



# Belted Kingfisher

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**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Ceryle alcyon*. From the Greek *ceryle* meaning seabird, a reference to coastal areas where the bird is often found and where it was probably first encountered by pioneering ornithologists and naturalists. *Alcyon*, also Greek, is the name of a mythical woman who was so grieved after her husband drowned that the gods turned them both into kingfishers.

**DESCRIPTION:** Medium sized (13 inches, 4.5 to 6 ounces), stocky and short legged. White collar, slate blue breast band. Large head, long, pointed bill, and ragged crest. Females differ from males by having a rust-colored belly band and flanks. One of the few North American birds in which the female is the more colorful sex. Voice is a loud, drawn-out, dry rattling call.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Nests from Alaska east into northwestern Canada and south throughout southern Canada and U.S. Winters from southern Canada and northern U.S. south to Baja California and into Mexico, Central America, West Indies, and Bermuda. In Arizona, belted kingfishers occur statewide along lakes, rivers, creeks, canals, and ponds from July through late April (except where ice-over occurs). They breed mainly along the upper Verde, Salt, Gila, and Black rivers and along smaller streams of the Mogollon Rim and White Mountains between mid-May and mid-July.

**HABITAT:** Watercourses, both freshwater and marine. Favored perches

ART BY NATHAN REDWOOD



include branches, stumps, snags, power lines above waterways, and fishing/boating piers and docks. Nesting habitat commonly a vertical bank near water; preferably with soil composition of high sand and low clay. Occasionally nests in hollow tree stumps or cavities.

**BIOLOGY:** The kingfisher's diet is 50 to 90 percent small fish; it also consumes aquatic invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, insects, young birds, mice, and rarely berries. Kingfishers dive directly or hover in the air before spiraling into the water to capture a fish. Then, they return to a perch, beat the fish against a limb, toss it into the air, and catch and eat it.

Males and females dig burrows 3 to 6 feet deep into riverbanks to nest. Burrows as deep as 15 feet have been recorded. Nest chambers in burrows have been found lined with white fish bones, regurgitated fish scale pellets, grasses, and leaves. Usually six to eight glossy white and nearly spherical eggs (range five to 14) are laid. Incubation is performed by both adults. The young hatch in 23 to 25 days and fledge at 30 to 35 days old. Their parents teach them to hunt by dropping fish into the water for the fledglings to retrieve. About 10 days after fledging, the young are

forced from their parent's territory.

To avoid predators, such as the peregrine falcon or sharp-shinned hawk, kingfishers may dive below the water's surface.

**STATUS:** The belted kingfisher is not federally listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, nor is it included in the Department's draft list of *Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona* (AGFD in prep.). As a migratory bird, however, kingfishers, their nests, and eggs are federally protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Possession of the bird, its feathers, or eggs is strictly prohibited by this act.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Nest-site characteristics, range, and abundance need to be better defined. Reporting confirmed breeding locations to the Department would help us to better understand the bird and its management needs. Additional knowledge about how grazing, cattle, flooding, and bank composition benefit or limit nesting habitat, and how presence/absence of native, introduced, or sport fish affects foraging opportunities would also be helpful. Maintaining snags and trees along riverbanks will improve perching, foraging, and potential nesting habitat. 🦉