

AFRICA'S KINGFISHERS

A GUIDE TO THEIR IDENTIFICATION

There are 87 species of kingfishers in the world, ranging in size from the large kookaburras of Australia, weighing nearly half a kilogram, to the miniscule African Dwarf Kingfisher, which weighs only 9–12 grams. Sixteen of the 87 species occur in Africa. Of these 16, all except Pied, Grey-hooded and River kingfishers are confined to the continent. Eastern Asia and Australasia are the kingfisher Meccas of the world, having respectively 25 and 31 species.

Most kingfishers are brightly coloured and some have unusual adaptations for display or feeding. The paradise kingfishers of New Guinea and north-eastern Australia have spectacularly elongated central tail feathers, and the Shovel-billed Kingfisher *Clytoceyx rex*, also of New Guinea, has an extraordinary bill, resembling that of a giant finch, which it uses to dig grubs from the soil.

In this article, Phil Hockey of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology outlines some of the key identification features of Africa's kingfishers, concentrating on those species-pairs and groups that sometimes cause problems in the field.

AFRICAN DWARF AND PYGMY KINGFISHERS



African Dwarf Kingfisher
Ceyx lecontei
10 cm

These are the smallest kingfishers in Africa. The major plumage differences between them are crown and frons colour. The African Dwarf Kingfisher has a rufous crown and black frons whereas the African Pygmy Kingfisher has a blue-banded crown and a pale frons. Their ranges overlap in West Africa. The African Dwarf Kingfisher is restricted to the interior of

rainforests, where it hunts insects from perches close to the forest floor. In the moist tropics, African Pygmy Kingfisher is found along forest edges and in clearings, as well as in lush grasslands; farther south, it is a bird of the savannas.



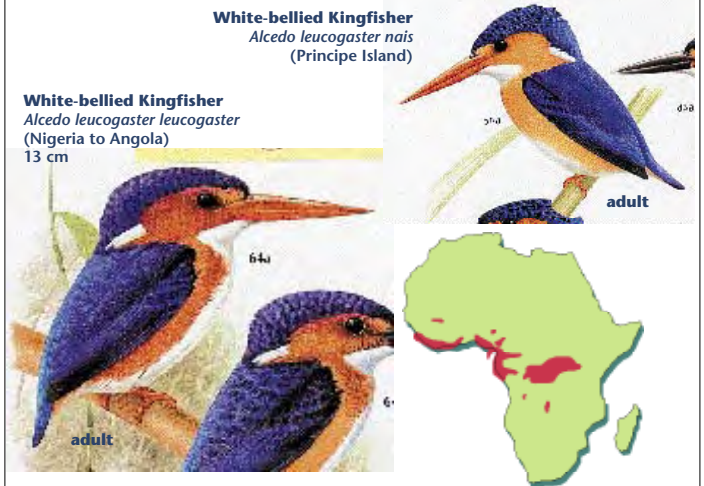
African Pygmy Kingfisher
Ceyx pictus natalensis
(Southern Africa)
12 cm



African Dwarf Kingfisher
Ceyx pictus pictus
(Northern tropics)



WHITE-BELLIED AND CHOCOLATE-BACKED KINGFISHERS



White-bellied Kingfisher
Alcedo leucogaster nais
(Principe Island)

White-bellied Kingfisher
Alcedo leucogaster leucogaster
(Nigeria to Angola)
13 cm

Both of these species occur in lowland forests of central and West Africa, up to 1 200–1 400 metres. The White-bellied Kingfisher is water-associated and also occurs in mangroves. It hunts from a perch close to the ground, preying on both fish and insects. Its range and habitat overlap to some extent with African Dwarf (immediately recognizable by its rufous crown)

and Malachite kingfishers. The crown of Malachite Kingfisher is a much paler blue, and the obviously long crown feathers are conspicuously barred with black.

The Chocolate-backed Kingfisher is a common rainforest species and cannot be confused with any other African kingfisher. Unlike the White-bellied Kingfisher, which breeds in streamside burrows, the Chocolate-backed Kingfisher breeds either in termite mounds or in the nests of arboreal ants.



Chocolate-backed Kingfisher
Halcyon badia
21 cm

KEY TO DISTRIBUTION MAPS

- RESIDENT
- BREEDING VISITOR
- NON-BREEDING VISITOR

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GREY-HOODED, STRIPED AND BROWN-HOODED KINGFISHERS



Grey-hooded Kingfisher
Halcyon leucocephala leucocephala
(Northern tropics)
22 cm



adult

This trio of species is found in woodlands and savannas over much of sub-Saharan Africa and all three species can be found together. The distributions of Striped and Grey-hooded kingfishers are tropical and subtropical: the latter is a summer visitor to the south of its range and also migrates to the south-western coastal regions of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the only one of these three species that is migratory.

The range of the Brown-hooded Kingfisher lies mostly south of the Equator and extends as far south as the eastern and southern regions of the fynbos biome in temperate South Africa. Of the three, the Brown-hooded Kingfisher

has adapted the best to man-modified environments and is commonly found in gardens and agricultural land.

Adult Grey-hooded Kingfishers (also known as Grey-headed Kingfishers) are not likely to cause identification problems anywhere within their range. Although the whiteness of the head and neck and richness of the cinnamon underparts do vary regionally, the colour combination is unique. In flight, both Grey-hooded and Brown-hooded kingfishers show predominantly cinnamon underwings, but the former has a very obvious white window at the base of the primaries.

Confusion is possible, however, between Brown-hooded

and Striped kingfishers and the juvenile Grey-

hooded Kingfisher. The latter, however, is fairly easily separated on head pattern: while all age-classes of Brown-hooded and Striped kingfishers have a brown-streaked crown, the crown of the juvenile Grey-hooded Kingfisher has light transverse brown barring. Its flanks are also usually more richly coloured cinnamon than any age-class of Brown-hooded Kingfisher.

The Striped Kingfisher is considerably smaller than Brown-hooded Kingfisher and, in flight, can be immediately distinguished by having predominantly white, not cinnamon, underwings, and a white flash visible on the upperwings at the base of the primaries. At rest, the all-red bill (with a slightly dusky tip) separates

adult Brown-hooded from Striped Kingfisher: the latter has a dark

upper mandible and predominantly red lower mandible. Note, however, that the bill of the juvenile Brown-hooded Kingfisher is completely dark. The back colour of Brown-hooded Kingfisher is variable, but the dark areas of the folded wing (lesser and median coverts) are either uniform or have deep brown/brown-grey tips to the feathers. The same feathers on Striped Kingfisher are conspicuously pale-fringed. In general, Striped Kingfisher has a more clearly demarcated dark eyestripe and whiter cheeks than Brown-hooded Kingfisher.

The call of the Brown-hooded Kingfisher is a clear, whistled 'tsee pi pi pi' whereas that of Grey-hooded Kingfisher is a weaker and faster 'tse ti ti ti ti ti ti'. The call of Striped Kingfisher has a much clearer trilling component – 'wee trrrrrrrrr' – which is frequently given in duet. During these duets, both members raise and quiver their wings while facing each other, displaying the strikingly patterned underwings.



Striped Kingfisher
Halcyon chelicuti chelicuti
(Most of sub-Saharan Africa)
17 cm



adult male



adult female

Brown-hooded Kingfisher
Halcyon albiventris albiventris
(South-western South Africa, KwaZulu-Natal)

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BLUE-BREADED, WOODLAND AND AFRICAN MANGROVE KINGFISHERS



Blue-breasted Kingfisher
Halcyon malimbica malimbica
(Cameron to Uganda and Zambia)
25 cm

adult



adult



adult

adult



These species are characterized by having blue backs, fairly uniform blue or grey heads, and unstreaked underparts. Blue-breasted and Woodland kingfishers overlap in geographical range, as do Woodland and African Mangrove kingfishers.

The Blue-breasted Kingfisher is restricted to West and central Africa, where it occurs in a variety of wooded habitats, from primary rainforest and secondary forest to riparian woodland and mangroves. Woodland Kingfisher is more a bird of open savannas, forest fringes and clearings, but the two species can co-occur.

The black eyestripe of Blue-breasted Kingfisher extends well behind the eye, as in the southern race of Woodland Kingfisher. However the upper breast is blue (adults) or pale turquoise (juveniles) as distinct from pale grey (adults) or faintly barred (juveniles) in Woodland Kingfisher. The Blue-breasted Kingfisher has

much more black in the upper wings and this is clearly evident at rest. Leg colour is also different: red in Blue-breasted Kingfisher and black in Woodland Kingfisher.

Field separation of Woodland and African Mangrove kingfishers is much more difficult and needs to be approached with care. Outside the breeding season, African Mangrove Kingfishers are rarely found more than 20 kilometres from the coast, but they do occur in habitats other than mangroves, including forests and parkland. During the breeding season, about August to January, they move inland, usually along wooded rivers. The difference between

the two that is classically highlighted in fieldguides is the all-red bill of African Mangrove Kingfisher and the red and black bill of Woodland Kingfisher. However, some Woodland Kingfishers do have all-red bills. The underwings of the two species also differ – African Mangrove Kingfisher has a black 'comma' close to the wrist, which Woodland Kingfisher lacks.

However (again!), some Woodland Kingfishers in Malawi show the black 'comma' to varying degrees, which has sparked speculation that the two species may interbreed. In the south of its range, the lack of black behind the eye of African Mangrove Kingfisher aids separation from Woodland Kingfisher.

The breeding season is the time when the two species are most likely to co-occur: fortunately, their calls are very different. That of the Woodland Kingfisher is a shrill, piercing 'trrp trrrrrrr' and is one of the most characteristic sounds of the savanna. The call of the African Mangrove Kingfisher is an accelerating 'tsee tsee tsee trrp trrp trrp' which progresses from a whistled introduction to a trill resembling that of a *Bradypterus* warbler.



African Mangrove Kingfisher
Halcyon senegaloides
22 cm



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MALACHITE, SHINING-BLUE, RIVER AND HALF-COLLARED KINGFISHERS



These four species are all characterized by having blue upperparts, rufous underparts and a pale chin. All are small and are water-associated. The range of the River Kingfisher, also known as the Common or European Kingfisher, probably does not overlap with that of any of the other species in this group. There are breeding populations

in Morocco and Tunisia as well as a scattering of breeding records from Algeria and Libya. Mostly, however, it is a non-breeding visitor to Africa north of the Sahara from breeding grounds in the Palearctic. These non-breeding migrants are only likely to be encountered between September and April. Apart



from a population of Pied Kingfishers along the Nile River, River Kingfisher is the only kingfisher species to occur in Africa north of the Sahara. It is generally found in the wooded lower reaches of rivers as well as among mangroves and in swamps and wet grassland. In north-east Africa it could conceivably co-occur with the isolated population of Half-collared Kingfishers in Ethiopia or Sudan. Although the two

species are superficially similar and have all-dark bills, the ear coverts of River Kingfisher are orange, whereas those of Half-collared Kingfisher are blue. It is farther south in Africa that identification problems can arise with this group. The ranges of Shining-blue and Half-collared kingfishers overlap only marginally in eastern Angola and western Zaïre, but the range of

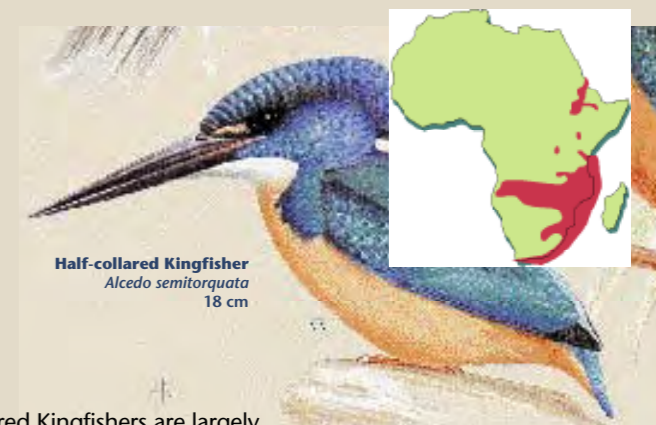
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MALACHITE, SHINING-BLUE, RIVER AND HALF-COLLARED KINGFISHERS



Malachite Kingfisher overlaps extensively with both species. The Half-collared Kingfisher is larger and paler than Shining-blue Kingfisher: this colour difference is most obvious on the wings and back. Malachite Kingfisher, on the other hand, is slightly smaller than Shining-blue Kingfisher. The adult Malachite Kingfisher differs in having a red, not black, bill; orange, not blue, cheeks and a much paler blue crown,

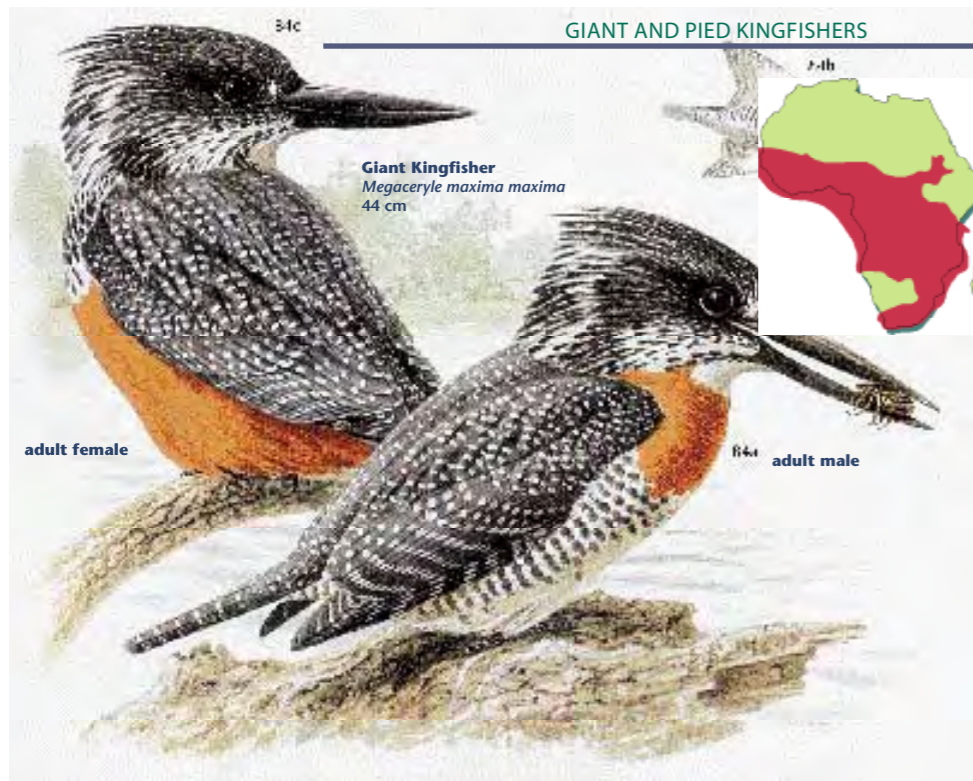
conspicuously barred with black. The juvenile Malachite Kingfisher does have a black bill, but is easily distinguished from juvenile Shining-blue Kingfisher on cheek and crown coloration. Juvenile Malachite Kingfishers do sometimes cause confusion with Half-collared Kingfishers, although this should never happen. These two are partially, but not completely, separated by habitat. Half-



collared Kingfishers are largely restricted to quiet wooded or forested rivers and streams. Malachite Kingfishers, on the other hand, regularly occur at standing water where there is riparian vegetation from which to hunt. Ponds and dams are very unlikely habitats in which to encounter Half-collared Kingfishers, but it is possible that juveniles may occasionally wander from their normal habitats. The Half-collared Kingfisher is considerably larger than Malachite Kingfisher, and its

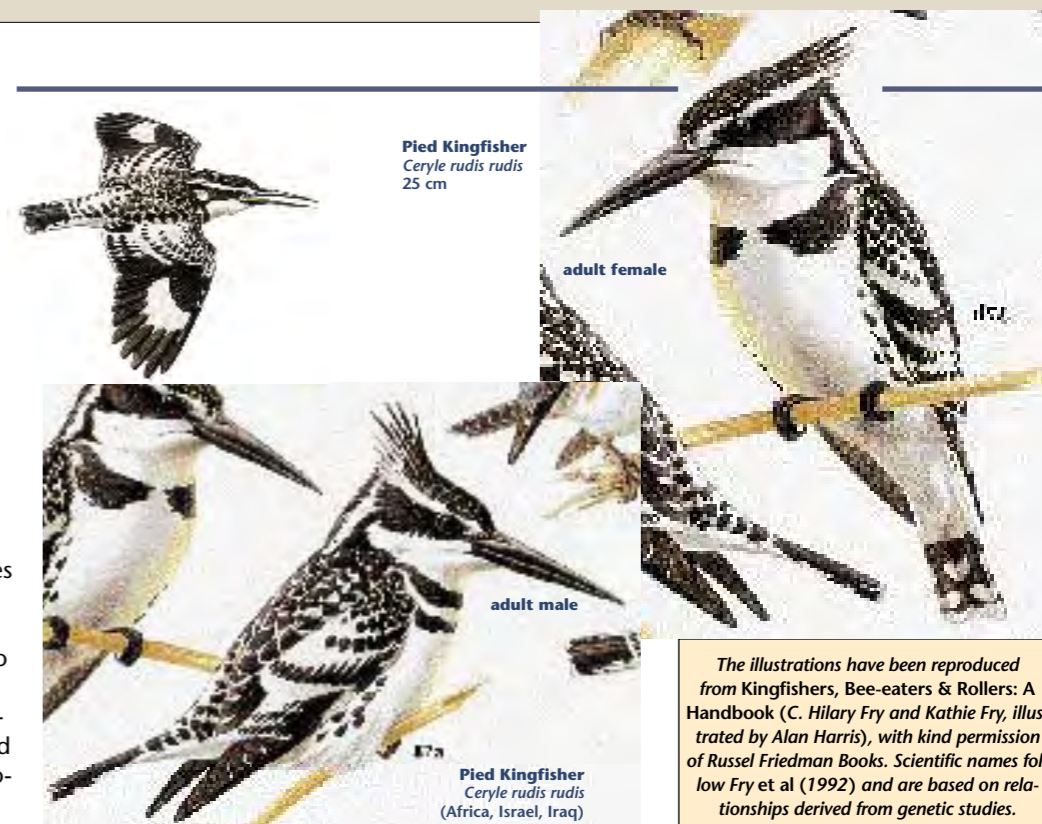
large, all-dark, dagger-like bill gives it an aggressive appearance. The juvenile Half-collared Kingfisher is paler than the adult, and the breast appears scaled. However, as with separating Malachite Kingfisher from Shining-blue Kingfisher, the colour of the cheeks and ear coverts are a give-away: dull rufous, slightly barred and flecked with black in Malachite Kingfisher, dull blue-black in Half-collared Kingfisher.

GIANT AND PIED KINGFISHERS



These two species cannot be confused with each other or with any other species of kingfisher in Africa. The Pied Kingfisher has a very large range, extending from West Africa across to eastern Asia: the Giant Kingfisher is confined to Africa. Unlike the other African kingfishers, both of these species are obviously sexually dimorphic, males and females differing in their underpart patterning. Measuring nearly half a metre in length, the Giant Kingfisher is far and away Africa's largest kingfisher. Males and females differ in the amount and positioning of the rufous colour on the underparts. The male has a chestnut upper breast and the white lower breast and belly are barred with black. In the female the lower breast and belly are chestnut and the upper breast is white,

GIANT AND PIED KINGFISHERS



vertically streaked with black. The male Pied Kingfisher has two complete black breast-bands, while the female has a single, broader band that does not quite meet in the middle of the breast. When hunting, Pied Kingfishers hover far more than any other kingfisher. This allows them to hunt at sea and far from the shores of inland lakes. At night, they roost in groups, sometimes of more than 200 birds. The sex ratio is biased in favour of males, and 'surplus' males help at nests, feeding both the incubating adults and their chicks. Breeding is often colonial: a single colony can

The illustrations have been reproduced from *Kingfishers, Bee-eaters & Rollers: A Handbook* (C. Hilary Fry and Kathie Fry, illustrated by Alan Harris), with kind permission of Russel Friedman Books. Scientific names follow Fry et al (1992) and are based on relationships derived from genetic studies.