BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz

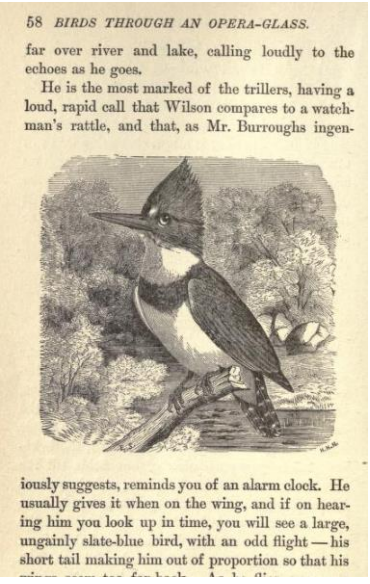
Belted Kingfisher
Megaceryle alcyon

Order: *Coraciiformes*, Kingfishers, Bee-eaters, Rollers
Family: *Alcedinidae* Latin for kingfisher
Genus: *Megaceryle* Greek for large kingfisher
Species: *alcyon* Greek (h)alkyon for kingfisher

Charles Wheeler

Upon delving into the Belted Kingfisher's scientific name, one flies right into Greek myth. According to Edward Gruson in his book, **Words for Birds**, (h)alcyon gives rise to the phrase "halcyon days" which are known as calm days at sea. The days were kept calm by order of the gods to honor the young Halcyone, daughter of Aeolus, God of the Wind. When she found her husband dead, she threw herself into the sea and the gods transformed her, and her dead husband, into kingfishers. Halcyon days occurred so that the floating nest of the kingfisher would not be disturbed during the brooding period.

Of the 87 species of Kingfishers, only two occur in North America, one of whom is the **Belted Kingfisher**. Its range extends throughout North America, spanning northern Alaska and Canada to the lower Rio Grand valley. The bird's look is unmistakable and has a rattling call that usually reveals its presence. I am particularly fond of Neltje Blanchan's description of the Belted Kingfisher's call in her book **Bird Neighbors**.



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far over river and lake, calling loudly to the echoes as he goes.

He is the most marked of the trillers, having a loud, rapid call that Wilson compares to a watchman's rattle, and that, as Mr. Burroughs ingeniously suggests, reminds you of an alarm clock. He usually gives it when on the wing, and if on hearing him you look up in time, you will see a large, ungainly slate-blue bird, with an odd flight — his short tail making him out of proportion so that his

"Flying well over the tree-tops along the waterways, the kingfisher makes the woodland echo with his noisy rattle which breaks the stillness like a watchman's at midnight. It is perhaps the most familiar sound heard along the banks of the inland rivers. No love or cradle song does he know. Instead of softening and growing sweet, as the voices of most birds do in the nesting season, the endearments uttered by a pair of mated kingfishers are the most strident, rattly shrieks ever heard by lovers. It sounds as if they were perpetually quarreling, and yet they are really particulary devoted."

The Kingfisher's diet consists primarily of fish, but it's also known to feed on crayfish, salamanders, frogs, young birds, dragonfly nymphs, grasshoppers, butterflies, and even berries in winter. The feeding behavior of the Belted Kingfisher was described by Mabel Osgood Wright in her book, **Birdcraft**.

"The Kingfisher seizes his prey by diving, and if it is small and pliable swallows it at once, but if it consists of the larger and more spiny fish they are beaten to pulp against a branch before they are swallowed, and even then the struggles and contortions the bird goes through before finally mastering the fish, would be very ludicrous were they not so evidently distressing."

The Kingfisher is one of the few species of birds which can hover. Audubon noted this behavior writing in his book, **Birds of America:**

"If, in the course of such excursions, the bird passes over a small pool, it suddenly checks itself in its career, poises itself in the air, like a Sparrow Hawk or Kestrel, and inspects the water beneath, to discover whether there may fishes in it suitable to its taste. Should it find this to be the fare, it continues poised for a few seconds, dashes spirally headlong into the water, seizes a fish, and alights on the nearest tree or stump, where it swallows its prey in a moment.

Steve & Dave Maslowski

An often rewarding activity is to search for the nest of the Belted Kingfisher. Somewhere near a stream or lake, inspect a tall mud bank for an entrance hole 3 to 4 inches in diameter situated 1 to 3 feet below the top of the bank. The hole is usually located where the topsoil gives way to preferred sandy or clay soil. The Kingfisher excavates the tunnel with its bill, scraping the loosened soil backwards with its feet. Tunnel length averages 4 to 6 feet but may be even longer. The nest cavity is at the end of the tunnel and is a chamber of 6 to 10 inches in height and diameter. The tunnel takes anywhere from 3 days to 3 weeks to complete depending on the soil type. The Kingfisher may start a number of tunnels before deciding on an appropriate spot. A sure way to tell an active nest is to look for two small grooves on the lower edge of the entrance. These are caused by the feet of the birds as they walk in and out of the tunnel. Nest building usually begins the first part of April but may proceed throughout May.

Questions and/or comments email me at eapyeritz@gmail.com.