

Dippers on Dartmoor

Amid the steep-sided valleys and fast-flowing rivers of his usual Devon haunts, Andrew McCarthy uses his well-honed fieldcraft and creative vision to capture magical images of this short-tailed, semi-aquatic songbird



Above A dipper posing for the camera in the lovely early morning light.

As a professional ecologist and nature photographer, I find dippers one of our most fascinating and enchanting birds. As well as having an unusual semi-aquatic lifestyle (they swim underwater to hunt their invertebrate prey), they are highly charismatic little creatures and they make compelling photographic subjects.

I have photographed dippers on our Dartmoor streams and rivers for a number of years, and after a successful series of photoshoots in spring 2019 I was really looking forward to working with them again in 2020. Last year's plans were, of course, scuppered by the first Covid lockdown, and the enforced lay-off was immensely disappointing. I was therefore really pleased to be able to get out and photograph them again during 2021.

While spring is a good time to capture shots of birds building nests, dippers are conspicuous throughout the year. Summer provides opportunities to photograph adults feeding young, for example, while winter

enables us to capture unusual images in frosty or icy conditions. In short, dippers make the perfect year-round wildlife subject.

The images in this article were taken with a mix of equipment, in particular the Olympus E-M1X and 300mm f/4 lens plus 1.4x extender. The light weight, portability and long focal lengths of a modern mirrorless set-up really suit my mobile photographic style. I rarely use a hide and prefer to carefully stalk my subjects, only settling into a well-hidden spot once the birds (which move around a fair bit during their territory-holding and foraging activities) have moved away for a while. I tend to carry a lightweight carbon monopod rather than a tripod – once I have settled down to wait for the birds to return, the monopod means I can keep the camera at eye level so I don't have to move when the birds come back, as this could disturb them.

My ideal photographic site would have a combination of features: good cover nearby through which to approach and shoot;

nicely lit 'props'; and shooting positions that maximise my ability to achieve a clean or interesting background.

It is relatively simple to make a representative image of these birds, since they have a habit of perching (and dipping) on rocks in fairly open conditions, but I am always on the lookout for perches and backgrounds which offer something slightly different. I find it creatively helpful to envisage future images, and when I am out in the field, I seek out certain locations for their photogenic qualities. I choose the approach and shooting position with care, so as to maximise the chance of obtaining images that are a little different to the norm. The slightly abstract head shot of a dipper surrounded by a very out-of-focus zone in this article is a case in point – I had to slowly work my way into position just below the perching bird, but close enough to nearby vegetation to give a blurred framing effect. It is really satisfying when a pre-envisioned image comes together.



Left Enjoying the morning light. Right Shooting through vegetation gaps with a wide aperture helps focus the eye on the main subject.

Camera settings are invariably dictated by prevailing conditions. In my usual Dartmoor haunts, the rivers tend to be in steep-sided valleys, which means that during early mornings when the birds are at their most active, conditions are often not ideal; the sun doesn't come over the horizon until mid-morning and photography can be in deep shade. I generally shoot wide open with the appropriate ISO to give a shutter speed of up

to around 1/500sec – sufficient to stop the kinds of movement these birds typically make while perching, or while looking around for predators prior to flying back to their nest sites.

Good fieldcraft skills are vital when dippers are close to their nest sites as they are particularly vulnerable to disturbance at such times. While dippers are fairly tolerant, there is a serious risk they will desert an area if a photographer spends too much time

Dipper facts

» Dippers live in upland streams and feed on aquatic insects such as caddis and mayfly larvae, which are found in fast-flowing and well-oxygenated stretches of water.

» Dippers hunt underwater and have a transparent nictitating membrane that allows them to see while swimming.



A low-key image shot in a heavily shaded section of river.



Left A dipper carrying a leaf for its nest. Right An adult bringing food to a nest. Below A dipper with nest material. Opposite (top) Composed to make the most of the hues in the background. Opposite (below) A really unusual nest site – high up in a tree and out in the open.

nearby. I will only photograph in the vicinity of a nest if I am sure that my presence won't have a detrimental effect upon the birds; it is essential that there is suitable cover so that I can make a quiet and unseen approach, and that I can remain properly concealed once I'm in position. While I sometimes carry a portable

bag hide for additional cover, if I'm not 100% certain the birds won't be disturbed, I'll move away to search another stretch of river. As always, the unwritten nature photography code of conduct is vital: the welfare of the subject is far more important than getting the image.

Best places to search

- » Look for white-water areas where water tumbles over rocks and stones, but where there are also nearby shallow or slightly slower-flowing sections in which the birds can swim.
- » Search for regular perching spots – these are often marked by tell-tale white streaks and spots.
- » Use binoculars to search as far along the river as possible. Dippers can be quite conspicuous while perching, and spotting them from a distance gives you the best chance to plan a really quiet approach.

Photography tips

- » Use the longest focal length possible (at least 600mm and ideally more) in order to minimise disturbance.
- » Get down low to obtain clean backgrounds – this will give your image maximum impact.
- » Minimise disturbance – move slowly once the birds have moved up or downstream. Once in place, remain quiet, still and alert. If you think you have caused the birds to leave, move away and search another stretch of river.

