

Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*



Folk Name: Diver

Status: Resident

Abundance: Fairly Common

Habitat: Lakes, ponds, streams, wires along roads with wet ditches

The Belted Kingfisher is a popular and well-known bird here in the Central Carolinas. Solitary kingfishers can be found foraging on almost every local creek, wetland, pond, or lake at some point during the year. Though not numerous, residents living along the shoreline of our many lakes and ponds might see or hear one almost daily.

The kingfisher is easily identified by its conspicuous field marks, its behavior, and its distinctive call. At 13 inches, it is about 2 inches larger than the Blue Jay—our only other bird with a crested blue head, blue back, and blue tail. Unlike the jay, however, the kingfisher has a large head, stout bill, and a band of pale blue crosses its white breast underneath. Female kingfishers have an additional belly band of rust underneath. The fishing behavior of the kingfisher is distinctive as well. No other bird of this size hovers and dives, or perches and dives, into water to catch fish.

The Belted Kingfisher is a year-round resident in this region. During especially harsh winters, some kingfishers migrate down into the Carolinas from the North. These birds may group together during migration. In 1894, an article on bird migration published in *The Charlotte Democrat* described various calls different groups of birds use while migrating and it noted: “The kingfisher which chatters in his summer creek, and scolds so that you might almost imagine that he was a human being, simply gives a scream or single resonant note, which keeps his forces together.”

The dry, harsh rattle call of the Belted Kingfisher is well known by many. It can often be heard echoing over water at a great distance. Prominent Charlotte businessman and birder C.M. Carson occasionally wrote about birds for the local newspaper. In 1919, he submitted a poem about the Belted Kingfisher writing in a letter to the editor that “everyone should enjoy the characteristics of the kingfisher, for it carries them to the old swimming hole way down home in the creek.” A portion of Carson’s poem describes the Belted Kingfisher’s call:

With your topknot up, and you in a chatter, up and down the creek you go, and we wonder what is the matter. The fish and tadpoles are scared to death, and in their holes do creep. Now why don’t you keep quiet, slipping [up] on them while they are asleep, and fly up on them unawares, gobbling them down



in pairs, instead of waking up the dead, with that outlandish voice from your great big head?

Now you are not a game bird, Mr. Kingfisher, nor have you any notes worth while, but the chatter from that big head can be heard for quite a mile.

Ten years later in Charlotte, William McIlwaine wrote: “Down by the creek I heard a sort of low rattling sound. Going to investigate I caught the barest glimpse of a wing. Then at quite a distance I saw the bird indistinctly. I got no marks—except the light wing, and a general idea it was a large bird. I feel persuaded it was a Kingfisher.” He returned several times over the next few days until he was better able to observe it and confirm his identification. Sometime later, McIlwaine submitted a report to the Bureau of Biological Survey that a Belted Kingfisher was breeding there. In November 1930, he added “Down on the creek the kingfisher is with us all the Winter long.”



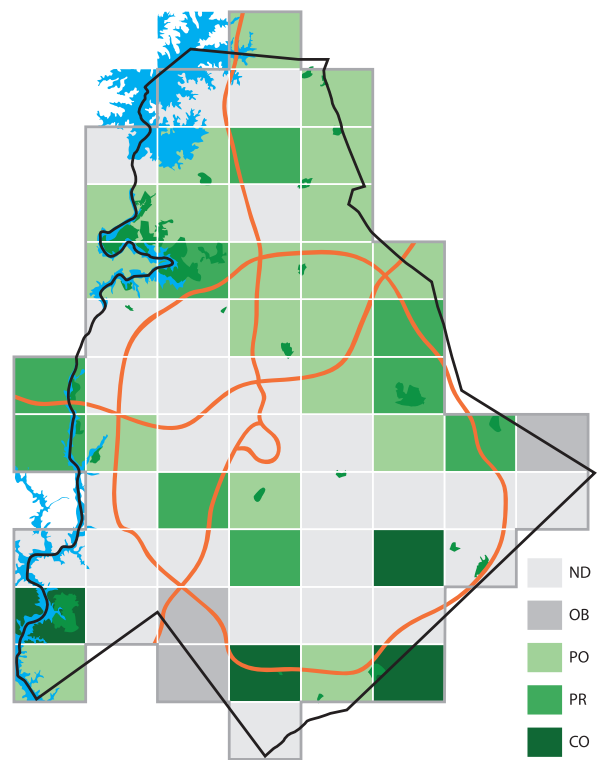
Male Belted Kingfisher. (Gary P. Carter)

Additional examples of early accounts of Belted Kingfisher from the region include: one recorded by C. S. Brimley in Hickory on June 21, 1910; one seen by Elmer Brown in Salisbury on April 7, 1923; one reported by Roxie Collie Simpson while birding with the Charlotte Bird Club on October 16, 1943; three watched by H. Lee Jones, flying along the shore of Lake Wylie on May 27, 1971. Jones observed the female dive, capture, and eat a 3-½-inch fish. Lastly in the 1980s, a male and a female Belted Kingfisher were killed while flying together after crashing into a picture window at the home of Mrs. W. Prindle off Carmel Road in Charlotte. The pair may have been involved in a courting or pair formation flight. Mrs. Prindle collected them and turned them over to staff at the Charlotte Nature Museum, where they were prepared as taxidermied mounts, placed on a driftwood base, and have been used off and on in their educational exhibits for more than 30 years.

Belted Kingfishers nest in steep mud or sand banks with no vegetation, situated alongside our larger streams, lakes, and rivers. They excavate their own holes which can be up to 6 feet deep. Like many other cavity-nesting birds, they lay a clutch of all-white eggs—as they don't require any pigmentation for camouflage.

Active nests of the Belted Kingfisher are hard to find. We have specific details on only one active nest from the region. A nest record card was submitted providing confirmation of a nest in Davidson located “on a stream in a deciduous forest beyond a lake, flanked by a paved road, some houses, more woods.” The nest was described as a “cavity in dirt/mud bank,” 3–4 inches in diameter, and situated about 12 feet above stream level. The adults were observed actively excavating the nest on 17 May, and

the observer described them as “excited,” “making a lot of noise,” and “nervous about my presence.” Unfortunately, this nest was found abandoned on 11 June apparently due to “serious construction” occurring nearby.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/9, CO/4)