



Northern Shrike observed feeding on suet

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Figure 1. Northern Shrike feeding on suet.
Dwight, Ontario. 10 February 2019.

Photo: Rick Stronks

Introduction

In his introductory description of Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*), A.C. Bent (1950) notes:

“The great northern shrike, or butcherbird, is known to most of us only as a rather uncommon winter visitor throughout the northern half of the United States, where we see it as a solitary sentinel perched on the top of a tree, looking for some luckless small bird, or hovering over an open field, ready to pounce on the timid little mouse as it threads his winter runway. Either bird or mouse is to be added to his larder, impaled on a nearby thorn or crotch, as the butcher hangs his meat; hence the appropriate name of butcherbird.”

The Northern Shrike breeds in northern Canada and Alaska and is an irregular winter visitor in southern and central Ontario. The winter range of Northern Shrike is highly variable from year to year and depends on food availability, severity of the winter, and the abundance of shrikes (Paruk *et al.* 2020). Although some birds remain within the sub-arctic breeding range, others migrate to southern parts of Canada and northern USA. According to eBird records for Muskoka, where the authors live (Dwight, Ontario), Northern Shrike is typically reported from mid-October through mid-April (eBird 2020).

In the winter, the diet of the Northern Shrike is primarily birds, mammals and insects. Avian species from winter stomach analysis include small passerines such as American Tree Sparrow (*Spizella arborea*), Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*), House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*) and Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*). However, some larger prey species including Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*), Hairy Woodpecker (*Dryobates villosus*), Canada Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*) and Evening Grosbeak (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*) have been recorded (Paruk *et al.* 2020). Mammals taken include voles, mice, shrews and occasionally American Red Squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) (Bent 1950).

The literature reports Northern Shrike as an infrequent feeder on carrion in the winter. There are reports of a shrike taking flesh from dead animals (e.g., frozen cow carcass, road-killed Red Squirrel) and taking meat from campsites

(Paruk *et al.* 2020). One mention of suet as a food is found in Bent (1950) who states: “In captivity it will eat almost any kind of raw meat” and “will come to a feeding station to eat suet or hamburger steak, even when live birds are in the vicinity.”

Observations

In the winters of 2018/19 and 2019/20, we observed a Northern Shrike regularly feeding on suet from our backyard feeder. When we mentioned these observations to several experienced birders, most responded that they had never witnessed this behaviour.

Our winter-feeding station consists of several black-oil sunflower and nyjer seed feeders and a suet cage. The suet feeder is a locally home-made cage (27.5 cm x 26 cm x 10 cm) and is attached to a White Birch (*Betula papyrifera*) 2 m off the ground. The feeder is filled with cow suet from a local butcher.

We first observed a Northern Shrike near the feeders on 21 November 2018. The bird was seen again on 30 December 2018 and several times in January 2019. On 17 January 2019, we first observed the shrike actually feeding at our suet feeder. Subsequently, it caught a small mammal, possibly a vole, below the feeder. We reported the shrike four times on eBird in February 2019, and the 10 February 2019 checklist included a photo of the shrike at the suet feeder (Figure 1).

In March 2019, the shrike was again a regular visitor to our suet feeder and was observed until 6 April 2019. Although we did not submit a checklist



Figure 2. A Northern Shrike, possibly the same bird from the previous winter, observed near the bird feeders. Dwight, Ontario. 6 December 2019. Photo: Rick Stronks

every day, several times we noted in our eBird checklists that the shrike was a daily visitor. Over the period of the shrike's visits, we observed that the other birds (Black-capped Chickadee [*Poecile atricapillus*], Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker [*Dryobates pubescens*]) seemed to get used to its presence and were often seen actively feeding within several metres of the shrike.

In the winter of 2019/2020, a Northern Shrike, possibly the same individual, was again observed at our feeders (Figure 2). It was first seen on 6 December 2019 and observed feeding on the suet on 14 December 2019. We observed the shrike three times in late February 2020 including 23 February 2020 when it was again seen feeding on suet. It was last seen on 19 March 2020.

As part of our review for this note, we searched online databases for similar observations. According to Project FeederWatch, a joint citizen science project of Birds Canada and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, only two records of Northern Shrike feeding on suet have been reported — one in Minnesota in 2010 and one in Manitoba in 2014 (K. Wilcox, pers. comm.). We also queried the comments for all eBird Northern Shrike observations (199,433 records) in Canada and United States and found 20 records which specifically indicated the shrike was feeding on suet (eBird 2020). Twelve of those records were from our observations at our feeders. The only other observation from Ontario was from Blake Mann and Larry Cornelis who reported a shrike “frequenting suet feeder” on 23 December 1989 in Chatham-Kent county. The additional observations are from New Hampshire (1996), Minnesota (2008, 2009), Wisconsin (2009), two in Michigan (2018) and New York (2020). Only the report from Minnesota suggested the same bird may have been observed for an extended period at the same location. There were an additional six reports of Northern Shrike interacting near or on a suet feeder, but it was not clear if the shrike was feeding on suet. Although our observations are not novel, the use of suet by Northern Shrikes is neither commonly observed nor reported.

Acknowledgements

We thank Warren Dunlop for encouraging us to write this note, for his assistance in the literature review and for his comments on an earlier draft. We also thank Ron Tozer for his review of the article and helpful suggestions. We thank Mike Burrell for his assistance in querying the eBird data and Kerrie Wilcox of Birds Canada for obtaining observations from Project FeederWatch. Finally, we thank the editors of *Ontario Birds* for their patience, editorial assistance and for their constructive feedback.

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