

Suet: Instant Energy

by Sue Friscia

Ounce for ounce, suet packs more punch than any seed on the market. Birds expend little energy foraging after they discover the suet basket. They are rewarded with a meal that will stick to their ribs and keep them warm all night as winter approaches.

Suet is animal fat; the highest quality forms on the loins and around the kidneys of a cow, but anything you trim from meat can be used. Just drop a hunk into a wire-mesh basket and several species will investigate. Downy Woodpeckers and an occasional nuthatch, wren, junco, and even a catbird have congregated around the suet feeder in my yard.

"For something more inviting, try making suet cakes, which can be a rewarding, albeit messy proposition."

For something even more inviting, try making suet cakes, which can be a rewarding, albeit messy proposition. To render suet, grind or chop it into small pieces for even liquification. Next, melt it in a double boiler, the oven, or even on a barbecue grill or in the microwave.

If you try the microwave, be care-

ful. I was on the phone when I heard my dog slurping something in the kitchen. I found her lapping up a greasy, gooey liquid that was seeping through the bottom of the microwave door and dripping down the cart and onto the floor. Turning off the oven didn't stop this major bubble-over. I just had to wait for the volcano to subside.

Once you've hurdled the melting part, you can use your imagination and add leftover rice, over-ripe fruit, raisins, stale bread chunks, peanut butter, corn meal, and bird seed.

Be creative, then freeze the mixture. When it sets, pop it in your suet basket.

If you get tired of all the mess of making your own suet cakes, try this: Save plastic containers the same size as your suet basket, mix the concoctions inside, and all you have to clean is the spoon. Whipped shortening works well in place of the rendered suet. Set the mixture in the freezer for a few hours, then pop it out of the mold and it will be ready for serving.

The easiest method, of course, is to buy already-prepared suet cakes. Bird feeding stores sell suet and nuts, suet and raisins, and the top of the line — suet and bugs. These store-bought cakes last about two weeks in my yard, but my homemade concoctions last only about five days, which goes to show you that you can't beat

home cooking.

Backyard High Counts

In the Field Notes section, Meadowlark lists high counts for birds that live in or migrate through Illinois. Some of those numbers come from my backyard. I would like to start a backyard high count report. Here are some of my records, which are begging to be broken.

Northern Cardinal, 22; House Sparrow, 120; House Finch, 9; Cowbird, 7; American Goldfinch, 20; Junco, 17; Black-capped Chickadee, 5; Common Grackle, 8; American Robin, 3; Chipping Sparrow, 3.

Send me your totals by 31 December 1993. Results may be published in a future issue. Feel free to list other species than I have listed. I'm curious to learn what is most popular in your yard.

Send questions, comments, backyard counts to: 3417 W. 123rd St.; Alsip, IL 60658. ♣