



A bright red cardinal provides striking contrast from its vibrant green perch

The Northern cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) is a year-round resident in the Florida Keys. It is one of the most familiar birds, even to those who struggle to identify bird species. Even if you say, look at the “red bird” you are partially right, as the Northern cardinal is commonly known as red cardinal, common cardinal or simply cardinal.

In the year 1883 there was a community in North Key Largo called “Red Bird City,” named after the colorful birds. Though it cannot be



Cardinals prefer to feed early morning and late evening. Place food on a seed table near the cover of shrubbery in your backyard.

found on any maps, it was a few miles up CR-905 from the intersection of US-1 near the current Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park. The Pinder and Russell families had more than 300 acres there, and earned their living by farming and fishing, and by the vocation of catching and selling cardinals. They would capture the red birds, send them by boat to Key West, where they would be shipped to Cuba, where songbirds were in demand as caged pets.

Historically, cardinals ranged from the Gulf to New York, southern Ontario and Iowa. Partly due to the proliferation of bird feeders, their range has shifted north to Maine, to Minnesota and southwest to Texas, New Mexico, southern Arizona, southern California and south through Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala.

Red cardinals are here year round, but it is their nature to be elusive at times. Unlike the mockingbird and the blue jays who will let you pass within yards of them, the cardinal always has a watchful eye out for intruders, and flits away when approached.

European settlers arriving in our country were reminded of the Roman Catholic bishops by the bird's crest, resembling the bishops headgear and red color resembling the red vestments of the church. The unmistakable bright red plumage of the male cardinal is from their food. They eat seeds and grains, but they also eat insects and a variety of fruits. The female is duller, but also has a crest, and a pink bill.

The Cardinal's Call

*When the cardinal sings its song
I feel a tug at my heart
A reminder of the love we shared
Even though we are apart
Its red feathers like a beacon
Guiding me through the night
A sign that you are with me still
In spirit and in light*

Their coloration is not all that makes a cardinal a spiritual reference. These birds have often symbolized heavenly visitors, or even a sign from a deceased loved one. A friend of mine received a large sack of sunflower seeds from a friend in memory of her husbands passing. She thought it unusual since she doesn't feed the birds. Perhaps her friend should have included a note with the gift containing the cardinals favorite food explaining her symbolic intent: the appearance of a cardinal is meant to show us that we are not alone. There is the rhyme “Cardinals appear when Angels are near.”

Cardinals are private birds that prefer thick foliage with lots of trees and



An Audubon illustration depicting male and female cardinals.

The Northern Cardinal... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis



Late summer, a male cardinal missing feathers during molting.



Cardinals are private birds that favor dense tangles of brush.

shrubs. In Spring and Summer they are extra protective of their nests, especially against intruders and other males. The blue jay is a major predator of cardinal chicks and eggs, as are squirrels, hawks, crows, owls, snakes, iguana and domestic cats. A word of caution: If you have bird feeders or spread seeds, avoid scattering near low

shrubs and anywhere else that predators may hide and attack from. If you have pets that go outdoors, keeps them away from cardinal nesting and feeding grounds.

Both male and female cardinals tend to the chicks in the nest, and pairs of cardinals form life-long bonds and remain together for consecutive breeding seasons. Cardinals are a symbol of devotion and loyalty.

On a recent photo assignment I was to capture the moment when a man proposed marriage to the love of his life. Awkward at best is how I describe my role as a paparazzi. So as I await, hiding in plain sight with my camera and long lens, I notice a red cardinal on a branch above the path leading to the beach where he would propose. Moments later the couple walked down that same path. What a positive sign, especially for a couple embarking on a lifelong partnership. She said yes! I love happy beginnings!

When it rains the birds remain hunkered under cover in dense brush, but as soon as it clears they venture out in search of food. At the first sign of good weather I put sunflower seeds on the seed table and soon the hungry cardinals reappear.

The return of the cardinal is a sign for new beginnings... and I'll embrace that thought every time.



When cardinals appear to you, it usually means nothing but goodness for you and your beloved, with their lifelong partnership suggesting a strong, unwavering bond.

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A female cardinal visits the seed table placed near shrubs and trees. Preferred feeding times are early morning and late in the day. She makes short work of a black sunflower seed with her strong, thick beak, which is perfect for large seeds.



The male cardinal is unmistakable for its bright red feathers and pointed crest on its head.