THE NESTING HABITS OF OUR CARDINALS

By MRS. HENRY KOENIG

The cardinals that come to our feeding stations are a part of our family, and when I meet friends I am usually greeted with, "How are the birds?"

We have seen many interesting and touching sights during the past four years such as: the cardinal parents in the window-sill feeder with their three young birds, feeding them hurriedly lest darkness overtake them; cardinals, their crowns white with frost, arriving at the feeder on a January morning when the mercury stood at 38 degrees below zero; a January visitor with an injured breast; a weary cardinal sleeping in the feeder from 2:15 until 6:15 P. M. of an April day. By the end of the month this cardinal, looking very strange, had lost ever single tail-feather. We have witnessed the raising of 28 young cardinals in 13 families during the past four summers. We feel reasonably certain that one male fathered all the young but he may not have had the same mate every year.

A survey of the history of a pair of cardinals observed during 1953 may perhaps (with variations) give an idea of the way of all cardinals in this area. This pair however, had five different families and succeeded in rearing eight young, five males and three females.

On January 14 the cardinals began to sing, "weeperty, weeperty, cheer, cheer" and went into the feeder together. All through the mating and nesting season the male was very attentive to his mate; they dined together and he even fed her at times. But after the young were grown he followed the usual pattern, monopolized the feeders and let his mate wait in the shrubbery until he had satisfied his hunger. She went into the feeder after her lord had departed but if he returned she immediately left him in full possession.

In early March the male cardinal seemed tired when he came to the feeder, and he sometimes fluffed up like a ball with his head under one wing and took a nap.

The First Nesting Fails

By the latter part of April the cardinals were nesting. We discovered this because when they left the feeder they made a bee-line for a place northwest of our house. Then in May, two young cardinals were thrown to the ground when a child shook the small evergreen tree in which the nest had been made.

The cardinals' second nesting was in an arbor vitae hedge which skirted the sidewalk of a busy street. By June 10 both parents were in the yard and we knew the young were out of the nest and nearby. Several days later a young cardinal was seen near the house and soon thereafter an immature, grayish bird with finely streaked breast appeared in the feeder. When we saw the father cardinal feed this bird and one of his own, we realized that the cardinal had hatched a cowbird. After the father had fed his son solicitously for a time he began the usual procedure of chasing the young bird away.
A few words more about this family of cardinals. After the birds had left their nest in the arbor vitae hedge, I was given permission to get the nest and found in it a pierced cardinal egg. Perhaps this was the first one laid and when the cowbird came to lay her egg she pierced the one already there; then the cardinal may have laid another egg, making a total of three eggs in the nest.

In early July we learned that our cardinals were nesting a third time and their choice for a home was the Dutchman’s Pipe vine above the clothes line and a few feet from the kitchen door of a family with four children. The nest was not noticed until July 3, and the birds were already out of it six days later. Two young male cardinals reared in this nest came to our feeders for food and to the pool to bathe.

Now we come to the fourth family of cardinals, and we surely thought it would be the last for that year. It was on the morning of August 5 that the screeching of the father cardinal called our attention to a squirrel lying on the lowest branch of our huge pine tree. We chased it away while the pair of cardinals flew wildly about; then near the end of the branch we saw their nest, to which the mother soon returned.

A Duplex Apartment

Next came the biggest surprise of all. Something dropped from the pine and examination proved it to be a baby cardinal. From our collection of nests we took the one in which the cowbird had been hatched, tied it to a branch about four feet from the original nest and put the baby cardinal into it, hoping the parents would care for the little one. After a while the mother did come to feed it and later the father took over the feeding. We wished that he would also keep that baby warm during the cold night, for the mother had the other nest to sit on. But father cardinals do not extend their responsibilities to sitting on the nest. Sometime during the following morning the parents chipped excitedly and flew all over the huge pine, but we could find nothing wrong. In the afternoon there was no movement in the nest and upon investigating we found both nests empty! We could hardly believer that those tiny birds had been ready to leave the nest. Of course we had never before seen a cardinal on the day it left the nest. They were in the apple tree several feet from the pine where I hoped they wouldn’t be struck by the falling fruit.

The two succeeding mornings I arose at 4:30 to guard the two young birds from a neighbor’s cat. Later, as I stood near the apple tree, the cardinals sang a duet of “cheer, cheer,” she in one tree and he in another. The young birds at this time were about the size of a chickadee.
For ten days after they left the nest, both parents continued to feed their little ones. Then we noticed the absence of the mother who came to eat only just before dark. The thought of a possible fifth family crossed my mind, but this seemed improbable. During these days the father was very busy feeding his young birds—both females. One morning he fed them muskmelon seeds and doughnut crumbs for breakfast as they sat side by side in the lilac bush. In the feeder he hulled the seeds, picked them up, took a drink to moisten them, and away he flew.

At this time it was interesting to hear the father sing short phrases and very often just a note or two. The cardinals explored the neighborhood together but returned every evening. The father chipped furiously as the young birds settled down for the night; then he usually came to the feeder for a peaceful snack before going to roost. By September the father no longer fed his fourth family and was gone most of the time. It was then that the two young birds went into the feeders alone. One ate of the suet cake for fifteen minutes after which its bill was coated with little pieces of suet. Next it tried the sunflower seeds which were too hard to crack, but the hemp seeds were easily eaten. Last of all this precious little bird ate some doughnut crumbs which clung to its bill until the bird’s appearance reminded one of a child as it looks after having eaten, with bits of food all around the mouth. The bird wiped and wiped its bill on the perching rail but a small piece of suet remained there.

Finally we were sure that the cardinals were nesting a fifth time, for when the mother finished feeding, she always flew off toward the northwest. In early September the cardinal parents came to the feeders constantly to carry food to their fifth family—now out of the nest. Five days later the father came with one of his new offspring which he fed. During the first part of October the cardinals came often to the feeders with their three young birds. The father regularly fed two males while the mother fed a young female. The five families of the past summer were usually hatched about a month apart, and in each case the father bird chased the young away as soon as they were able to care for themselves. We are now looking forward to the cardinal families of 1954.

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MORE NEWS . . .

Another field trip to watch the hawks at Cedar Grove is planned for Sunday, September 26. 55 persons were thrilled with a similar trip last year. Not only do we see hawks migrating, but also many other birds passing through as well; and it is a treat to see the hawk banding station in operation. Plan now to attend.

This issue carries the annual pre-Christmas mailing of outstanding buys from the W. S. O. Supply Department. You can choose many nice gifts now and avoid much of the rushing and worrying that usually come in December.

When considering gifts, think also of the products offered by our advertisers. These products are fine for you, and fine for your friends. Now is a good time to order, and when ordering, always be sure to mention seeing the advertisements in The Passenger Pigeon.

One Christmas bird count (making a state total of 45) was received too late for publication in the last issue. It was taken at Mishicot in Manitowoc County on January 2, 1954, by John Kraura, Bernard Brouchaud and Clyde Rau. Among the 19 species recorded were 23 mourning doves, one belted kingfisher, one red-headed woodpecker, and two song sparrows—all wintering north of their usual range.

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