

DIPPER *CINCLUS CINCLUS* IN MILLCOMBE – A FIRST FOR LUNDY

by

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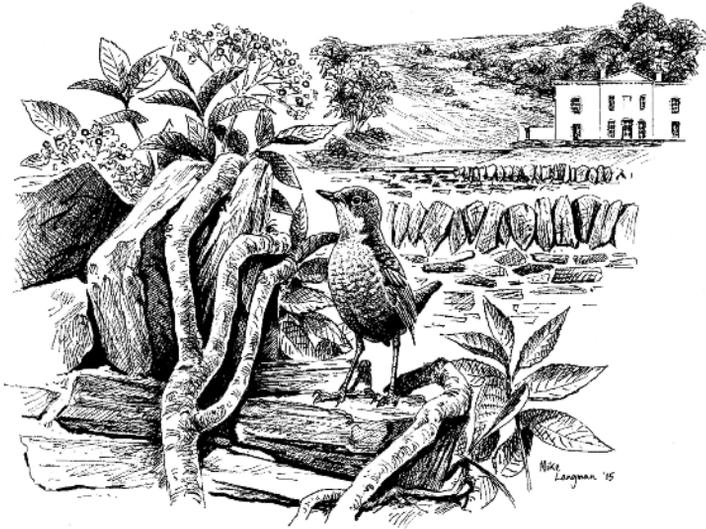
In our book *The Birds of Lundy* (Davis & Jones 2007), Dipper – essentially a sedentary bird of stony fast-flowing rivers and streams – is listed under ‘Unsubstantiated historical records’ with regard to its status on Lundy. We based this conclusion on what we then considered were misinterpretations by both Davis (1954) and Dymond (1980) of Chanter’s mention of ‘*Cinclus*’ in his 1877 list of birds seen on Lundy as referring to Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*. Chanter duplicated the entry for Turnstone in his list, the first entry showing the scientific name *Cinclus interpres* and the second *Strepsilas interpres*, a species whose scientific name had formerly been *Cinclus interpres*. Both Davis and Dymond, however, correctly placed Dipper in square brackets as there were no dated records.

In the 141 intervening years since publication of Chanter’s *Lundy Island: A Monograph*, Dipper had not once been recorded on the island until a brief visit by a juvenile bird on 9 June 2014. For the three birdwatchers involved, myself, Tim Jones (TJ) and Martin Palmer (MP), the occasion was memorable. Shortly before 09.00hrs TJ and I were walking down the track from Millcombe House and had reached the wall of the ‘Secret Garden’, the small walled garden directly below Millcombe House. As TJ was scanning the trees and bushes in the garden, I cast my binoculars over the walls and down the valley. A movement drew my eyes onto a bird on top of the wall nearest Millcombe pond. It was standing slightly side-on, facing down the valley and bobbing up and down on long legs.

After a millisecond or two while the significance of what I was looking at sank in, the word “Dipper” quietly escaped from my lips, to which TJ exclaimed, “What!” I replied more emphatically, “I’ve got a Dipper!” TJ quickly latched onto it. The bird was about 30 metres away from us, bobbing characteristically and giving us excellent views of its long pale legs and large feet, darkish-grey scaly upperparts and light-grey scaly underparts with a full pale ‘bib’ – distinctive of a juvenile. Its short tail was held upright as it bobbed, its bill stout tilted upwards. It stayed on the wall for some 20 seconds before flying towards us, but on seeing us it turned and perched on the recently built fruit cage against the wall of the middle garden.

It is at this point that Martin Palmer, a birdwatcher from Bedford revisiting the island some 40 years after his first trip, comes into the picture. Martin had been birding lower down the valley and as he arrived we were able, with much gesticulating, to indicate the presence of the Dipper. Martin’s notes record: “*There, on a timber and wire ‘fruitcage’, sat a dumpy and unmistakable bird with a short tail held cocked. A Dipper, and only 10 m away! A little smaller than a Blackbird, round head, fat body, pale breast, cocked tail and it ‘bobbed’. Just as I was focusing my pocket camera, the bird took flight and flew ‘whirringly’ up the valley toward Millcombe House.*”

Flying up the track, the Dipper passed by us within a couple of metres, just above head height, and swung left past the steps to the Secret Garden. Despite a thorough search of Millcombe the bird was not seen again. One can only presume that with no favourable habitat on the island in



which to feed, the Dipper either headed back in the direction from which it came, or onwards to find a suitable stretch of unoccupied flowing fresh water on which to establish its own territory.

The Migration Atlas (Wernham *et al.* 2002) details the lack of any widespread seasonal movements in Dippers breeding in Britain and Ireland. From 220 ring recoveries analysed at that time, the median distance for recoveries of dead birds was just 2 km, while 95% were within 35 km. Natal dispersal – the movement of juvenile birds between sites of hatching and first breeding – is given as between 3 and 5 km, with few movements greater than 40 km. This helps to explain the lack of Dipper sightings on Lundy over the years.

At dawn that morning, the weather had been fine and settled with a gentle south-easterly breeze; ideal conditions for a dispersing bird to have set out from the North Devon mainland. TJ & I know from our own observations along the stream that borders our home that Dippers, as well as being rapid flyers, sometimes fly at considerable height. This one confirmed instance of post-breeding dispersal to Lundy, whether from England or Wales, lends weight to thoughts that Chanter's listing of '*Cinclus*' may indeed have referred to Dipper, but we will probably never know for sure.

So occurred the first substantiated record of Dipper on Lundy – as with so many bird sightings, brief but magical. Our thanks to Mike Langman for capturing the moment so well in his illustration.

From a personal point of view, in my 42nd year of birdwatching on Lundy, although I have enjoyed many memorable encounters with birds, common and rare, this was doubly exciting since it was my first 'first' for the island.

References

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