

Discoveries

News and views from Discovery Southeast Spring 2007

American Dippers: Songsters by the streams

Mary Willson

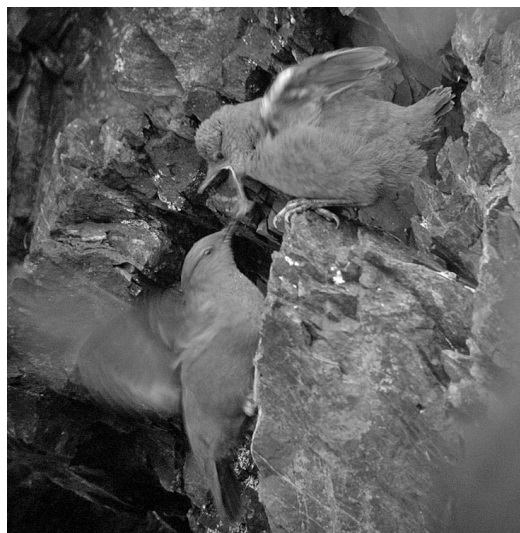
Go to the footbridge on Steep Creek or the Sheep Creek bridge on Thane Road, and you are likely to hear a long, rollicking bird song filled with repeated phrases. Look for the songster, probably perched on a rock by the water, and you'll spot a small gray bird, arguably the best singer in Southeast Alaska. It's the American Dipper, whose scientific name is *Cinclus mexicanus*. This species is North America's only aquatic songbird. One of only five species of dippers in the world, our North American species breeds from the Brooks Range in northern Alaska south through the mountainous west to southern Central America. All dippers live along mountain streams, feeding on aquatic insects (especially caddisflies, stoneflies, and mayflies) and small fish.

I have been studying American Dippers near Juneau for several years, funded in part by ADFG's non-game program, and ably assisted by Kathy Hocker and summer field technicians. There are several reasons for studying dippers. They are charismatic as well as biologically unique, and they can be a part of watchable wildlife programs. More importantly, perhaps, they are indicators of stream quality, in that they do not reproduce well in polluted streams.

Names

The American Dipper was formerly called the water ouzel. Ouzel apparently meant 'thrush' in Middle English, and the current German name of Wasseramsel for the European dipper means exactly 'water thrush'. But dippers are not thrushes. There is another European mountain bird, called the Ring Ouzel, which *is* a thrush. I'm guessing that taxonomists changed the common name of our dipper so that it did not imply some close relationship to the unrelated ring ouzel or to thrushes. Our dipper should really be called the North American Dipper, because there are two other species of dipper in South America. Its scientific name of *Cinclus mexicanus* adds to the confusion of names, because the bird is not just Mexican – but perhaps the first specimens came from there.

Dippers are known to be sensitive to all kinds of diminished water quality, including acidification, sedimentation, and waste material from industry, agriculture, and mining. Some stream disturbances are natural ones, such as landslides, avalanches, and floods, which are fairly frequent in our region of high precipitation and mountainous terrain. Some of the disturbances are anthropogenic, caused by road-building, logging, mining, and dam-building. Such activities can dump into streams an array of pollutants, including sediment and debris, heavy metals (lead, cadmium, etc.), and toxic wastes (e.g., cyanide, organochlorides). Therefore, given that all of Southeast is subject



RH Armstrong

A dipper fledgling clamoring eagerly for food from its busy parent.

to numerous stream disturbances, we felt it was essential to have some baseline information on the distribution and habitat use of dippers in this area. Without a baseline, it is hard to know the status of a population when exposed to future environmental changes.

The Juneau dipper study

The first goal therefore was to map the distribution of nesting dippers on streams around Juneau. My crew and I surveyed almost 40 streams, ranging in size from tiny Lena Creek to major drainages such as Lemon Creek and Fish Creek. A few of these streams were accessible only by skiff and were visited only once to de-

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Banner: Banded dipper, by Kathy Hocker from a photo by Arnie Hanger.

From the Director

Dana Owen

One thing about this year's long winter is that spring seemed especially abrupt. One day we were sliding on ice and the next we were planting annuals. It seems only a few days ago that we were marveling at – ok, bragging about – the record snowfall. My garden was buried under about five feet of snow I'd piled up from shoveling the driveway. Songbirds in my neighborhood were really quiet. I was beginning to suspect that someone had turned off the sun.

Suddenly, everything was different. Skunk cabbages were up, birds were in full throated chorus, and days were notably longer. There was just no stopping it.

As with spring, Discovery Southeast looks a little different this year, but the same demanding cycle drives activity as it always does. Connecting people with nature doesn't stop, even if we change focus from time to time. Kids are still eager to see what's out there, and we're just as eager to show them. We're still helping them unravel the stories told by the tracks in the snow, or showing them what happens to a landscape as a glacier advances and then recedes. We're still helping them understand their place in the natural world and to find their sense of wonder at it all.

Also with a new season comes a new issue of the newsletter. For some time now, I've been intrigued with Mary Willson's study of dippers, one of my favorite birds, and I am extremely grateful to Mary for her cover story. As always, I'm grateful to Kathy Hocker, Richard Carstensen and Jan Carlile for their contributions to a consistently outstanding newsletter.

This issue is also my valedictory. In December I was offered a job I would have been foolish to refuse, so this will be my last column as Executive Director. Working for Discovery Southeast has been a great experience, and I'll miss it terribly. Mostly, I'll miss working daily with such an impressive collection of people. Few organizations in our line of work have as deep a pool of expertise to draw on. We've got wildly talented naturalists, a committed, energetic and capable board, and above all we have strong community support and dedicated members. It's been a privilege to serve you.

I'll see you on the beach, or the trail, or volunteering for our favorite nature education organization. So long until then.



Last summer's teacher training expedition to Endicott Arm

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Discoveries is published by Discovery Southeast, Southeast Alaska's leading source for natural history and conservation education. Founded in 1989 in Juneau and serving communities throughout Southeast Alaska, Discovery Southeast is a nonprofit organization that promotes direct, hands-on learning from nature through natural science and outdoor education programs for youth, adults, and teachers. By engaging youth and adults in the study of nature, Discovery Southeast naturalists deepen and enrich the connections between the people of Southeast Alaska and nature.

Editor: Richard Carstensen
Writers: Mary Willson, Dana Owen, Jan Carlile
Illustrations and photos: Bob Armstrong, Kathy Hocker, Mary Willson, Richard Carstensen, and DSE staff

Discovery Southeast

PO Box 21867, Juneau AK 99802
907/463-1500 phone • 463-1587 fax
e-mail: info@discoverysoutheast.org
website: www.discoverysoutheast.org

Discovery News

Auction

Our 18th Annual Discovery Southeast Auction and Dinner Fundraiser on April 6, *Wading Into Spring*, was a record setter! We had the biggest selection of auction items ever, brought in the most amount of money ever, and enjoyed a great evening with friends and supporters. In addition to our customary delicious dinner and suite of children's activities, we tried a couple of new things – delightful dinner entertainment by Ursa Minor and a table full of auction items just for kids. Many thanks to our wonderful Board, a host of volunteers, and the many contributors who helped make this event the success that it was. Your participation as a worker, contributor or attendee helps keep hands-on nature education in Southeast Alaska a reality!

Transitions

With the loss of our director, Dana Owen, in January, we have made a few temporary changes in our operations. The office is only staffed part time for now; but the phone is checked regularly when we're not in and messages are returned. The Board is discussing how and when to fill the vacant Executive Director position. If you or someone you know might be interested in taking a leading role in fulfilling our mission of strengthening the bond between Southeast Alaskans and our natural home, give us a call or drop us an email!

With reduced staffing and with an eye toward strengthening our financial footing, we also made the very difficult decision to cancel our popular Outdoor Explorers summer day camp for this year. We ran one of our best summers ever last year with 7 weeks of this long-standing program – proof that this kind of active outdoor experience is valued by Juneau families. The calls we've received this spring requesting information on the camp have been encouraging, too; lots of wonderful accolades from new and returning families who love this unique offering from among the various summer youth opportunities. We have every intention of being back with Outdoor Explorers in Summer 2008!

Tracy Arm Cruise

Despite the low overcast and cool temperatures, an enthusiastic group of warmly clad folks boarded a Four Seasons boat on May 12 for our 4th Annual Tracy Arm Cruise. After a beat south

under intermittent showers, we welcomed the pockets of sun that appeared as we worked our way down the arm. Thick ice allowed us to get in as far as Marguerite/Sawyer Island. We saw a good mix of standards and surprises – black bear, a mama brown bear with cubs, goats, many birds, and a couple dozen humpbacks. Spring is such a fantastic time to visit this wildlife wonderland! Thanks to the Board for their work to plan the trip, and thanks to all who joined us to enjoy the show and support our great programs. And thanks to Four Seasons Marine for partnering with us to make this cruise possible. Think about coming along next year!

Can You Help?

As we mentioned in our last newsletter, our highly popular *Common Birds of Southeast Alaska* field guide is out of print. We would love to have it back 'on the shelf' with our other great publications, but need some financial help to make that happen. If you would like to contribute some or all of the approximately \$2500 a reprint would require, we—and all the folks out there itching to do some bird watching—would be grateful. We also have a brand new geomorphology field guide nearing completion. A generous donor has provided the design funding for this great new addition to our offerings; but we need some financial assistance to get the guide printed and out there for you to use. Please give us a call at 907-463-1500 if you would like to help move these projects along.

Summer Teacher Expeditions

Once again this year we are offering, in partnership with Alaska Discovery, Alaska Natural History Association, and the U.S Forest Service, three exceptional opportunities for teachers to participate in week long field studies and earn professional development credits at the same time. The classes are: *The Brown Bears of Admiralty Island* (June 5-11); *Seals, Ice and the Wilderness Idea* (June 26-July 2); and *Whales of Icy Strait* (July 19-25). In addition to observing the behavior and habitat of these animals with expert professionals, participants learn about safe, comfortable travel in wild country and collaborate on how to transfer some of this knowledge to students. The Bear trip is full, but we still have openings in the other two. Please contact the Discovery Southeast office at 463-1500 or our website (www.discoverysoutheast.org) ASAP for more information or to register.



Naturalist Scott Burton with his Harborview Nature Studies students near the flume above downtown Juneau.

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tect the presence of nesting dippers. Most of the streams were accessible from the road system or local trails, and these were patrolled regularly. By wading up the stream when the water levels permitted, or bushwhacking alongside when there was high water or a waterfall, we searched for dipper nests. We covered many miles of stream and found 38 nests in 2005 and 44 nests in 2006. Kathy mapped all these nests in GIS ("Geographic Information Systems" - computerized mapping that interfaces with a database).

In addition, we regularly monitored most of these nests, in order to learn more about nesting biology and nest success. Starting in April, we tried to find nest-building pairs, so that we could have the history of their nests from the beginning of the nesting cycle.

Dipper nesting

Dippers need both good nest sites and suitable streams for foraging. Most dippers nest along stream reaches that are full of cascades and riffles, where prey is abundant. Our data also show that dippers nest only on streams above a certain minimum size. This is probably because prey is more abundant in streams that have higher flow and cover more substrate where the prey live. Some streams that appear to be sufficiently large and productive do not have nesting dippers, but they lack good nesting sites.

Interestingly, and contrary to conventional wisdom, dippers are able to nest on streams of glacial origin. We found them nesting along Eagle River, Lemon Creek, and Nugget Creek, for example. They can do this, despite the glacial silt that makes the water opaque as the season progresses, because they nest rather early, before the heaviest silt loads come



RH Armstrong

A dipper nest, composed of many kinds of moss, with a side entrance.

down, and they also forage in clear-water side-channels and tributaries.

Dipper pairs are very territorial, vigorously defending their own reach of stream against all other dippers. The length of each territory differs with circumstances but ranges up to 2 km long.

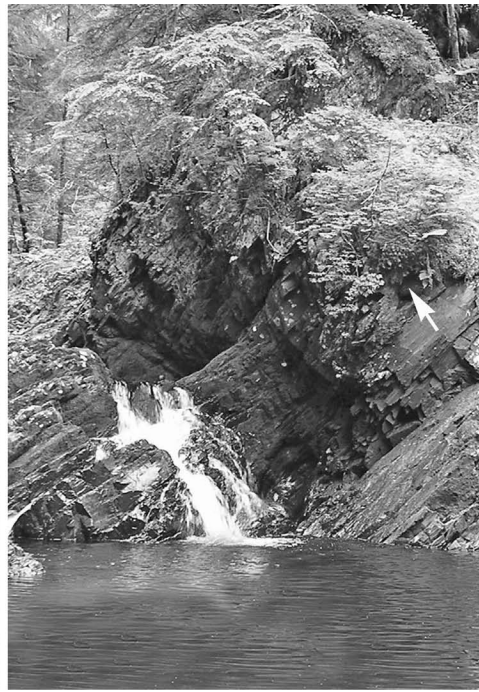
American Dippers form pairs in very early spring. Courtship activity usually centers somewhere near a prospective nest site. One good place to watch is near the end of the broken spillway on Gold Creek, where a pair has nested for the past several years. When the end of the spillway was wrecked in the fall floods of 2005, the birds moved to the new end, farther upstream. From the streambank here, you can observe a good length of the creek, and spring-time courtship activity can often be seen. The birds chase each other and display on the rocks, with wing-fluttering and strutting.

They may start nest-building in April, but the majority of nests around here are started in May. In a cold, wet spring (such as 2006), nesting is delayed by 2-3 weeks. Nests are round balls of moss, a bit smaller than a volleyball, with a side entrance. Inside the nest is a cup of grass and leaves that makes a bed for the eggs and nestlings. The nests are commonly placed on cliff ledges right next to the stream (sometimes even behind a waterfall), but caves and crevices under piles of boulders are also fairly common nesting sites. More rarely, nests are placed under bridges (where the beams may offer horizontal ledges), in old wooden dams left from the min-



RH Armstrong

Dipper nestlings begging to be fed. Usually only one chick is fed each time an adult visits the nest.



Dipper nest locations on Gold, Peterson and Kowee Creeks, indicated by white arrows. Typical nests are on cliff ledges or under boulders, but sometimes on bridges or in old wooden dams, and rarely on top of boulders.

by irresponsible persons.

Once the nest is built, the female lays four or five white eggs, and she does all the incubation. Birds incubate eggs by means of a brood patch; the incubating bird loses all the feathers from a large part of the breast. This area becomes highly vascularized, so that heat from the adult's blood can be transferred to the eggs when the adult sits on them. Only female dippers develop brood patches and incubate, but their mates often bring food to them while they are sitting in the nest. Although incubating females are fed sometimes by their mates, they also emerge from the nest to stretch and feed themselves.

After a little more than two weeks, the eggs hatch. The female broods the tiny chicks, which are almost featherless, feeble, and unable to regulate their own body temperature. For the first week or so, then, the male does most of the food deliveries to the chicks. He also removes fecal sacs from the chicks and dumps them in the stream. Gradually, the chicks need less warmth from the female and demand more and more food. So both parents get really busy, dashing back and forth, bringing prey from the stream to the nestlings. Sometimes the chicks are fed more than 20 times an hour (and occasionally the adults take breaks to forage for themselves). The young-

ing era almost 100 years ago, and on top of big boulders. Almost all nests have an overhang of some sort, which protects the nest from weather, but a few lack any protection at all. Most nests are inaccessible to predators, but mink, weasels, squirrels, and ravens can reach some of them. Nests that are placed beside popular fishing holes on Fish Creek and Montana Creek are sometimes disturbed, inadvertently, by fishing activity, and one nest site is regularly vandalized

sters get strong enough to stick their heads out of the nest entrance and call to their parents for *More Food, More Food!*, and they can back up to the nest entrance to eject their feces out of the nest. The chicks grow very quickly as they develop a good coat of feathers and the physiological ability to keep themselves warm.

We try to capture the adults during the nesting period. This is a good time for us to do this, because the adults are flying busily back and forth, usually several times an hour. And they are so intent on feeding chicks that this interruption does not deter them from resuming when we release them. We capture the birds by stretching a mist-net across the stream. This

Housecleaning and parasites

We became curious about the observation that dippers often clean out the nest lining when the nesting cycle is finished. In 2006 there was an accomplished rock-climber on my crew, which allowed us to reach a number of nests. We checked the nests after the cycle was complete and found that lining is removed if the nest was successful but not if it failed. I do not know why they do this, but it might be related to the risk of bird blowflies or other parasites that afflict the chicks and the possibility of using the nest for a second brood (at least in some years). We found blowfly pupae in several nests and sent them to an expert in Washington state for identification. In most cases, chicks were able to survive and leave blowfly-infested nests, but severe infestations might lead to failure. There remains much to be learned on this score.



Adult dipper carrying juvenile coho salmon to its nestlings (the nest is a few feet above the bird).

RH Armstrong

kind of net is made of fine black nylon thread and is almost invisible to a bird that is flying up and down the stream. When a bird flies into the net, we wade out and remove it from the net, bring it to shore, weigh it and look for a brood patch (so we know what sex it is), and put light-weight bands on their legs. By using several small bands of differing colors, we can create unique color combinations so that we can identify each individual. This whole process takes less than ten minutes, and the birds go back to their business of feeding chicks very quickly.

Once the adults have been banded, we can then watch the nests and record visits by male and by female, so we can learn how often each one feeds the chicks and get some information about what kind of prey they are bringing. It is quite easy to identify small salmonid fish and sculpins, sometimes possible to identify the larger invertebrates, but smaller items are impossible to identify. We found that female dippers tend to bring more fish to their chicks than the males do, but both parents are very attentive to their offspring. An adult dipper can catch a juvenile salmonid even if it already has one or two in its beak; in fact, dippers are capable of carrying at least four small fish at a time. We learned in a previous study that chicks that are fed partly on fish tend to weigh more than chicks that are fed only aquatic insects, and fewer fish-fed chicks die in the nest.

It takes about 3.5 weeks for the chicks to be ready to jump out of the nest and start learning how to forage for prey. When the chicks leave the nest, they are almost as big as their parents, and they can even fly a little. The fledgling chicks are pretty clumsy at first, and beg a lot of food from the parents, but after a few days they are reasonably proficient and can feed themselves—even catching a few small fish. But they go on begging from their parents for up to two weeks and occasionally win a meal that way. They hang around the old nest site for a while, but gradually move farther and farther away, and by winter they may be in another stream altogether. By next spring, they will be very proficient at foraging, ready to find their own mates and raise their own chicks.

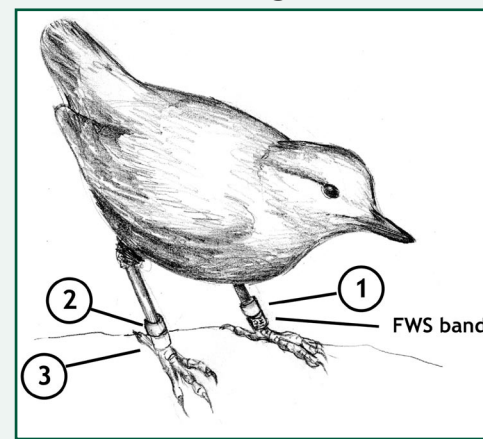
Finding banded birds

The more eyes are looking, the more banded birds are likely to be seen. So when you are out and about near our local streams, it would be helpful if you'd note the presence of dippers with bands. Remember that each bird has a unique color combination plus a US Fish and Wildlife Service aluminum band. There are two bands on each leg (unless one got lost). On the left leg there's a color band above the silver FWS band; on the right leg there are two color bands. We read the color bands in a consistent order: top left, top right, bottom right (Bands, 1, 2 & 3 in the illustration below). We don't make a point of stating the aluminum band, because all the birds have one.

For example, the male at the Steep Creek nest in 2006 was BRO (blue red orange), and his mate was BWY (blue white yellow). The male at the nest in Salmon Falls near the salmon-bake was ORG (orange red green) and his mate was RWG (red white green). This green is a pale one and easy to mis-read, so watch carefully!

The more birds are re-sighted, the more information we can accumulate about movements, mate changes, and survival. So your help will contribute to the growing fund of knowledge about our local dipper population. Please contact:

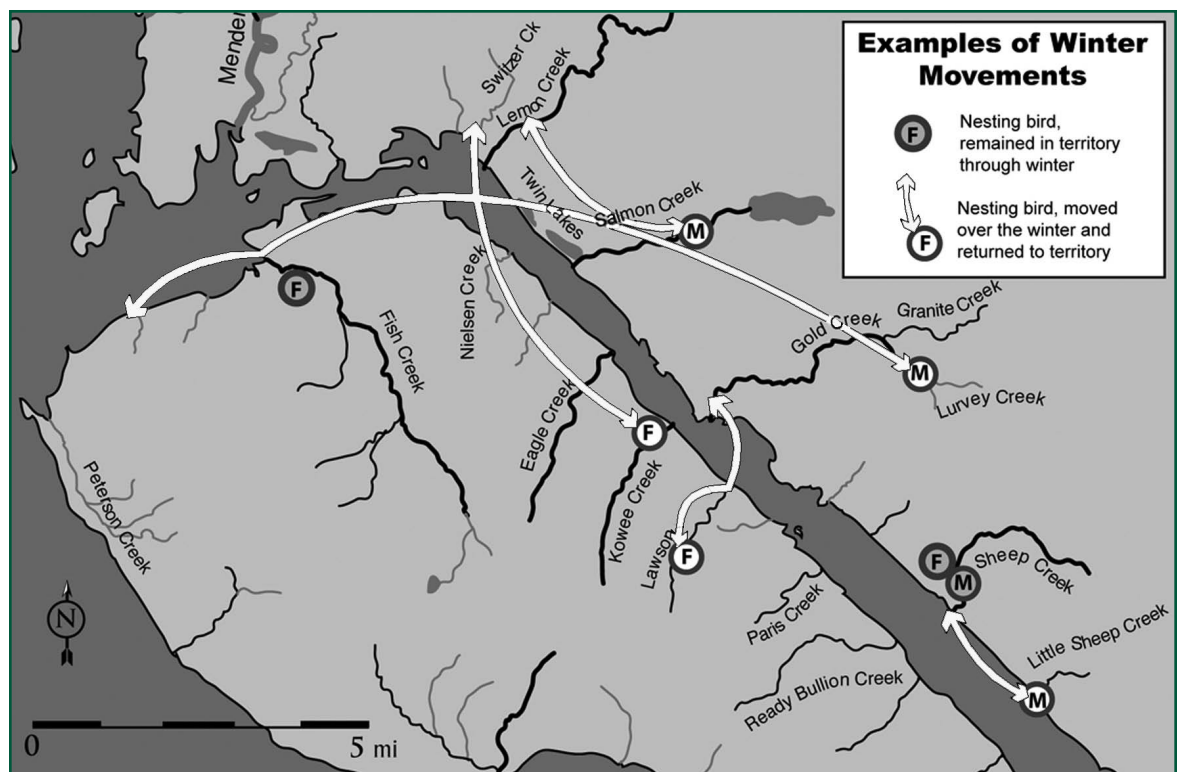
Mary Willson: mwillson@gci.net
or Kathy Hocker: alcyon@gci.net



K Hocker

Meanwhile, the parent birds sometimes start a second brood. This is only possible at nests that were started early in the season, so in nasty springs such as the spring of 2006, second broods are very rare. We think that access to young salmonids and sculpins also increases the likelihood of starting a second brood, because

The Juneau dipper study showed that some birds move as much as ten miles between nesting and wintering areas. F = female; M = male. Stream volume is roughly proportional to line width.



K Hocker

pairs that nest on streams with juvenile coho salmon or near an intertidal area seem to make second broods more often than those without easy access to abundant fish.

Each nest we found was monitored every few days until the chicks fledged or the nest failed, so we can estimate the level of nest success in rearing chicks through the nesting cycle. Over the past three years, nest success was about 90% in two years but only 65% in 2006. Dipper nests are generally more successful than nests of birds that build open-cup nests (robins, sparrows etc.); the level of success tends to be more similar to that of cavity-nesters such as woodpeckers and chickadees.

Because the adults are banded, we can also estimate the probability that they will live from one nesting season to the next. Of course, we can't be sure that they did not move to some other area altogether, but all of the moves we could detect occurred within the same watershed, so we think that birds that disappeared are very probably dead. Annual survival of adults was 57-67% over two years, but only 38% from 2005 to 2006. Our oldest known bird was a female banded in 1998 in an earlier study; she lived to be at least seven years old; in her last year, her nesting attempt failed because her hyper-aggressive neighbors drove her and her mate away.

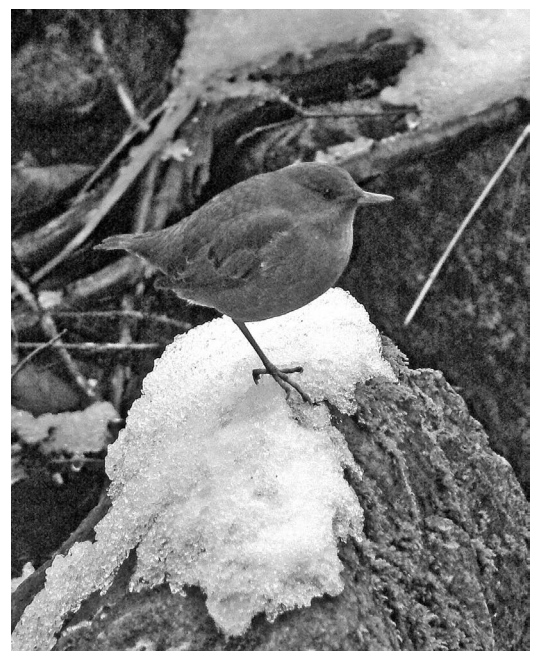
If both members of a pair survive, and if they

nested successfully in the previous year, they are likely to pair up again. We have one pair that has nested together for three years, raising two broods every year in the same location (in 2006, they were the only pair to do so). Several other pairs have been together for two years. In other cases, only one member of a pair was seen in the following year, with a new partner, sometimes on a different territory.

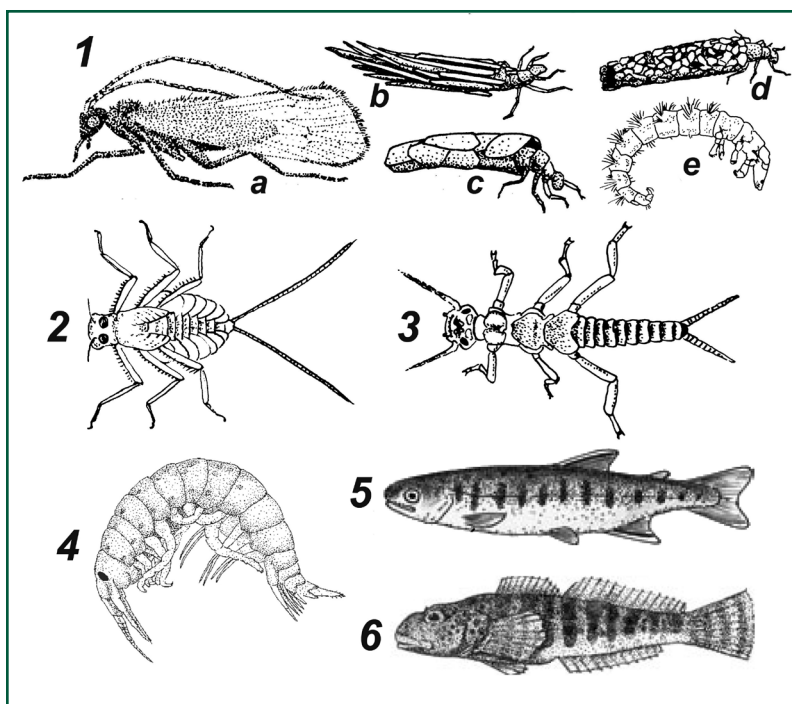
Dippers in winter

Dippers do not migrate south for the winter, although they may move from high elevations to low, or make regional movements from interior to coast. They are known to overwinter in the Brooks Range in northern Alaska and in the Yukon Territory, where winter temperatures plunge far below freezing. This is possible because in some locations there are upwellings that prevent the stream from becoming totally covered with ice. Dippers then can forage

A dipper resting between foraging bouts in a small opening in the ice on one of the ponds in the Dredge Lake area.



RH Armstrong



Dipper prey items: 1) caddisfly (a = adult, b, c and d = cases of needles bark and sand, respectively, e = free-living caddis larva); 2) mayfly larva; 3) stonefly larva; 4) amphipod, a brackish water species; 5) coho fry; 6) coastrange sculpin, a freshwater form.

for insects and small fish in the openings in the ice. Despite this appearance of toughness, evidence from the closely related Eurasian Dipper suggests that low winter temperatures probably diminish survival.

After the nesting season, dippers molt their old feathers and get a new coat of fresh feathers. During this time they are much more shy and secretive than at other times of year. By late September, however, they start moving around and occur in many places not used for nesting. In fall and winter, we often find them on very small streams and on deltas where the freshwater stream flows out over the tide flats at low tide. They are still feisty and aggressive, but no longer territorial.

We have found banded dippers over ten miles from their nesting areas, and many wintering birds move around from one stream to another. Others seem to spend most of their time in one area, and some use the same area for several winters. Dippers regularly cross Gastineau Channel in the off-season: birds from Douglas Island are seen on mainland streams and deltas, and vice versa.

When wintering dippers forage in streams, their prey choices seem to be similar to those in the nesting season. In contrast, when dippers forage on deltas, their prey is quite different. On deltas, the flowing stream is still fresh water but the area is inundated twice a day by salt water. There are virtually no stream insects that tolerate salt water, but there are small shrimp-like crustaceans called amphipods that can live in both fresh and salt water. Dippers commonly hunt amphipods by turning over small rocks on the stream bottom; amphipods often congregate by the dozens in such places, and if a dipper turns over the right rock, it can capture as many as 20 or 25 amphipods in a minute or so. However, amphipods that we sent in for analysis contained much less fat than many aquatic insects, so they appear to be poorer prey.

Wintering dippers also eat fish, especially sculpins. Sculpins have big heads and spines, so they are rather hard to handle. Dippers whack sculpins into edible condition by pounding them on rocks, sometimes for many minutes. I have seen dippers swallow subdued sculpins up to about 4" long—quite a feat for a bird that is less than 8" in total length, including the tail! In late winter (February-March), salmon fry start emerging

from the gravels where the eggs were incubating. If they emerge a little prematurely, still with yolk sacs attached to their bellies, they sometimes try to rebury themselves. I have seen yolk-sac young with their heads buried in the gravels but their tails still waving in the current. When a dipper encounters a group of these tails, it plucks the fry from their imperfect hiding places, much like us pulling carrots from a garden. And the fully emerged fry also make good foraging in early spring.

Salmon eggs are a good source of food, too. Some eggs are poorly buried by female salmon or get dug up by later spawners. These eggs are not incubated properly and will not hatch. They are readily available to foraging dippers (and other predators such as sculpin) in fall and into winter. And they are full of fat, providing a rich supply of energy to the consumer.

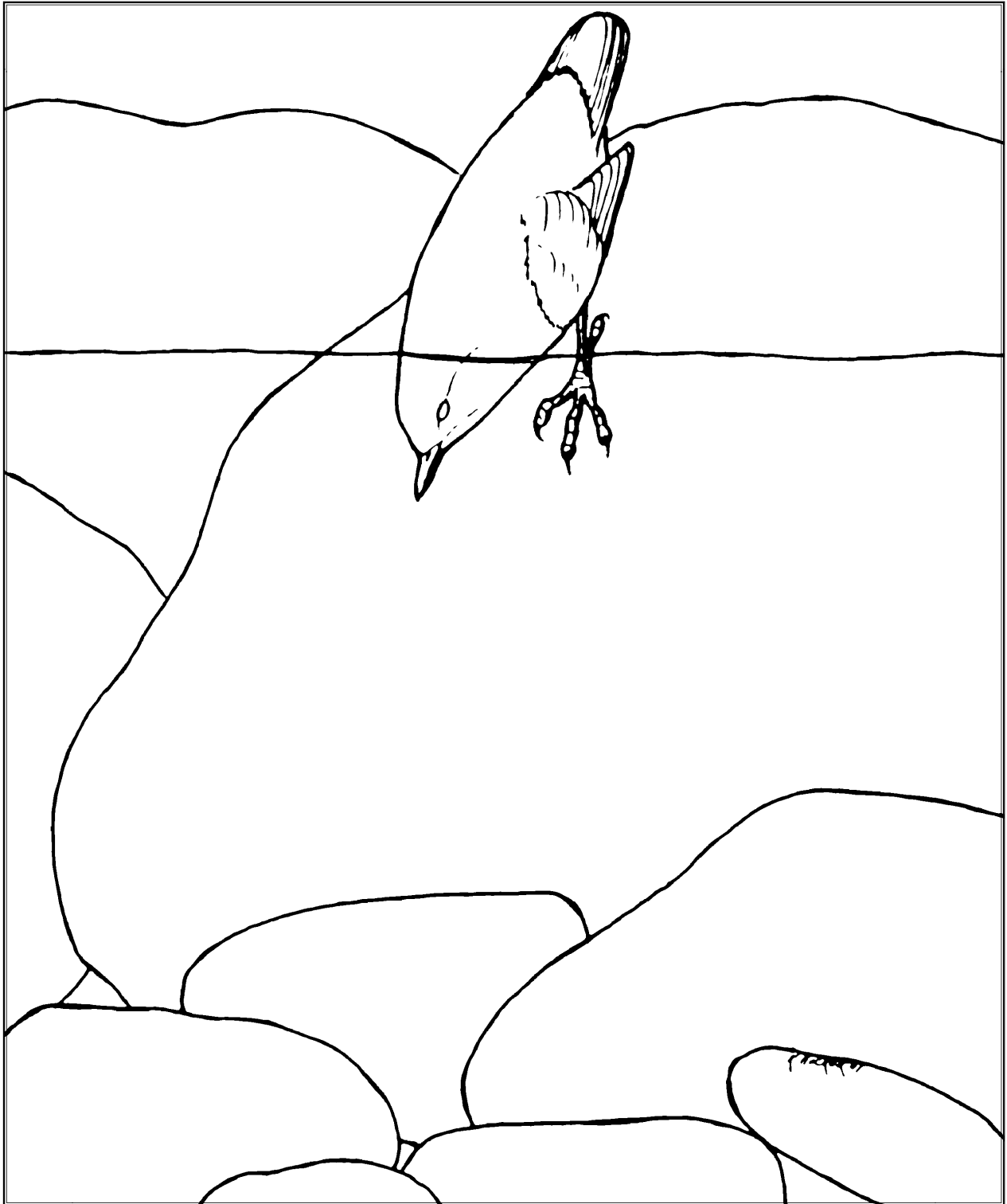
Winter is a good time to observe the foraging behavior of dippers. If you go to the Sheep Creek delta at low tide, for instance, you can often find three or four dippers making the best of the short winter days by foraging very actively. If you take the time, you'll be able to observe several different foraging behaviors. Sometimes the birds 'snorkel'—by swimming around with their heads under water, searching for prey; if they see something suitable, they'll dive down to grab it. Often they wade in the shallows, gleaning the rocks. When turning over rocks on the deltas in the search for amphipods, they may flip over the rock with a quick turn of the head or actually pick it up and toss it away. Sometimes they leap off the rocks to snag an insect floating by. Find a dipper near a pool, and watch it swim (with its wings) underwater in pursuit of food. Watch a bird extract a caddisfly from its case. Occasionally, a dipper will catch a caddisfly or small fish, store it temporarily on a rock or the ice, and go back to get more.

And of course, you'll see dippers standing on rocks, bobbing up and down. That's presumably how they got their name. Why do they bob? No one really knows!

Dipper coloring page

Kathy Hocker

When a dipper is hungry, she sticks her head just below the water to watch for food such as aquatic insects, fish, and fish eggs. Then she dives in and “flies” underwater to the bottom of the stream to catch her prey. What does this dipper see underwater? Draw some things she might want to dive for. Then color the picture. Dippers are dark gray with brownish-gray heads. Their legs are grayish-pink, their eyes are brown, and their bills are black.



Many thanks to our great supporters!

Grant support

Discovery Southeast thanks the following foundations and organizations for their generous support in the past year.

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