

American Dipper

(Cinclus mexicanus)

Recently, while fishing, I actually forgot to fish. I had become mesmerized by the antics of a small, slate gray bird. With wild abandon, it would leap into the frosty, rushing current of Rock Creek, submerge for longer than seemed possible, then suddenly pop up, fly onto a boulder, and gobble an aquatic insect it had grabbed underwater. Then the bird would tip its head back and sing a wonderful song, all the while bobbing up and down. While this curious creature appeared to be doing a rendition of Elvis in a wet suit, it was only doing the dance for which it was named. I was watching an American dipper.

APPEARANCE

Also known as the water ouzel, the dipper is a chunky, gray-colored, dark-billed bird, 7 to 8 inches long. It has long legs, a stubby tail, and short powerful wings. White eyelids flash when the bird blinks, up to 50 times a minute. The male and female look alike, but the juvenile may be a little lighter in color.

The wren-shaped dipper gets its name from its strange movements. The bird jauntily bounces its body up and down, sometimes also twitching its wings. Theories vary as to why dippers dip. Some experts say the movement helps the birds communicate with their mates; others say it scares off potential predators. Maybe it's simply a dance of exuberance, born of

the joy of living along a sparkling mountain stream.

SONG

Both dipper sexes sing year-round. The song is usually a long series of delightful trills and warbles, loud enough to be heard above the tumble and splash of a mountain stream. The birds sing to stake out their territories and to attract a mate.

FOOD

Dippers forage for aquatic insects and their larvae, small fish, and fish eggs. They wade in shallow water, using their strong toes to grasp rocks in the streambed. If the water is too deep for wading, the dipper swims, using its feet to paddle and its strong little wings to help propel it against swift currents. During insect hatches, the dipper will take to flight and skim just above the water, snatching floating morsels.

ADAPTATIONS

Dippers have the greatest oxygen capacity of any songbird. Nasal flaps keep water out of their nostrils, helping them remain underwater for up to 30 seconds. A thick coat of down beneath a heavy layer of waterproof contour feathers provides insulation from even the coldest waters. A dipper preens extensively, spreading body oils that maintain the waterproofing and smoothing ruffled feathers to protect the down beneath and maintain its insulating qualities.



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REPRODUCTION

Dippers use fast-flowing water to protect their nests, which they build in the most unlikely places—below bridges, into steep creek banks, and even behind waterfalls. The nests, which have an opening on the side, are constructed of grass and leaves and are covered with a layer of moss.

The female builds the nest, but the male might help. The same nest may be used for years as the male and female rejoin there each spring.

Dippers lay two to five white eggs, which take roughly 16 days to incubate. While the babies stay in the nest, about 24 days, the male helps the female with feeding duties. When the babies leave the nest, they are able to swim and dive. Two broods a year are common.

HABITAT AND MIGRATION

American dippers breed in western mountains near streams that have clean, flowing water. Except during the breeding season, the birds are solitary. Migration is often limited to

within a single water drainage, only as far as the birds need to go to find ice-free water.

STATUS IN MONTANA

The U.S. Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey showed that the state's dipper population from 1980 to 2002 was stable. But Jeff Marks, director of bird conservation for Montana Audubon, notes that the 2000 Montana Bird Conservation Plan lists the dipper in the priority level 3 category, which means that the species is not at risk statewide but may be declining in number in some local areas. Threats to dippers include heavy siltation in streams, water pollution, and high temperatures.

VIEWING

The dark wet boulders along fast-flowing streams provide perfect camouflage for the dipper. Be patient; the birds are there. When you cross a bridge, or reach a waterfall, stop and scan the stream for movement. Look for the little Elvis in a gray wet suit. 🐼

BY GARY BEELER

Gary Beeler is a freelance writer from Boyd.