

Both newcomers and visitors to southern Arizona are often surprised to see Northern Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) flying about in our desert. They seem out of place without the deep green forest foliage of the north and east United States. Yet they thrive here, and are always a beautiful sight to see as they move about the Mesquites, Ironwoods, and even Cacti. While they may not be the state bird, (an honor reserved for the Cactus Wren) they are likely still our most recognizable bird and even have a sports franchise named after them (the Arizona Cardinals).

The male Cardinal is bright red, has a black facemask, a distinctive crest, and a large orangish triangular bill. The female is mostly brown but with a similar bill. The heavy bills are no doubt useful for cracking and crushing the many seeds that they consume. They also eat insects and berries.

If you are observant you will likely see another type of bird that seems like a Northern Cardinal but somehow is different. It is gray or tan, with a strong wash of red especially on its chest. Its facemask is red rather than black. Its beak is a bit different as well, being more yellow, less triangular and more curved. This is the male Pyrrhuloxia (*Cardinalis sinuatus*). I find they are a bit less common here in Tucson than the Cardinal, but still easily seen. I also find them every bit as pretty with colors that might be less brilliant than the Cardinal but very pleasing and complimentary. Female Pyrrhuloxias are brown, and not always easy to distinguish from the female Northern Cardinals. I use the bill shape and color to distinguish them. Their food preferences are similar to the Cardinals.

A third bird that can be confusing is the Phainopepla, a black bird (having white wing bars very visible in flight) with a crest. I have heard it called a "Black Cardinal". It is actually a flycatcher and not related to the Cardinals. It is frequently seen around clumps of mistletoe at the tops of trees where it dines on the mistletoe berries.

We are fortunate to have such jewels flitting about our desert, and it is especially fun if you can identify them and know a bit about their lives and life histories. A wonderful resource is a book by Lynn Kaufman "Birds of the American Southwest" that has information about most of our native birds and whose author lives in Tucson.

Young Cage