

Notable Natives

Northern Cardinal

Baker's Lake in Barrington is one of my favorite spots for bird watching and searching for wildflowers. There I can easily sight the northern cardinal, a native North American songbird that likes dense shrubby areas such as forest edges, overgrown fields, hedgerows, backyards, and feeders.

The northern cardinal is a medium-sized bird with a crest, the male all red and the female olive colored. Both have reddish, conical bills which are efficient at opening seeds.

During the fall, the male cardinal may not seem as red as usual since late in summer cardinals molt, and many of the male's new feathers are tipped with light gray. As winter wears on, the tips of his feathers wear off, revealing the bright red breeding color beneath. Cardinals owe their flaming feathers to carotenoids, orange-reflecting pigments the birds extract from the berries and insects they ingest.

Often we are attracted by hearing a northern cardinal singing its most common song with beautiful clear whistles, "whoit-shoit-whoit-tea, tear, tear," sometimes interpreted as "cheer, cheer, cheer." When disturbed, it gives a loud "chip, chip" call. Both males and females sing, a rarity among female songbirds. The female cardinal often does so while sitting on her nest. To hear a beautiful rendition of cardinal song, check out the Cornell Lab of Ornithology online.

The northern cardinal was once considered to be a southern bird, but now it is relatively common even in New England and parts of southern Canada. It is considered non-migratory, and banding records have shown that adults rarely stray more than a few miles from their birthplace.



Male northern cardinal. Photo by Mary and Lloyd McCarthy.

Like many of our winter birds, cardinals congregate in the fall, forming loose flocks that stay and feed together although a few pairs remain alone in their breeding territories. Flock size depends mainly on the availability of food and how many birds a certain area can support. Two food sources are primary; in the winter they eat seeds and in the summer, insects.

During the winter, males treat females the same way they treat other males in the flock, but in the second half of winter, males begin to flirt by using song. In late winter, females answer, and as pairs join together, the winter flocks break up.

In 1758, the cardinal was one of the many species originally described by Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, physician, and zoologist, who called the cardinal *Loxia cardinalis* since, based on its appearance, he thought it was related to the red crossbill. In 1838, the bird was given the scientific name *Cardinalis virginianus* which means Virginia cardinal. Then in 1983, its name changed to *Cardinalis cardinalis*, and its common name became "northern cardinal."

Its name may have been derived from the vivid red plumage of the male which resembles the robes of the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church. We could have a lot of fun here comparing beaks, crests, etc., but we won't!

John James Audubon wrote of the cardinal, "In richness of plumage, elegance of motion, and strength of song, this species surpasses all its kindred in America." Thank you, Mr. Audubon for this description and many thanks for your remarkable paintings of this precious gift of beauty and song to the human race.



Female northern cardinal. Photo by Mary and Lloyd McCarthy.

— Edith Maynard