

# Tales From Along the Trail...

## NORTHERN CARDINALS- OHIO'S VALENTINE BIRD

CARDINALIS CARDINALIS

*with naturalist Cathy Ricks*

The groundhog may still be sleeping but the cardinals are signaling their signs of spring on sunny winter days. The male cardinal begins his courtship by singing in late January & February. Each day we see the hours of daylight increase and nature responding. The loose flocks of cardinals will start to break up.

Watch your feeders and you may see a male offer a valentine treat (a sunflower seed) to the rosy, brown female. The males are at their most vivid in the winter. A newly molted male cardinal in fall has grey feather tips that slowly wear off by winter revealing the brilliant red. The brightest red plumage results from eating seasonal carotenoids (like wild grapes or berries).

The female cardinals are one of the few North American songbirds that joins their mate in singing, often calling from the nest. They share song phrases, perform duets, and typically mate for life. The male will feed the female while she incubates the eggs and both will raise the young together (2-3 broods a season). They aggressively defend their territories, even “shadow boxing” with their reflection from a window.



As you walk through the parks in late winter look for the flash of red, the “what cheer, cheer, cheer” sound of their singing and last summer’s cup shaped nests, 3-8 feet above ground level, tucked into shrubs and hedges (perhaps hosting a white footed mouse).