

# Cherokee Ethnobiology

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## CARDINAL

### Cherokee Importance

The Cardinal has great importance and significance in Cherokee Culture. A sacred bird – it is a carrier of “news”, both good and bad. Whenever found singing near your home, visitors can soon be expected. However, when a Cardinal actually visits your home, it is considered a sign of death (because it is believed that this bird carries the soul to the creator when a person dies). Young kids are told not to touch cardinal feathers or else they will get a bloody nose. One of the most revered Cherokee Traditionalist, Redbird Smith, was named after this bird.

### Description

Most people are able to recognize the bright red coloration of the Northern Cardinal (as they are frequent visitors to backyard bird feeders). The male Cardinal is bright red in color with a thick red bill that is encircled with a black ring at the base (giving the appearance of a mask). The female is adorned in a more sedate brownish-gray color with only red tinged feather tips. Sometimes even stranger colorations occur (as in the case of the leucistic female shown above). The male’s loud, musical call, used to attract females, is familiar to most birdwatchers. Cardinals are a medium-sized songbird measuring up to 8” in length.

**Where found:**

Cardinals can be found throughout the 14 County Jurisdictional Service Area as well as our ancestral homelands in the east.

**Other names:**

Cardinal, Redbird.

**Taxonomy:**

Kingdom - Animalia  
Phylum - Chordata  
Class - Aves  
Order – Passeriformes  
Family – Cardinalidae  
Genus – *Cardinalis*  
Species – *cardinalis*

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