
Black Cardinal is Really Phainopepla

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THE “SHINING ROBE”



photos courtesy Wikipedia

Newcomers to our area often comment about the black cardinal they see perched high in a tree.

Indeed, he does look somewhat like a cardinal at first glance with his streamlined body and pointed crest on top of his head. His jet-black feathers glisten in the sunlight and his red eyes sparkle with curiosity. He has no common name, but his formal name fits him perfectly.

He is the Phainopepla (*Phainopepla nitens*), his name being a Greek word meaning “shining robe.” When he flies, you will see a white patch on each wing – which is why the Native Americans appropriately called him the “window wing bird.”

The females and young are gray with light-gray wing patches. In the book *Birds of North America*, he is listed as uncommon countrywide; but in the lower Sonoran life zone he can be seen quite often. Phainopepla are semi-migratory, spending winters here. They nest and raise their young here also; but when the summer heat begins, they leave for higher country.

He belongs to a family called flycatchers. You won't see him at the feeder because his main diet consists of insects. He also enjoys small



fruits and berries, one of his favorite being the mistletoe berry.

He builds his nest on a mesquite branch in or near a clump of mistletoe. The nest is made of fine materials held together with hair or spider web and is lined with soft down from seed pods. The male does most of the work building the nest, and also helps feed and raise the young. If he loses his mate during this time, he will take the responsibility of raising the young all by himself until they are self-sufficient.

To view him, walk down a wash and look for mesquite trees containing mistletoe. Listen for his soft, short, one-syllable whistle. He enjoys perching high on the tree. He is rather shy, keeping his distance – but often he will follow you, darting from tree to tree. If you imitate his call, don't be surprised if he answers you. When you finally find the "window wing bird," you will not be disappointed.

