

# BOREAL BITS

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## FEEDING WINTER BIRDS

*“And all was white.  
The pure keen air abroad,  
Albeit it breathed no scent of herb, nor heard  
Love-call of bird nor merry hum of bee,  
Was not the air of death.”*

*A Winter Piece, William Cullen Bryant, 1821*

It's cheap, clean, environmentally friendly and absolutely loaded with cholesterol. And it will make a great difference to your bird feeding enjoyment. It's suet, it's cheap, and it's sold at your local supermarket or butcher shop.

We have more than a few feeders at our place. We do something for the birds and they do something for us in return by showing up. Our most popular feeder is what is termed a platform feeder. Friend Jim makes his by putting a slab of 4 by 8 chipboard on his picnic table and sprinkling sunflower seeds on it. We use a similar size piece of wood and support it on the deck railing. Birds love it. We also have a saucer feeder, hanging tube-style feeders and another smaller platform feeder.

The saucer feeders are made from the plastic saucers for flowerpots and these are mounted with two pieces of wood that straddle the deck railing. Being removable as they

are, it is easy to dump snow and seed husks. Birds seem to like them but the lip of the saucer gives them a little concern. Unlike the platform feeders that allow birds to see around them when their heads are down, the lip of the saucer feeder blocks their view. If a predator is coming you don't really like to have your vision blocked for very long and the birds respond to this by continually bobbing their heads up and down. The hanging feeders don't seem to cause this concern although the birds view is partially blocked there as well. We placed branches on the deck posts near the feeders and many birds use these to approach the feeder before committing themselves to a landing. Birds are by nature very cautious; when they are looking over their shoulders you can be sure they aren't checking to see if their friends are coming.



(P Burke)

platform feeder approximates the ground feeding conditions of many birds and hence its popularity. Since we started using this, our number of species of bird visitors has improved dramatically.

We don't have trouble with the idea of feeding squirrels and have fed numerous generations of the arboreal rodents over the decades. The only time we've had more than one squirrel at a time at our feeders has been when a mom was introducing her young ones to the delicacies offered. Our attitude toward squirrel feeding may be quite different if we were dealing with the more gregarious grey squirrel that will sit for hours gobbling up all the seeds with its gang of buddies.

There are feeders with roofs or covers and while these offer the advantage of protection from snow and rain, they will limit your visitors.

One cold day this winter, I stocked the platform feeder and put out the suet for the first time. That day we recorded, in addition to the visitors at the other feeders, two hairy woodpeckers, one downy, a red-breasted nuthatch and a white-breasted nuthatch. Since then, we have had chickadees regularly visit the suet along with crows and a pair of pileated woodpeckers. The woodpeckers are thrilled to get this slug of fat without having to burrow into a tree trunk to do it.



(P Burke)

We put our suet out using little cages sold for that purpose although we have used net produce bags like the type that hold onions. They worked very well but need replacing occasionally. Others birders have great luck with peanut butter or lard stuffed into holes drilled into a piece of wood.

In this column we have talked at length about the joys of bird watching at the home feeder. During the drought of winter, the feeder provides a much-needed contact with some of our most favourite residents. In fact during the Audubon sponsored Christmas bird count, it is the folks who sit in their cozy kitchens watching their feeders that regularly record the greater numbers of birds. The field counters, that is, those people who slog through snow and suffer hypothermia to see birds in the bush don't fare nearly as well.

Judy Stockham, a fan of nature for many years and an accomplished photographer, had her suet taken by a black bear on November 24, a date when most of us thought the bears would have already been hibernating. She then waited until December before putting out suet again and this time was thrilled to see a pine marten after the delicacy.

For winter feeder activity, it's hard to beat the power of suet.