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**Waxwing** by Michael Blencowe of the Sussex Wildlife Trust

***Hold onto your berries***

Once there was a time when people believed that the rare appearance of a flock of waxwings was an evil omen; a portent of disaster, war or pestilence. Well, if Armageddon is the price I have to pay for a glimpse of one of these beautiful birds - then bring it on.

Waxwings are dumpy, starling-sized birds which look like something from a Beryl Cook painting – all silky curves, coiffured crests and heavy makeup. Imagine an orangey-brown hand grenade wearing eye shadow and you’re almost there. Add to it black, white and yellow wings jazzed up with a row of shiny, scarlet teardrops. These waxy red feather tips, which give the bird its name, are believed to be used in courtship; the biggest and best wing-bling belonging to the older males.

Waxwings roam in gangs – you’re more likely to see twelve than one. To be next to a berry-laden bush when a flock descends is akin to being sat in a quiet pub when a drunken hen party bursts through the door. Waxwings announce their arrival with high-pitched chattering and excited trills, and greedily squabble over berries as if they were fighting over half-price handbags in the January sales.

Waxwings love berries. They can eat their own bodyweight in just a few hours. Once this flock of feathered Pac-Men have chomped their way through one berry bush they fly off to ransack another. Their reliance on berries is the cause of their irregular migrations or ‘irruptions’. Every few years a failure in the berry crop in their eastern Scandinavian and northern Russian homeland sparks a winter-long, Europe-wide berry guzzling rampage which eventually leads them to our island. British ‘waxwing winters’ are by no means an annual event and we may go for years without seeing any waxwings in Sussex.

During some winters though, we hit the jackpot. At the start of November 2012 thousands of them arrived on the Northern Isles and throughout December the advancing waxwing tsunami surged south, binging on berries in Banff then Bolton then Birmingham then Bracknell. By mid-December they hit Sussex and flocks of the birds were reported all over the county. They’re not fussy about where they dine; industrial estates, petrol station forecourts, parks and gardens - anywhere that can lay on a decent berry buffet. Out of town supermarkets have a habit of planting decorative berry bushes which attract waxwings. So look out for them over the coming weeks while you’re shopping – you may find yourself an early Christmas present.

Ends

**Sussex Wildlife Trust is an independent charity caring for wildlife and habitats throughout Sussex. Founded in 1961, we have worked with local people for over half a century to make Sussex richer in wildlife.**

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