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Watchable Wildlife -- American Dippers

By Bob Garrison

Mid-summer is the time of year to head to the mountains to escape the heat and search for one of California's most unusual birds -- the American dipper. Any trip in search of the often elusive dipper is a success in my book since your journeys will take you to some of the most scenic areas of wild California. The dipper lives along clear, swift, mountain streams. They prefer boulder filled streams where rushing water hides the aquatic insects and small fish that the dipper hunts. In fact if you're a trout angler, bring along your rod and reel, because finding dippers means you are in prime trout waters.

Dippers are rather ordinary looking little sooty-gray birds. However, dippers have one very unusual behavior; they hunt underwater. Not a big deal for a duck or a grebe, but dippers are members of the perching bird order Passeriformes. At first glance, the last place you would expect to find this bird is underwater, especially in roaring streams that would sweep a person off their feet. Dippers "fly" through the swift water using their wings as oars. Not only can they "fly" to depths of over 20 feet, but they also walk along the bottom searching for insects and small fish.

Despite its ordinary appearance, the dipper is well suited for swimming. Soft, dense feathers keep out the cold water, valve-like scales close the nostrils underwater and a third eyelid protects the eyes from damaging sand and silt. These may not appear to be any great evolutionary feats, but they are fascinating examples of how a bird more closely related to a sparrow than a duck has adapted to take advantage of a rich aquatic food source.

I never get tired of watching these birds. Above water, they constantly bob up and down, hence the name dipper. Look for dippers sitting on top of rocks and boulders in the center of the stream or river. If you find a dipper, you generally can get a close look without scaring it off. Try to find a spot where you can see down into the water, that's where the real show is. Vigilant birders may be lucky enough to find a nest tucked behind a waterfall or on a cliff face. But like fishing for trout, the pleasure is in the hunt, not the catch. So enjoy the adventure and happy hunting.

Where to view dippers

Follow the wildlife viewing road signs or check the California Wildlife Viewing Guide for the directions to the following areas:

Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park
Jackson Meadows Reservoir
Mount Tamalpais State Park
Big Basin Redwoods State Park
China Flat/Silver Fork Campgrounds, Eldorado Natl Forest
Loon Lake/Crystal Basin Recreation Area
Yosemite National Park
Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks

You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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