

Utah County Birders Newsletter

October 2016



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OCTOBER MEETING:

Thursday, October 13th, 2016

Our meeting this month will be a **documentary night!** We're going to start a new tradition where once or twice a year we'll watch a bird documentary. We'll be starting right at 7 so we have enough time to finish the film.

Meet at 7:00 pm at the Monte L. Bean Museum. 645 East 1430 North, Provo, UT <http://mlbean.byu.edu/>

FIELD TRIPS:

Saturday, October 8th, 2016: All day. **The Big Sit** - Continuing our long-standing tradition, we will be holding a Big Sit where we count birds seen from a 17' circle on the Provo Airport Dike. This year we will be counting at the same location as the last couple of years on the southwestern corner. Please come and join us for as little or as long as you would like. Various people will be helping out this year, but if you show up and no one is there, we will hopefully have the circle scratched out in the dirt, and you can keep a tally of all the species you see from inside the circle and the time you are there and report it to keeli.marvel@gmail.com.

Saturday October 15th, 2016: 7am-noon. We are going to bird the **International Center and Lee Kay in SLC**. Meet at 7am at the AF park and ride to carpool. We'll look for rare gulls and late season migrants.

We are actively recruiting people to lead local half-day field trips, any time, any place. If you would like to lead a field trip or if you have any ideas for this year's field trips, please contact Keeli at - keeli.marvel@gmail.com

Utah County Birders Captain's Log: October 2016

by Keeli Marvel

Hello fellow birders. How's migration birding going? A couple weekends ago we had a successful hawk watch up at Squaw Peak. Thanks to everyone who came out, and especially to Hawk Watch for hosting the count and bringing the cutest education birds – a Western Screech Owl and a beautiful Swainson's Hawk – to share with us. Over 200 raptors were counted, with Cooper's Hawks and Turkey Vultures making up the majority of birds sighted.

I don't have any epic trips to report on, but I've tried to make an extra effort get out here and there, especially after each wave of wet/cold weather. I haven't been able to catch anything too vagrant yet, but I've seen some interesting patterns in the birds migrating. A couple of weeks ago I went for a morning walk along the lake by my house and there were Lincoln Sparrows everywhere. After seeing them at home, I saw them at work as well. It also seemed like Wilson's Warblers went through in a mad flush and I felt like every time I went out I saw Wilson's Warblers. Last week at work I walked around housing and saw a couple of Gray Flycatchers, a Wilson's Warbler, a Red-naped Sapsucker, and Townsend's

Solitaires. A couple nights ago I was hanging out at an outdoor festival in north Salt Lake around dusk and saw two Common Nighthawks, which was interesting because I haven't seen any for a few weeks. And this past week, I've had two different non-birders ask me if the Turkey Vultures were migrating because they'd each seen huge kettles of them in places where they aren't usually seen hanging out. Just some interested things to note. Still hoping for something rare, but I appreciate every opportunity to get out and see the birds.

Something interesting I was reading about this week – did you know that birds do not have vocal cords like mammals (including humans) do? Bird vocalizations are produced not through the larynx, like mammals, but by a structure further down in the trachea called the syrinx. It is located at the base of the trachea where it branches into the lungs. Both branches can be independently controlled, which means that many bird species can produce two separate noises at the same time – basically they could sing duets with themselves if they wanted to. How birds create so many different vocalizations is not very well understood, but it's



Hawkwatch day at Squaw Peak
photos by Keeli Marvel

thought that for the most part it is learned behavior that accounts for the wide variety of bird calls and songs rather than differences in physiological structure. There's been some research done on identifying the region of birds' brains that controls song and it appears that the bigger the region, the better the singing ability. In fact, in some bird species where the females don't sing at all, there's a direct correlation to reduced size of that brain region. Birds who are exceptional mimics must have well-developed singing brains. Super interesting!

Well, that's all I've got for now.

Keep on keepin' on, and happy birding!
Keeli Marvel

Bird of the Month American Dipper

Cinclus mexicanus

by Landon Jones

[Rerun article from October 2008]

Last week I went to a lovely picnic at South Fork Canyon Park with my good friend and his family. He just finished law school and got a good job with a law firm, and I hadn't seen him for a year or so. After discussing his work a little he asked me if there were any strange or interesting birds in Utah. Pointing to the stream running through the park, I told him about one of the most amazing and specialized birds in the U.S., the American Dipper.

The American Dipper, *Cinclus mexicanus*, frequents fast-flowing mountain streams and rivers year-round. It obtains food by diving under water, walking upstream against the current, and turning over rocks and searching along the bottom for tasty invertebrates. "What???!!" I said in my mind, the first time I heard this. "Surely I must have heard incorrectly." No, you heard it right. "It walks underwater, not swims, in mountain streams created from snowmelt, even in the winter, and eats bugs off the bottom?" Yes. "That's crazy! How can it do that??!!" Dippers sport some fascinating adaptations for their frigid aquatic lifestyle.

Most aquatic birds are fairly large, so as to conserve as much body heat as possible, but dippers are rather small at about seven and a half inches in length. Larger animals retain more heat as they increase in size because their volume increases little as mass increases, leaving less surface area for heat to dissipate away from them, keeping them warmer. Dippers also have little in the way of fat reserves compared to other aquatic birds. They do, however, have lots of down feathers, to keep them warm while diving, which is quite a divergence from the typical passerine body plan. Dippers also have an enormously enlarged preen gland (ten times the size of other passerines), which allows them to waterproof their numerous feathers. Water just rolls off them as they come up for air after a dive. Also related to thermoregulation, dippers have very short tails and wings compared to other passerines. Long tails and wings would quickly dissipate much of the heat necessary to keep them warm. Their body plan is as close to a sphere as possible, the most efficient shape for heat conservation, without compromising other morphological traits necessary for life in their habitat. Dippers can survive winter temperatures as low as -49° F.

Dippers are also well-adapted to their unique environment. The first time I saw an American Dipper, I thought it was a rock on a sandbar in the middle of the river until it moved and sang its clear notes. Their plumage blends well with their surrounding habitat. Logically, dippers would do well in the water with webbed feet, but as passerines, their feet



photo by Paul Higgins

are fixed in the typical passerine toe configuration, which constrains the development of this trait. However, dippers have strong legs and well-developed claws, allowing them to forage on the stream bottom under continuous pressure against the fast-moving current. Their chest muscles are also very strong compared to other passerines so they can flap their wings underwater, their primary means of locomotion in their habitat. They also have a third eyelid, which is clear and protects their vision underwater (built in goggles, wouldn't that be handy!). They also have movable flaps to cover their nostrils when diving (and noseplugs too!).

American Dippers defend linear stretches of streams as their individual territory, year-round. One of their most interesting attributes that they share with no other bird outside their family is a feathered eyelid. The eyelid is white and conspicuous against their drab gray plumage, warning other dippers to stay out of their territory. This adaptation allows them to stay relatively incognito from predators most of the time, but the flash of white is unmistakable when they want to be noticed.

Dippers are in the family Cinclidae, and all are in the genus *Cinclus*. There are only five species in the world, almost one for every major continent. The American Dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*) resides in western North America, from Alaska to Panama. The Rufous-throated Dipper (*Cinclus shulzii*) occurs in South America along with the White-capped Dipper (*Cinclus leucocephalus*) which is confined mostly to the Andes mountain range. The White-breasted Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) is distributed throughout Europe and into a little bit of North Africa. The Brown Dipper (*Cinclus pallasii*) is found throughout Asia. Dippers are currently placed as most closely related to thrushes. However, their unique adaptations to take advantage of a very harsh and specialized feeding niche make them, in my eyes, birds nothing short of miraculous. When I ask birders from the east coast what species they would like to see in Utah, they often say "show me one of those dippers." The concept of an American Dipper is simply unreal until you have seen one; they are truly one of the marvels of the west.

If you would like to write an article for the Bird of the Month, please contact Mabelle - mabelle13johnson@yahoo.com

Backyard Bird of the Month

September 2016

Jack Binch - Sandy

I had a **Black-chinned Hummingbird** at 6:00 this evening. (30 Sept 2016). Hate to see them leave.

Suzi Holt - Payson

I love when the **Common Nighthawks** do a flyover over my house in Payson. Such a great sight to see!

Eric Huish - Pleasant Grove

Black-capped Chickadees - Regular visitors all month's. But I enjoyed them more this month.

Keeli Marvel - Saratoga Springs

A **MacGillivray's Warbler** in my backyard after one of the storms came through. I heard a super strong chip so I followed the noise and found a MacGillivray's in my tree. I also saw a pair of **Great Horned Owls** around dusk in my neighborhood a few weeks ago. I heard them hooting and then saw them both flying.

Milt Moody - Provo

A pair of **Downy Woodpeckers** came to check out my trees.

Alton Thygerson - Provo

Cooper's Hawk - Over the past couple of years we've had a Cooper's Hawk family nesting in the neighborhood. The larger trees in my yard have providing infrequent daytime perching places.

Report your favorite backyard bird each month to Eric Huish at 801-360-8777 or erichuish@gmail.com
