

KINGFISHER



A striking flash of blue, accompanied by a shrill, piping whistle is what alerts our attention to the fleeting glimpse of a kingfisher. At first, the bird appears to be flying like a dart at high speed, but this is not the case, as kingfishers fly no faster than most other birds of similar size. It is the fact that they fly so close to the water surface and in a direct line that gives the impression of speed.

The kingfisher is a small bird, similar in size to a starling. What it lacks in size it more than makes up for with its appearance and charismatic lifestyle. The wings of the bird are blue and the back flaunts an almost fluorescent, bright cobalt colour. The breast is chestnut and there are contrasting white patches around the neck and bill. This is the most handsome of birds. The sexes can be distinguished by the orange colour on the lower mandible of the female. The male's bill is completely black.

In winter, kingfishers are solitary, holding individual territories and showing aggression towards others of their kind. Defence of the home range is vital in order to preserve fish stocks, favourite fishing perches and roosting sites.

During the breeding season, a pair of kingfishers will share a territory, nesting in steep banks, usually above slow-moving water. The nest chamber is formed at the end of a tunnel, which the birds dig with their formidable bills. The tunnel can be up to one metre in length, rising slightly to a rounded chamber about 150mm (6 inches) across. Both birds take turns to incubate the clutch of 6 to 7 eggs, over a three-week period. Nestlings are also tended by both parents for around three-and-a-half weeks. Once the fledglings leave the nest, the parents tend them for only a couple of days before driving them out of the territory. Juvenile kingfishers have to learn the

delicate techniques of diving into the water to catch fish on their own. Being double-brooded with large clutch sizes potentially produces a wealth of progeny. This annual explosion in population is offset by the challenges of learning to fish, resulting in a large proportion of young birds drowning in their early attempts. It is thought that only half of fledglings survive for more than a week, and less than a quarter of youngsters survive to breed the following year, enough to maintain population levels. In the long term, very few kingfishers live longer than one breeding season, with a maximum life expectancy of up to two years.

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