

BIRD OF THE MONTH

By Jeannie Marcure

DENIZEN OF THE WATERWAYS

Since May is the month that many Montanans return to our beautiful lakes and streams for recreation, it seems appropriate that our featured bird this month is one seen almost exclusively on or near the water. My favorite form of water recreation involves paddling a small kayak with binoculars and camera close at hand. Not only is this activity good exercise, but it also offers some of my best bird watching and photography encounters of the year. Combine the quietness of a kayak with its ability to reach places otherwise unattainable and you have the perfect opportunity for some great birding! I might also add that part of my fascination with this particular bird is the fact that even after hundreds of opportunities; I've never been able to get a good photograph. Somewhat of a tease, he often lets me approach quite closely but then just as I focus for the perfect shot, he gives his raucous call and flies up the shoreline to a new perch. Something about his sassy demeanor as he watches me, tells me that he enjoys this little game we play!

Often seen perched jauntily on a branch hanging over the water, the Belted Kingfisher is found throughout most of North America and is fairly common here in the Flathead Valley. Two other species, the Ringed Kingfisher and the Green Kingfisher are also found in North America but these two, while common in the neotropics, are rarely seen beyond the Rio Grande area of southern Texas.

The Belted Kingfisher is stocky and short-legged with a large shaggy, crested head, and a long, thick bill. Both male and female have blue-gray heads, backs, wings and chest bands with white throats and bellies. The female has an additional rust colored belly band and is one of the few North American birds who is more colorful than her partner. Kingfishers emit a hoarse woody rattle usually while in flight or when disturbed from their fishing perch and this distinctive sound helps me spot many Kingfishers who would otherwise go unnoticed as they sit quietly in the waterside brush. You can hear this call on the net at:

<http://whatbird.wbu.com/obj/61/ /Belted Kingfisher.aspx>

According to Sibley, Belted Kingfishers eat mainly small fish that are captured under water but they also consume amphibians, reptiles and aquatic insects. Since they hunt by sight, they need clear water and can be found on favorite perching spots along streams, rivers, ponds and lakes. Interestingly, Kingfishers are able to see well both in the air and under water, thanks to an egg-shaped lens in their eyes which allows them to focus in both environments. They hunt by sitting on an exposed branch or hovering over the water before plunging head first after the prey. After the catch, the Kingfisher kills its catch by either whipping it against a tree or dropping it on a stone. Unlike other fishing birds such as Eagles and Osprey, Belted Kingfishers have weak feet, suitable only for perching and the outer and middle toes on each foot are partially joined.

Belted Kingfishers are monogamous and pair for life. The pair bond is maintained through display and active defense of a territory of about 500 yards of waterside habitat. During courtship, the male conducts aerial pursuits of the female and following these pursuits, the pair engages in a courtship feeding during which the female sits upright with her beak in the air, wings dropped and quivering and gives a begging call. After the male presents her with food, the two mate.

Nesting occurs in burrows made on exposed vertical banks along or near waterways. Both sexes build this burrow using their heavy beaks to create a tunnel up to 2 inches wide and from 3 to 10 feet deep. The tunnel is usually gently angled upward, probably for drainage, and ends in a rounded nest chamber. No nesting materials are used and sanitation is ignored

as the nesting area becomes littered with food remains and excrement. The five to seven white eggs are incubated by both sexes and hatch within 22-26 days. Both parents feed the young regurgitated prey until they are big enough to eat whole prey. After the babies fledge (18 to 28 days) the parents teach them to fish by dropping dead prey into the water for them to retrieve.

Belted Kingfishers are solitary except during breeding season and winter as far north as they can find open water. Migrants move at low altitudes, following rivers and shorelines until they reach suitable winter habitat. Returning to their breeding territories as soon as the ice leaves in the spring, they seem to return to their favorite tactical positions every year. Some good places to find Belted Kingfishers locally are:

- The boat access at Leisure Lane—look in the brush just across the river or listen for the call
- The bridge across Ashley Creek just south of Kalispell on Airport road—check the power line and the brush near the creek.
- The bridge area on Old Hwy 93 near Dayton—check the brush on the lakeside and also the dock area that belongs to the winery
- Highway 93 south of Ronan where Post Creek crosses the highway—check the power lines and brush near the creek

As you return to your favorite lakes and rivers this summer, listen for the raucous call of the Belted Kingfisher and watch the waterside shrubbery and hopefully you'll catch a glimpse of this interesting little bird. Be sure to take your binoculars and a camera and remember that this is breeding season so be careful not to disturb any nesting birds or waterfowl. Birds disturbed during nesting often abandon their nests and fail to reproduce.

(Google.com)

