

DIPPER PROJECT

Dipper Habitat



Dippers inhabit fast flowing streams with rapids, small waterfalls and gravelly beds, and the Shropshire Hills, particularly in the Teme catchment, is the County stronghold.

They feed largely on larvae collected on the stream bed (they don't take invertebrates from bankside vegetation, like Grey Wagtails do), and, to a lesser extent, on small fish. They take readily to carefully-sited nest boxes over water.

Several other Community Wildlife

Groups have put up boxes, and shown that they help increase the population, partly by providing new nest sites on suitable stretches of stream which otherwise lack them, and partly by protecting the eggs and chicks from predators, so the average number of fledged young per nest increases.

Dippers in the Strettons area

Dippers have been absent from most of the Strettons area since the 1980s, but the population has increased across the whole of the Teme catchment in recent years, as a result of the nest boxes, which has led to more observations here. The Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group has now started its own Dipper Project, covering the Cound Brook north to Longnor, and the Quinney Brook south to Marshbrook, and their tributaries.

Dippers are very territorial, so the first step was getting a better understanding of which streams they inhabit, their favoured locations and the distances between nests, before putting up boxes.

Members were asked to report sightings in 2020, and from previous years, and an appeal for information appeared in *Stretton Focus*.

Nest building usually starts in early April, and young are being fed in late April or early May, so that is the best time to locate breeding pairs. Some pairs raise two broods.

Three were found at previously known sites, and four were found at new sites. The nests of two pairs could not be found, as they probably nest under bridges in private gardens, in Church Stretton itself, and Little Stretton. Three previously-known sites were not visited, but it is likely at least two were occupied. The population in the area is therefore estimated at 9 – 11 pairs.

Two of the found nests each produced four fledged young, four more almost certainly produced fledged young (they were about to fledge from the nest), and the unfound nest in Little Stretton produced at least two fledged young. The final found nest was

definitely predated. A pair near Leebotwood laid a second clutch, but the outcome is unknown.

Nest boxes

The Community Wildlife Group has received a grant from the Stepping Stones project, with the support of players of People's Postcode Lottery, which includes funding to install 10 new nest boxes. The nest finding in 2020 has identified some sites that will be more secure if boxes are placed there, and other suitable sites have been identified, some mid-way between nests now known, which may result in a population increase. These boxes should be installed before the start of the 2021 breeding season.

Rings

Ringling has been going on for many years, across the whole of the Teme Catchment, but also on the Cound Brook around Leebotwood and Longnor, but the colour-rings to identify individual birds in the field were only introduced in 2014. A colour-ring on the left leg is shown in the lower photo. The letter and two numbers on each ring are unique, so if the ring can be read it will add to what is known of the life history of the bird.



Colour-ringed Dipper © John Hanley

The smaller ring looks silver, and in silhouette it looks like a small wellington boot (the leg appears thicker at the bottom than the top). The Dipper in both photos has a small metal (BTO) ring on the right leg.

Members were asked to look for colour-rings and the smaller metal rings, and an attempt was made to read them all, by photography with a long lens, or a telescope. Nine colour-ringed birds were found: five were read, but four did not provide a good enough view.

Two of the five were colour-ringed in Cardingmill Valley in the winter of 2018, and the other three were all ringed in winter 2019, all adults at or very close to the sites where they nested. None of these five had been ringed earlier, as nestlings

By carrying on with the project in future years, it will be possible to build up an understanding of how long Dippers live, how far they move between fledging, roosting and nesting, and fidelity.

If you see a Dipper, please try and see if it has a ring and colour-ring, and report it, with the location, to Leo Smith (01694 720296 leo@leosmith.org.uk).