

Belted kingfisher

Megaceryle alcyon

The belted kingfisher is a medium-size bird with a distinctive stocky appearance, bushy crest, blue-gray feathers with a white collar and underbelly, and large bill for spearing fish. Among the more than 90 species of kingfishers, the sexes often look alike. The belted kingfisher is one of the few species in which the female is more brightly colored than the male.

The kingfisher is found near inland bodies of water, rivers and shorelines across Canada, Alaska and the United States. It is a commonly-found species throughout its range, especially in the Mississippi River valley and southeastern U.S. They migrate from the northern parts of its range to the southern United States, Mexico, Central America, the West Indies and northern South America in winter.

The breeding distribution of the belted kingfisher is limited in some areas by the availability of suitable nesting sites. This bird nests in a horizontal tunnel made in a river bank or sand bank and excavated by both parents. They often use the same tunnel year after year, especially if it is left undisturbed. The female lays five to eight eggs and both adults incubate the eggs and feed the young. Human activity, such as road building and digging gravel pits, has created banks where kingfishers can nest and allowed the expansion of the breeding range. Belted kingfishers have been known to share their tunnels with swallows. The swallows dig out small side rooms in the main tunnel wall.

During breeding season the belted kingfisher pair defends a territory against other kingfishers. A territory along a stream includes just the streambed and the vegetation along it, and averages more than half a mile long.

The kingfisher is often seen perched prominently in tall trees, on posts, or other suitable vantage points near water. They often hover before plunging in head first after fish. They also eat small crustaceans, frogs, aquatic insects, small mammals and lizards. To avoid being eaten by hawks, they will dive into the water. A group of belted kingfishers are collectively known as a “crown” and a “rattle” of kingfishers.

Belted kingfishers are commonly seen in the Chicago River watershed, especially along the straight channels with steep banks covered with trees, and in the Palos area. Be sure to keep your eye out for these dashing and unique birds the next time you are on the Chicago River.

