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DIPPER
(WATER OUZEL)

Cinclus mexicanus 7-8½

Dippers: Cinclidae

PLUMP, stub-tailed birds; resemble large wrens. Solitary. Dive, swim under water; walk on bottom. Food: Insects, aquatic invertebrates, small fishes. Range: Eurasia, w. N. America, w. S. America (Andes). No. of species: World, 5; West, 1.

A Field Guide to Western Birds by Roger Tory Peterson

A Water Ouzel Takes a Break

by Ron Mackie
Oakhurst, California

I am sitting on a granite ledge beside a pool on Lewis Creek, that tributary of the Fresno River which parallels Highway 41 for several miles before that highway approaches the south boundary of Yosemite National Park. The stream cascades in foaming white down a granite trough and into the pool. And now a water ouzel comes zipping through the trough, skims the pool with landing gear extended, and lands on the rock not more than five feet from me.

I am surprised. Never before has a water ouzel given me the time of day. It is a solitary bird, infrequently seen. But this bird is apparently looking for a diversion. He dresses his feathers a bit and glances at me as if it were I who were the curiosity. He is handsome, all right, all in slate gray, as large as a robin with a nice plump middle, tapering to a ridiculously short tail which it did not fail to wag up and down.

In *The Mountains of California*, John Muir wrote that the ouzel is "a singularly joyous and lovable little fellow." The ouzel may also be the most interesting and is certainly the most singular inhabitant of our swift-flowing streams. For it, the wilder the waters the better, and it is the only land bird that has taken to the water for its livelihood. It has neither web feet nor broad bill.

The ouzel's distinguishing trait which immediately catches the eye and makes it a true comedian is its remarkable practice of bobbing up and down on its

stout legs, a practice it indulges constantly. My new-found friend, perched so close to me, did not neglect this aspect of its repertoire. I surmise that the reason for these knee-bends is to keep its legs in shape for the strenuous business of walking on rocks under the water against the current. Anyway, this bobbing is the reason for its common name, American dipper.

In a few minutes my ouzel got tired of bobbing in one place. It skimmed the pool to that part of the rock shelf where the stream pours into the pool, a distance of 30 feet. It dove into the churning water upstream. Soon it was back, standing on the shelf where the water was only a couple of inches deep. It began to shake itself like a puppy. The feathers of the water ouzel are thicker and deeper than those of other land birds. It dresses its feathers with an oil from an oil gland located at the upper base of the tail which is ten times as large as in related land birds of equivalent size. So, after it shakes, it is as if it had never been in the water, so it starts dipping. The ouzel has made other adaptations for living in water. It has white spots above its eyes. These are "eyelids" which, when closed, keep the water out of its eyes, and which, like a face mask, allow it to see clearly. It also has scales to cover its nostrils while under water.

Now my ouzel hops to granite that is green with algae, dampened by the

stream. It pecks here and there for a morsel. And now I have a second surprise. Another ouzel comes flying down the trough and joins my ouzel.

It seems to me that this new ouzel was my ouzel's mate. Ouzels are great song birds. Their songs are comparable to mockingbirds, and to canyon wrens to which they are closely related. Ouzels love to sing in winter, even when it is snowing. But this second ouzel was not singing. She (and I think she was a she) was repeating call notes as fast as she was able, a sort of "bezeet, bezeet" call. My ouzel attempted to get in a few words but was overwhelmed by the newcomer. During this exchange there was a good deal of hopping and bobbing but the upshot of it all was for both birds to take wing and disappear up the trough.

I feel quite sure the mate insisted it was time to get back on the job of feeding the babies. An ouzel nest is a bulky ball of moss with an opening on one side and is built on mid-stream rocks or a crack in the rock beside the stream or even behind a waterfall where spray will keep the nest wet and where food is nearby as the babies will have to be fed until as late as July.

As I sat there it came to me that I had not seen an ouzel for a long time and then I had seen just one. Water ouzels are fairly common from the Rockies to the coast ranges where there are mountain streams and canyons. In the old days I saw an ouzel occasionally in the mountains of Southern California, in the Sierra, and at the headwaters of Alder and Willow Creeks south of Big Sur when I went fishing each year on the first of May. But I had not seen one for so long I had forgotten about a wonderful bird.

And then it came to me that it is I who am at fault. It is I who no longer headed for the high country trails. Ouzels live and nest up to 10,000 feet even in the rigors of Sierra winters. They retreat downstream only when the stream freezes. Or they live at the headwaters of remote canyons in cascading fountainheads, wild places to which I no longer go.

In my mind's eye I see them now. Diving into a rushing stream against the current, walking under the water on the bottom of the stream, foraging under rocks and in crevices for the larvae of aquatic insects. Or climbing, again under water, up precipitous waterfalls, using their short, rounded wings to propel themselves, swimming with their wings. And I am glad the water ouzels are up there, unmolested. ●

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