



Birds of Barrington:

NORTHERN CARDINAL

IF THERE IS ANY SONGBIRD that consistently arrests attention, especially in a winter landscape, it would be the northern cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*). The brilliant crimson plumage of the male makes even those little interested in birds take notice. In fact, it's perhaps mostly the non-birders who are most enthusiastic observers of cardinals; they, along with birders visiting from other countries, take note of the flashy red bird, while local seasoned birders often dismiss the species because it so common.



A male and female cardinal.


Perhaps it is the flashiness that has led seven states, including Illinois, to list the northern cardinal as their state bird. That number puts it in first place among state bird species.

From the time they first noticed birds, our grandchildren loved to point out the visual difference between the male and female cardinals. The male is the more conspicuous, with its scarlet flight and body feathers and sharply contrasting black face. The female is more muted. Like the male, she has a blackish feathered face, but overall her plumage is a dull pinky brown with reddish highlights in the wings and tail. Both birds have distinctive crests and large, orange-red bills that they use to crush seeds.

That strong bill is characteristic of many of the species in the family *Cardinalidae*, a family of birds that occur in both North and South America. Frankly, I long wondered why the northern cardinal is termed "northern", especially since it is common in many southern states. But it turns out that in the wider Cardinal family, it is the northernmost species, nesting even in provinces of southern Canada. The name "cardinal" was bestowed because of the color which reminded

taxonomists of the red vestments worn by cardinals in the Roman Catholic Church. On many occasions, students have guessed to me that the bird is named for the St. Louis baseball team mascot!

Barringtonians can see northern cardinals year-round. They do not migrate, but rather are permanent residents and favor open woodlands, yards, thickets. Frequently the cardinal builds its twiggy nest in an evergreen. In a soft inner cup of grasses, the female lays three or four eggs that are heavily blotched with irregular squiggles of various hues. It is mostly the female that incubates. Sometimes the male will bring her food and feed her much the same way the adults later feed the young. Cardinals nest early and late; they can raise as many as three or four broods in a season.

Even in stretches of frigid mid-winter weather, I sometimes hear male cardinals venturing spring songs, one of which is a bird-y, bird-y, bird-y, bird-y that is probably familiar to most people even though they might not be able to identify the singer. Cardinals have a wonderful repertoire of whistled, musical songs and, unlike many species, both sexes sing. In fact, they countersing in duets. When spring finally does make its long-delayed appearance in the Barrington area, it is a duet from a classy pair of birds that we all can look forward to. 

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