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FAST FACTS

NAME: Northern Cardinal

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Cardinalis cardinalis*

AVERAGE WEIGHT: 42 to 48 g

AVERAGE WINGSPAN: 25 to 31 cm

AVERAGE LIFESPAN: 28.5 years (in the wild)

DID YOU KNOW?

Male cardinals are feisty! If they see their reflection, they will fight for hours to scare off the “other bird” that they see as a threat.

PHYSIOLOGY

These adult male songbirds have bright red plumage, while female adults tend to be more brown or grey with hints of red on their chest, tail, crest and wing tips. Males have a black mask that extends down to their chest. Females don't usually have a mask, but some have dark markings on their face. Each has a cone-shaped orange bill, a long tail and a feathery crest.

Baby cardinals closely resemble females, except they're born with a black beak. As they mature, the beak transforms from black, to a cream colour before turning orange.

HABITAT/BEHAVIOUR

Northern cardinals live in forests or in thick bushes surrounding residential areas — both are prime places for these birds to gather food. Their strong beaks help them dig for insects in bushes and bite into tasty seeds, grains and fruits.

The females build nests using grass, twigs and bits of shrubs. They build their nests in the middle of thick bushes, which offer them protection from predators such as cats, dogs, snakes, owls, chipmunks, squirrels and brown-headed cow birds. When predators get too close to the nests, both male and female cardinals give a shrill chirp to scare them away.

Each year, female cardinals lay three eggs on average, but can hatch up to five. For about two weeks, the female incubates the eggs while the male brings her food and keeps predators at bay.

These song birds communicate through calls and songs. Males use a combination of singing and fluffing their feathers to attract a female's attention. Mating couples often sing a similar song of whistles together.

RANGE

Northern cardinals are found around southeastern Canada. Their range extends down into central and eastern United States. Over the past 200 years, cardinals have expanded their range and moved toward warmer areas and closer to humans — a dependable source of food from bird feeders.