

WATER OUZEL OR AMERICAN DIPPER

It sometimes seems that birds figure out an easy way of doing things or follow ideas that have been suggested by man. When the Forest Service built a bridge across Fall Creek up Wind River Valley in Washington, a pair of water ouzels selected a site for a home on one of the bridge timbers.

This is a slate-colored, aquatic bird with a short tail and smaller than a robin and lives along the swift, rocky streams of our western mountains.

One day Jack Horton of the United States Forest Service ~~noticed~~ ^{was watching the} ~~a~~ ^{American} ~~pair of~~ ^{water ouzels} dippers building a nest on the bridge beam. He and his companion saw the birds darting down and picking up nesting material that was floating by.

On second thought, it seemed rather strange that favorable bits for the nest were brought down by the current. The observers started off upstream to find out where the nesting material was coming from.

^{about 100 yards above}
To their great surprise, they discovered one of the birds pulling lichens off the rocks and casting nesting material in the current. It was similar to cutting logs upstream, floating them down the current and salvaging them later on. The ouzels in some way had discovered it was easier to use the flowing stream that swept by just under the doorway of the new house and pick up the drift close at hand than to make the flights upstream for nesting material and back to the building spot. ^P The dipper's nest is usually built of moss, round like a ball covered over the top, and with a doorway in the side. Often times it is on a ledge beneath the falling water where the bird has to go through the spray.

The habit of the ouzel ~~of~~ lighting on a rock in mid-stream and bobbing up and down as if he had St. Vitas dance has given him the common name of "tester-tail." He hasn't webbed feet but he dives into a foaming stream and flies under water as expertly as a duck. He often wades up stream in the shallow water's edge with his head under hunting for water insects. Contrary to the opinion of some anglers, the bird does not live on young fish.

Few people are familiar with the remarkable song of this bird. As it flies up or down stream following the water course, you generally hear a chattering note. But in the early spring or even during the winter it has a strong, exuberant song with a great variety of trills and whistles that echo from the canyon walls above the roar of falling water.

One can always see some of the water ouzels below Multnomah or Latourell Falls or along Eagle Creek. A pair generally builds a nest each spring on the cliff at the side of the lower falls at Multnomah.