

The American Dipper

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Perhaps one of my most sought-after birds in North America is the American Dipper. I first learned about these birds when I was taking an Ornithology class, and it has been on my “Must See” bird list ever since.

The American Dipper is a western species that is not a long-distance migrant (sorry, you won’t typically find them on the Upper Texas Coast). Their primary range includes mountainous regions in the western portion of the United States and Alaska. They also have a smaller range in mountainous regions of Central America.

Dippers have chunky, medium-sized round bodies, with a short tail. Adults are grayish brown and have all black bills during the breeding season. For comparison, they are slightly smaller than an American Robin.

But of course, there’s more to this bird than just its physical appearance. Dippers are unique because they are the only known aquatic songbird. That’s right, they wade, swim, and even dive into fast-flowing streams to find aquatic macroinvertebrates. Their main food sources include larvae of caddisflies, mayflies, stoneflies, midges, and mosquitoes.

As far as nesting behaviors go, American Dippers build their nests on steep, hard-to-reach surfaces, near fast-moving water. They commonly nest on large rocks, cliff edges, fallen logs, under dirt overhangs, or beneath bridges and culverts. If nest boxes are available, they may use those as well. In some cases, they even build nests behind waterfalls, requiring them to fly directly through the falling water to reach them. The female selects the nesting location.

Dippers spend most of their time searching underwater for aquatic invertebrates. They can be seen walking along streambeds and can stay submerged for up to 15 seconds. To enter the water, it dives headfirst from a rock or log, using its partially spread wings to propel itself. Once underwater, it navigates between foraging spots by flapping its wings at the bottom of the stream. As I’m sure you can imagine, these birds are strong swimmers, using both their feet and wings to stay afloat.

On land, the American Dipper is constantly bobbing its body and dipping its tail—sometimes as often as once per second, especially when excited or alarmed. Scientists believe this movement may help them communicate in their noisy, rushing-water environment.

Male American Dippers defend a territory all year, usually staying in the same place unless heavy ice forces them to leave in winter. Both males and females sing loudly from rock perches near the water, starting in late winter. They form socially monogamous pairs, often reuniting with the same mate in following years if their territory is plentiful.

American Dipper populations are of relatively low conservation concern. It is quite difficult to get a count on their population size because they are often in locations unreachable to most birders and researchers. Scientists still believe that their numbers are relatively stable, despite this fact. Surprisingly, the construction of roads and bridges along mountain streams has provided American Dippers with suitable nesting spots. Some of their biggest threats include damming rivers, which takes away viable

habitat. Additionally, logging and mining can affect water quality, which can reduce the amount of insect prey that is available to them.

I strongly suggest you look up videos of this bird if you aren't familiar with them, they truly are unique. I hope the next time you are in western mountain regions, you are able to find an American Dipper, I know that's what I'll be doing next time I head out west!

Photo: The American Dipper

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