

Watchable Wildlife – The Belted Kingfisher

By Bob Garrison

What better animal to highlight in our annual fishing issue than the belted kingfisher? After all, every angler has hopes of being a “king” fisher. Yet mention the kingfisher in a mixed group of anglers and fisheries managers and you’re likely to get some surly responses. Kingfishers live up to their reputations as fish eaters. For decades, Fish and Game hatcheries served as feeding stations for kingfishers and other fish eating birds until exclusion nets were built over the raceways to protect the young fish. Despite Fish and Game’s efforts to discourage the birds, hatcheries are still some of the best locations to view kingfishers. So today the Department shares a few trout and salmon fry with the birds and in turn, offer visitors a chance to watch not only fish, but kingfishers too.

There is no other way to say it, kingfishers are one of the kings of California’s bird species. They are bold, brash and strikingly beautiful. With a sharp chiseled beak, ragged crest and slate-blue and white markings, the kingfisher is hard to miss. It is one of the few bird species in which the female is more brightly colored than the male. The female displays a rust-colored belly band which is absent on the male. If their appearance doesn’t attract your attention, their call will. You can’t miss the kingfisher’s loud rattle call which it uses at the slightest disturbance. Combine their looks and vocalizations with their spectacular dives for fish and you have a bird that is hard to top.

Kingfishers hunt from a favorite perch or by hovering above the water. Their primary prey are small fish a few inches in length, however kingfishers also hunt crayfish, insects, and amphibians. After catching a fish, the kingfisher will land and beat its prey against the perch to stun the fish before swallowing it whole. Once the food is digested, the bird regurgitates a pellet of undigested bones, shells and scales. Biologists as well as interested viewers can find the pellets under the bird’s perch to determine what types of food the kingfisher is eating.

Kingfishers are solitary except during the breeding season. Each bird protects a home territory which varies in size based on the available food supply. At the start of the breeding season, the male increases the size of his territory in preparation for nesting. During courtship, the male presents a perspective mate with a fish and upon acceptance, the pairing is forged for the season. Both the male and female digs a nesting burrow three to six feet into the side of a bare earth bank. About six or seven eggs are laid in the nesting chamber and both adults incubate the eggs. After hatching, the young are fed partially digested fish for the first five days until they progress to whole fish. The fledglings first leave the burrow about 28 days after hatching and the adults continue to feed them for another three weeks. The fledglings start hunting crayfish and insects and progress to fish as their hunting skills improve.

Where to Watch Belted Kingfishers

Anglers and bird watchers alike can find the bold, flashy kingfisher throughout the state at different times of year near fresh and salt water. They can be found in central and northern California year-round, and in southern California during the winter. Along the coast, the birds prefer calm, shallow inlets and bays with relatively clear water. Inland, kingfishers prefer shallow streams and rivers with riffles, and lakes and ponds.

Follow the brown and white wildlife viewing road signs or check the California Wildlife Viewing Guide for directions to the following areas to view belted kingfishers:

- Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park
- Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary
- Battle Creek Wildlife Area
- Clear Lake State Park
- Feather River Hatchery
- American River Parkway and Nimbus Hatchery
- Stanislaus River Parks
- Lake Merit
- Hot Creek Hatchery
- Mt. Whitney Hatchery
- Malibu Creek State Park
- Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve

You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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