

SUET MIXTURES

There are many varieties of commercial suet mixtures now widely available at wild bird stores, and most farm and hardware stores. They come in various-sized balls or small cakes which can be dispensed from plastic-covered metal holders.



Commercial suet blocks, widely available, are eagerly consumed by a variety of species, including Boreal Chickadees (left [MYRNA PEARMAN]) and Downy Woodpeckers (right [HAROLD FISHER]).

Homemade suet mixtures can also be made. These mixtures, which entail melting (rendering) the suet and then mixing in other ingredients, are less expensive than the commercial mixtures but are more time-consuming and messy (and risky, as overheated fat can catch on fire).

HOW TO RENDER SUET

Suet can be rendered using an oven (at 120°C [250°F]), stovetop, microwave, bottom of a pressure cooker pot (lid off, heat on medium), electric frying pan, camp stove, or induction burner. If feasible, this messy project

This Golden-crowned Kinglet enjoys bark butter (suet, peanut butter or a mixture of both) smeared on the bark of a tree. [MYRNA PEARMAN]



should be done in a garage or outside in an area that can be covered with plastic, pieces of cardboard, old blankets, etc. If undertaken inside, be mindful of the fire risk and be sure to protect floors/countertops, etc. from the splatter and in the event of a spill.

Before starting the process, gather together all the necessary ingredients as well as mixing utensils, moulds, and holders/dispensers.

Cut chunks of raw suet up into small pieces or put it through a meat grinder. Melt small quantities at a time, adjusting the temperature so it melts but doesn't burn or smoke.

After the material has fully melted, strain out the rind and other impurities by carefully pouring it through a metal sieve or colander lined with cheesecloth into a heat-proof container (it can melt plastic containers). Discard the impurities and set the mixture to cool in a safe place. Go through the melting/hardening process at least one more time—three times will make it even easier to work with. If adding peanut or other nut butter, do so while the suet is still fairly warm after the final melting/hardening process.

When the solution cools down to the consistency of butter, mix in the remaining ingredients. The warm mixture can be spread directly as “bark butter” onto tree trunks or spooned onto suet logs, suet sticks, or pine cones. To avoid an oozing mess, apply bark butter on tree trunks only during the winter so the mixture is all eaten before spring. To reduce the risk of the birds inadvertently coating their feet and feathers, make sure the gobs are clearly visible, and limit the application to small areas at a time. Replace logs, sticks, and cones frequently.



A White-breasted Nuthatch on a homemade suet feeder (left [MORLEY MAIER]) and a Downy Woodpecker on a suet log (right [BRIAN STERENBERG]).

- Offer only canola, sunflower chips, and nyger seeds from upside-down feeders. Both the small portal and perch placement (perch is above the portal) should deter them.
- Try encircling seed feeders with monofilament line (see illustration below). In 1990, researchers at the University of Nebraska developed a sparrow deterrent system consisting of a wire hoop and four pieces of monofilament line. It was hypothesized that the sparrows avoid the monofilament line-treated feeders because they perceive that the lines will hinder quick escape. The system has met with varying degrees of success but is worth a try. The line, held down by weights (e.g., nuts), is placed at 60-cm (24-in) intervals, approximately 20 cm (8 in) from the feeder perches.



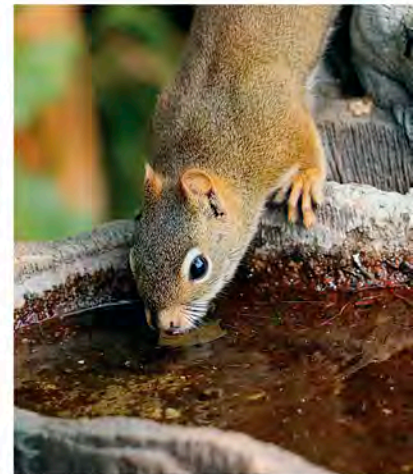
(ILLUSTRATION BY CAITLIN TURNER, FROM PROJECT FEEDERWATCH BLOG OCTOBER 9, 2012. USED WITH PERMISSION.)

Sparrow traps (multi-bird or in-box) can be used to reduce local sparrow populations.

Squirrels and Other Rodents

There are four squirrel species in Saskatchewan and all will visit feeding stations. Two species, the diurnal Red Squirrel and the nocturnal Northern Flying Squirrel, are native. The Eastern Gray Squirrel and Fox Squirrel, while native to the continent, were not seen in Saskatchewan until the last few decades. Today these two larger squirrel species are prominent in many towns and cities in the south of the province.

While most people enjoy the presence of squirrels in their backyard, these wily rodents are aggressive, can be serious predators of nesting birds, and will often chew their way into nestboxes, plastic tubs, etc. They will even chew (and sometimes destroy) metal feeders. Northern Flying Squirrels are less of a problem because they will only visit feeding stations at night and will usually only eat their fill. They do not hoard food like the other three species.



From Top: Three of Saskatchewan's tree squirrel species: Northern Flying Squirrel, Fox Squirrel, and Red Squirrel. [TOP: LEO DE GROOT, BOTTOM LEFT: MORLEY MAIER, BOTTOM RIGHT: HAROLD FISHER]

MARY WOREL



ORCHARD ORIOLE
OROR (*Icterus spurius*)

Orchard Orioles have in recent decades become an uncommon but regular breeding species in the southeastern corner of the province, especially in the Qu'Appelle and Souris River basins. They often nest in shelterbelts with Manitoba Maple trees. The dark chestnut and black plumage of males distinguishes the species from other orioles, while females are greenish-yellow with no black on the head. Its song is a rapid jumble of notes, more like a finch than other orioles.

BOYD COBLURN



BULLOCK'S ORIOLE
BUOR (*Icterus bullockii*)

Bullock's Orioles are rare in Saskatchewan and found primarily in the southwestern part of the province. The males can be told from the Baltimore Oriole by their bright orange eyebrow and white wing patch. The females are mostly olive gray with a dusky yellow face. Their song is a series of rich whistled notes interspersed with rattles.

MALE BOB SCHULTZ FEMALE MYRNA PEARMAN



BALTIMORE ORIOLE
BAOR (*Icterus galbula*)

The most common and widespread of the province's three oriole species, Baltimore Orioles are birds of the deciduous woodlands and are found in all regions of Saskatchewan except for the far north. The males are easy to identify by their orange and black plumage. The females are olive brown with dull orange underparts. Baltimore Orioles arrive in late May and depart in August. Their song is a very loud, clear *peeter peeter heere heere peeter*.

Orioles are quite shy, but they can be attracted to special oriole feeders, hummingbird feeders, grape (as well as strawberry and raspberry) jelly, orange marmalade, and orange halves, as well as chunks of other fruit. They may also eat sunflower chips, mealworms, and suet. Syrup solutions are the same as for hummingbirds (see page 38). Offer the jelly in small dishes and impale orange halves on a wooden feeder or tree branch.

Finches

GAIL BRUCKNER



GRAY-CROWNED ROSY-FINCH
GCRF (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*)

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches are birds of the alpine and rocky coastal barrens that migrate in small numbers to the open plains in winter. When they are found in the province it is usually at feedlots, grain elevators, and feeders in southwestern Saskatchewan. They can be identified by their black foreheads, gray crowns, and their rose-coloured shoulders, rumps, and bellies. Like all finches, their numbers vary each year. Their song is a long, goldfinch-like warble.

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches will come to ground, hopper, or tube feeders that offer sunflower seeds, nyger, various grains (including ground wheat), millet, milo, cracked corn, and canary grass seed. They will also eat grit.

The Intricacies of Irruptions

By definition, an irruption (sometimes called a "superflight") is a dramatic and sudden change in population density. The term is applied to the dramatic increase in numbers of certain bird species during the winter. The species most commonly associated with winter irruptions are the winter finches (Pine Grosbeak, Red Crossbill, White-winged Crossbill, Purple Finch, Pine Siskin, Common Redpoll, Hoary Redpoll, and Evening Grosbeak), but other species will also occasionally shift from their usual wintering grounds into other areas (e.g.,

Powell, H. (2013). *Inside the Massive Winter Irruptions Known as Superflights*. Accessed February, 2021 from <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/inside-the-massive-winter-irruptions-known-as-superflights/>.

MORLEY MAIER



PINE GROSBEAK
PIGR (*Pinicola enucleator*)

Male Pine Grosbeaks are crimson, while the females and young males are gray with a rusty orange tinge to their crowns, necks, and rumps. Pine Grosbeaks are regular winter feeder visitors in both northern and central Saskatchewan. In winters when they come south, they usually arrive near the end of October and stay until mid-March. Pine Grosbeaks sing a series of pleasant, warbling flute-like notes, even during the winter.

Pine Grosbeaks dine almost exclusively on sunflower seeds served from ground or tray feeders. They have also been reported eating wild bird mixes.

Red-breasted Nuthatch, Bohemian Waxwing, Black-capped Chickadee, and Varied Thrush).

It is generally thought that irruptions are driven by a lack of food on the normal wintering grounds. Redpolls, which feed primarily on birch and alder catkins, will move away from regions where the catkin crop is poor, to areas where food is more plentiful. Redpoll irruptions can be extensive, ranging as far south as the mid-Atlantic states or central Kansas.