



How to Help

Northern Cardinals

The iconic and melodious “redbird” is a favorite yard bird from New England east to the central Great Plains. Common in parks and suburban neighborhoods with adequate shrubby nesting and foraging sites, they can be attracted to more urban locations by planting patches of native trees, bushes, and shrubs.

What Northern Cardinals Need

Food: Adult cardinals eat a wide range of seeds and fruits. Seeds and fruits make up about 70 percent of the annual diet. When available, they also eat insects. Adults feed their nestlings almost entirely insects. At bird feeders they are drawn to sunflower and safflower seeds provided on open flat feeders or on the ground.

Nesting: Cardinals are habitat generalists, requiring areas of dense shrubs and small trees for nesting sites. They usually build nests 3 to 6 feet high on a sheltered branch fork of a low tree or shrub. Males require low trees or tall shrubs with prominent perches for singing. Invasive plant species are detrimental to birds nesting in urban/suburban habitats.

Shelter: Cardinals roost and sleep in thick vegetation of low bushes or shrubs.

Other: Cardinals will drink and bathe at a birdbath or small pond. They are susceptible to predation by cats and collisions with picture windows. Male cardinals are very territorial and may attack their reflection in windows or car mirrors. Low flying cardinals also frequently collide with automobiles.

How You Can Help

- Plant native fruiting trees and shrubs including wild grapes, mulberry, sumac, and hackberries.
- Provide sunflower or safflower seeds in a tray feeder.
- Scatter small amounts of seed on the ground; avoid spreading more food than can be eaten in a day to avoid fungal or bacterial growth and attracting mice.
- Avoid using pesticides that may poison insects eaten by cardinals, and avoid herbicides that kill weedy plants that provide a source of seeds.
- Plant thick patches or rows of diverse native bushes, shrubs, and low ornamental trees. Favorites may include dogwoods, hawthorns, native honeysuckle, native cherries, sumacs, elderberries, spirea, and wild grapes.
- Encourage neighbors to plant bushes and shrubs to provide additional habitat.
- Plant native ornamental trees to provide singing perches for territorial males.
- Minimize pruning of bushes and shrubs to provide adequate cover for roosting and sleeping.
- Provide a birdbath or small pond for bathing and drinking. Make sure to keep birdbaths clean and free of mosquito larvae.
- Keep cats indoors to keep them safe from outdoor hazards and to protect birds. Remove feral cats from neighborhood.
- Screen windows or make them visible so cardinals can avoid colliding with them, especially if male cardinals are attacking their reflection. More information at www.audubonathome.org/SafeWindows.html.
- Whenever possible, plant patches of shrubs for cardinals away from busy roadways.