

Belted Kingfisher

Ceryle alcyon

Kingfishers of the family *Alcedinidae* are short-legged, short-tailed birds with long, sharp beaks. Large, ragged crests adorn the stout heads of these stocky birds. Adept anglers, kingfishers are named for the Anglo-Saxon word meaning "king of the fishes." Although kingfishers often perch near water, they are recognized on the fly by their deep, irregular wingbeats. These birds often hover before plunging headlong into open water to catch fish (just like terns!). Look and listen for these conspicuous and loud birds in wooded areas near ponds, streams and coastal areas. Though three species of kingfishers exist, the Belted Kingfisher is the only one occurring in North America.

Common and conspicuous, the Belted Kingfisher occurs along open watercourses, both fresh and marine, including rivers, brooks, ponds, lakes and estuaries. Generally solitary, they perch prominently and motionless on branches or wires near water. At 33cm, these large-headed birds display a distinctive ragged crest, long, powerful bill and slate-blue breast band (the "belt"). While the belly and undertail coverts are white, the back, nape and rump are solid slate-blue. Both sexes are similar in appearance but the female has a rusty belly band and flanks. Although juveniles resemble adults, their breast bands are spotted in rust.

When announcing their territory, Belted Kingfishers give a loud, dry and unsteady rattle, similar to that of a Hairy Woodpecker. Another call is a higher, shorter, rapid musical trill, "tirrrr."

With their strong bills and feet, Belted Kingfishers dig nest-burrows in steep, dirt banks near water. Occasionally, they will nest in the cavities of trees or snags. Both sexes alternately excavate the 3'-6'-deep, horizontal or slightly upward-sloping burrows into sandy earth. A saucer of grass or leaves lines the nest cavity which houses the 5-8, 34mm, white and unmarked eggs of the clutch. Both parents incubate the clutch for 23-24 days but nestlings also cling together to maintain body heat. It is believed that both parents rear the young birds that fledge (learn to fly) in 23 days after hatching.

Fish are the favorite food of the Belted Kingfisher! Spotting from their perches or hovering over water, these birds catch prey by plunging after it headfirst into the water. They also take aquatic organisms, reptiles, amphibians, insects, young birds, mice and occasionally berries. On the coast, they are known to feed on squid and oysters. Although prey may be large enough to fill the throat, rapid



digestion allows food to slowly move down the gullet. The young birds are fed a milky regurgitant. After fledging, the parents teach their perched young to fish by dropping dead meals into the water. Within ten days, young fledglings are catching live prey!

Belted Kingfishers are year-round residents of North America and occur throughout most of Alaska and Canada and southward into the western and southwestern United States as far as New Mexico. In winter, these birds occur as far south as northern South America.