal tail tip colors. We hope to complete this survey and submit it for publication during the coming year.

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