ALCEDO ISPIDA, Linn.

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Kingfisher.

Alcedo Ispida, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 179.

As the blue of the Turquoise forms a pleasing contrast among minerals, and the drooping blue-bell imparts colour to our shady woods, so is the Kingfisher conspicuous for its brilliancy among our native birds. Still, with all its beauty, it is by no means the finest of its family; for in those countries where nature is more lavish of her gifts, other and still lovelier species exist. The great group of birds to which it belongs are so varied that they are naturally divisible into many distinct genera; they are, moreover, so widely dispersed that not only each of the great continents of the globe, but all or nearly all the islands are also tenanted by Kingfishers, as these birds are generally called. This familiar term, however, is a most inappropriate one, inasmuch as but few of them take fish, or live in the vicinity of water,—some of the species even being found on the hot scoræ of volcanic mountains, such as occur in the Island of Ascension; and I believe none of them ever drink. Our bird and its allies, for which the generic name of *Alcedo* has been retained, and the members of the genus *Ceyx* are the most truly aquatic of the entire family; for they frequent exclusively the neighbourhood of brooks and rivers, and feed principally on fish, aquatic insects, and diminutive Crustaceans.

A sight of the Kingfisher on its native waters, transient though the view may be, is necessary before a just conception of its beauty can be formed; for the specimens generally seen in our museums, or as an ornament in our drawing-rooms, convey but a sorry idea of the loveliness of the living bird. By nature shy, and in habits solitary, few but naturalists or anglers have had an opportunity of noticing the speck of glancing blue which with arrow-like swiftiness descends the gloomy beck or overtops the gushing waterfall, or the red gleam which shines forth from the stranded snag in the river or the post standing upright in the stream; and none but those who are familiar with the actions and habits of our native birds are aware that the diminutive object hanging over the river on quivering wings is the Kingfisher, poising itself above a little fish, on which it presently darts with unerring aim. The observer of nature sees the stoop, if he awaits the rising, and can follow with his eye the flash of blue which skims away like a brilliant beetle; he will perceive it suddenly stop on a stone or dead limb of a tree, near the water's edge, and, if near enough, may see the minnow, the glistening bleak, or young trout beaten to death before it is either swallowed or carried to the clamorous and expectant brood which are being reared on a shelving bank near at hand, or on the side of a pit in the neighbouring wood. In England the Kingfisher occurs in every district where there is water: even the smallest streamlet will attract it; and thus the clear swift-flowing Wandle, the murky Brent, the Colne, and the Kennett are all enlivened with its presence. Old Father Thames, however, feeds more Kingfishers than any of his tributaries; and on that beautiful river, particularly from Windsor to Henley, it is sufficiently abundant to admit of every one gratifying his wish who may be desirous of seeing the bird in a state of nature. That its numbers would be far greater, and that every mile would be enlivened with its passing flight and shrill note, there is not the slightest doubt, could the destructive hand of the collector be stayed; for then our queen of rivers and its beautiful woods and meads would form a sanctuary wherein the bird might remain free from molestation. In Scotland, although it may be observed in every county, it is more scarce than with us; in Ireland it is occasionally met with in suitable localities throughout the island, but is nowhere numerous.

For the following interesting note on the occurrence of the Kingfisher in Argyleshire I am indebted to the kindness of the Duke of Argyll:—

“This bird visits Argyleshire only occasionally, at distant intervals, and, so far as I have observed, never remains long. I attribute this entirely to one circumstance, viz. the absence in the rapid streams of our country of the numerous species of fish common in English rivers, and which constitute the chief food of the Kingfisher. The bleak, the dace, the roach, the minnow, and others whose fry swim in the shallows, or near the surface in lowland rivers, are entirely wanting in Argyleshire. We have nothing but the various species of *Salmonidæ*; and their fry conceal themselves so well among the stones and rocks of the rapid waters in which they are produced, that they must afford a very scanty supply to such methods of capture as those practised by the Kingfisher.

“Two years ago a Kingfisher staid some weeks at Inverary, and frequented partly a lake of brackish water, which is well supplied both with trout and marine fish. The last time I observed the bird, it was sitting on a bunch of seaweed; and the brilliancy of its colouring, set off by so dark a background, attracted the eye from a great distance. I have never observed it except in autumn.”

So general is the dispersion of the Kingfisher in all parts of England, that there are few situations, of which water forms a part, where it may not be found; even the waters in Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park are seldom without a solitary example sitting motionless in some nook or corner: yet how few of the busy denizens of our over-crowded metropolis have ever seen it there!

To find a Kingfisher on the Thames, or indeed on any other river, some knowledge of the habits of the bird must have been previously acquired. If the water be clear, it may be seen over the main stream; but if turbid and heavy, and its favourite food not visible, the bird instinctively resorts to a neighbouring ditch or some backwater: there he patiently sits on an overhanging bush, and drops upon any aquatic insect, stickleback, or other small fish. There are times, particularly in autumn, when a partial migration takes place, and the young at least leave the river altogether for the salt marshes near the sea; here every ditch crossed by a rail forms a perch, whence it keeps a sharp look-out for crustaceous or other aquatic creatures, in the choice of which it is not over-nice or particular. Voracity, in fact, is one of the characteristics, not only of our bird, but of the whole race. The Australian Kingfisher will attack a small rat; the English bird a bullhead or a gudgeon the length of its own body, by which means it is not unfrequently choked. No greater proof can be given of the immense number of fish destroyed by these birds than the fact that, of the bones cast up in the shape of lengthened pellets from the stomach of a single pair, a large dry nest was formed in a few days. That such a quantity of bones should be cast up in so short a period may seem strange; but facts are stubborn things, and I will now relate an incident of this kind which came under my own observation.

On the 18th of April 1859, during one of my fishing-excursions on the Thames, I saw a hole in a precipitous bank, which I felt assured was the nesting-place of a Kingfisher; and on passing a spare top of my fly-rod to the extremity, a distance of nearly three feet, I brought out some freshly cast bones of fish, convincing me that I was right in my surmise. The day following I again visited the spot with a spade; and after removing nearly two feet square of the turf, dug down to the nest without disturbing the passage which led to it. Here I found four eggs, placed on the usual layer of fish-bones. These I removed with care, and then replaced the earth, beating it down as hard as the bank itself, and restored the turfy sod. A fortnight after, the bird was seen to leave the hole again, and my suspicion was awakened that she had taken to her old breeding-quarters a second time. I again visited the place on the twenty-first day from the date of my former exploration, and, upon passing the top of my fly-rod up the hole, found not only that it was of the former length, but that the female was within. I then took a large mass of cotton-wool from my collecting-box, and stuffed it to the extremity, in order to preserve the eggs from damage during my again laying it open from above. On removing the sod and digging down as before, I came to the cotton-wool, and beneath it a well-formed nest of fish-bones, the size of a small saucer, the walls of which were fully half an inch thick, together with eight beautiful, translucent, pale pinky-white eggs, and the old female herself. This nest I removed with the greatest care; and it is now deposited in the proper resting-place for so interesting an object, the British Museum. This mass of bones, then weighing 700 grains, had been cast up and deposited by the bird and its mate in the short space of twenty-one days. Ornithologists are divided in opinion as to whether the fish-bones are to be considered in the light of a nest. Some are disposed to believe them to be the castings and fæces of the young brood of the year, and that the same hole being frequented for a succession of years, a great mass is at length formed; while others suppose that they are deposited by the parents as a platform for the eggs, constituting, in fact, a nest; and I think, from what I have adduced, we may fairly conclude that this is the case; in fact nothing could be better adapted to defend the eggs from the damp earth.

The great *Dacelonæ* of Australia deposit their eggs in cavernous hollows in the boles of the *Eucalypti*; the *Halcyonæ* in the spouts of the branches of the same trees; both on the bare wood. Our Kingfisher, and probably all the true *Alcedines*, on the other hand, like the Sand-Martin, drills a circular, upward-slanting hole in an upright bank, to the depth of two or three feet, at the end of which it excavates an oven-like chamber, large enough for its seven or eight young to sit upright on the nest of bones, the slanting direction of the entrance serving as a drain for the excrement; and hence the foetid odour from this cloaca often leads to the detection of the breeding-place. It is also detectable by means of another sense; for if the ear be placed to the opening, the shrill voices of the young, resembling the noise produced by a spinning-wheel, or the pea in a child's rattle, may be heard. When the young quit the hole, they sit about on the neighbouring branches, and greet the old birds as they arrive and supply by turns the ravenous brood. These young fliers generally resemble the adults in colour; they are therefore gaily dressed from the beginning. The adult of both sexes are much alike; the male, however, is smaller than his mate in size, but brighter in colour.

Independently of the British Islands, the Kingfisher inhabits every part of Europe, except the extreme north; it is also distributed over the African border of the Mediterranean; in India it is replaced by a nearly allied species, the *Alcedo Bengalensis*.

The Plate represents the two sexes, of the natural size, on the *Carex riparia*.

Gould, John. 1873. "Kingfisher, *Alcedo ispida* [Pl. 10]." *The birds of Great Britain* 2, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323825>.

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