

Northern Cardinal

Cardinalis cardinalis

Bird - Buntings and Tanagers

Location: Northern cardinals can be found from the Dakotas, southern Ontario, and Nova Scotia southward to the Gulf Coast, and from southern Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and southern California southward into Mexico. Although these birds are non-migratory, the species has greatly extended the range northward and westward, thanks mainly to the profusion of backyard winter bird feeders. Cardinals prefer open woodland habitats such as parks, gardens and suburbs. They may also be found in thickets, brushy swamps, evergreens and privet hedges.

Diet: The cardinal primarily consumes a variety of seeds but it sometimes feeds on insects. Beetles, cicadas, dragonflies, leafhoppers, aphids, ants, termites, grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars, moths, cutworms, spiders, snails and slugs are common prey items. Also included in its diet are wild fruit, grains, blossoms and buds of elm trees.

Life Cycle: Cardinals mate for life and inhabit the same general vicinity for several years, often raising 1-4 broods during the breeding season. They are highly protective of their territory and chase off other birds. Occasionally, a lone bird, or member of a neighboring pair, competes for a bird's mate.

There are 3 main features in the cardinals' courtship: countersinging, mate-feeding and the lopsided pose. In the early stages of courtship, the male and female perch in different areas of the territory and countersing. First 1 sings a phrase and then the other sings, often matching the same phrase.

Countersinging involves copying phrases, which functions to synchronize and unify members of a pair; when given between males, it helps settle territorial disputes. Mate-feeding occurs when the male feeds the female in courtship. The male picks up a seed or other food bit, hops over to the female, and tilts his head sideways to place it in her beak.

The third feature of cardinal courtship is rarely observed. The lopsided pose (in which 1 or both birds tilt the body from side to side) sometimes happens so quickly that it creates a swaying type of motion. It is most often given by the male to the female.

Copulation has not been that commonly observed. The female may solicit copulation by crouching with head and tail raised. Sometimes immediately prior to copulation, the male (while singing with crest erect) may sidestep or almost slide down a branch to the female.

Cardinals prefer to nest in thickets and shrubs, but nests can also be found in honeysuckles, privet hedges, multiflora roses and dense evergreens. The nest is usually built by the female, and a common sight is the pair flying across an open space, the female leading with nesting material in her beak.

She chooses the site, usually about 8 feet from the ground but sometimes as high as 30

feet. There are 4 layers in cardinal nests. The first is a platform of stiff weed stems and vine stems; the second consists of leaves or paper and grapevine bark; the third is fine weed stems, grass and trailing vines; and the fourth is fine rootlets and grass stems.

Occasionally, the male may help gather material and even take part in some building. The nest takes approximately 4-6 days to complete.

A clutch of about 2-5 eggs (usually 3-4) are laid in the nest. The eggs may appear blue, green or gray in color with spotted or blotched markings. The eggs are laid 1 per day until the clutch is complete. The female starts full incubation after the last egg is laid.

While the female is incubating, her behavior in relation to the male is variable. Sometimes she sings, calling the male to feed her on the nest. At other times, she may fly to him and combine feeding herself with being fed by him.

Once the eggs have hatched, the female broods the young constantly for about the first 2 days after hatching. During these first days of the nestling phase, the male brings food for the female and the young. Later both parents gather food for the young. During the last few days of nestling life, the young may be fed as often as 11 times in an hour. The nestling phase may last about 9-14 days (roughly 1-2 weeks).

When the chicks fledge the nest, the male watches over them for about 3-4 weeks while the female incubates the next brood. The young tend to stay near the nest, often calling to the parents. Food is brought to the chicks until the young gain more flying ability, and then the family becomes slightly dispersed. If there are multiple broods, the adults may drive off the young when they are independent and it is time to start feeding the next brood.

Adult cardinals may weigh between 1.2-1.9 ounces, and have a wingspread of roughly 10.25-12 inches. These birds have a longevity in the wild of approximately 13-14 years. One captive is reported to have lived 28.5 years.

Cardinals usually gather in flocks in the fall and remain together through the winter, staying in areas where food is plentiful. The flock is often fairly evenly divided by sex, and at night, they roost together. In these flocks, males may be slightly dominant over females in feeding situations. The flocks break up in late February. Some cardinals do not join flocks but remain on their breeding ground with their mate through winter.

Culture: The Cherokee have a tale that explains how the male cardinal obtained his red color. A raccoon came upon a wolf one day in the forest and, in passing, made several insulting remarks to the wolf. The wolf became angry and began chasing the raccoon, who only laughed and ran swiftly through the forest. Finally, the raccoon came to a tree beside a river and without missing a step, quickly climbed up and stretched out on a limb overlooking the water. When the wolf came to the river; he saw the reflection of the raccoon and, thinking it was the raccoon, jumped into the water after him. Once he

realized his mistake, he began struggling toward land. The wolf nearly drowned before he could scramble out of the river. When he finally pulled himself ashore, exhausted, he lay down on the bank of the river to rest and was soon sound asleep.

As nimbly as he had climbed up, the raccoon scrambled down from the tree and cautiously approached the sleeping wolf. Quickly he took mud from the river and plastered the wolf's eyes and then ran into the forest. When he awoke, the wolf could not open his eyes and began to whine. Just then, a little brown bird came through the bushes.

The bird heard the wolf crying and asked what was the matter. The wolf told the bird what had happened and asked the bird for help. The little bird easily cleaned the mud from the wolf's eyes. The wolf was so grateful that he showed the little bird a magic pool of red.

The happy bird jumped into the pool and swam all around, being careful not to let the red paint get into his mouth. He then called his mate so that she, too, could become a beautiful red color. But by the time she got there almost all of the paint was gone and she could only add a little color to her wings, breast and crest. And from that time on, the male cardinal has been all red, except for around his mouth, and the female has had to be content with her brown color and just a blush of red.

Remarks: Male and female cardinals are easily told apart through plumage. The male is all red and the female is a light brown with reddish overtones. The juveniles are similar to the female but have a black bill rather than a red one. Both male and female cardinals utter loud, clear whistles and beautiful songs with many variations.

The genus and species names, *Cardinalis cardinalis*, are Latin words pertaining to a door hinge. Cardinals were named for the rich, bright red color found in the males, the same color as the robes worn by the cardinals of the Catholic Church.

The cardinals of the Church are important to the Pope in that many essential matters are dependent on, or hinged on, their decisions.

Sources: The Backyard Bird-Lover's Guide

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