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# Profile Belted Kingfisher

*Ceryle alcyon* (formerly *Megaceryle alcyon*)

Belted Kingfishers are winter migrants to southern Florida, the American southwest, Mexico, and points south. In spring, the species returns to its more northerly breeding grounds between late April and mid May.

They are stocky, medium-sized birds with large heads relative to their body size. They have a shaggy crest on the top and back of the head and the bill is straight, thick, long, and pointed. They measure between 11-14 inches in length and have a wingspan between 19-23 inches.

Belted Kingfishers are a powdery blue-gray. Males have one blue band across the white breast while females have a blue band and a chestnut band. There is a small white spot by each eye at the base of the bill.

They establish regular fishing stations and live solitary lives in their own territories. The only time they mingle peacefully is during breeding season in the north.

Males and females vigorously defend their territories throughout the year. They do this with strident vocalizations, especially a reverberating mechanical rattle, and by aerial chases.

Belted Kingfishers almost always take food from the water, feeding on the most readily available prey in the habitat in which they are foraging.

Primary prey are small fish although they will also take crayfish, frogs, tadpoles, and other aquatic dwellers. Occasionally, they will also take reptiles, young birds, small mammals, and even some berries.

Belted Kingfishers spend much of their time perched alone along the edges of water, searching for prey. They also fly quickly up and down shorelines giving the loud rattling calls. They require foraging perches along the water bodies from which they can hunt. These perches include bare, projecting branches, telephone wires, or pier pilings.

In spite of their seemingly indiscriminate use of different aquatic habitats, kingfishers prefer calm, clear waters that are free of dense mats of aquatic plants or floating debris. Those, plus silt stirred up by heavy rains or wave action, hamper foraging by obscuring visibility.

Belted Kingfishers use sight as their primary means of perception. Their eyes have two fovea which give them the advantage of precise depth perception. Oils within their eyes improve their ability to see color. Their eyes are protected by a nictitating membrane when diving for fish. This membrane impedes their vision, so their sense of touch becomes increasingly important after the bird has entered the water. They close their bills as soon as they feel contact with a prey item.

They hunt either by plunging directly from a perch or by hovering over the water, bill pointed downward, before diving straight down after a fish they've spotted. They rarely go all the way under and are usually going after prey near the surface of the water.

When a kingfisher catches a fish, it will fly back to its perch, bang the fish against the branch until it no longer

moves, toss it into the air, catch it, and swallow it head first.

Like owls, adult kingfishers later regurgitate a pellet with bones and indigestible material.

All kingfishers are exceptionally vocal. Their calls are used for communication and claiming territory. They exhibit at least six different calls which they combine in different ways to express different messages. The call most commonly heard by observers is a call used for territory delineation, which is a long, high-pitched chatter or rattle.

## FUN FACTS

- Pleistocene fossils of Belted Kingfishers, to 600,000 years old, have been unearthed in Florida, Virginia, Tennessee, and Texas. The oldest known fossil in the kingfisher genus is 2 million years old and was found in Alachua County, Florida.
- According to Greek legend, Alcyone's husband drowned in a storm and so great was her grief, the gods permitted him to live again as a kingfisher. Alcyone was also metamorphosized into a kingfisher. The gods provided that every year there should be 7-14 days when the sea was calm so Alcyone could tend to her nest. This calm period became known as Halcyone days, a time of peace and tranquility. Thus the Belted Kingfisher's species name, *alcyon*.



Range Map (from Ken Kaufman)

