

August 2022 | Issue 8 | Volume 2

# EARTH HERO



• Mammals • Birds • Reptiles • Insects



# BIRDS

## (THE KINGFISHER)

(Photos by: Mark Louis Benedict)

The Kingfisher is a small, brightly coloured bird. There are around 120 species of kingfishers and they are mostly found in Australia, Asia and Africa. There are also a few species that live in the South and East Pacific Ocean islands. Kingfishers like to live in wooded tropical habitats near freshwater and saltwater and can be found in riverbanks, rice fields, swamps, scrublands and even in city parks and gardens. There are 15 species of kingfishers that can be found in Malaysia. They are the common kingfisher, blue-eared kingfisher, blue-banded kingfisher, black-back dwarf-kingfisher, rufous-backed dwarf-kingfisher, banded kingfisher, brown-winged kingfisher, stork billed kingfisher, ruddy kingfisher, white-throated kingfisher, black-capped kingfisher, sacred kingfisher, collared kingfisher, rufous-collared kingfisher and pied kingfisher.



Blue-eared kingfisher



Black-back dwarf / Oriental dwarf kingfisher

Each kingfisher has a distinctive colour on their feathers that can be used to identify them. Green and blue are the two common colours of most species. For example, the blue-eared kingfisher has a stunning blue and orange-brown plumage and is well-known among bird lovers. Meanwhile, the stork-billed kingfisher has a distinctively large red coloured bill and legs. Both males and females of most kingfisher species share the same colours with no major differences between them.

Kingfishers are known to hunt and eat fish. Some species also prey on crustaceans, frogs and other amphibians, spiders, worms, insects and small reptiles. Their ability to catch prey is highly reliant on their physical features and hunting skills. One of the most distinguishable physical features of a kingfisher is its bill. The kingfisher's bill is extremely sharp and is specially adapted for catching aquatic prey. The structure of the kingfisher's bill and the weight distribution of the bird's body enables it to achieve great velocity when attacking prey. This is combined with its excellent vision and head movements to track prey and judge the depth underwater to successfully hunt. Upon hitting the water, its eyes are protected by a membrane while maintaining visibility. They have perching feet which means that their feet have three toes in front and one behind which helps them hold the prey securely while feeding. Like most bird species, kingfishers hunt for food mainly in the mornings and evenings when the weather conditions are cooler.



Ruddy kingfisher



Collared kingfisher

Most kingfishers are solitary and mainly pair up to breed during the breeding season. Many pair for life and live in a small family unit and are very territorial. Kingfishers will not tolerate other kingfishers in their territory. They will find a territory based on food resources, desirable perching trees and safe roosting sites. Kingfishers use a variety of vocalizations. They make calls for communication with their mates and chicks and also to drive other birds away. The calls of kingfishers have been described as shrieks, screams, clicks, whistles, chuckles, rattles and chirps.

Kingfishers are cavity-nesters. When they are nesting, they will create tunnels by digging into the ground on the banks of waterways. They are also known to use man-made ditches and termite nests for nesting. Both males and females construct their nest and when the female lays eggs, they will take turns burrowing out a tunnel with their feet, and then, they will hollow out a narrow chamber at the end. A female typically lays three to six eggs depending on the size of the kingfisher species. The kingfisher exhibits a high degree of parental care with both males and females incubating their eggs. This helps to ensure that their young survive and reach adulthood successfully. The chicks usually stay with the parents for three to four months.



Blue-banded kingfisher

Kingfishers can serve as an indicator of the health of an ecosystem. A good number of kingfishers in an area usually means a healthy habitat with good water quality. As kingfishers feed on fishes and small aquatic animals, toxins in the water affect them severely. A decline in their population can be a sign of bad water pollution. Kingfishers also help control the populations of their prey, especially in freshwater habitats.



Stock-billed Kingfisher

Deforestation and forest clearing are two of the major threats to their population. Human activities that cause disturbance and pollution to the waterways also have a negative impact on kingfishers and their food source. We need to continue looking after our environment, especially our rivers and lakes to help maintain a healthy kingfisher population. Healthy rivers and lakes will also ensure a healthy aquatic ecosystem that we can enjoy while admiring the sight and sounds of the beautiful kingfishers.