

**Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi**

Published on 22 May 2011

The king of good times

In the distance, I could hear a loud, cackling "ke-ke-ke-ke...." call. Sitting in my garden with a visitor, I immediately recognized the call to be that of a kingfisher. I mentioned this, and was immediately questioned "A kingfisher? I thought kingfishers were found only near water and there isn't any water really close to your house?" my visitor queried.

Aha-another one of those misconceptions! The bird calling was the White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*. While my visitor was partially correct, in saying that most kingfishers are found near water, the White-throated kingfisher is an exception. It can be found at quite a distance from any water source, sitting on a telephone wire or the branch of a tree, searching for prey. It eats all kinds of small animals-rats, snakes, lizards, scorpions and even small insects and of course, an occasional fish! When it catches its prey, it mercilessly beats it to death on a branch or wire before devouring it.



The White-throated kingfisher is unmistakable-bright turquoise-blue wings, bright brown breast and head, and white throat, pretty much like a bib! A large red bill completes its natty wardrobe.

Many interesting stories about kingfishers filter through from folklore. It is believed that a grey kingfisher was one of the first to leave *Noah's Ark* to search for dry land. The kingfisher caught the red rays of the sun on its breast and the blue of the sky on its back, hence its colours! In Europe, many fishermen carry a feather of the kingfisher in their pockets, believing that it will bring them good luck.

The genus to which the kingfisher belongs, "halcyon", has an interesting tale associated with it. In Greek mythology, halcyon is a mythical bird that builds floating nests in the sea, and calms the waves. Hence the use of the word "halcyon" which means idyllic or calm. In ancient days, it was mistakenly believed that the kingfisher nested out at sea (which is untrue), hence its genus was named "Halcyon"!

On many occasions, non-birders have asked me innocently "How do you differentiate between a kingfisher and a woodpecker?" The kingfisher normally has a large beak in relation to the size of the bird. In many kingfishers, the bill is brightly coloured ; the woodpecker's bill is always dull coloured-brown, black or grey. Watch the bird and its habits-this is the surest way of telling them apart. While a woodpecker will always sit on a branch or a tree trunk, facing the wood, a kingfisher is normally seen sitting on a branch or a tree looking around for its prey. If none of this works, take a photograph and send it me-I will help you identify it!

Feedback on this column is welcome at sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com

Making a difference: While the White-throated kingfisher can survive away from water, we, humans, cannot survive without water! With the summer here, water shortage affects everybody. Make a difference-don't waste water. Don't use a pipe with running water to wash your vehicle-use a bucket of water instead. Remember-every action counts-yours, too.

Photograph caption: White-throated kingfisher

© Sanjay Sondhi