Cardinal

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

The Cardinal is probably one of the most recognizable and popular backyard birds because of its brilliant red color and crested head. It is a great bird to admire year-round. The color contrast of the brilliant red against fresh white snow really is a high point during the winter months. Early settlers were said to have named this bird after the Cardinals of the Catholic Church who wore red robes.

Both sexes are accomplished songsters and may be heard at any time of year. Cardinals will mate for life and remain together throughout the entire year. That's why you will usually see a male and female together at your feeding station.

Interesting Facts:

Family: Emberizidae

Scientific Name: *Cardinalis cardinalis*

Location: They can be found across the eastern U.S. from lower Canada south to the Gulf Coast and west to Arizona and parts of Southern California. The Cardinal's range has expanded dramatically since 1886 when it was rarely seen north of the Ohio River. Habitat is typically dense thickets along fields, hedges, swamps, and parks and gardens.

Migration: Cardinals are not migratory. Their bright plumage brings color to our yards during the winter when many other species have flown south. In winter, most cardinals flock and roost together but, at other times of the year, they are quite territorial. In flocks, males dominate females when feeding. It is also nice to hear a pair calling to each other in late winter or early spring.

Nesting: A Cardinal's nesting season lasts from March to August. They usually raise 2-3 broods a year. The female builds a nest of small twigs and grasses in a shrub or dense bush. She lays about 3-4 white to greenish eggs that average about one inch in length. The female usually incubates the eggs, which takes 12-13 days. However, after the eggs hatch, the male tends to the chicks while the female incubates her next brood. Young leave the nest after 9-10 days. Male Cardinals often feed the females while courting and when they're nesting.

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Diet:	About 90% of the Cardinal's food consists of weed seeds, grains, insects, fruits, and sunflower seeds. They prefer seeds that are easily husked. Cardinals are less selective during winter in the colder climates. Cardinals also drink maple sap from holes made by sapsuckers.
Size and Color:	Cardinals range from 8 to 9 inches long, with a wingspread of 10-1/4 to 12 inches across. The adult male is bright red with a black face and red bill. The adult female is buff-brown with a red tinge to the crest, wings, and tail. Like the male, the face is black and the bill orange.
Special Characteristics:	Male and female Cardinals both sing. Songs are loud, beautiful whistled phrases. Some songs you may hear sound like "whoit whoit whoit" and "whacheer whacheer." These songs are used in forming territories and in courtship. Male and female cardinals use "chirps" as contact calls and alarms. They also have many visual displays such as "tail-flicks" to signal alarm. The crest may be raised and lowered. Strongly territorial, males will fight other males, along with their own reflection in windows!
Attracting:	Create a dense hedge or thicket around your backyard. Cardinals are especially fond of roosting and nesting in honeysuckle thickets. Provide open areas with trees and berry producing shrubs such as mulberry, blueberry, grape, and dogwood. At feeding stations, they prefer unhulled black-oil sunflower seeds over all other foods. They will also eat safflower, cracked corn, white proso millet, bread, nutmeats and peanut butter mixes. Offer a source of water for drinking and bathing.
Life Span:	Up to 15 years.

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