

Conservation Corner

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“A cardinal in your backyard is a visitor from heaven.”

This week’s color of Christmas is the traditional red of holly berries, poinsettias, candy canes, and Santa Claus. This week’s topic is the Christmas Bird whose bright red color has become a symbol of faith and hope, especially during the cold, dreary days of winter. It’s also the state bird of more states than any other, seven, and a popular sports mascot of pro baseball and football teams as well as our own Iowa State Cyclones.

Yes, this week we’ll color Christmas with the eye-catching scarlet feathers of the Northern Cardinal, *Cardinalis cardinalis*. Commonly called redbirds, cardinals are passerines or perching birds whose range covers the eastern half of North America. Named for the red robes and caps worn by Roman Catholic Cardinals, they are the northernmost species of cardinals. As cardinals don’t migrate and don’t molt, they provide a welcome touch of color in the winter landscape.

The bright red plumage of the Northern Cardinal is not just for looks, of course, but rather helps attract mates and defend territories. The biochemistry behind red feathers has long remained a mystery to scientists, but recently a team of researchers may have finally figured it out by analyzing an early 1900’s breeding project that involved red siskin birds from the Amazon, domestic yellow canaries, and their hybrid offspring. Working together, geneticists and molecular biologists from the United States and Portugal were able to identify the two genomic regions responsible for first changing the yellow carotenoid pigment to red and then putting the red into the bird’s feathers.

Cardinals begin nesting in late March, earlier than most birds, and may raise four broods by summer’s end. They hide their cup-shaped nest built of twigs, roots, or leaves and lined with grass or animal hair in thick shrubbery. Cardinals will eat over 100 different kinds of food, including sunflower seeds, fruits, and insects. Fortunately, the growth of towns and suburbs has helped expand their range.

The Northern Cardinal is also known for its whistling song. Did you know cardinals can sing 28 different tunes? Or that the female cardinal is one of only a few North American female birds to sing, often while sitting on the nest? From Canada to Mexico, the Northern Cardinal mixed chorus sings to the tune of over 100 million.

Once prized as pets because of their bright plumage and pleasing song, Northern Cardinals are now protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. On that note, I’ll close with a familiar Stephen King quote from *The Shawshank Redemption*. “Some birds are not meant to be caged, that’s all. Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. And the part of you that knows it was wrong to imprison them in the first place rejoices, but still, the place where you live is that much more drab and empty for their departure. I guess I just miss my friend.”

