

A Call to Action:

It is time to change the Illinois State Bird

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The trend of states establishing state symbols can be traced back to the 1893 World's Fair - hosted in the City of Chicago. According to a Smithsonian Gardens article from 2020, one idea discussed and subsequently acted upon following the completion of the World's Fair was the creation of a National Garland of Flowers that would include a representative flower from each US state and territory.¹ It was this idea that led to many states choosing an official "State Flower" and began the trend of states choosing other representative symbols: state trees, state birds, etc.²

Illinois has thirty official state symbols of which eleven were chosen by or advocated for by school-aged children. An additional two symbols were chosen by vote of Illinois residents. The oldest Illinois State Symbols are the State Flower (Common Blue Violet) and State Tree (White Oak) both chosen in 1908 and the State Bird (Northern Cardinal) chosen in 1929. All three were decided upon by school children.

A 2005 article from Stateline Magazine suggests that states are suffering from an overabundance of frivolous state symbols and cites attempts to codify a state mythological creature in Wyoming and a state dinosaur in South Dakota.³ However, the author also recognizes that because schoolchildren often provide the impetus for enacting new state symbols, the exercise of participating in the designation process provides children a hands-on opportunity to observe and be involved with the legislative process that is a foundational part of our system of government.

Instead of focusing on frivolous state symbols, perhaps this Stateline Magazine author should have focused more of their attention on **repetitive** state symbols. If a state symbol is something that is intended to be unique, defining, and notable for a particular state and generate a sense of pride and community identity, when multiple states share the same symbol, it undermines the specialness of that symbol. Unfortunately, this is the case for several of Illinois' State symbols. The Illinois State Flower is also the state flower of New Jersey, Rhode Island and Wisconsin.

¹<https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/a-national-garland-how-women-led-the-movement-to-declare-state-flowers/mAFroO4vbPIJakiE>

²<https://statesymbolsusa.org/#:~:text=A%20%22National%20Garland%20of%20Flowers,unique%20state%20symbols%20recognized%20today>

³ <https://stateline.org/2005/03/11/can-states-ever-have-too-many-official-symbols/>

And even more lamentable, the Illinois State Bird, the northern cardinal, is shared with six other states: Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, and West Virginia. Talk about a lack of uniqueness or notability!

I recognize that for the Illinois school children in 1929 when they were choosing a state bird from the options provided (bluebird, meadowlark, bobtail quail, oriel, and cardinal) they were likely drawn toward the beautiful red color of the cardinal and its omnipresence throughout all the seasons in Illinois. However, today, as we look at the crowded field of state bird symbols it only makes sense that Illinois should reconsider its choice and choose a bird that will set our state apart with pride from the other states.

Let us no longer be satisfied with a State Bird that leaves Illinois in the midst of a pack of seven states who have all chosen the northern cardinal as their official state bird.

Let us set Illinois apart and let us choose an instantly recognizable bird that is a year-round resident of the State of Illinois, that lives in habitats throughout the entire state, that can be found in urban, suburban, and rural settings, and that would be a charismatic emblem of the energy, vitality and uniqueness of our great state.

Let us invest in increasing a sense of pride, awareness, and community identity among our residents, and let us set ourselves apart from the pack and choose a unique state bird.

Let us even become the FIRST state to choose a bird of prey as its state bird rather than a songbird or game bird like most of the other states.⁴

Let us start a movement to establish the magnificent Great Horned Owl as the official state bird of our Great State!



⁴ While a few states have chosen State Raptor in addition to their State Bird (see New Hampshire, Idaho, and Oregon), no state has chosen a predatory bird as their official state bird.

Note: Great Horned Owl image courtesy of the NARA and DIVDS Public Domain Archive:
<https://nara.getarchive.net/media/d-m-takes-care-of-its-wildlife-1f1ec1>