

Songbirds

of Missouri

Cardinal

Northern cardinals, *cardinalis cardinalis*, belong to the bird family Cardinalidae and are one of the most recognizable birds in North America. The Cardinalidae family consists of 42 species, all found in America only. These are small to medium-sized birds with conical bills. Some of the species have enlarged beaks. The males of most members of this family are brightly colored.

Did you know?

The cardinal is named after the bright red robes worn by Roman Catholic cardinals.



Even if they're not interested in baseball, virtually all Missourians are cardinal fans. The northern cardinal, known simply as the "cardinal," is among the most popular songbirds in Missouri. In fact, it is probably one of the best-known birds in North America! In Missouri, the bird's reputation is boosted by its status as mascot for the St. Louis Cardinals' baseball team. But Missouri's love affair with the cardinal isn't just about sports.

Since the days Europeans first explored this country, the male cardinal's bright red coloring, black facial markings and distinctive head crest have been a beautiful sight. And the melodic singing of this songbird during spring and summer is certainly a sweet sound to hear. Once trapped and sold as cage birds by the thou-

sands, the cardinal and numerous other birds are now protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty passed by Congress in 1918. This treaty made it illegal to buy, sell, capture or kill migratory birds. The protection extends to their feathers and eggs as well.

Cardinals are found throughout most of the United States and in Missouri they can be seen year-round. Cardinals raise two to three broods per year, usually building their cup-shaped nests in shrubs. Each clutch contains from one to five eggs. Cardinals lay eggs from April to August, but the peak is late spring to early summer. Less striking in color than the males, female cardinals tend the nests and rear the young. Their drab colors camouflage them from predators.

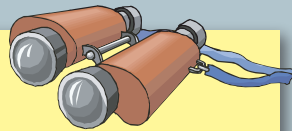
Eggs hatch in 12 to 13 days and the young chicks fledge in nine to 10 days. The chicks depend on the adults for two to four weeks after leaving the nest. A little-known cardinal fact is that the males will often care for the first brood while females incubate the second batch of eggs.

Over the last 150 years, cardinals have greatly expanded their range. In 1886, the cardinal was occasionally seen north of the Ohio River. By 1895, it had reached the Great Lakes, and by 1910, the bird was found in southern Ontario, in Canada. The first documented cardinal nesting in Connecticut was in 1943. The bird reached Massachusetts in 1958, and has since reached parts of Canada.

Cardinals have probably expanded their range because of habitat help from humans. By planting shrubs, humans have provided the bird additional nesting and cover. The cardinals' food supply has also increased because more and more people are feeding birds these days!

More information about cardinals can be found at your nearest Missouri Department of Conservation office.

(Missouri Show-Me Standards: S.3, S.4)



Be a Bird Watcher!

Look...

Northern cardinals are year-round residents of Missouri and can be found in both rural and urban areas. They prefer the edges of timbered areas, hedgerows and shrubby and small trees around houses.

In southwest Missouri in winter, they are frequently spotted in large clusters under bird feeders where they feed on seeds other birds have scratched onto the ground.

...and Listen

Of course, you may actually hear a cardinal before you see one! Both males and females have loud, beautifully whistled phrases. Their songs resemble a "whoit-whoit-whoit" and "whacheer-whacheer." These songs are usually used to defend territories and to court mates. Female cardinals frequently sing from the nests to communicate with males. Both males and females use "chips" as contact calls and alarms.