

American Dipper or Water Ouzel

"No true water bird loves the water more than the Dipper or Water Ouzel," proclaims Hal H. Harrison of the American dipper in his 1948 bird guide *American Birds in Color*.

The American dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*), a small jovial member of the order *Passeriforme* and the family *Cinclidae*, is the only aquatic passerine in America. The American dipper is slate-gray with short wings and a short tail. Young are lighter gray and have a paler bill than adults, because their gape is still showing from their nesting days. There are five species of dippers in the world. The common name, dipper, comes from bobbing movements of the head, body, and tail, which are done on rocks midstream. They are closely related to thrushes, but not to wrens as is apparent in most taxonomical field guides.

Dippers are unique from other songbirds in that they forage food on the bottom of streams. They can remain underwater for more than twenty-five seconds and have been known to dive at up to twenty feet under water. Dippers eat small aquatic invertebrates, fish and fish eggs. This is why it is necessary for them to swim in fast moving streams and even walk on the bottom of streambeds. *Cinclidae* birds have a completely different body structure than other birds of the order *Passeriforme*. The wings are short and powerful for underwater propulsion. The legs are long and their feet have strong toes to help them not be carried away by the current. Scales cover the nostrils upon their entry into the water and even the eyelids of dippers have small white feathers which are shown when the bird blinks. This unique bird also has an insulating down coat for the cold water and cold weather, in which it thrives. A short tail is often held high and bobbed. The purpose of this bobbing is unknown, but it is thought that the behavior is supposed to be threatening to predators.

Aggressiveness is always displayed during the breeding season of dippers, but they are relatively tranquil the rest of the year. Dippers usually demonstrate monogamous behavior, but some birds have been recorded as polygynous. The nest is an oven shaped structure, similar to an ovenbird's nest. It is different from the ovenbird in that it is usually placed on a cliff face or under a bridge or like structure. Both parents help to build the nest. It is usually made with available materials such as pine needles, mud, moss, lichens, and others. Dippers usually have two broods of four or five eggs since fledgling mortality rates are very high in these aquatic birds. Fledgling dippers learn to swim before they can fly, an imperative part of their survival. The young fledge by jumping out of the nest into a rushing stream or river below; they literally have to swim to survive.

It is often said that a dippers presence or absence at a stream site reflects the health of the stream. There is a pair of dippers that raises two broods of young every year under the bridge by my house. They have been there every year that I can remember. I have always seen the young dippers learning how to forage and hunt in the stream, Ten Mile Creek, which, ironically is the source of most of Helena's water. The water treatment plant is down the stream from the dipper's home. The dippers are a good indicator of a healthy stream. Though populations of dippers are in decline due to lack of good breeding sites and unhealthy streams, ours continue to return every year to the Ten Mile Creek.

Sources:

American Birds in Color. By Hal H Harrison. 1948 by Wm. H. Wise and Co., Inc. New York.

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The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior. Illustrated by David Allen Sibley. Edited by Chris Elphick, John B. Dunning, and D. A. Sibley. 2001 by Chanticleer Press. Essay written by Thomas Knight.

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