

American Dipper: a swimming and singing songbird

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

If you walk along a mountain stream almost anywhere in the western United States, you may see a uniformly gray bird standing on a rock near a riffle or rapid in the middle of the river.

The bird is slightly smaller than an American Robin.

As you watch, the bird repeatedly bobs up and down. It hops into the water and then hops back up on the rock and bobs up and down some more.



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.

Then, believe it or not, the bird dives into the water and disappears, emerging a short time later, upstream from the rock you saw it use before and it is carrying a meal.

This is an American Dipper, our only swimming and diving songbird.

You may also hear it referred to as an Ouzel or Water Ouzel. John Muir referred to it as a Water Thrush.

No matter the name, this bird is unique and deserves your attention for a few minutes.

Watch it fly low, following the stream, land on a mid-stream rock, bob up and down, and then go for a swim. (When a bird flies underwater are their wings more appropriately referred to as propellers?)

The rather chunky American Dipper is almost tail-less. They feed on aquatic insects, larvae,



The American Dipper has been called a trout with feathers for its ability to swim underwater, finding small aquatic life to eat.

snails and small fish.

Imagine the bird flying underwater, chasing a small fish or disturbing rocks to uncover a caddisfly or hellgrammite larvae. Better yet, take a few minutes to watch a short video prepared by photographer, Mike Forsberg, titled *A Trout with Feathers*. You can find it by searching for *A Trout with Feathers*.

The film documents the challenges of filming the bird underwater to show you how remarkable this little bird really is. Along the way you get to see some wonderful images of the bird.

The American Dipper always nests near a river or stream and places its nest high enough above the water to avoid any high water or flood damage.

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The first Dipper nest I was fortunate to see was under a hiking bridge in the Columbia River Gorge. There were two Dippers flying along the stream, stopping to dive to grab some food, then return to the bridge area.

I approached the bridge from downstream, walking along the river's edge. I set up my tripod and camera then sat down to

watch the birds in action.

After about 30 minutes they seemed quite comfortable with my presence. They showed me their favorite rocks and I learned their schedule.

Two hours and several hundred photos later, I packed up and departed. I could hear their lovely song and call above the sound of the river as I headed for the car, smiling the whole way.

The next time you are able to visit one of our wonderful mountain streams, be on the alert for the American Dipper. If you can, spend some time with the birds.

Young children will enjoy watching the "trout with feathers," a unique bird in the American West.

Don't forget your binoculars and camera. Good luck.