

northern cardinal *Cardinalis cardinalis*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Passeriformes

Family: Cardinalidae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

The northern cardinal is the state bird of Illinois. It averages about seven and one-half to nine inches in length. The male has bright-red feathers with a black patch of feathers at the base of the red bill. The female has gray-brown feathers with dull red feathers on the wings and tail and a black patch of feathers at the base of the red bill. Both sexes have a crest on the head and a thick bill. The immature cardinal has a black bill but otherwise is colored like the female.

BEHAVIORS

The northern cardinal is a common, permanent resident statewide in Illinois. Nesting occurs from April to August. The nest is built in a shrub, small tree, vines or briars from three to 20 feet above the ground. The female, assisted by the male, builds the nest of grasses, bark, vines, sticks and other plant materials in three to nine days. Two to five white eggs with dark streaks and spots are laid by the female. She alone incubates the eggs for the 12- to 13-day incubation period. Two or three broods are raised each year. Nests are often parasitized by the brown-headed cowbird that deposits an egg that the northern cardinal will hatch and raise, taking food and care away from its own young. The northern cardinal lives in woodlands, thickets, brushy and weedy areas, residential areas and parks. It also uses open fields in winter. The male and female both sing. Songs include "what-cheer cheer cheer," "birdy, birdy, birdy" and "whoit, whoit, whoit." This bird eats insects, grains, fruits and weed seeds that it finds on or near the ground.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

bottomland forests

Woodland Habitats

bottomland forests; coniferous forests; southern Illinois lowlands; upland deciduous forests

Prairie and Edge Habitats

none

© Illinois Department of Natural Resources. 2017. Biodiversity of Illinois.