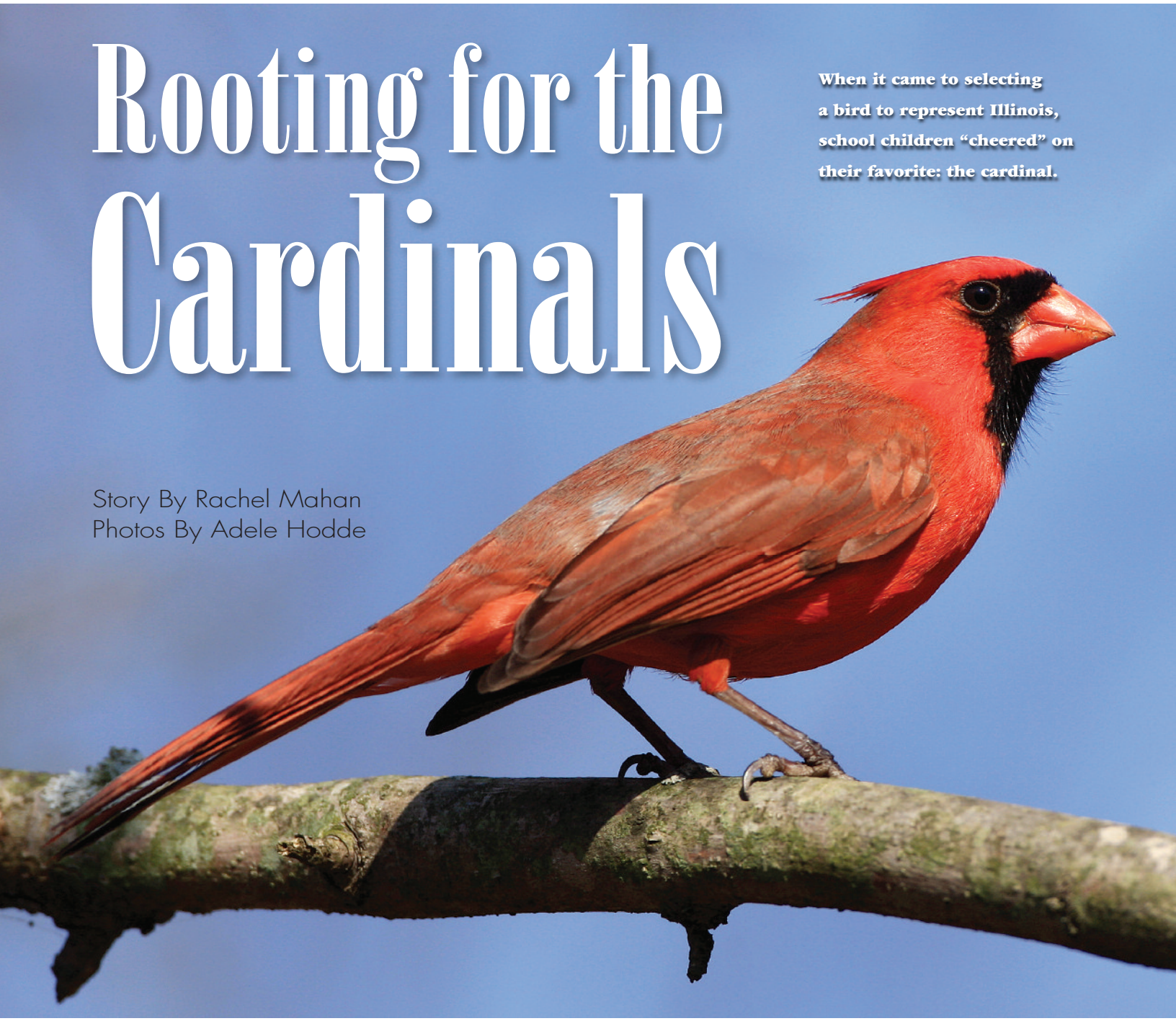
Eighty years ago Illinois school children se

Rooting for the Cardinals

When it came to selecting a bird to represent Illinois, school children "cheered" on their favorite: the cardinal.



Story By Rachel Mahan
Photos By Adele Hodde

For 80 years, the northern cardinal's black face mask and ruddy feathers have been one of our state's symbols.

In 1929, at the urging of the Macomb branch of the National Federation of Professional Women's Clubs, Illinois school children were allowed to choose a state bird. Out of a list of five species—cardinal, bluebird, meadowlark, bobwhite and oriole—the cardinal became Illinois' state bird. Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia and West Virginia also call the cardinal their own.

Cardinalis cardinalis is still a favorite backyard bird today. The flashy red males and more subtly colored females are a common sight at bird feeders across the state, especially in the winter. However, they were not always so abundant, said Jeffery Walk, a conservation planner for The Nature Conservancy in Illinois. Back when the cardinal was voted a state symbol, the birds were more common in the southern part of the state. Bird-feeding has probably helped them increase their range, and one of their favorite foods is black sunflower seeds.

Luckily for cardinals and birdwatch-

lected the cardinal as our first state symbol.

A species exhibiting sexual dimorphism, male and female cardinals have different plumages, with the colors serving distinct purposes.

ers alike, the birds are well-suited to living near humans, and not just because of the ubiquitous bird feeders. Cardinals prefer forest edges, and with increasing development there is little shortage of this habitat. The birds also frequently nest in the shrubs people plant in their yards.

Cardinals are different because both males and females sing, and they sing well. Their song contains variations of phrases such as "what cheer cheer cheer." A modestly sized songbird of about 8 inches long, territorial males keep other males apprised of his territory by singing. If he sees his own reflection in a window or chrome, he may spend hours fighting with the "intruder," sometimes returning day after day. When it comes to mating season, though, males show a softer side. Often they can be seen feeding a mate, even before she begins incubating her clutch of about four eggs.

"It's easy to forget the beauty of this state symbol because we can see cardinals almost every day," said Walk.

Eighty years and still as gorgeous as ever.

Rachel Mahan is a freelance writer and native of southern Illinois.