
For the Birds

by: Geri Rodin¹

BIRD FEEDING AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Look! Our Lord and Lady Cardinal!

We are seated, having Sunday brunch at our home. Well, it is 11:00 AM! That is breakfast time for them, with a 4:30 PM dinner time every day at our residence.

When we first arrived here from Pennsylvania, we installed our bird feeder in a tree that we could watch from our kitchen table and the Arizona room and began buying 10# sacks of bird feed. We were so pleased to be able to see the birds feeding and to watch their habits.

I bought lots of bird seed. First 10 pounds, then 15 pounds and 25 and 50 pounds. The birds our first year here began coming in increasing numbers. I was so thrilled! They are wonderful to watch.

THEN THE WINDS AND RAIN CAME!

The birds “took refuge” on our covered patio. Birds that had eaten all that seed we had provided left their droppings on every chair, lantern, table, and floor space that they occupied.



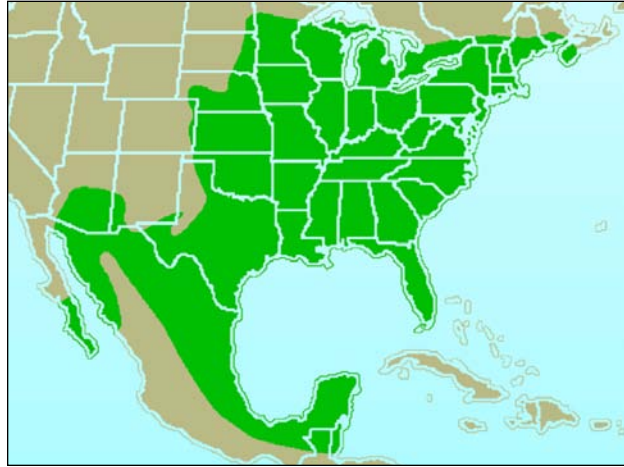
Northern Cardinal
Male (above) and Female
Female lacks the vivid red color of the male.
[Wikipedia]

¹ Article first published April 1999.



My husband said we should not feed the birds any more. But it was always so much fun to see them visiting and be able to watch them up close, I could not “not feed the birds.” But I decided to see if they perhaps liked things other than bird seed, as we have noticed them picking at the most minute particles on the streets. One day after breakfast, we had left over one-half a bagel with a little lox (smoked salmon) on it. I cut it in small pieces and put it on the bird feeder, knocked on the top “three times” to let them know it was there, and went inside.

Within five minutes the Cardinal arrived. Wow! Was he spectacular! He landed on the top branch of the tree, stood guard, looked around and up and down. After deciding it was safe, his mushroom-colored “wife” arrived. He immediately took an “outlook” position above her as she enjoyed the lox and bagel. Shortly after her breakfast, both took a large portion of bagel, the female flying away first, the red male following her.



In case you don't already know, a bird book² provides some details about the Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*). He is scarlet, with black on the face all around the base of the bill, and has a prominent crest. The female's olive shading has red tinges. A Cardinal is nine inches long and has a pinkish/orange, conical bill. The large, short bill indicates a diet mostly composed of a wide range of seeds. He is very territorial and aggressive among his own kind. At certain elevations Cardinals are year 'round residents, but you'll not find them in the city. They can be bold but are often wary of people.

Editor's note: The above write-up is of observations made by comparatively new residents of the Desert Foothills who have yet to find out some good general rules that bird enthusiasts have found work well in this area. Soon these well meaning newcomers will conclude they should simply cut back on the quantity of bird seed provided for their wonderful feathered visitors. The quantity of bird seed put out should be restricted to that amount that will keep the birds busy for

² See also article in [Wikipedia](#).



about an hour, no more! This will keep birds from becoming dependent upon humans for all their food. It will also keep costs down and cut back on excessive mess. Birds will devour all the food humans have monetary and physical resource to provide, but it is not wise to become their slaves – it is not healthy for the birds that are better served by being required to remain in touch with and in balance with their environment. Besides, overfeeding them exhausts us and makes us resent their constant demands. We can schedule our enjoyment of their beauty and our pleasure in their presence near our homes to that hour they busily consume the limited supply of food we provide. We and the birds will both be better off!

A good general rule for feeding desert wildlife is DON'T! This guideline is very difficult to keep in the case of birds whose existence is an exquisite delight to humans. This is why many locals make the exception of feeding that hour's worth of birdseed daily (and to provide water in containers regularly cleaned) in order to draw birds to observation decks. It is unwise, however, to feed other desert critters at all, mostly because it is dangerous to habituate wildlife to the presence of humans. It can become threatening for little people and pets, of course, but also dangerous to the critters themselves because they lose natural caution and become vulnerable to harm from thoughtless humans.

Three more remarks:

- 1) Birds' health is not well served by consuming leftover foods from people's meals so we would be wise to confine our scrapings to the compost heap.
- 2) If you appreciate the joy it is to have birds come to your yard but don't want to feed them, you can at least provide clean water. Birds will come! They especially find a dripping, moving source of fresh water irresistible, as it is to all wildlife.
- 3) Be prepared, if you decide to feed birds, that you can expect more rodents to occupy your yard as they too will be attracted to the grain!

