



**MASSACHUSETTS AUDUBON SOCIETY
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**CARDINALS AND TUFTED TITMICE IN NEW ENGLAND
(from the 1973 report to participants)**

The bright red Cardinal, with his crest and his cherry whistled song, is a recent and welcome addition to our bird life. He and his mate, who wears an orangey plumage, a similar crest, and a red bill, both add a flash of color to the drab winter landscape throughout much of New England. The Cardinal is not the only recent addition to New England's avifauna, for another "southerner", the Tufted Titmouse moved into our area at about the same time. This bird, a close relative of the Black-capped Chickadee, is crested like the Cardinal, but is a soft grey in color.

Prior to the fall of 1957, adjectives such as "uncommon" and "rare" were used by Massachusetts ornithologists to describe the status of both the Cardinal and the Tufted Titmouse in this state. There were occasional reports of Cardinals each year but the titmouse was considered such a rarity that it was not included on the official Massachusetts bird list. However, during the early 1950's, both Cardinals and titmice were nesting in Connecticut, and were appearing in increasingly northerly locations in that state each year.

This slow build-up in numbers apparently led to and culminated in a remarkable invasion into central and northern New England in the fall of 1957. There were two major invasion routes - one the Connecticut River Valley and the other along the coastal sections of eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island. This northward surge was an interesting departure from the previous slow steady progression of both of these species out of the southland. But the 1957 influx was immediately successful in extending the range of both species, for the first recorded nesting for both species in Massachusetts occurred in the summer of 1958. Titmice brought their young to a feeder in Waban and Cardinals raised a family in Waltham, both communities just west of Boston.

By 1962, it was obvious that the birds were here to stay and a 1963 midwinter census of Cardinals and titmice was organized by the Allen Bird Club. At first it included only the four western counties of Massachusetts, but it was soon expanded to include the whole state and then *all* of New England. What has become evident from this census is that the Cardinal is much less limited by habitat and physiography than the Tufted Titmouse. Cardinals have now spread into central Vermont and New Hampshire in some numbers and have been reported almost to the Canadian border in both Vermont and New Hampshire. They have appeared on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket as well as the islands in Narragansett Bay, and they have apparently adapted, with the help of feeders to tide them over the winter, to habitats as diverse as the oak-pine woods of Cape Cod

and the northern hardwoods-conifer vegetation of north-central New England.

By contrast, the Tufted Titmouse seems firmly tied to the oak forest. Indeed, the titmouse is described by early authorities as living in the deciduous bottomlands of the South, dependent upon acorns for much of its winter food. Sunflower seeds provided at most birdfeeders have replaced acorns in part, but the titmouse is still rare or absent in northern Vermont, New Hampshire and most of Maine. In addition, this species is apparently reluctant to fly over even a small amount of water, for it has been absent from all major Massachusetts islands and very scarce on outer Cape Cod.

Cardinals and Titmice in New England, 1973

There has been a general decline in the number of both Cardinals and Tufted Titmice reported this year. It is difficult to determine the precise reasons *for* this as several factors, such as publicity, weather on the reporting weekend and failure to report birds which are no longer a novelty, all distort the relationship between the actual number of birds present and the number reported. However, if real, there are a number of possible explanations *for* the *low* numbers. This winter has been unusually open in much of New England. While our precipitation has been about normal, *most* of it has fallen as rain. This has left the fields uncovered and weed seeds available to such seedeaters as Slate-colored (now Dark-eyed) Juncos, Tree Sparrows and Cardinals. As a result they have not frequented feeding areas with their usual regularity. In addition, the cold, wet spring of 1972 resulted in the poor breeding success of many small songbirds, such as Tufted Titmice and chickadees. It seems likely that this unseasonable weather also decreased the insect population, making fewer insect adults, eggs and larvae available to these birds and further depressing the population. Finally, large groups of birds attract additional customers to feeders. It may be that the overall "birdlessness" this winter has acted to reduce the numbers of Cardinals and Tufted Titmice reported.

Regardless of *local* or annual fluctuations, the rapid northward advance of these two species has provided ornithologists with an unparalleled opportunity to document their range expansion in detail. We plan to continue to monitor their spread and encourage you to participate in our midwinter census the second weekend in February. Official report cards are available by sending a large self-addressed, stamped envelope to "Census" at the above address after January 1st.

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