



## NORTHERN CARDINAL

January 2020

As we head into the new year, and the days gradually lengthen, songbirds take notice of this increased daylight and begin to get ready for another breeding season. One of the most significant breeding behaviors — and the one that we most notice — is singing. Male songbirds sing their distinctive, specific melodies both to attract females and to stake out and advertise their territories to other males. One of the loudest and most familiar of these songbirds in Victoria Park is the Northern Cardinal. Its “what cheer, what cheer, what cheer ... wheet, wheet, wheet...” and “cheer, cheer, cheer ... what, what, what, what” songs have already begun to punctuate our yards and woodlands.

The Northern Cardinal is arguably the most prominent songbird in Florida, if not the entire country. It has been chosen to be the official “state bird” of more states (7) than any other species : Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia. The brilliant red male, with its distinctive crest and black facial mask, can’t be mistaken for any other bird (the female is brownish with a reddish wash on the wings, and unlike most other birds, she also sings). During the courtship season in late winter, male cardinals become aggressively territorial, singing loudly from exposed perches atop trees and attacking any intruding male cardinal. They’ll even repeatedly attack their own reflections in windows and mirrors (see photo of cardinal on my car).

The cardinal’s thick, cone-shaped beak is adapted to crunching seeds, but buds and berries are also included, and insects make up 35% of its diet, especially when feeding young. Nests are built in woodland thickets or residential

shrubbery. Besides the loud song, another interesting feature of the cardinal's courtship behavior to look for now is "mate feeding" in which the male delicately feeds seeds and other tidbits to the female.