

Belted Kingfisher

Megasceryle alcyon

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DESCRIPTION

Taxonomy and Basic Description



Photo by Will Elder, NPS

The Belted Kingfisher is a stocky, medium-sized bird (28-35 cm long; 140-170 g) with a thick bill and large head covered with a conspicuous crest. Both sexes have a slate blue head and wings, a white collar across the neck above a blue-gray dorsum, and white underparts. Females have a rufous band across the lower breast extending down the flanks (Kelly et al. 2009). The species is sexually dimorphic with females more brightly colored than males (Alderfer 2008).

The Belted Kingfisher is one of 3 kingfisher species occurring in North America. The Belted Kingfisher is widespread throughout its range from Canada south to Mexico and the Caribbean. It is a fairly common resident of South Carolina. The Fall Migration Count conducted in 2000 showed *M. alcyon* present in all 11 South Carolina counties that were surveyed (Bailey 2001). There have been several confirmed breeding records in South Carolina with the majority in the Upstate and Midlands regions including Oconee, Pickens, Greenville, Laurens, Spartanburg, Edgefield, Aiken, Lexington, Barnwell, Williamsburg, Horry, and Jasper counties (Cely 2003) .

Status

The Belted Kingfisher is ranked as Secure and at very low risk of extinction or elimination due to its extensive range and stable population (Rich 2004). Its national or sub-national conservation status has not yet been assessed; therefore, it is included on the priority list for the SC SWAP.

POPULATION SIZE AND DISTRIBUTION

The Belted Kingfisher breeds from Alaska throughout Canada and the Northeastern United States. It is a resident throughout the United States and is a non-breeder south to Southern Mexico and the Caribbean. The global population is estimated at 2,200,000 (Rich 2004). It is a common resident in South Carolina and is most abundant in winter when migrants from northern latitudes arrive (Sprunt and Chamberlain 1970).



HABITAT AND NATURAL COMMUNITY REQUIREMENTS

Belted Kingfishers are often observed perched around streams, creeks, ponds, and estuaries where prey fish are visible. In South Carolina they can also be seen perched on telephone wires along tidal creeks and streams (Sprunt and Chamberlain 1970). Their diet consists primarily of small fish, but they also take crustaceans, mollusks, and insects (Kelly et al. 2009). Kingfishers often perch above calm water and wait for prey fish to swim near the surface; however, they also can be seen hovering in the air and plunging into the water after their prey.

The species is solitary except during the breeding season. Their thick bills and stubby feet allow them to excavate nesting burrows on the banks of streams where they also feed. Availability of appropriate earthen banks where burrows can be excavated appears to be critical for their distribution and range (Bent 1940).

CHALLENGES

Because of their diet of fish, Kingfishers were often shot by humans before migratory bird laws prohibited this practice. Kingfishers were especially detested around fish hatcheries where they were considered "significant predators" (Kelly et al. 2009). The Belted Kingfisher appears to be less susceptible to environmental contaminants than other piscivorous birds, perhaps due to their diet of smaller fish which contain smaller amounts of toxins (Kelly et al. 2009).

CONSERVATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

No conservation initiatives have been set specifically for the Belted Kingfisher. Long-term monitoring programs, such as the Breeding Bird Survey (Sauer et al. 2004), have provided population trend data that enables biologists and land managers to prioritize management decisions based on knowledge of population trends.

CONSERVATION RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide quality nesting habitat along earthen banks and suitable vegetative perches near foraging streams
- Monitor breeding sites and protect them from destruction or excessive human disturbance
- Maintain water quality in fresh water and estuarine systems

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

As the above-mentioned action items are accomplished and yield valuable information, adaptive management procedures will be evaluated and implemented for this bird species.

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