



“Musing from the Hill” by Susan Crossett

as seen on the *Dunkirk Observer* on Fridays
and the *Jamestown Post-Journal* on Saturdays



Such an Attractive Water Bird

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Why did I choose to write about a bird when the few photographs I have are decidedly poor?

Why? Because, the way this summer is going, I'd feel myself fortunate to see any birds in the not-too-distant future.

Whatever is decimating their ranks is certainly doing a tragically good job. A few geese are down the road but mine left as soon as they could fly. I'll run from any part of the house to set peanuts out if I hear a jay. Maybe there's a crow, maybe not. A phoebe this morning. Have the wrens departed as well? Only the catbird (pretty specific voice) is here to talk back to me from the poplars.



I'm not surprised at the Kingfisher's name though it could be equally suitable for the heron or the cormorant when it visits.

For those of you not fortunate enough to live near water, let me describe this bird which, for whatever reason, I tend to picture as chunky.

Cornell describes the kingfisher as stocky (I wasn't far off) and large-headed with a shaggy crest on the top and back of its head, having a straight, thick, pointed bill. Blue-grey above with fine, white spotting on the wings and tail. The

underparts are white with a broad blue breast band that extended to the same color on its back. Juveniles show irregular rusty spotting in the breast band while a female has a broad breast band on its belly. It's smaller than a crow (wingspans of 18.9 to 22.8 inches, 11.0 – 13.8" long and weighing 4.9 to 6.0 ounces).

Stokes: “The female has a rusty band of feathers across her breast while the male's breast is all white.”
(When else does the lady get the fancier plumage?)

Donald and Lillian Stokes in the second volume of their *A Guide to Bird Behavior* have these marvelous observations to share: “Kingfishers are usually heard before they are seen, for their Rattle-call travels far

and is easily recognized. A common experience is to be by a stream or river and hear a Kingfisher give the Rattle-call as it swoops overhead and flies upstream. You lose sight of it until you come closer, when it again calls and flies further. The bird will continue to do this until it reaches the end of its territory along the stream, then it will circle back, often without your knowing. In spring and summer, pairs of Kingfishers defend territories, which contain both a nest site and fishing area, although the two may not be adjacent. When breeding is over, the pair separate and each defends a smaller territory through fall and winter.



“The nest of the Kingfisher is truly remarkable. It is excavated in the ground and consists of a long tunnel with a large space at the end. The nest is not as hard to find as one might expect. You don't look for the nest at first, but rather for a steep cutaway bank clear of vegetation. The bank may be beside water, at the edge of a road, or along an old gravel pit. About a foot or two from the top, look for a tunnel three or four inches in diameter. If you find one, there is a good chance it is a Kingfisher nest. Look at the bottom edge of the entrance: if there are two slight grooves there, you can be sure to have found a nest, since these are the tracks worn by the birds' feet as they enter and leave. If there are no spider webs in the entrance and a little fresh earth below it, then the nest is probably active.

“When males first arrive on the breeding ground in early spring, they begin to defend a nest site. When the female arrives, she seems to be attracted to the nest site and then pairs with the male. (“First, show me the money, honey.”) Once paired, the two tend to stay together and share in activities. The two then defend the nest site and a fishing area.

“Many Belted Kingfishers remain in the northern states through winter, especially along the East and West coasts. They stay in areas where there is open water and they can continue to catch fish. When these areas freeze, they move as far as they have to, to find open water.

“A curious behavior of Kingfishers at this time takes place high in the air. Several birds fly up together, rising several hundred feet, and circle about and chase each other and give the Rattle-call, as well as other sounds. The function of these flights is not known.”



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