

## Northern Cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*



**Folk Name:** Cardinal Grosbeak, Redbird, Winter Redbird, Seed-cracker

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Very Common

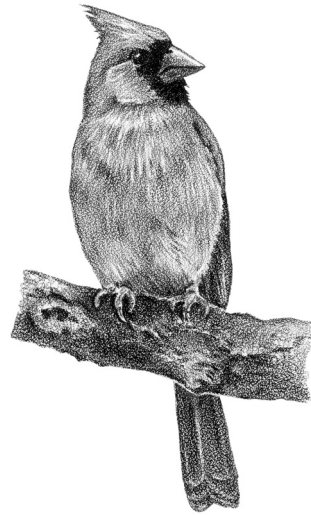
**Habitat:** Open woods, forest edge, thickets, residential neighborhoods

The Northern Cardinal, or “Redbird,” is one of the most widely recognized and most commonly encountered songbirds in the Carolinas. This 8-¾-inch all-red bird has a pronounced crest on the top of its head and a stout, conical, red-colored bill surrounded by a black mask. The female is mostly buff brown with tints of red on its crest, wings, and tail, and a light black wash on her face. This species is found throughout the Carolinas year-round. Single day counts of over 400 birds have been tallied on Spring Bird Counts and over 300 have been tallied on Christmas Bird Counts conducted in the Central Carolinas.

The cardinal is a widespread species that inhabits a variety of habitat types from open woods to streamside thickets. These birds are frequent residents in urban and suburban neighborhoods, and they visit feeder stations throughout the Carolina Piedmont. Their strident “*What Cheer! What Cheer! What Cheer! Whoit! Whoit!*” song is common here throughout spring and summer. During the winter months, they are often regarded as cherished guests, as their brilliant red color helps to brighten up the otherwise dreary landscape. Like other grosbeaks, cardinals are predominately seed eaters. Their powerful bills help them easily crack open the thickest hull of sunflower or other thick-shelled seeds.

During the nineteenth century, the cardinal was so popular that many were captured and sold as caged songbirds. This description of the “pride of the Carolina woods” was published in one Piedmont newspaper in August 4, 1887:

We need not go far to see the finest plumaged bird of this vicinity, our well known Red Bird (Cardinal Grosbeak) who so cheerily greets us at all hours of the day with his clear swelling notes. He stays with us during the whole winter making his home among the pines and cedars, and especially delights to flit among the evergreen trees near our homes. In the coldest, snowiest weather, he flies and hops about the barnyard and stables and often boldly enters the granary, to break his fast, dine, or take his evening meal, giving you, with uplifted crest, a merry song in return.



Early in February he woos his mate with softened notes, followed by a guttural trill. In March he is chasing her from tree to tree in the orchard and battles with his brother for supremacy. In April he is busy in and out among the apple-blossoms busily assisting his mate in building a nest. She wears a more sober and Quaker-like dress, but is as shrewish as any scolding housewife, and lords it over all she surveys. Many a luckless schoolboy who has cruelly struck her with a sling shot, and thought her a prize, found her beak sharp enough to make him cry out.

In this region, Northern Cardinals can have three or more broods. They generally begin to build their first nest in early to mid-March. William McIlwaine shared these comments regarding the breeding activity of the cardinal in Charlotte on April 1, 1928:

The cardinal is a great songster. And there is no resident of Charlotte who is not familiar with the “red bird.” Any little clump of bushes may have its nest. For instance, last Summer I found a cardinal’s nest in the hedge around the yard of W.S. Adams on Euclid Avenue, and another across the street in a rose bush on the fence between the yards of Mrs. Henry Knox and D.S. Montieth. You can find them anywhere.

Nature’s powerful drive to successfully rear young and the perils faced by wild birds are illustrated in this account of the Northern Cardinal written by 13-year-old Frank Ramsey of Charlotte in 1959:

Early this May, a pair of Cardinals built their nest in a small cedar tree at the back of our property, about one half mile from the city of Charlotte. In their first clutch were three eggs, and after approximately twelve days they hatched. I watched these young for several days and then some predator—presumably a cat—tore the nest down and ate the young.

The pair was not discouraged and they built again about five or six feet from the ground in a small tree. Here again they had three eggs in the clutch. Twelve or thirteen days later the eggs hatched. During the next few days we had some very rainy weather and one exceptionally heavy thunderstorm, which presumably drowned two of the young in the nest. We removed these, leaving one in the nest. It was almost starved, as the parent birds would not come to the nest as long as its siblings were lying dead in the nest. After the dead ones were removed, the parents resumed feeding the remaining bird. This fledgling was banded by Mr. William L. Anderson, Jr. It was found dead in the nest the following morning. The Cardinals' second attempt to raise a family was foiled by the forces of nature.

The determined pair built again not thirty-five feet from the site of the first nest in a small bush about four feet from the ground. This time they had three eggs again, and when they hatched, three young. Everything seemed against these birds, and a few days later the young mysteriously disappeared.

These Cardinals were not to be discouraged. They built again about seven feet from the ground in a small tree. This nest was not twenty yards from their first nest. Again the Cardinals had three eggs. When these hatched, the three young lived for a few days, then died. My guess as to the cause of death was the terrific heat. From 1:30 to 2:30 each day the

sun was shining directly on the nest.

Right now as I write this letter, the male of the species is singing his territorial song at the top of his voice outside our back door. Maybe this tragedy-torn pair will decide to try again. Maybe this time they will succeed in raising a brood of young Cardinals.

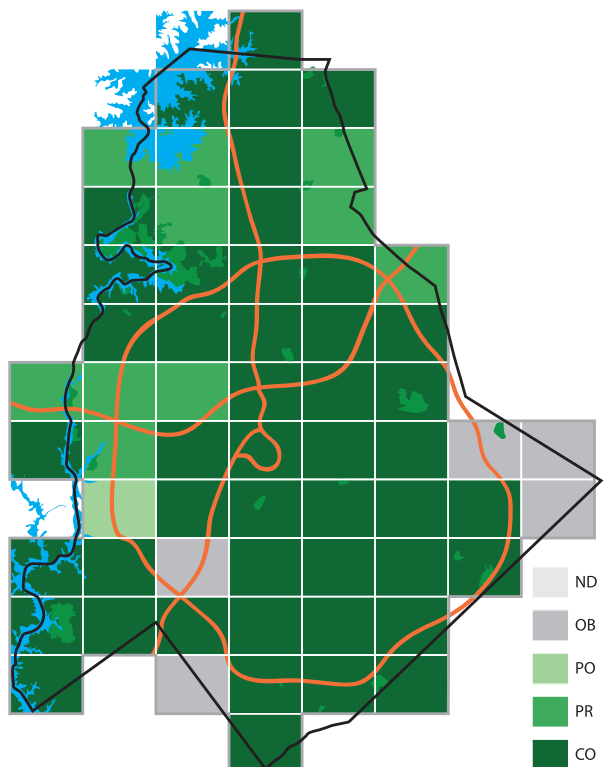
In 2001, staff from MCPRD implemented a nest success study to learn more about the perils faced by birds nesting in local fields. A total of 22 Northern Cardinal nests were monitored during four different nesting seasons. Over one-half (54%) of the nests were depredated, 6% of the nests were parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, and only 40% of the nests successfully fledged any young.

In 2013, Bill Hilton Jr. recaptured a Northern Cardinal at Hilton Pond that he had originally banded there 10 years before. This bird was the oldest bird he had ever confirmed at his York County banding station. Hilton noted that federal banding records indicate some cardinals can live to be up to 16 years old.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed the Northern Cardinal as the single most widespread breeding bird in Mecklenburg County.



*Northern Cardinal at nest. (William G. Cobey)*



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

*Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/10 CO/46)*