

Waxwing

Bombycilla garrulus

Bird · Winter visitor · Nov–Mar (irregular)



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Waxwings are one of the most eagerly anticipated winter visitors to Dumfries and Galloway, though they don't turn up every year. This starling-sized bird is unmistakable: a soft pinkish-brown body, a jaunty crest, a black eye-mask, and wingtips finished with tiny red, wax-like tips that give the species its name. Waxwings breed far north in Scandinavia and Russia, and only cross the North Sea to Britain when the berry crop fails back home — an "irruption" that can bring flocks flooding into supermarket car parks and suburban streets wherever rowan, cotoneaster and hawthorn berries hang heavy. Some winters see none locally at all; others bring flocks of dozens, often astonishingly tame and easy to watch at close range as they strip a berry bush bare in a matter of hours. By March, whatever birds have arrived head back north to breed.

BEHAVIOUR

Waxwings feed almost entirely on berries in winter, swallowing them whole and working through a bush systematically until it's stripped clean before moving on together as a tight flock. Because they rely on an unpredictable food supply, they show little fear of people, often feeding at eye level a few metres from passers-by. Their soft, trilling call is a good way to locate a flock before you see it.

WHEN TO SEE IT

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QUICK FACTS

FAMILY	Waxwings (Bombycillidae)
SIZE	18 cm · starling-sized
UK STATUS	Amber-listed

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