

## Northern Cardinals

By Celeste Silling

Last year, I moved to the Texas upper coast from Albuquerque, New Mexico and I am still blown away by the staggering amount of birds that live around here. There are so many different interesting species flying through these skies, it's hard to keep track of them all. The more colorful birds have always been my favorite and Texas has them in spades! Roseate Spoonbills, Blue Jays, Eastern Bluebirds, and even Painted Buntings can be seen here.

One of my favorite birds here is the Northern Cardinal. Texans who grew up surrounded by these birds might take them for granted, but as an outsider coming in, these bright red birds amaze me. What's more, they're so abundant here, I can barely go ten minutes without seeing one through my window. I love watching them hop through the foliage, raising or lowering their crest depending on their mood.

Northern Cardinals stay here year-round, they don't migrate South like many other bird species. The males are the ones with the famously bright red plumage and the black mask around their eyes and beak. The females are a more rusty brown color and are therefore somewhat more difficult to spot in the foliage. Both the male and female hatch out of the egg with a dark gray beak that, as they mature, turns a vibrant orange. Their beaks are thick and strong so that they can crack open the seeds that they eat.

In the wild, Northern Cardinals eat a variety of seeds from native plants as well as fruit and insects. They'll eat pretty much any kind of seed that you put in your bird feeder, but they particularly love black oil sunflower seeds. As part of the breeding season courtship, the male and female will visit the feeder together. The male will pick up a seed with his beak, then feed it to the female in an adorable "kiss!"

To attract more nesting Northern Cardinals to your yard, leave the shrubs, undergrowth, and tangled vines untrimmed. This is where cardinals like to nest and rest. The female will build her nest in the fork of two branches in a shrub or tree. The nest is well hidden in the foliage so predators can't find it. The male will collect nest materials and bring them to the female, who does most of the actual construction work.

It's a complicated nest with four layers. The bottom layer is sturdy twigs, then there's a mat of leaves, then bark, then soft grasses, pine needles, and other cushiony plants for the eggs to lay in. A lot of work goes into building the nest and it can take up to nine days to construct. But even though Northern Cardinals tend to nest in the same area year after year, they rarely reuse a nest from the previous season.

Northern Cardinals have feisty personalities to go with their fiery plumage. They will fight off other birds and especially other cardinals if they're intruding on a claimed territory. If there are a lot of cardinals in an area, they'll spend hours each day flying around, fighting, chattering, calling to their mates and being generally dramatic. This is why you might see a cardinal battling its own reflection in a window or car mirror.

Cardinals may be a common sight here in Texas, but they're special birds. They're beautiful to look at and they lead interesting lives as well. The next time you see a Northern Cardinal, watch it and see what it does. You might be surprised!

Caption: A male Northern Cardinal perches in a feeder and cracks open a seed. Photo by Morgan Barnes.