



Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon
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For Immediate Release

A Cardinal Year

The northern cardinal, may be classified by bird conservation professionals as one of “least concern”, but is it not without significance. *Cardinal cardinalis* is a real favorite in the northeast, but depending on where you live, the cardinal may be a stranger. This year, there is a lone male coming into our feeder, and this is a first in five years. Preferring more suburban surroundings, the cardinal has been working its way north over time. It is therefore a bit odd to see one so far out in the NEK. Now that he is here and if he decides to stay, there is good bird behavior-watching ahead. Here is what the first season of the year of the cardinal might hold in store.

The Stokes Nature Guides for Birds organize birds lives well into 12 months of behaviors that one might see. Our lone male would normally be one of a flock at this time of year. The flocks form in the fall and remain together through the winter in areas where food is available. One thing that most people do know is that mated pairs are often seen together if they have not merged with a flock. Roosting together, feeding together and chasing one another, the flocks can also be heard giving harsh sounding, single chip-calls as well. Flocks break up in late February and disperse into territories to start singing from prominent perches. Although our lone visitor is not in a flock, he may have bred in the area, lost his mate and decided to stay in the breeding ground where he found food. He will start singing in late February, hopefully attracting another mate within our view.

Watching pairs at feeders, one can trace the changing relationship of a male and female as the breeding season approaches. For example, the male’s mild aggression towards the female in early winter changes into more tolerance of her in later winter. At the beginning of courtship, both will feed together quite peacefully. Some singing during the day may be heard as the spring advances, until finally courtship is in full swing. It will then be time to witness the three main characteristics of cardinal courtship: countersinging, mate-feeding and a lop-sided pose.

The pair will sing equally well to each other. Watch for the male feeding her a seed; it can happen up to 4 times in one minute. . Both birds can do this, but the male gives to the female more often than the female to the male. Finally there can be a head tilting motion that looks like the bird is swaying. You may also hear the flight song as the male flies toward his mate or an intruding female.

If a female does not show up here, our male will leave to find one somewhere else, most likely in the neighboring towns where there are more buildings, feeders and people to fill them. It would be so exciting to watch the rest of this life story take place right here.

Don’t forget the Great Backyard Count, February 12-15, 2010. It’s fun and easy to do. Go to <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc> for details. This year there will be a cardinal on my data sheet for the first time.

Happy Cardinal Watching!

Carolyn E. Boardman is a board member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK Audubon is a non -profit organization that encourages people to enjoy birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For more information about meetings, field trips and special events visit www.nekaudubon.org. Find us on Facebook at Nek Audubon. Art work by Robin Rothman.

