

Local Bird Profiles: Our aquatic songbird

By Larry Hyslop



An American dipper paddling around a beaver pond

The American dipper is unique, North America's only aquatic songbird. Its prime habitat is mountain streams with fast flowing water. Watch for this bird anywhere throughout the Lamoille Canyon drainage, although actually seeing one takes patience. Most times a dipper (also called a water ouzel) is seen flying low and fast over a stream, often accompanied by its high pitched song. It is often gone before the viewer registers their passing.

By watching carefully, the viewer can spot a gray bird with a stubby tail standing on a mid-stream rock where foaming water splashes all around it. An identifier is the bird's continual bobbing or dipping, as it does squats.

With further patience, the viewer can see why this bird is our only aquatic songbird. It feeds by diving into water too fast for a person to stand in the water. Rather than the bird being flushed downstream, it usually pops back to the water's surface in the same area or even upstream of where it entered. Beneath the water, this bird swims against the current using its wings and walks across the bottom by gripping pebbles and rocks with its toes. It flips over bottom rocks to find aquatic insects before rising directly into flight to eat its meal on a water-washed rock.

When standing on a rock, the viewer can catch a flash of white in the bird's eyes. The open eye is ringed with a thin band of white, the only other color on this all gray bird. The dipper has nictitating membranes it draws across its eyes while underwater, to protect the eyes. When it blinks, the membrane shows as a flash of white.

The above photo shows behavior I had not seen before. This dipper was serenely paddling around a Thomas Canyon beaver pond, often with its head held underwater. With a splash, it would dive to the bottom. It would pop back to the surface with an insect in its mouth, before resuming its paddling on the surface.

A dipper's nest fits its lifestyle. The nest made of moss and sticks is usually placed so close to a stream that it is continually wet from the splashing water. Often it is built on a vertical rock face, in a crevice or beneath a rock ledge. The only indication of its presence may be the birds flying in and out barely above the roaring stream. Nests have also been built behind the screen of small waterfalls.

During your next trip to Lamoille Canyon, watch and listen for this unique bird. Spend some time walking along the streams to catch a glimpse of the American dipper.

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