

ON THE WILD SIDE

Cardinals Bring Greetings

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It happened last week, as it does every year just before Christmas. It started to flurry and a few cardinals came to visit and brighten up the view through my window. I look forward to seeing them perch on the dark branches of the Maple tree especially if snow has accumulated. Turns out we did not get much snow that day so I was lucky to see them during the flurry. But, sure enough, I opened a few Christmas cards this week and one of them prominently featured a pair of cardinals on a snowy leafless branch of a tree. It is a common theme for Christmas cards – you probably got one, too.

Why do we associate cardinals with Christmas? Is it because of the brilliant red color of the male? They are the most colorful of the winter birds, to be sure. Maybe their color brings brightness to our lives in what might otherwise be a dark day. These birds are so brilliant, they sharply contrast with a snowy background, much like the red berries of the holly tree, another symbol of the season.

There is no need to describe the Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) in detail; everyone seems to know the male is bright red except for the black mask he sports and the female is a warm brownish red color. Both have crests and coral-colored beaks. The only difficulty with identification has to do with the juveniles. Male and female juveniles look like the adult female, except they have darker beaks than the adults. That one fact makes it easy to figure out who is who in the summer when families of cardinals abound in Norton.

Cardinals did not always celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts. They have gradually spread north from the southeastern part of the country. According to the Cornell website (www.birds.cornell.edu) the first documented Northern Cardinal to nest in New England was between 1958 and 1961. That would explain rumors I heard of parties being held in the 1960's. People were so excited to see them, they wanted to share the experience with friends.



Cardinals are a favorite among winter bird watchers for the bright colors sported by the male, above



In the spring and summer, they feed on a variety of seeds, flowers, berries, fruit and lots of insects. Among their most endearing behaviors in the spring, I think, is the passing of seeds to each other. (They look like they are kissing!) In winter they eat lots of seeds and other vegetation. They are frequent visitors to birdfeeders and especially like big seeds like sunflower seeds.

One of the most interesting facts I learned (www.massaudubon.org) was that cardinals appear to prefer the same ratio of forest to open land that humans do so life on the farm and in the suburbs are very agreeable to the Northern Cardinal. That is right, human settlement actually supported their growth in population and their spread from the American southeast. (How often can we say that about human development and wildlife abundance?) Increases in the number of birdfeeders over the last few decades may also account for their increasing numbers.

Recently, Prof. John Kricher gave a marvelous lecture at the Norton Public Library. John is an ornithologist and gifted, witty speaker. I had a conflict that morning and missed part of his talk, but was happy to catch the whole event on Norton Cable TV. You can still see it at: www.nortontv.org/. Look through the program listing and you may be able to catch the lecture on local Channel 15. It is listed as *Norton Library Bird Lecture*.

If you miss the TV broadcast, it is easy to view on your computer. From the NortonTV web page, click on EDUCATION (in the channels list;) scroll down the list of programs and click on *Bird Lecture 1/2*. (The second part is: *Bird Lecture 2/2*). You can enlarge it to full screen to enjoy all the details of the photos. He talks about cardinals and many other birds and what their behavior tells us. John lives in southeastern Massachusetts, so what he describes and shows in photos can be seen right here in our own backyards - our own wildlife habitats.

Speaking of habitats, I am happy to report that five more households in Norton have become Certified Wildlife Habitats by the National Wildlife Federation. In order for Norton to be designated as a Community Wildlife Habitat, we need more – 98 more.

Please consider joining our effort. For complete information, go to the National Wildlife Federation website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx or see the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton website: www.nortonlandpreservation.org/

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