



**Northern Cardinals  
by Larry McQueen**

Northern Cardinal  
(*Cardinalis cardinalis*)

The common and familiar Northern Cardinal is a bird whose range has expanded northward in the last 100 years. Originally a bird of the Southeast, the Northern Cardinal's range expanded north and northwest along the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

Cardinals are noted for their loud, clear whistled songs, often sung from a high treetop song post. Females will counter sing, duetting with males - usually after the males have established territories and before nesting begins. Local variations and accents have been noted in cardinal songs.

Typical habitats are thickets and brushy areas, edges and clearings, riparian woodlands, parks, and residential areas. Here the nonmigratory cardinals feed on a variety of foods including seeds, leaf buds, flowers, berries, and fruit. Up to one-third of its summer diet can be insects. Its winter diet is 90 percent vegetable matter, especially large seeds. Winter flocks can be very large, up to 60 to 70 individuals in areas of abundance.

Northern Cardinals are a medium-sized songbird (approximately 8.75 inches in length) with short, rounded wings, a long tail, a heavy conical bill, and a crest. Males are nearly all brilliant red; brownish-gray-tinged scapular and back feathers give the upper parts a less colorful appearance. The coral red bill is surrounded by a mask of black that extends to a dark eye and includes the chin and throat. Legs and feet are dark red.

The female is soft grayish brown on the back with variable areas of red on the tail, crest, and wings. The underparts are a warm pinkish brown. Her coral red bill is also surrounded by darker but not black feathers, so her mask is not as distinct as the male's. Females are slightly smaller than males.

Juveniles are like females but more brown in color, with shorter crest and a blackish bill. They molt to adult plumage in fall.



**J. R. Woodward/CLO**