

Green Scene: Songbird of the Salmon Streams

by Elaine Golds

(published in The Tri-City News - Friday, January 4, 2008, page 14, 15)

[photograph]

[caption: An American dipper watches for aquatic insects from its vantage point just above the stream.
Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: Songbird of B.C.'s streams

Sub-title: The American dipper is well adapted to our fast-flowing waters]

The salmon streams that flow through our urban neighbourhoods provide vital habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals. Trees along creeks offer a protective corridor of green that attracts many species of songbirds; quiet backwater areas in streams offer safe refuge for ducks. Many of the animals that make use of this riparian habitat can be found in other areas as well. For example, the great blue herons often seen stalking fish in urban streams also use the open fields at Colony Farm, especially during the winter, where they search for meadow mice. The spotted towhees that rustle in the leaves for insects along streams can also be found in backyards with similar ground cover. There is, however, one bird that is found exclusively along fast flowing streams – a small grey bird known as the American dipper.

The dipper has the most specialized habitat requirements of any songbird in North America. A little smaller than a robin with a plump appearance because of its dense plumage, the dipper is typically seen in rocky, fast flowing streams standing on rocks or emerging from the cold water where they feed on aquatic insects. When they dive underwater, dippers use their stubby tail and short wings for swimming. Their name comes from the “knee bends” that dippers do up to 60 times a minute. Biologists speculate these movements help the birds spot their prey in the water. For a bird that spends its entire life in such a cold, wet and shady environment, I am sometimes tempted to think such constant movement must also help to keep them warm. Dippers have an amazing ability to walk underwater in search of prey, even in creeks where forceful flows would sweep people away.

Dippers are rarely found far from streams. Even their nests, built of moss, are constructed in concealed areas close to roaring creeks. Their favourite nesting locations are behind waterfalls or under bridges. Because dippers spend so much of their time in the water, their oil glands, used to keep feathers waterproof, are ten times larger than that of other songbirds. They share their dietary tastes with salmon and trout and have a strong preference for caddisflies, mayflies, mosquito larvae and water beetles.

Dippers are non-migratory species that reside year-round in British Columbia. However, when the higher elevation areas of creeks freeze over in winter, dippers move downstream in search of open water. Thus, winter is the best season to catch a glimpse of dippers in urban areas. Because dippers establish feeding territories along streams, it is rare to see more than one at a time. Even their song is adapted to their lifestyle – it is a long and loud whistling trill that enables them to be heard over rushing water.

For a bird that favours cold mountain streams, it's hard to believe their territory extends as far south as Panama in hot and humid Central America. But, in fact, wherever there are fast flowing streams tumbling

down from the mountains, you can expect to find dippers. I fondly recall a trip to the province of Chiapas in Mexico. We were exploring spectacular waterfalls where the water roared over limestone shelves out of the high county. As we cautiously climbed through the mist, several hundred meters up slippery wooden steps to get a better view of the plain below, I was startled to hear the bubbling and beautiful song of a bird only centimetres away but totally invisible under a curtain of dripping moss. I instantly recognized it as the song of a dipper; it was an evocative reminder of my home in the salmon forests thousands of miles away. But you don't have to go to very far to see dippers. Locally, some of the best places to view them during the winter months are in the Coquitlam River, north of David Avenue, or in Noons Creek in Port Moody close to the hatchery and soccer field.