



A male cardinal perches on a budding maple tree branch.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE GRALL, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

Cardinal

COMMON NAME:

Cardinal

SCIENTIFIC NAME:

Cardinalis cardinalis

TYPE:

Birds

DIET:

Omnivore

AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN THE WILD:

15 years

SIZE:

8 to 9 inches

WEIGHT:

1.5 to 1.8 ounces

SIZE RELATIVE TO A TEACUP:



The northern cardinal is so well loved that it has been named the official bird of no fewer than seven U.S. states. Bright red cardinals are easily identified by even casual bird watchers and are often seen frequenting backyards and bird feeders. When foraging elsewhere the birds eat insects, seeds, grain, fruit, and sap.

Population Range

Cardinals, also called “redbirds,” do not migrate and have traditionally been more common in warmer climates such as the U.S. southeast. However, in recent decades they have expanded their common range north through the United States and even into Canada. This population growth may be due to an increase in winter birdfeeders and to the bird's ability to adapt to parks and suburban human habitats.

Coloring

Only males sport the brilliant red plumage for which their species is known. The color is a key to mating success—the brighter the better. Females are an attractive tan/gray.

Behavior

Cardinals are active songbirds and sing a variety of different melodies.

Males can be aggressive when defending their territory, and they frequently attack other males who intrude. This tendency sometimes leads cardinals to fly into glass windows, when they charge an “intruding bird” that is really their own reflection.

Cardinals are fairly social and join in flocks that may even include birds of other species. During mating season, however, groups dissolve into pairs. Male birds feed their monogamous partner as they incubate clutches of eggs—typically three per season.