

WILDLIFE DIVERSITY NOTEBOOK: The Belted Kingfisher



DNR Photo Archives

Scientific Name: *Ceryle alcyon*

Status: Populations may be declining in many areas.

WV Status: Breeding Bird Survey data indicate that populations may be declining, but the trend is not clear. It is absent from some state waterways where it previously bred, apparently because of pollution.

Description: The belted kingfisher is a medium-sized bird (about 11-14 inches) with a large head and shaggy crest. Its plumage is dark blue with a white collar and chest. The female has a red chest band and flanks, making it one of the few species in which the female is more colorful than the male. It has a loud, rattling call.

Habitat: Kingfishers defend linear territories along streams, rivers and lakes that include approximately 800-1,000 linear feet of shallow riffles (six inches deep); they prefer to fish these riffles areas because of higher fish densities. Winter territories are smaller.

Kingfishers require fishing perches, especially near riffle areas, and the water needs to be

clear for fishing.

Nesting Requirements:

Availability and suitability of nest sites is a limiting factor for kingfishers. They excavate nesting burrows in vertical streambanks over six feet high with a substrate of at least 75 percent sand and with 7 percent or less of clay. The bank above the nest is often free of trees and is vegetated with herbaceous plants.

Kingfishers have nested in artificial banks (sawdust piles, sandpiles, road cuts), but these are the exception.

Diet: Fish, generally no more than 4 inches long; species taken are typically the most abundant or easily caught fish in the stream. Occasionally crayfish, amphibians, reptiles, insects, young birds and mice are also caught.

Kingfishers feed by diving headfirst into the water from a perch or from a hovering position, catching prey underwater. They fly to a perch to kill and eat the prey.

Life History: The clutch size for the kingfisher is 5-8 eggs.

Range: Kingfishers are considered resident/short-distance

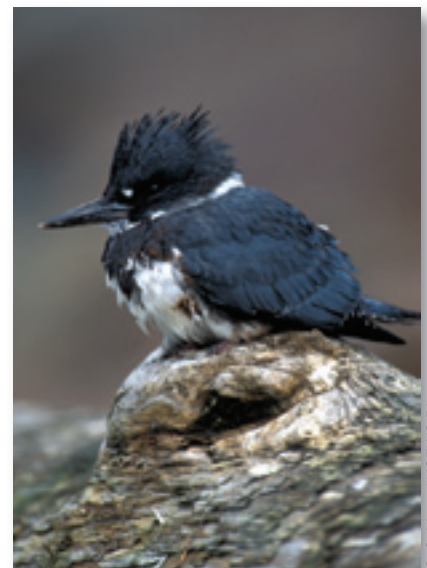
migrants. Breeds throughout the U.S. and central Canada and Alaska. Wintering range restricted to areas with open water (central/southern U.S. to southern South America). It nests throughout West Virginia along rivers and larger streams but is less abundant in the Allegheny Mountains than in other areas of the state.

Threats and Prospects:

Kingfishers appear to be less susceptible to environmental contaminants than other fish-eating birds, possibly because the small fish they eat have lower toxic levels. Acid mine drainage, and its subsequent degradation of stream life, may be an important factor in apparent declines of kingfishers in West Virginia.

Another factor may be stream channelization or any other activity (dredging, diking, etc.) that severely alters bank, stream flow or streambed characteristics. Kingfishers are sensitive to human disturbance and may abandon territories if harassed, especially during breeding.

Information compiled by Susan Olcott, a wildlife biologist stationed in Farmington.



C. Schlawe/USFWS Photo