Are "Not-So-Warm Springs" a Haven for American Dipper?

Photo by Heidi Kristenson

Kugrak Springs in western Gates of the Arctic National Park is home to some American Dippers.

The "Not So Warm Springs:" While the temperature of the water at Kugrak Springs in July—about 15^0 C—is similar to that of the other rivers in the area, these springs along a tributary of the Noatak River in Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve are warm enough to sustain flow through the winter months when most of the rivers are frozen, consistently providing open water in which resident American Dippers can forage for food.

Nests Discovered at "Not-So-Warm" Springs

Photo by Lois Manowitz

The American Dipper is one of the few species that overwinter in northern Alaska, foraging in icy waters kept from freezing by springs or swift currents.

While exploring the Kugrak River in Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, NPS scientists discovered a series of American Dipper nests tucked among rocky crags along the river corridor. Recently-hatched young were observed in two of four nests and adult birds were seen foraging in the river corridor. Two of the basketball-sized nests were in a small, damp, stalactite-laden cave near the source of one of the "not-so-warm" springs. These two nests, built into the rocky interior of the cave behind a curtain of spring water, had been woven from moss found around the spring. On top of one of the nests, a puffy chick perched quietly.

Nearly a mile downstream from where the springwater wells up from the ground on a hillside, right where the spring water joins the main channel of the Kugrak River, two more nests were found in exposed rock faces overhanging the emerald-green river water.

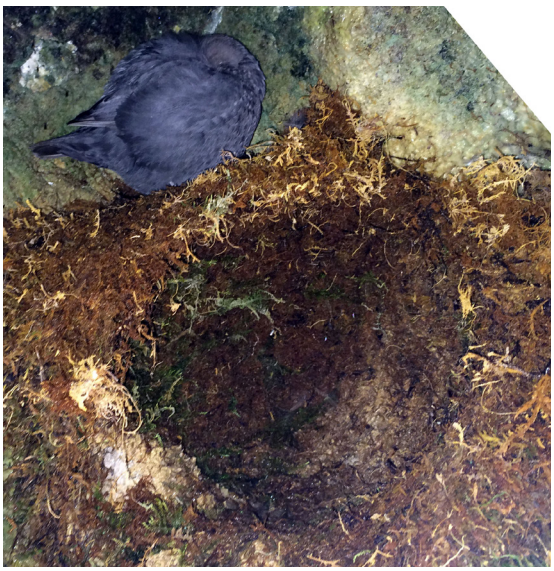


Photo by Delaney Vinson

An American Dipper chick perches atop its mossy nest in a cave shielded by a curtain of spring water.

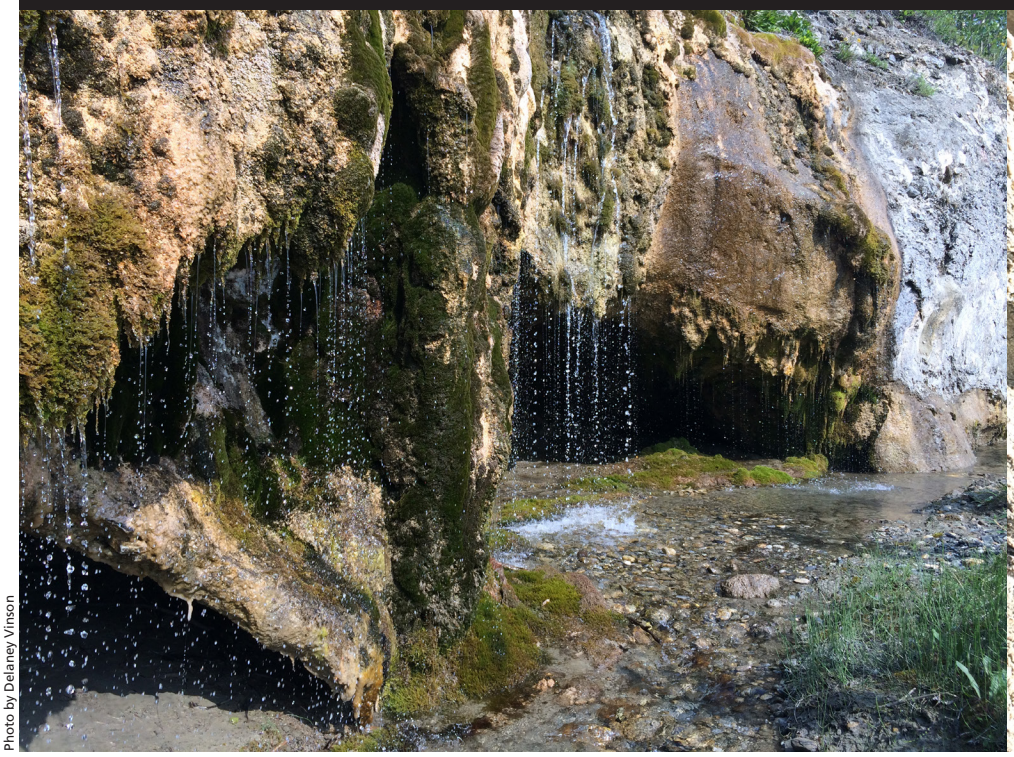


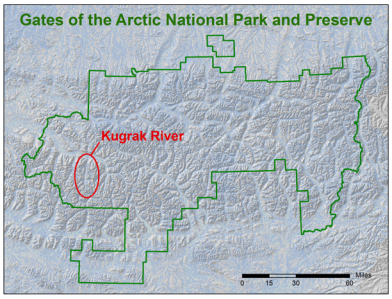
Photo by Delaney Vinson

A curtain of spring water rains down in front of a cave entrance where two American Dipper nests were discovered.

Photo by Delaney Vinson

American Dippers near the Kugrak Springs build their nests from moss that grows in the surrounding area.

A Year-round Park Resident



Kugrak Springs is just one of many potential year-round open water areas in Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve where American Dippers may be found.

The American Dipper is one of the few songbird species that overwinter in northern Alaska. It forages in icy waters throughout Alaska all year 'round, depending on localized areas of open water maintained by springs such as this one. The American Dipper enters the water by wading, swimming or diving and feeds on aquatic insects. In swift water it can walk on the river bottom by using its toes to cling to rocks. It carefully inspects river debris and turns over small twigs and rocks to locate insects attached to the material.

Dipper populations are very difficult to assess because the birds occur in small numbers in localized patches where conditions allow for survival. Relatively little is known about the distribution of American dippers in Gates of the Arctic, but they are frequently seen throughout the park.

Given the high number of fast-moving streams with extensive springs and open water areas in the park, combined with the rocky ledges commonly found along its rivers, Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve is likely an important haven for the American dipper.

For more information on this project, contact Aquatic Ecologist Amy Larsen at (907) 455-0622 or email her at Amy_Larsen@nps.gov.