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American Dipper

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AMERICAN DIPPER



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American ● ● ● ● ● ● ● Dipper

Idaho is home to a very unusual bird, the American dipper. What makes it so unusual? Dippers are songbirds that spend a lot of time in the water. Most songbirds spend their time in trees and shrubs. Not the dipper! This plump, seven-inch long, grayish brown bird hangs out among the rocks along the edges of streams and rivers. In fact, dippers are the only aquatic songbird in North America.

Dippers eat the insects and insect larvae that live in and around water. They especially like to eat the larvae of mayflies, crane flies, mosquitoes, midges, caddisflies, dragonflies, stoneflies, and other aquatic insects. Dippers also eat flying insects, fish eggs, worms and sometimes small fish. To find their food, dippers wade, swim or dive into fast flowing streams. They turn over rocks under the water to find their food. Dippers are picky and like their streams to have clear, clean water with a lot of riffles, cascades and even small waterfalls. These kinds of streams are also the best habitat for the insect larvae that dippers like to eat. The mountains and even some deserts of western North America provide these kinds of habitats. Here in Idaho, many mountain streams have dippers living along them.

Dippers get their name because they constantly dip their entire body up and down. Scientists are not sure why dippers do this. It could be a signal to other dippers, telling them that this section of stream is taken. Or it could help the bird see into fast-moving water. Another possible explanation

is that dipping helps the bird measure its position as the water rushes by. No matter what the reason, dippers do a lot of dipping! They also look like they are winking. Dippers have white eyelids, so when they blink, it looks like a wink.

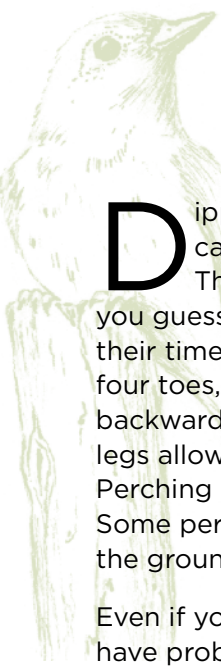
Living along the water year-round is challenging. Dippers have several special adaptations to help them survive in their wet habitat, especially during the cold winter months. Dippers have more feathers than other songbirds. While a songbird like a robin might have around 3,000 feathers, a dipper will have close to 6,000. These feathers grow very thickly, helping keep the bird warm and dry. Dippers are also able to carry more oxygen in their blood. This lets them stay underwater 15 - 20 seconds when they are looking for food. In addition, dippers have a low metabolic rate. This means that their bodies do not use energy as fast as other birds, so they don't have to eat as much to stay active.

Dippers also like to sing. Because they have to be heard above the sound of the water, dippers have a very loud song. It is full of trills and tinkling sounds that carry a long way. Next time you are along an Idaho stream, listen for the dipper and see if you can spot it diving into the water or dipping up and down on top of a rock.



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Perching Birds



Dippers belong to a large group of birds called passerines (PASS-err-eeens). They are also called perching birds. Can you guess why? Perching birds spend a lot of their time in trees and shrubs. Their feet have four toes, three facing forward and one facing backward. These feet along with extra-strong legs allow perching birds to hold on to branches. Perching birds also use their feet to build a nest. Some perching birds use their feet to scratch on the ground and turn over leaves to find food.

Even if you have never seen a dipper, you have probably seen many perching birds. That is because this is the largest group of birds. More than half of all the birds in the world are perching birds. The group includes sparrows, jays, wrens, chickadees, thrushes, orioles, warblers and many more. Idaho's state bird, the mountain bluebird, is a perching bird. So is the robin, hopping around on your lawn. The goldfinch at your bird feeder is a perching bird. The list goes on and on. Perching birds are usually small to medium-sized birds. On the small end are tiny birds such as kinglets and wrens. They are a little over four inches long and weigh about as much as a nickel. The largest perching bird is the common raven. Ravens are not quite two feet tall and weigh between one-and-a-half to three-and-a-half pounds.

Perching birds eat a wide variety of things. Some of them eat insects while others eat seeds. A few perching birds, like waxwings, eat fruit. Several species might eat insects in the summer and seeds and fruit in the winter. The chickadees visiting your feeders eat insects in the summer and seeds in the winter. Robins eat worms in the summer and fruit, like crabapples, in the winter. Eating many different things allows perching birds to live in many places around the world.

Passerines are also called song birds. That's because this group has the best singers of all birds. A few song birds, such as jays and crows, don't have the prettiest songs, but other birds have beautiful songs. Thrushes and wrens are known for their beautiful songs. The song of the dipper is also beautiful to hear. Now that spring has arrived, spend some time outside enjoying the songs of your passerine neighbors.



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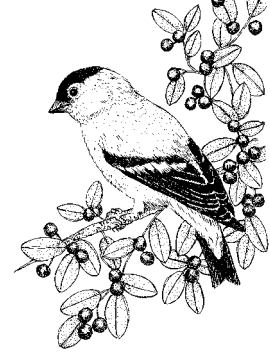


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What's in a Name?



Birds are named for many things. The dipper gets its name because of its habit of dipping up and down. Another name for this bird is water ouzel (OO-zel). The word ouzel is a nickname for the common blackbird found in Europe. When people came to North America and saw the dipper, it reminded them of the ouzel they had back home. Since dippers are found near water, settlers called them “water ouzels.” This is also how our robins got their name. American robins reminded people of the familiar European robins of their home country.

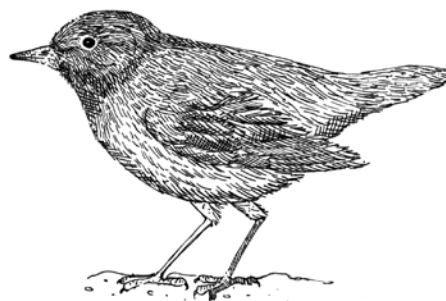
Sometimes birds are named for their songs or calls. Think of the “killdeer.” They are named for their loud “killdeer, killdeer” calls. These small shorebirds certainly do not kill and eat deer!

The little black-capped chickadee is named for its cheerful “chick-a-dee-dee-dee” call. The song sparrow is named for its beautiful song.

Birds are sometimes named for the places they live. Think of the barn owl. No question where that name came from. How about the marsh wren or the tree swallow? Other birds are named for their colors such as the yellow warbler, the red-breasted nuthatch, or the great blue heron. Still others are named for people such as Clark’s nutcracker or Steller’s jay.

All these different names can get confusing. This is why all animals and plants have their own special scientific name. Latin is the language of science. Scientists all over the world use Latin scientific names. This makes it a lot easier to know exactly what animal you’re talking about. But just for fun, check out this list of nicknames for some of our more common birds:

Bird	Nickname	Bird	Nickname
Spotted sandpiper	Teeterpeep	Common merganser	Goosander
Barn owl	Church Owl	Nuthatch	Tree mouse
Yellow-rumped Warbler	Butterbutt	Canada jay	Whiskey jack
Northern flicker	Yellowhammer	Spruce grouse	Fool hen
Common nighthawk	Bullbat	Turkey vulture	Buzzard
Great horned owl	Hoot owl	Barn swallow	Country swallow
Northern shrike	Butcherbird	Great blue heron	Blue crane
American goldfinch	Thistlebird	Dark-eyed junco	Snowbird





Losing Feathers

Have you ever seen a hawk flying overhead that is missing some feathers in its wings? The hawk is going through a process called molting. When a bird molts, it loses some of its feathers and grows new ones. Just like your fingernails and hair, feathers are made of a protein called keratin. Hooves, claws, horns and even baleen in whales are also made of keratin. It's pretty tough stuff. But even strong feathers get worn as a bird goes about its busy life. This is where molt comes in.

Every year, birds replace their worn out feathers. Many birds molt in mid-to-late summer. The nesting cycle is over and birds need to get ready for the winter. Migratory birds need to grow new flight feathers to make their long journey. Birds that stay put need fresh new feathers to stay warm when it gets cold. Male birds that were brightly colored in the spring lose their bright feathers because they no longer need them. Instead, they grow feathers that will help camouflage them in their habitat for the rest of the year.

Unlike most birds, when waterfowl like ducks, geese and swans molt, they lose all their tail and flight feathers at once. This means that they cannot fly for several weeks. Even though dippers are not waterfowl, they also have the same kind of molt. Dippers, however, are flightless for a much shorter time, about four days to two weeks.

So why would a bird want to be flightless? That's a great question that scientists have tried to answer. The reason might have to do with how waterfowl fly. Because they weigh more, it takes more effort to get up into the air. If a goose is missing a few feathers, it would be really hard to take off. Losing all their flight feathers at once and growing them all back together would be easier for the bird. It would take less time overall than replacing a few feathers at a time. Since waterfowl can swim, they don't have to rely on flying to get away from danger when they are molting.

When dippers molt, they become very secretive. They stop singing and are very cautious when feeding. No one is exactly sure why dippers molt the way they do. What do you think?

Nest, Sweet Nest

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Spring is a very busy time for birds. They are building nests and raising their young. Nest-building is a pretty amazing process. Can you imagine having to build your house using your mouth and your feet? Birds create some pretty amazing nests out of a wide variety of materials, all with their beaks and feet.

Nests are made to hold and protect both eggs and young. Some nests are used only once. Others are used for many years. Songbirds, like robins, build a new nest every year. Birds of prey often re-use their nest for many years in a row. They add new materials each spring. Sometimes these nests can get pretty big. A bald eagle nest in Ohio weighed 4,000 pounds when its tree finally fell down!

Nests take many forms. Most songbirds make a cup nest. Magpies build a round dome-shaped nest complete with a roof. The nests of killdeer and other shorebirds can hardly be called a nest. They are just scrapes in the soil where the eggs will be camouflaged by surrounding rocks, sticks and dirt. Some water birds like loons and grebes build floating nests. Wood ducks and

goldeneyes nest in cavities in trees. Herons and egrets build stick nests in trees.

The materials that birds use to build their nests can be common or very unusual. More common materials include sticks, grass, mud, feathers, plant down, and animal hair. Unusual materials include man-made things such as pieces of plastic, old fishing line, string, barbed wire, and bailing twine. One of the oddest nests made out of man-made materials was built by a canyon wren. The little wren built its 8-inch nest out of office supplies such as paper clips, rubber bands, post-it notes, pins, and thumbtacks!

Dippers build a round nest about the size of a basketball. They build their nest six to 18 feet above a stream on a ledge, crevice, hollow tree stump, culvert or even a bridge. This helps protect the nest from predators. The nest is made of two layers. Moss makes up the outer layer. As the birds weave the moss, they first dip it into the water. The inner layer is made of grass, leaves and bark. This helps keep the eggs and baby birds warm and dry.





Bird Watching



If you are enjoying learning about the dipper, you might want to become a bird watcher. People all over the world enjoy this fascinating hobby. It is easy to watch birds. Just spend some time outside and you are likely to see a bird. Spring is a great time because you can also hear many kinds of bird songs. The male birds sing to set up their territory and attract a mate. If you spend some time in your backyard just listening, you might be amazed at how many different kinds of bird songs you will hear.

Once you find a bird, look at its size and shape. Is it one color or several? Do you see anything that stands out like stripes or spots? What about stripes on its wings? Does it ever land on the ground or does it stay in the trees? What kind of habitat is the bird in? Having a bird identification

guide will help you decide what you are seeing. You can find these at your school or community library. Some guides can be downloaded on a smart phone or tablet. The Merlin app is a great, free tool to help you identify the birds that live near you. Ask your parents to check it out.

One way to learn about bird watching is to go on a bird walk. Contact your local nature center or park to see if they offer bird walks. Visit your local Audubon Society's website for a list of their bird walks and programs. Most experienced bird watchers enjoy helping new birders, especially students. In fact many of the best bird watchers started out just like you, by learning about the birds in their own backyard.



American Dipper Word Search

Complete the sentences and find your answers in the word search puzzle.

Dippers spend a lot of time in the _____.

Dippers are the only aquatic _____ in North America.

Dippers eat _____ larvae.

Many of Idaho's mountain _____ have dippers living along them.

Dippers were named because they _____ their entire body up and down.

Dippers have white _____.

Dippers have more _____ than other songbirds.

Dippers can carry more oxygen in their _____.

Dippers don't need to _____ as much as other birds to stay active.

Dippers belong to a group of birds called _____.

Dippers are _____ birds.

Another name for a dipper is water _____.

When dippers _____, they lose all of their feathers at the same time.

The nest of a dipper is about the size of a _____.

_____ makes up the outer layer of a dipper nest.

WORDS
BASKETBALL
BLOOD
DIP
EAT
EYELIDS
FEATHERS
INSECT
MOLT
MOSS
OUZEL
PASSERINES
PERCHING
SONGBIRD
STREAMS
WATER

W J G P Y R S F B H Y L L L C
P R Z Z P F E O E X L Z S I E
E M J D P V N U U A O U Z E L
R D D L T K I Q B Y T M G Q P
C Q P Q W C R T N Z R H H Q I
H Q G A J F E Z V C E M E Q W
I Z P M O K S S K W T O G R S
N U E Q S G S C N P A S M T S
G K A A E Z A L N I W S R C H
N O B M W T P B R P M E D G Z
S O N G B I R D S D A O T V H
S D I L E Y E V I M O N L C W
L X E F Y O U P S L Y F O T T
L T T A E C B B B P U J D R U
W H I X R Q C F C Q X W I S H

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

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