

You usually hear it first, crashing the silence of a tree-lined stream with its piercing rattle. Then the belted kingfisher appears in a flash. The stocky, white and grayish bird with the tufted head and thick bill bursts from nowhere and alights in an instant on a limb high above the water.

Of the world's 93 species of kingfishers, 90 are strictly tropical. Only three occur in the United States: the ringed, the green, and the belted. Of those, the belted is the most widespread, its range spanning North America.

Appearance

The belted kingfisher is a small but stocky bird with a large, daggerlike bill, short legs and tail, and an oversized head sporting a shaggy crest. "Belted" refers to a broad white band around the throat and a slate blue band encircling the breast. Unlike most bird species, the female is more brightly colored than the male, with a band of rust around her white chest and rust coloring along her belly. With binoculars you can see, on both sexes, dozens of small white dots on the upper wings and a white spot in front of each eye.

Food

From its high perch or while hovering overhead, the belted kingfisher scans streams and ponds for minnows, young trout, and other small prey. When one appears near the surface, the bird plunges headfirst (only rarely submerging itself completely), snags the fish with its beak, then returns to its perch. There it pounds the fish to death against a branch. Then the kingfisher repeatedly tosses the dead fish into the air until it drops smoothly, headfirst, down the bird's gullet.

Kingfishers also prey on crayfish, salamanders, lizards, mice, and insects. Because they consume their prey whole, the birds regurgitate pellets—as do owls—that contain bones and other indigestible bits.

Range and territory

You can spot kingfishers year round in western and central Montana—where portions of many high-gradient streams stay open all winter. Because the still or slow waters of

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Belted kingfisher

Megaceryle alcyon

By Ted Brewer

Scientific name

Megaceryle (megga-SER-ih-lee) is from the Greek *mega*, for very large, and *kerylos*, a Greek word for a halcyon, or kingfisher. In Greek mythology, Halcyone was the daughter of Aeolus, god of the winds. Having angered other gods, Halcyone was transformed into a kingfisher. Every winter Aeolus sent calm winds for a short time so Halcyone could hatch her eggs in peace. From this story comes the expression "halcyon days," meaning a time of peace and joy.

Alcyon (AL-see-on) is another Greek word for Halcyone, also spelled Alcyone.

eastern Montana lakes and streams freeze solid during cold months, the birds appear there only in summer.

Both males and female kingfishers stridently defend their territories, which average roughly half a mile of stream and the vegetation alongside it.

Nesting and reproduction

A kingfisher is equipped with syndactyl (partially fused) toes, which make excellent shovels for digging tunnels in stream banks for nests. The male and female take turns excavating the 1- to 8-foot-long tunnels, which take three to seven days to complete. Inside a small chamber at the back of the

tunnel, the female lays two to eight white eggs on the bare earth floor. Biologists who've explored the chambers say the nest sites reek of excrement, regurgitated pellets, and other food remnants.

Within roughly two weeks of hatching, the young kingfishers weigh the same as their parents. They fledge (begin to fly) within 22 to 40 days of hatching. To teach fishing skills, the parents drop dead prey into the water for their young to retrieve.

Conservation status

The annual Breeding Bird Survey, compiled by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, showed an 88 percent decline of kingfisher populations in Montana between 1967 and 2007. "I'm not sure anyone has made a good case for all the reasons," says Steve Hoffman, executive director of Montana Audubon. "We know there has been a long-term decline in the quantity and quality of riparian habitat, so that could be a key factor."

Even with such population losses, kingfishers remain widespread. Neither FWP nor federal wildlife agencies are considering the species for special conservation status.

Catherine Wightman, who is FWP's Bird Conservation Program coordinator, says the department keeps an eye on stream degradation from new subdivisions and other development. She also cites the lack of restorative flooding for the long-term loss of cottonwoods, which kingfishers use for perching along streams and rivers. 🐦