U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Northern Cardinal

The bright red northern cardinal is the state bird in seven states – more than any other species (Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, West Virginia). It is a year-round resident of the Eastern United States, though it only moved into the Northeast in the middle of the 20th century.

Male Northern Cardinal
USFWS

The range and density of the cardinal have increased because they thrive on park-like urban habitats and bird-feeders. However the cardinal is a species of special concern in California because of habitat loss.

Cardinals prefer brushy woodlands, streamside thickets, orchards, swamps, suburban gardens and parks. They roost and nest in dense thickets, evergreens and hedges. They are popular visitors to backyard birdfeeders, especially when their favored black oil sunflower seeds are offered. Their large beak is especially useful for crushing seeds. They also eat fruits and insects. Cardinals may lose their head feathers if they become infested with feather mites. They are not able to preen on their heads, but when the mites are gone, the feathers return.

Cardinals will mate for life and stay together throughout the year. They don't migrate and often come to birdfeeders as a couple. A male northern cardinal sings and leans from side to side to display his wings while attracting a female. Males fiercely defend their territory – if a male cardinal sees his reflection in glass, he will spend hours banging the class and fighting the imaginary foe.

The male cardinal is entirely bright red with a large crest on his head. The female is grayish-tan with red tail and wings. They sing in a series of clear whistles ending in a slow trill. Sometimes the female will sing to let the male know it's time to bring food to the nest. A mated pair will share song phrases, but the female may sing a longer and more complex song than the male.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
National Wildlife Refuge System
http://www.fws.gov/refuges

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Find out More:
Cornell Lab of Ornithology
www.birds.cornell.edu

Wild Birds Forever
www.birdsforever.com

Orvis Beginner's Guide to Birdwatching by Alicia King (Rockport Publishers, 2008)

The Young Birder's Guide to Birds of Eastern North America by Bill Thompson and Julie Zickefoose (Houghton Mifflin, 2008)

Female Northern Cardinal
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