

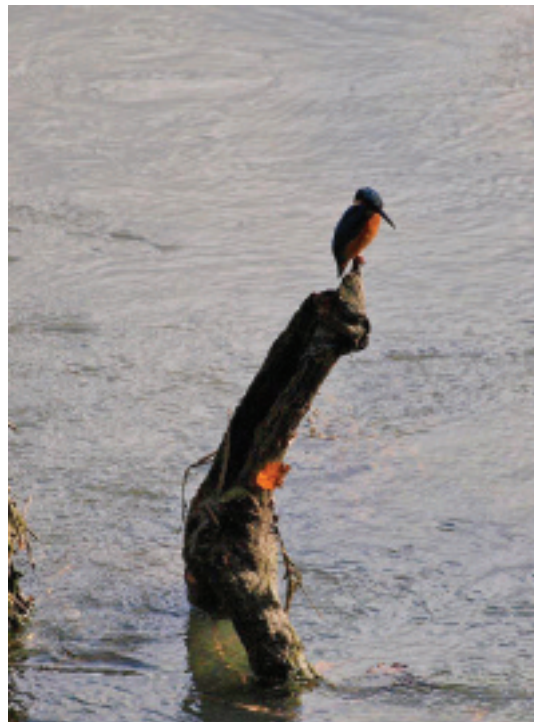
## Inspired by Nature competition runner-up

# The Art of Seeing Kingfishers

From my first footsteps I've tracked rivers. I was lured by the loop and dart of blue damselflies, the chortle of gravels and the silky sink of silt. I grew to be an avid I-Spy kid and soon ticked off most of the creatures in these pocket nature guides. But the kingfisher eluded me. As is the way with things denied, my ambition to see this fabulous bird grew and grew. It has taken me years to realise that too much intent makes them disappear.

The bird's colours and dumpy outline were tattooed on my mind a little larger than life-size. This didn't prepare me for their speed and elusiveness. A bright blur. A brilliant tease was my first experience of a kingfisher. I braked so sharply I almost went over my handlebars, over the parapet of the bridge and down into the dark waters of the Lugg. I watched, waited for a second streak; scoured the alder leaves for a gleam until my eyes lost ability to focus. I rode off, questioning that mirage like religious doubt. I yearned even more keenly for a still sighting, a good-long-look kind of sighting. I had to move to Wales and wait almost twenty years for that and then the circumstances were unlikely.

August Bank Holiday Sunday 1983 – members of The Pentecostal Church were holding a baptism in the Severn in Newtown. I walked away, upstream. As I crossed the footbridge over the Dingle brook a man touched my arm, put his finger to his lips and pointed to a hazel twig stretching over the water. Eight feet from us, a male kingfisher was preening. I



Kingfisher at the Spinnies, Aberogwen

Arfon Thomas

gulped. Ages later I let out that breath and the bird was still working, his dagger beak zipping up barbules, oiling his sheen, completely unperturbed by us watchers or the noisy baptism. Then he plunged and surfaced. I thought he'd fly, but a few dips are part of the preening ritual. I lost track of time, thrilled by the close display of mottled turquoise, cobalt, lapis and chestnut; by his yawning and careful stretching of each wing.

Awed but not sated, I became a kingfisher addict. The mystery of iridescence deepened. From then on I had fitful sightings. Mostly, the birds flew the instant they felt my gaze on them. Even when I saw a bird land, my eye couldn't hold it for long. How could such brilliance just vanish? Sometimes the only confirmation was its white collar. Brilliance is sparked by movement. A still bird doesn't reflect much light and the extreme colour contrast acts as disruptive camouflage breaking up the bird's outline. Ground in a pestle, the kingfisher's feathers are dark brown, similar to ravens; contour feathers have a



tiny turquoise spot at the tip and colourless barbules to trick the light and scatter the blue-green wavelengths. Flight illuminates the bird. The twisting and shugging involved in preening sparks colours too.

I've seen many more kingfishers from Dolerw's banks this century. It's a bright indicator of the health of the river, but it's also down to adopting greyhounds. They are better than binoculars. Greyhounds and kingfishers share an average top speed of 43-45 mph, so I'm now trained to see speed. They've taught me much about stealth, but, more importantly, they've taught me how to see – to spot movement and interpret it later. I trace the streak and let it resolve into identification.

I've learned the sharp schree, the territorial cry too. This is a great cue to positioning. If I've missed the spark, it tells me whether the bird has flown up or downstream and gives me a chance to wait for reappearance. If the river is in flow then the dart will come along the centre, if the water's very low, as it has been for much of this year, then the birds fly under the dark knot-work of tree roots, close to the bank.

Whilst hunting, the kingfisher is very still, though to compensate for restricted movement of the eyes in their sockets, the bird tracks prey by moving its whole head. It is busy calculating the depth of fish and the angle of attack before diving at speeds of up

to 60mph. Schwab and Hart<sup>1</sup> are fascinating on the special visual adaptations kingfishers have to meet the challenges of refraction, glare and moving prey. Kingfishers need to eat between 60 and 100% of their own weight in fish each day, so they can't afford many misses.

Greyhounds pose a very low threat to kingfishers. Occasionally, when thirsty or hot, the dogs disturb a bird, but this is when there's a black scribble of minnows writing themselves out of a favoured pool. With pollution under better control, the biggest threat to kingfishers comes from our weather. And recent years have been tough.

Floods disperse fish and sluice oily pollution making it hard to track prey. Summer floods can drown young birds still in the nest. I saw fewer birds in 2007, but just when I was despairing over the swirls and force of near bank-burst, in January 2008, my eye was caught by a female shaking her head – probably after supping. She stoked the blaze of her breast feathers as though she had a scoop of sunset in her lower mandible. And just when I thought their arch enemy, ice, was a thing of the past, we've had two harsh winters.

The Germans, who made the kingfisher their national bird for 2009, call kingfishers "Ice Birds", not for their glacier colour, but for their habit of retreating before a freeze. This year there was a shortage of ice-free places to retreat to. In 30 years of daily walking I've seen jigsaw pieces of ice at edges of the Severn, but this winter long sections were plated right across. I feared the kingfishers starved. On Valentine's Day, traditionally the 'Parliament' when birds find a mate, I saw a single bird rise from a dive. On the 19th March I was overjoyed to see three screaming and chasing each other up and down river contesting territory and mate.

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#### References

1. I.R. Schwab and N.S. Hart, *Halcyon Days*, in The British Journal of Ophthalmology, 5th May 2004.