

BACKYARD and BEYOND



FROM THE BACKYARD
VAL CUNNINGHAM

The Red Birds

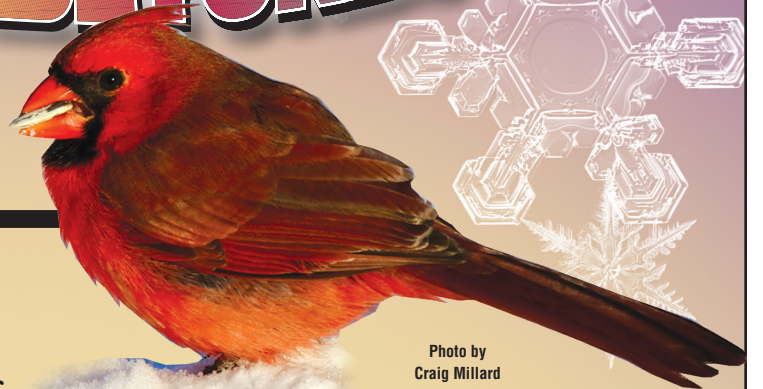


Photo by
Craig Millard

Everyone enjoys cardinals in all seasons of the year, but especially now, when their brilliant feather coats light up the dreary winter landscape. There's no mistaking a cardinal for any other bird, with that jaunty crest and the way a pair remains together throughout the year.

We often forget the fact that cardinals have traditionally been Southern birds: Until a century ago, cardinals were more at home in Alabama and Florida than in our region. Young birds, however, kept pushing northward and enough survived to stake out new territories, to the point that they're now residents from Minnesota through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to New York state.

Three factors are encouraging cardinals to put down northern roots: warmer winters, habitat changes (more open land), and the increase in bird feeding. Cardinals essentially are ground-feeding birds, but have learned to

visit bird feeders. They're a thirsty bird, too, so backyards with heated birdbaths in winter attract large numbers of cardinals.

They're huge fans of black-oil sunflower seeds, but also like safflower, cracked corn, and various nuts and dried fruits. Their strong beaks and jaw muscles can crack open just about any shell covering any seed. Much of the cardinal diet comes from wild sources, but they're frequent visitors to backyard feeders.

Activity is picking up outdoors, as wild things sense that spring is not far off. Cardinals are beginning to whistle their familiar "wha-cheer" song. Both male and female cardinals sing, unusual in the bird world. At this time of year, you can hear cardinals loudly counter-singing, with one bird singing several phrases ("wha-cheer-cheer-cheer") and the other singing

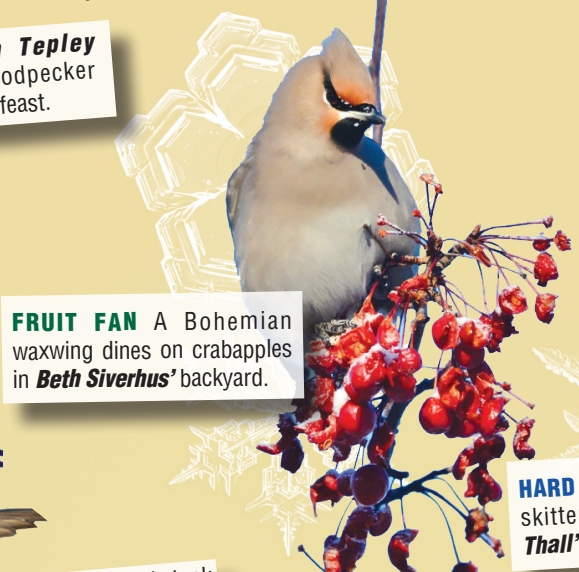
the same phrases back. This duetting helps strengthen the bond with their mate prior to the start of courtship season.

Northern cardinals sing with a slightly different accent than their southern counterparts, and cardinals in the north are somewhat larger, allowing them to better conserve body heat.

It sometimes seems that winter will go on forever, but keep an ear tuned when you're outdoors. The songs of a cardinal pair are a promise that warmer weather, and nesting season, aren't far off.



FEET FIRST Rita Tepley caught a hairy woodpecker coming in for a suet feast.



FRUIT FAN A Bohemian waxwing dines on crabapples in Beth Siverhus' backyard.



LEFT A BIT LATE A flock of sandhill cranes dropped down to spend the night near Melinda Hipsher's home.



NATURE SMART
STAN TEKIELA

American Oystercatcher

Slowing wading through a clear, knee-deep tidal pool in coastal Florida, I was trying to avoid flushing a gorgeous American oystercatcher napping on a small sandbar in the middle of the lagoon. Oystercatchers are amazing-looking shorebirds with a black hood punctuated by a bright yellow eye surrounded by a striking orange ring. Matching the crazy-looking eye is a very long, thick, orange to red bill that the bird uses for probing into the sand for aquatic insects.

I moved slowly across the shallow lagoon, being careful to watch for alligators and water snakes. With each step, I'd check depth and watch for hidden aquatic critters. When carrying \$30,000 in camera gear, the last thing you want to do is fall into saltwater.

With the sun at my back, the lighting was perfect. It was just an hour or so before sunset, and the harsh light of the midday had passed. The air temperature was in the high 70s and no wind - absolutely perfect conditions for wildlife photography.



Photo by
Stan Tekiela

Studies show that when shorebirds are resting they often gather in small flocks. They collect close together, often with one sturdy leg tucked into their belly feathers and long bill under a wing to conserve heat - standard shorebird resting position.

The birds near the center of the flock will close both eyes and sleep. The birds on the edge of the flock will sleep with one eye closed and the other open. In addition, the open eye is usually the one pointing outside of the flock to watch for incoming predators. Birds have the ability to "sleep" with one eye closed and one open. It is called unihemispheric, slow-wave sleep, and it allows the birds to see approaching danger/predators while still resting/sleeping. If the right eye of the bird is closed, the left side of the brain rests. And if the left eye is closed, the right side of the brain gets a break.

This ability to control sleep and wakefulness simultaneously also been observed in seals, manatees, and dolphins. It allows these aquatic mammals to sleep underwater and still rise to the surface to breathe without fully awakening every few minutes.

This solo American oystercatcher saw me coming with his one open eye. He untucked his bill from under his wing to watch me, but he was comfortable enough that he never dropped the leg tucked into his belly feathers. He remained still, allowing me to capture a few images before I headed back to the far side of the lagoon.

Only recently have scientists observed and studied USWS. This kind of behavior was once thought to be impossible, but nature has been doing it for millions of years. We just didn't understand it. Perhaps this is another wakeup call (pun intended) for us to learn from Mother Nature. Until next time ...

HARD WATER Several mallards skitter across the ice in Mary Thall's photo.

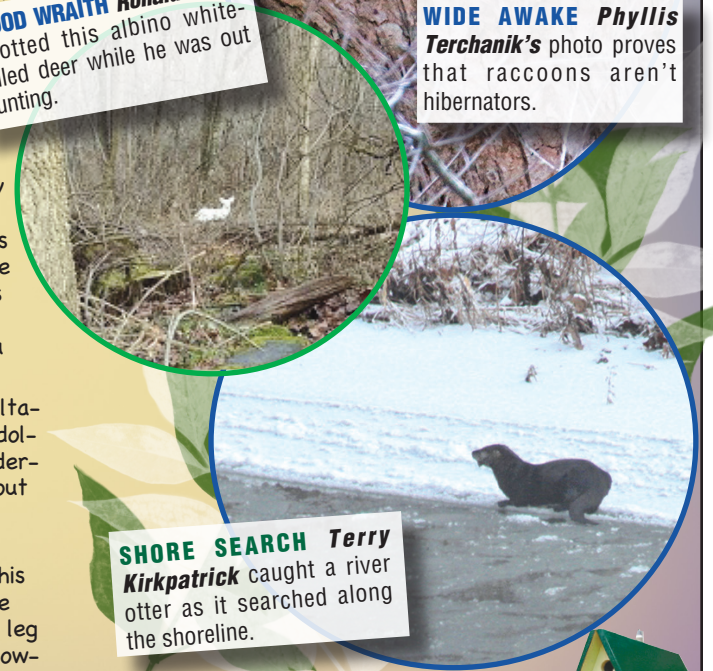


GROUND LEVEL Mindy Methven snapped a female cardinal foraging under her feeders.



WIDE AWAKE Phyllis Terchanik's photo proves that raccoons aren't hibernators.

WOOD WRAITH Ronald Ralph spotted this albino white-tailed deer while he was out hunting.



SHORE SEARCH Terry Kirkpatrick caught a river otter as it searched along the shoreline.

Your photos are welcome. Send prints to address below and digital images to Val Cunningham's email address.

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