

April 17, 2007

Northern Cardinal

Of all of the songbirds that adorn our gardens and yards, few can compete with the northern cardinal for rich, melodic song and brash, exotic good looks. Even the bird's name is distinctive, inspired by the red-robed cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church. As long as you can provide trees and bushes in good supply, chances are that a pair of northern cardinals will call your property home.

These birds are only recently “northern,” however. In fact, they are closely related to birds living year around in the tropics. Ontario has been home to cardinals only since 1901 when the species was first found at Point Pelee, near Windsor. Bird feeders facilitated their expansion northward by helping to assure winter survival. Cardinals first appeared in the Peterborough area in about 1951. They remain, however, a bird of built up areas and are almost never found far from human habitation.

Cardinals are a strongly territorial songbird. Starting in early February, the male reasserts his claim to nesting real estate by pouring out his loud, clear song from a tree top or other high location. The cardinal's song is an easily recognizable series of clear whistles. The first one to three are usually down-slurred. These introductory whistles are generally followed by a slow trill. I usually think of the song as "Cheer, cheer, cheer, what, what, what, what..." Other times, however, cardinals sing a series of two syllable “purty” or “birdy” notes, a kind of “birdy-birdy-birdy-birdy.” Most birds will also sing combinations of these two basic song patterns. The quality of the cardinal's voice is always the same, however, and easily recognized after a little practice. You should also be familiar with the cardinal's distinctive alarm call. It is best described as a soft, metallic “chip.”

In most songbirds, only the male bird sings. However, cardinals are an exception to this rule. After a male has established a territory but usually before nesting begins female cardinals will sometimes sing as well. A female cardinal often repeats the song her mate sings. A pair's back-and-forth singing to each other sometimes goes on for hours. Singing by females may be important in pair bonding and, perhaps, in reproductive synchronization.

For several years in a row, April's arrival at our house was announced by a thumping sound on one of our living room windows. A female cardinal would spend close to an hour every morning attacking her reflection in the glass. With her hormones flowing at full tilt, she was obviously primed to defend her nesting territory - and its food and nesting resources - from other cardinals. From a bird's point of view, the reflection is another cardinal that simply won't go away, despite the fact it's trespassing on private property. The intruder has decided to stand its ground and to ignore the repeated attempts to drive it out.

As interesting as the display may seem, the bird's persistence in flying up against the window soon becomes quite annoying. The female cardinal in question would continue to the point of exhaustion and even leave small feathers stuck to the glass, a testimony to the force with which she hurled herself against the pane. The only way we were able to stop her was by covering the outside of the window with a small piece of cardboard. The cardboard served to temporarily hide the reflection. Once the mirror-image visitor disappeared from view, the indignant female resumed her normal nesting activities.

Cardinals aren't the only birds that are known to attack their reflections. Robins,

sparrows, orioles, catbirds and even woodpeckers have been observed acting this way.

During late winter or spring courtship, you may also see cardinals participating in a bonding behavior where the male collects food and brings it to the female, feeding her beak-to-beak. If the mating is successful, this mate-feeding may continue throughout the period of incubation. The literature also describes a display in which the male and female, with outstretched necks and erect crests, will sway from side to side while singing softly.

Cardinals usually build a tidy bowl nest in dense evergreen boughs or in the thick understory of shrubbery. Usually the nest is only about 4 to 5 feet (1.2 to 1.5 metres) above the ground. If nesting is successful - which it is, only about one third of the time - the male will care for the first brood while the female incubates a second clutch of eggs. Young cardinals, recognized by their female-like colouration and dark bills, will accompany the parents for several weeks after they learn how to fly. Like twenty-something children still living at home, they continue to sponge food off the parents, sometimes well into September if it's a second brood. Young cardinals, recognized by their dark bills, will eventually, however, be driven out of their parents' territory and go off to find their own space.

As with so many birds that nest in urban and suburban areas, a huge number of nests are predated by cats. A few also fall prey to squirrels, raccoons and other predators. However, if there is one thing you can do to help increase the nesting success of songbirds, it is to keep your cat indoors during the April through early July nesting season. You'll also be helping the innumerable butterflies and small mammals that fall prey to felines.

Cardinals must also contend with the brown-headed cowbirds of which it is a common host. Cowbirds are parasites, laying their eggs in the nests of a wide variety of other bird species. As forest lands were converted into farms and pastures by early settlers, cowbirds spread into eastern North America from their original territory in the Great Plains.

How cowbirds evolved to parasitize other birds' nests is fascinating. This species traditionally followed the great buffalo herds of the western plains and fed on the insects that these huge mammals stirred up as they moved along. In order for the cowbirds to stay with the herd and still reproduce, they adapted to the constant movement by laying their eggs in other birds' nests. To accomplish this, the cowbird watches for when its host lays its own eggs. Then, when the nest is left unattended, the female cowbird will come in and lay an egg or two of its own in the nest.

Like other host species, the cardinal will normally incubate the cowbird's egg or eggs. The cowbird chick grows quickly. Sometimes it will eat so much of the food the parent brings that the host's babies die of starvation. Other times, the cowbird will use its large size to push the cardinal chicks out of the nest! In some areas, cowbirds are sufficiently numerous to pose a threat to the continued existence of certain species that it regularly parasitizes. This is especially true for the Kirtland's warbler, an endangered songbird that nests in northern Michigan.

Drew Monkman is a local naturalist, teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*.