

# American Dipper

## *Cinclus mexicanus*

### DIPPERS IN THE ROARING FORK VALLEY

The abundance of dippers in the Roaring Fork Valley is a prime indicator of the excellent water quality in the Roaring Fork Watershed. Since dippers feed on the aquatic macroinvertebrates that reside in the Roaring Fork River, clean water is necessary for visibility as well as a plentiful insect hatch. In fact, the dipper was chosen for the Roaring Fork Conservancy's logo because they are an indicator of great water quality.

Dippers have a very heavy coat of down under their outer feathers. This enables them to maintain normal body temperatures when the air temperature is as low as 40°F below zero. Feeding in cold mountain streams year-round, dippers depend on staying warm for survival.

Dippers are usually non-migratory birds, but do move to lower elevations in the Roaring Fork Valley during the winter to ensure that the water where they feed does not freeze. Consequently, in the summer months dippers are found closer to the headwaters of the Roaring Fork, yet during the winter, dippers are found at lower elevations of the Roaring Fork.

### NATURAL HISTORY AND ANATOMY

The American Dippers, also known as the water ouzel, is found throughout western North America. Dippers get their name from their habit of rapidly bending and extending their legs causing their body

to 'dip' up and down. Sooty-gray, with a dark bill, American dippers are generally five inches in length, and have a sturdy tail and short wings. They spend most of their life living along a small stream where they search for food. Their anatomy enables

the dipper to aptly forage underwater for aquatic insects and their larvae, such as mayflies, stoneflies, and dragonflies.

North American's only truly aquatic passerine, dippers feed by diving under the water of streams and by swimming using their wings. They also can walk along the bottom of a streambed using their elongated toes. Dippers are well adapted to diving underwater, for they are equipped with nasal flaps to prevent water from entering their nostrils and a set of transparent eyelids, called nictitating membranes, to protect their eyes while underwater. Dippers' also have a large preen gland that provides oil to waterproof their feathers, and muscular

wings to help them swim. Dippers can reach a depth of about 20 feet!

Dippers have a melodious song, which can be described as bubbling and wren-like.

### BREEDING

Adult dippers are monogamous; they mate with the same partners year after year. In early April, the pair begins building a hollow dome-shaped nest on



**American dippers are the only truly aquatic songbird in North America.** Robin Henry

a rock ledge below an overhang, behind a waterfall, or under a bridge. The entrance to the nest always faces the water.

Three to six eggs are laid in the nest where they incubate for 18 days. After hatching the young spend about 24 days in the nest, about twice as long as other nesting birds, due to increased physical development needed to meet the demands of their aquatic lifestyle. Once the young dipperlings leave the nest they have to watch out for a variety of predators such as hawks, mink, weasels, wolverines, and even the occasional large fish.

### CONSERVATION

Since dipperlings rely heavily upon the rivers and streams in the Roaring Fork Watershed, it is vital for their survival that the water remains clean and unpolluted. Polluted streams are poor habitats for aquatic insects and thus a stream without aquatic insects will be a poor habitat for dipperlings. Ensuring that the water in the Roaring Fork Valley stays clean is not only good for aquatic, terrestrial, avian and human health, but it is vital for the dipper's well being.

In 1996, Roaring Fork Conservancy chose the

dipper for its logo because of the dipper's ability to indicate clean water. Around North America, the dipper has become a symbol for healthy mountain streams and rivers.



A dipper nest along a river bank. Robin Henry

### OBSERVATION

Look for the well-camouflaged dipperlings on the banks of most streams and rivers in the valley. They tend to always fly over a stream or river, and rarely venture far from water. Wherever you find dipperlings, you know the water quality has to be high. Dipperlings are to rivers what canaries are to mines; dipperlings need healthy rivers to survive. Fortunately dipperlings are common throughout the Roaring Fork Watershed.

For more information on observing American dipperlings throughout the Roaring Fork Watershed, contact Roaring Fork

Conservancy, at (970) 927-1290.

*Written by Danny Hundert and Tim O'Keefe*

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**ROARING FORK CONSERVANCY**

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