

## Clippings



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A Weekly Column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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**For Immediate Release**

### The Northern Cardinal

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The northern cardinal is probably the most recognizable bird in the back yard – at least the male. He wears brilliant red plumage throughout the year. It is this amazing color that has made him the subject in many photographs and artists' drawings, especially in winter and often on Christmas cards. Nothing is quite as cheery as seeing this holiday red bird sitting on a tree branch with a snowy scene in the background.

But let's not forget the female cardinal. While she lacks the bright red feathers, she does hold the distinction of being one of few female songbirds in North America who sing. She often does so while sitting on the nest.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology All About Birds website, a mated pair of northern cardinals will share song phrases.

Northern cardinals are found in our region throughout the year. They are common to back yards and are frequently heard, though not always seen, perched in the higher branches of trees or shrubs while singing. They nest in shrubs, thickets or sometimes in low areas of evergreens and build their nests in the forks of small branches hidden in the dense foliage. The female builds a cup-shaped nest made of twigs. She will crush the twigs with her beak and bend them around her while she turns in the nest. She then pushes the twigs into the cup shape with her feet. The nest is lined with finer materials such as grasses or hair. Females will commonly have two broods a season and incubate three to four eggs for up to twelve days.

A regular visitor to bird feeders, the northern cardinal's thick, cone-shaped bill is well designed for cracking seeds. A favorite is the black oil sunflower seed. Because the northern cardinal has a diverse diet, which includes fruit and insects, to attract them to your bird feeder try adding cracked corn, peanuts or apples together with the sunflower seeds. Place feeders near shrubs or tree cover. Cardinals are often seen foraging on or near the ground. During the spring, keep an eye out at the feeder to see if you can catch the courting male feeding seeds to the female.

If you want to encourage northern cardinals to spend time in your yard throughout the year, provide good habitat. There are numerous plants common to home landscapes that can offer shelter, nesting habitat, roosting sites or food sources for cardinals. The list includes dogwood, wild grape, mulberry, hackberry, hawthorn, viburnum, raspberry, honeysuckle, red cedar, spruce, and pine. Also, it is important to provide a water source for them even in the winter. So, if possible, supply a heated birdbath that keeps water from freezing during these cold months.

To learn more about northern cardinals and other songbirds that are in northwest Iowa this time of year, please join Iowa State University (ISU) Extension and Outreach and Sioux County Conservation Board for a free, family event at Sandy Hollow Recreation Area and Campground, Sioux Center on Saturday, Feb. 14 from 9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. We will be talking about the different types of songbirds you can watch here in the winter, what they eat and how to design a bird-friendly habitat in your yard. There will also be crafts and, weather permitting, a bird walk. To register visit the Sioux County Conservation Board website. For more information, please feel free to contact Margaret Murphy, ISU Extension and Outreach Horticulture Educator at (712) 472-2576 or E-mail [mmurphy@iastate.edu](mailto:mmurphy@iastate.edu).

This winter treat yourself to a little birdwatching!

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