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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Cinclidae (Dippers)

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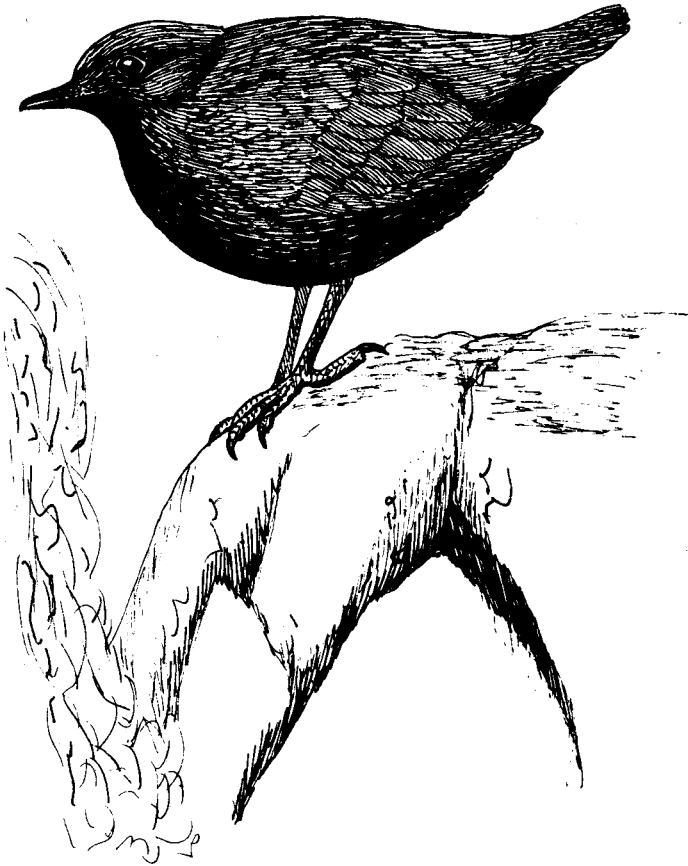
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FAMILY CINCLIDAE
(DIPPERS)



Dipper

Dipper

Cinclus mexicanus

Breeding Status: Limited to the Black Hills of South Dakota, where it is an uncommon permanent resident.

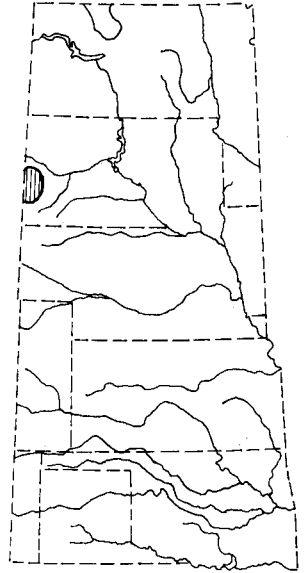
Breeding Habitat: The dipper is associated with rapidly flowing mountain streams. In the Black Hills it is most common in Spearfish Canyon, but it also occurs elsewhere in the hills.

Nest Location: Nests are usually over water, either under bridges or under overhanging rock ledges. They have also been found among the roots of fallen trees, but in all cases they are made of woven mosses, usually with a roof, sides, and a front entrance. The nest may be from 8 to 12 inches in external diameter, thus being rather conspicuous, or may appear to consist of a small hole about 2 by 3 inches in a vertical wall of moss on the side of a cliff. The nest cup is of coarse grass, which effectively resists moisture.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 3 to 6 white eggs, usually 4 or 5. The incubation period is 15-17 days, averaging 16. Single-brooded.

Time of Nesting: In the Black Hills the estimated breeding period is from late April through July, with eggs seen as late as July 5 and fledged young as early as June 13.

Breeding Biology: Dippers are very sedentary birds, and pairs tend to remain well separated. Studies in Montana indicate that by November the birds begin to establish winter territories, which are strongly defended through February and may include from 50 yards to as much as a half mile of stream. In spring the birds abandon these territories and begin to move upstream into breeding territories. During winter the birds also begin to sing, and singing increases in intensity to a peak in April. The songs of the two sexes are indistinguishable, and pair-formation is accompanied by loud singing as well as wing-quivering and chasing behavior. Both sexes participate in nest-building or in reconstructing an old nest, which seems to be more common than building entirely new nests. Incubation is entirely by the female, but the male frequently brings food to her during incubation. The young are hatched with a coating of down but grow relatively slowly, so that the nestling period is surprisingly long, about 19-25 days. The female broods regularly for about a week after hatching, and males rarely or never enter the nest. Instead, the older young poke their heads out the nest entrance to be fed. When the young birds leave the nest they are nearly as large as their parents and easily flutter out to a safe landing below. After the birds leave the nest, one or both of the parents typically removes the nest lining, presumably to prepare the nest for use in another year. The young birds soon learn to clamber about on the



wet rock surfaces, and they remain in the vicinity of the nest for up to 15 days after fledging. It is likely that adult birds return to their same nesting areas each year, but in at least one case an adult bird had different mates in two successive years.

Suggested Reading: Bakus 1959; Hahn 1950.

