Attracting Cardinals to Your Yard

UNL Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Female cardinal

Cardinals are one of the most popular of all songbirds. The male cardinals are famous for their brilliant red feathers and crested heads. Female cardinals are also beautiful with their tan and rosy coloration.

Cardinals are not shy about taking food from a feeder. They're usually the first birds at the feeder in the morning and the last ones to feed at dusk. You'll hear their sharp "chip, chip, chip" as they make their way to the feeders.

At the feeder, male cardinals will often fight other birds for the seed; they'll even fight their own mates. But the possessive male will eventually relent and allow other birds to feed.

As the breeding season approaches in March, the male cardinal becomes more interested in his mate. In later winter, he will begin to open sunflower shells and feed the tender nuts to his mate.

Cardinals prefer feeders that are four to six feet from the ground. They prefer steady, stationary or platform feeders. Be sure you protect your bird feeder from cats who will hunt the birds.

Cardinals prefer black-oil sunflower seeds. They'll also eat safflower if they don't have access to the sunflower seeds.

Cardinals don't migrate and rarely fly more than a few miles from their nest. Once you've established a home landscape where cardinals are nesting, you could have the same family in the area for several years.

Cardinals prefer landscapes with a mixture of evergreen and deciduous trees. They like to nest in shrubs or thickets that face an open lawn. Viburnums, raspberry, elderberry, hackberry, dogwood, grapes and hawthorns all provide suitable habitat for cardinals.

Cool Facts About Cardinals:

- The Northern Cardinal is the most popular state birds in the United States. Seven states record this bird as their state bird.
- Cardinals have benefitted from urban park-type habitats created by humans. Their population and range has increased over the past 200 years.
- The female Northern Cardinal sings, often from the nest. The song may give the male information about when to bring food to the nest. A mated pair shares song phrases, but the female may sing a longer and slightly more complex song than the male.
- The male cardinal fiercely defends its breeding territory. When a male sees its reflection in a window or other shiny surface, it will "fight" its own reflection.
- Male cardinals with the brightest red feathers are more successful. The brightly-colored males have better territories, feed at higher rates and have more reproductive success than male cardinals with duller coloring.

Sources: eXtension at www.extension.org and Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Bees as Pollinators

When most people think about the benefits of honey bees, they think about the honey produced. But honey bees' pollinating activity greatly outweighs the value of hive products. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates about one-third of the human diet is derived from insect-pollinated plants and the honey bee is responsible for 80% of this pollination.

Honey bees gather nectar to produce honey which is the hive's energy source. They also collect pollen which has significant amounts of protein to feed brood. When flying from flower to flower, bees transfer pollen which fertilizes the next plant.

Apples, blueberries, cantaloupes, cherries, cucumbers, strawberries, raspberries, squash, sunflowers, watermelon and many other crops all rely on bees for pollination. Some crops, like corn, are wind pollinated. Tomatoes will do okay if there are no bees, but will produce more if bees are active.

In areas of the country where there are large acreages of insect-pollinated crops, growers hire beekeepers to bring honey bee hives to the field to pollinate the crops.

Other bees that pollinate garden crops are pollen bees. What are pollen bees? This term was coined in 1992, to describe all the bees other than honey bees that help to pollinate our crops and wild flowers. They have also been called "native bees," "wild bees" and "non-*Apis* bees." Before Europeans brought honey bees to North America, pollen bees did all of the bee pollination work here.

In North America alone, there are over 3,500 species of pollen bees. Some of the more recognizable pollen bees include carpenter bees, bumble bees, mason bees, sweat bees and leaf cutter bees.

Many of these pollen bees are solitary, which means all females mate. Each female makes her own simple nest, provisions her cells with a pollen ball and lays all the eggs. Solitary bees create nests in hollow reeds or twigs, holes in wood or in tunnels in the ground.

Although flowers that provide nectar and pollen are important for pollen bees, a lack of nesting sites is probably a greater threat to native bees than a lack of flowers. Providing nest boxes for solitary bees is increasingly popular for home gardeners. To enhance pollen bees, experts recommend reducing or eliminating insecticide applications.

Nesting Sites for Solitary Wood-Nesting Bees

The great majority of bees nest on their own, many in holes in wood. Wood nests with a range of hole sizes between 3/32" and 3/8" (2.5 mm to 10 mm) in diameter will support a wide range of pollen bee species. These nests need to be placed so the open holes face the morning sun. Not only will this warm the nests earlier in the day so the bees will become active, but it will also prevent them from overheating in the hottest part of the summer afternoons.

Nesting blocks. Bee blocks can be made by drilling nesting holes between 3/32" and 3/8" in diameter, at approximate 3/4" centers, into the side of a block of preservative-free lumber. The holes need to be smooth inside, as deep as possible and closed at one end. The length of the lumber is not critical—eight inches or more is good—but the lumber should be at least four inches deep. Blocks can be fixed firmly to a stake, fence, building or placed in a tree.

Twig bundles. Some plants, like teasel and bamboo, have naturally hollow stems. Cut the stems into 6- to 8-inch lengths. Be careful to cut the stems close to a stem node to create a tube with one end open and the other closed. Take fifteen to twenty stem pieces of a variety of internal diameters and tie them into bundles with the closed ends of the stems together. Fix each bundle to a stake, fence or tree with the stems horizontal to the ground. For more information, check out: http://www.xerces.org/Pollinator_Insect_Conservation/Xerces_bee_nests_fact_sheet.pdf

Sources: The Xerces Society, an organization for the preservation of invertebrates (Xerces.com) and Dr. Suzanne Batra, http://www.pollinator-paradise.com/Solitary_Bees/Diversfy.htm

Mace Vaughan/Xerces Society

Bee block on a fence

Mace Vaughan/Xerces Society

Bamboo bundle

Urban Pest Management Conference, Feb. 19–20

The 16th Annual Urban Pest Management Conference will be held Feb. 19–20 at the Cornhusker-Marriott Hotel in Lincoln. This will be an excellent opportunity for people interested in stored grain and processed food management, public health and community/structural pest management to receive updated information from state, regional and national wildlife and insect pest management experts.

A few of the nationally-known speakers on the program include Bobby Corrigan, author and rodent control expert; Jerome Goddard, author and medical entomologist, Mississippi; Stephen Kells, University of Minnesota; Roger Gold, Professor of Urban and Structural Entomology, Texas A & M; Frank Meek, Technical Director, Orkin, Inc.; and Dini Miller, Urban Pest Management Specialist, Virginia Tech.

Presentations will include managing cockroaches, termites, rodents, urban birds, trapping vertebrate pests, vector-born diseases, bedbugs, brown recluse spiders and ants. Several presentations will emphasize low-toxic pest management approaches that can be used in schools, daycare centers, retirement homes and other sensitive environments.

Nebraska Department of Agriculture state certified applicators in Structural (08), Wood Destroying Organisms (08W), Public Health (09) and Fumigation (11) categories can be re-certified by attending this training.

Registration is $150. For more information, go to http://entomology.unl.edu/upm.shtml or contact Shripat Kamble at 472-6857.

Beginning Beekeeping 2-Day Workshop

Saturday, March 8, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.
Lancaster Extension Education Center, 444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln

Saturday, April 12, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.
Apiculture lab, Agricultural Research and Development Center (ARDC), near Mead

On March 8, you will learn to:
- manage honey bees by understanding their biology and behavior
- identify the best Nebraska honey plants
- locate hives for best survival and production
- manage honey bee diseases

On April 12, you will learn to:
- install packaged bees
- assemble a hive
- harvest honey and beeswax
- prepare your crop for market

Registration fee: $20 per family (family to include parents and siblings living at home). Registration includes refreshments, one workbook and one lunch. Lunch for each additional family member is $10.
Please pre-register by calling 441-7180.