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Birds of the Great Plains: Family Alcedinidae (Kingfishers)

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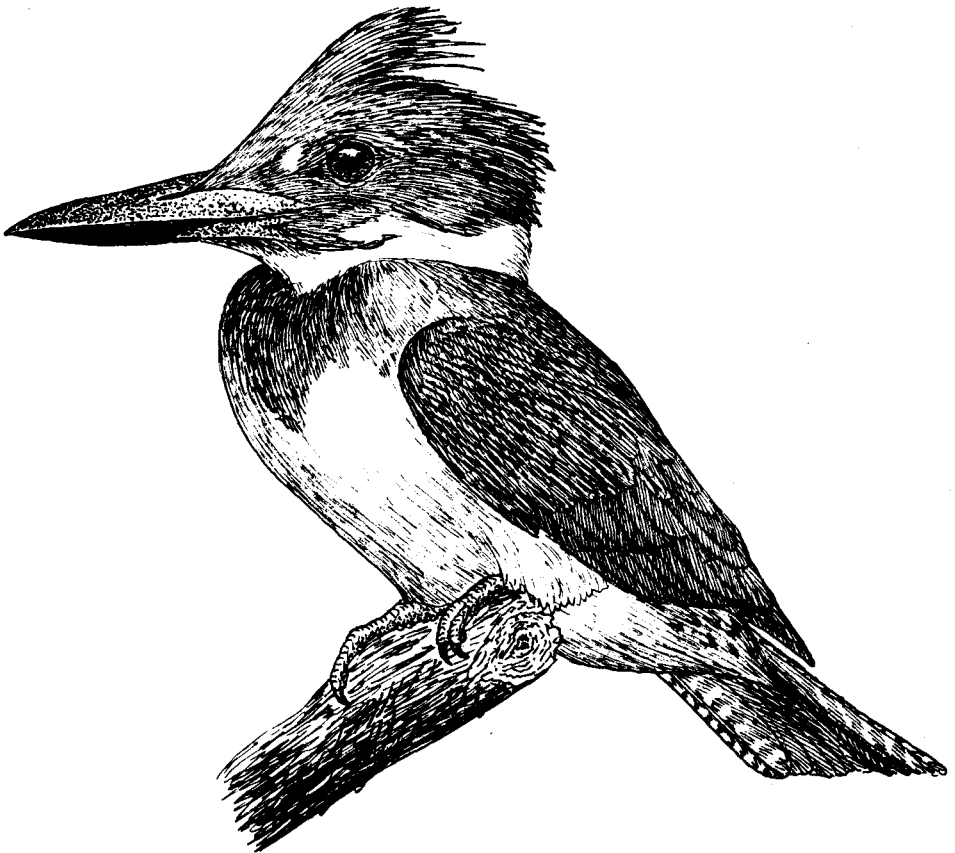
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(FAMILY ALCEDINIDAE
(KINGFISHERS))



Belted Kingfisher

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*

Breeding Status: A pandemic breeder in suitable habitats throughout the region.

Breeding Habitat: This kingfisher breeds near water supporting aquatic animal populations, where bluffs, road cuts, gravel pits, sandbanks, or similar nearly vertical earth exposures provide suitable nest locations.

Nest Location: The nest consists of a rather long burrow, often about 5 feet long but up to 15 feet, with an entrance about 3–4 inches in diameter (slightly wider than high) and usually within 3 feet of the top of the bank and at least 5 feet above ground level. The nest cavity is an enlarged area at the end of the burrow and is often lined with disgorged food pellets. Sandy clay soil seems to be the preferred substrate, and nests are usually near a dead or dying tree.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 5 to 8 eggs, white and glossy. The incubation period is 23–24 days. Single-brooded, but a persistent re-nester.

Time of Breeding: The nesting season in North Dakota probably extends from mid-April to late July. In Kansas the egg-laying period is at least from April 21 to May 20, and Oklahoma egg dates are from April 26 to July 1, with nestlings reported from June 4 to July 15.

Breeding Biology: Belted kingfishers take up residence in suitable habitats that allow for large home ranges. At times they may forage up to 5 miles from the nest site, and a population density of about 1 pair per 1.8 square miles of habitat has been estimated at Lake Itasca in Minnesota. Small fish averaging about 3–4 inches long compose more than half their diet. Both sexes participate in nest excavation, which may require up to 3 weeks. Both sexes incubate, apparently beginning after the last egg is laid. After hatching the male also assists in getting food. At night the male usually roosts away from the nest, sometimes in a separate burrow or in a forested area. The young are relatively helpless and spend much time clinging to one another, apparently to maintain body warmth. They remain in the nest for at least a month, when they are first able to fly, then stay near it for the next few days while their parents teach them to catch fish. The adult captures a fish, beats it until it is nearly senseless, and drops it back into the water. The young are encouraged to capture these easy prey and gradually learn to catch normal fish. Within 10 days they are relatively independent and soon leave the vicinity of the adult pair.

Suggested Reading: Cornwell 1963; White 1953.

