

The Music of the Water Ouzel

It is early morning. I'm down at the river as the sun's first rays melt the chill of a frosty morning. I'm on the hunt along the Gunnison River for the voice of a drab, shy songbird that is usually overlooked.

Patience: sitting still is a plus. It's helpful to dress in the colors of rocks.



Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

flaged against the gray rocks, is a bobbing little bird, the American Dipper.

The American Dipper, also known as the water ouzel, is named for its constant habit of nodding up and down, bending low (remember the legs flex backwards), and doing a twist with each bend. It's a comical trait, almost as if it has a nervous twitch that prompts it into such a dance. And all the while it continues to sing.

Its song can be hard to hear over the noisy waters, but here is a creature which seems to be perpetually happy all the time. Curious. Here I am, quivering away in the breezy morning air, yet after its morning serenade, it jumps into the icy waters to hunt for breakfast.

This overlooked bird and its music might reflect a similar sentiment about how we could see our rivers and ourselves.

Dippers live very close to rapidly flowing streams with rocky riverbeds. Tucked at the bottom, among those rocks, are water-loving insects and their larvae just waiting to be eaten.

At least that's how the birds see them. But if the food is underwater, the bird has to go get it. So it plops into the water, using its beak to roll over stones and rocks looking for worms or small fish to eat.

Their range runs from Mexico to Alaska and is adjusted to meet a lifestyle of living in and close to fast

moving water. Feathers are very waterproof and insulating, and the oils they glean from glands during preening help water to roll right off.

Their powerful wings work like flippers when swimming in strong underwater currents. Picture those pectoral muscles. And their legs work like paddles helping them move along the cobble-rich river bottoms.

They can hold their breath underwater for long periods of time. Some research shows that they average 297 seconds underwater. Imagine this, you not only hold your breath for 5 minutes, but you're also going to eat your dinner while you do that. I'm not sure there are many restaurants that will succeed with that business model.

They are pretty territorial especially when breeding. One spring morning, I saw two ouzels tussling over their space on the Gunnison. The sweet trills were gone. The chase burst forth, one after the other, blasting out squawks from its bossy beak as it buzzed up and downstream beseeching the other to beat it.

They prefer the company of rivers. The most important requirement is a clear, flowing stream. A healthy watercourse with abundant aquatic life

makes it possible for dippers to survive. Pools, rapids, rocky surfaces and even shorelines provide habitat for a variety of life. But gravelly, rocky, river bottoms are where dippers are happiest.

Biologists say that the adaptations they have made mean that they can live nowhere else.

Although they are not endangered, they are an indication of how liveable our waters are. There could be more at stake when toxic chemicals spill into our streams than a wonderful float with a kayak.

Perhaps John Muir said it better: "Ouzels seem so completely part and parcel of the streams they inhabit, they scarce suggest any other origin than the streams themselves, and one might almost be pardoned in fancying they come direct from the living waters, like flowers from the ground."

The music of the flowing waters intermingles with the harmony of the dipper. Muir equally noted their irrepressible joy in song.



Dippers are active along rivers through the winter, moving downstream only after ice begins to form. Similarly, they move upstream as soon as ice melts off of the water to begin breeding behavior as early as February or March. (Courtesy National Park Service.)

Their melodies belie a happy heart that seems hard to understand. They have been known to trill and warble up to 10 minutes. That's quite a song. In fact, one researcher found that they sing to their young after feeding, possibly to help them learn the value of the art.

Down by the riverbank; I'm still shivering, and questions come to mind. Do we prefer the company of western rivers? Do we embrace the melody of the

waters in our world? Like the care we might give for our own young, maybe we have more in common with dippers and their streams than we realize. Protecting our rivers is like protecting our hearts.

Paul Zaenger has been a supervisory park ranger at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park since 1993. Other park assignments included Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

The multi-tool, don't leave home without it

When we sit back and think about all the possible scenarios we might run into outdoors, and all the possible situations, we start to add things to our pack. I have done this so many times in my chosen profession, that my pack has evolved into a life of it's own.



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I then remind myself that weight is also an important aspect to consider and I start to remove stuff, otherwise I could never get my pack over my shoulders.

The multi-tool is one of those items you should never be without. I remember watching MacGyver on television. He would be in some predicament and all would seem hopeless.

Then he would whip out his trusty knife with all the tools on it and make something to save the day. There are so many items covered by a good multi-tool, and it all comes in a package that weighs a few ounces.

Multi-tools come in all shapes, sizes, configurations and prices. There are three things to consider when purchasing a multi-tool, versatility, quality and safety of use.

For versatility, first I think about what tools I might need. The most important one I look for is a pair of pliers. I prefer needle nose with a built in wire cutter.

I have completed more tasks with good pliers than I could ever begin to list here. Everything from

removing fish hooks to repair jobs on other pieces of equipment and first aid.

I also like two knife blades. One being a good regular blade, and the second a serrated one. These two blades will handle almost any cutting chore you may encounter.

I like to have a regular and Phillips screwdriver, and a can and bottle opener. These are the basics. As you shop for your multi-tool, you will be overwhelmed with options, but these are the ones that I can't be without.

Quality is something that you and your budget must decide. There are tools for as cheap as five dollars, but I would leave them alone. I firmly believe that you get what you pay for.

I look for things like titanium for the handles so they will not corrode. I like all the tools to have a high quality stainless steel in them. Remember, this tool will probably be abused in its lifetime, so quality components are imperative.

Many of the better-made multi-tools come with a lifetime warranty. I have returned a few in my time and that warranty alone has been worth the extra money.

The last consideration is safety. The tools should all open, close and store easily. I look for a locking system when the specific tool is deployed.

This is especially important for the knife blades. You do not want a blade slipping closed when you

are using it. Generally, I prefer one-hand operation to open a specific tool. It seems that whenever I need one, my hands are busy holding something else. I also like them to come with a holster to carry the tool around in.



The Leatherman 17-Piece hand-held multi-tool would be considered a top-of-the-line device, retailing at \$39. (Courtesy Photo)

I usually wear the tool on my belt when outdoors. Keeping it handy means I use it more, rather than improvise with something else.

A multi-tool has many uses in a medical emergency as well. You can remove clothing or a boot from someone, to access an injury for treatment. Thread from sutures can be cut. Tweezers to remove splinters, and the list goes on and on.

If you have not looked at a multi-tool in the last few years, you owe it to yourself to check out the new ones. The manufacturers have come a long way recently, both with quality and the types of tools available.

You may spend a bit more than you planned but think of all the specific items you can remove from your pack that are covered by a good multi-tool. You may even find yourself wearing one all the time, not just when you are outdoors. Until next time, see you on the trail.

Mark Rackay is a freelance writer who serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.



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