



Breeding the Red-crested Cardinal at the Tracy Aviary

(*Paroaria coronata*)

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Found over a large area of South America (southeast Brazil, eastern Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay and northern Argentina), Red-crested Cardinals are typically birds of wet scrub and shrubbery.

The species has also been introduced to, and appears to be flourishing in, certain locations in Hawaii and southern Florida. Other introductions into south Africa and the Agalega Islands in the Indian Ocean failed.

A member of the *Emberizinae*, its closest relatives, apart from other members of the genus *Paroaria*, include old world Buntings as well as American Sparrows and Juncos. It is not a close relative of the American Virginian Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*), which is a member of the *Cardinalinae* or Cardinal Grosbeaks.

Simply though strikingly plumaged with warm grey upperparts, wings and tail, white underparts and jubilantly crested, bright red head, this active and energetic bird is simple to maintain and relatively easy to breed.

Females can often be distinguished from males by the more orange-red coloring of the head and crest as opposed to the deeper scarlet of the males. This species has been maintained at the Tracy Aviary and bred here intermittently for a number of years.

The two pairs are housed in quite large flights with year-round access to heated shelters, which they never spend time in other than to eat and drink. The smaller flight is 12 x 8 x 10 feet high, planted with a stunted Russian Olive and a small *Euonymus* shrub, which is shared by Bleeding Heart Doves, Turquoise Grass Parakeets and Saffron Finches. The larger flight is some 30 x 15 x 10 feet high, planted with Pines, *Ailanthus*, a couple of *Acers* and *Euonymus* shrubs. Other inhabitants of this flight are Scarlet and White-fronted Ibis, Silver Teal, Mountain Witch Doves and Northern Orioles. Both flights are turfed.

The birds have bred successfully in both aviaries and are quite active

although non-aggressive to the other inhabitants, and look very attractive amongst the greenery. We have, on occasion, had a bird escape through a hole in the wire and stay at liberty for up to a week before recapture. Typically, the escapee never wanders more than 100 yards from its mate with whom it stays in vocal contact and whom it returns to visit every few minutes. The escapee also visits the second pair of cardinals and scolds and squabbles with them through the wire, the resident male fluffing out his plumage and singing loudly while trying to attack the bird outside.

Breeding activity often begins around the end of March. The pairs have both built their own nests and used canary nest pans fixed into the trees. Nests built by the birds have consisted almost entirely of pine needles, fine twigs and grasses and been placed about 10 feet high, immediately under the ceiling wire in a dense clump of Pine. In contrast, the canary nest pan chosen was totally exposed at six feet high, attached to a small limb of a nearly naked Russian Olive and virtually unlined.

We avoid interfering as much as possible with the birds, merely checking on the due hatching date or thereabouts, to see if the chicks have hatched, although we do, of course, keep a close eye on the birds to make sure that incubation is proceeding normally and that the chicks, when hatched, are being brooded and fed.

A mixed-species aviary obviously has a wide range of feed provided, including seeds, pellets, chopped fruits, mashed boiled eggs, meat, fish and insects of which the Cardinals have free choice. The only addition to the feeding regimen when the birds are breeding is a separate supply of mealworms dusted with Vionate, located well away from the large and greedy, not to mention less agile, and hung upon the wire wall of the aviary. The chicks fledge when less than half grown and are extremely difficult to find in a planted aviary. Greyish backs, whitish underparts and brownish heads, they remain totally immobile and almost invisible until a parent approaches, when they will leap into action with loud cries, begging to be fed.

Pairs have recycled as many as three times a year here and can be quite prolific with a clutch size of up to four. ●