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The Altruistic Cardinal?

Paul A. Johnsgard

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MOST PEOPLE WOULD AGREE that male cardinals are perhaps the most beautiful of American backyard birds, and their stunning adult plumage, held year around, is supplemented by an equally memorable voice. In Nebraska, cardinals are the first backyard bird species to begin singing in winter – usually starting very early in January – and they continue to sing through mid-August, when they start their last nesting effort of the year.

Cardinals also are known for their intense parental behavior. Most feeding of fledged young is done by the males, since females typically begin a new nesting cycle very shortly after their first young fledge. I've seen male cardinals feed female cardinals, cowbirds and house finches. One researcher in Oklahoma reported a cardinal attempting to feed goldfish in a pond!

While photographing backyard birds in Lincoln, I noticed that a male cardinal was tending to a single newly fledged cardinal chick, but also was being constantly pestered by two young house finches. Cardinals raise their young on insects while house finch parents feed their young regurgitated seeds.

The cardinal was feeding on spilled sunflower seeds under a bird feeder when the young finches approached him and

begged for food with loud name calling and wild wing flapping. The cardinal began rummaging through the thatch, produced a caterpillar and stuffed it down the throat of one of the youngsters. The finch was surprised to be receiving such strange food, but nevertheless dutifully swallowed it. The male then took a mouthful of seeds from the feeder tray and flew off to feed other waiting finches.

Why are Cardinals so willing to take the young of other species “under their wings?” Perhaps it is related to the fact that Cardinals have a low successful birth rate among their own, despite repeated nesting efforts throughout the year (as many as eight), and under the influence of parental hormones such as progesterone, they are compelled to feed, tend and surrogate youngsters.

Sometimes it seems that if you are beautiful enough, you can be less than brilliant and still be successful – the horde of beautiful actresses who can't seem to stay out of jail would bolster this opinion.

Applying this principle to birds, I am inclined to think that the northern cardinal might qualify as being either not very bright or remarkably altruistic.

