

December with the Birds.

TO OUR WILD BIRDS, this month of December is little different from November or January: much depends upon the prevailing type of weather.

Every part of England almost has its distinctive bird life, and this varies to a marked degree as we go north or south, inland or towards the coast. One might almost say that no two counties have exactly similar conditions of bird life.

We learn little by little of the movements of birds in each small area and thus come to have knowledge and understanding of bird life as a whole. Bird watching is a most absorbing and fascinating pastime and there is ample scope in every area for careful records to be made by any bird lover. It is work which, to have any real value, must be done continuously over a long period.

It is better to study the birds of one's own area first and later on, to find out other species which are less familiar. Careful notes should be made of uncommon visitors at all times.

In the depths of winter and in the coldest and most disagreeable weather, when there is hardly a sound to be heard from the other birds, there is one bird which is then in its finest voice and which may be heard singing gaily on the most depressing days. The dipper requires special surroundings and therefore is not widely distributed. It is only to be met with on rapidly flowing rocky streams and rivers, mostly, of course, in the north, though it may be found in the south where suitable streams exist.

The dipper is one of the few birds which is strictly non-migratory and it is to be found in its favourite haunts throughout the year. This joyous bird is in full song in mid-winter. It is a bird of unquenchable spirits and the colder the day the better does the dipper seem to sing.

It is a bird of special interest because its habits are quite unique. A land bird which looks as though it should be at

home in the trees, it has taken to the ways and habits of a water bird, and, though not web-footed, it obtains its food under water as though it were a real water bird.

It does not dive in the real sense of the word, but deliberately walks down into the water from the shore, or from some rock in the stream and it is able to maintain its position even in a strong current walking about over the stones on the river-bed seeking for the grubs, crustaceans and algae on which it feeds. If one is fortunate enough to be able to watch the bird under favourable conditions—for instance, when it is at work under a bridge, looking down, it will be seen that it is only able to remain under water with considerable effort. It has to struggle hard to remain submerged, and the moment the effort is relaxed it will bob up to the surface like a cork. While hunting under water, it turns over the stones in search of its food with surprising agility and ease, stones weighing at least twice as much as the bird itself.

This bird starts its nest by the end of February or early March, and before the end of March it will be complete, and the bird will be sitting on four or five pure-white eggs. The structure of the nest is interesting and not quite like that of any other bird. It is a bulky mass of green moss, domed, and with the entrance-hole low down in front; it is constructed with a porch or vestibule, a curtain of moss coming down over the front of the actual entrance. This is a precaution against flying spray and water. The cup of the nest is lined with dead leaves, usually those of the oak. It is usually to be found placed on some rock ledge, very frequently near, or even under some waterfall. Another favourite position is in a hole under a stone bridge. Two broods are sometimes raised in the year but this does not happen frequently as some books on the subject are apt to imply. A second nest is rare and may even be the result of an accident to the first attempt.

This bird is in a class by itself and has no near relations, yet it is curious to notice how many points the dipper has in



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[previous page](#)

[next page](#)