



ORNITHOLOGY

The Belted Kingfisher in the Western Palearctic

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By Marc Duquet



Belted Kingfisher, Glomel, Côtes-d'Armor, Brittany, December 2025 (© Romain Bazire)

The finding of an American Kingfisher in early December 2025 on the banks of the Nantes-Brest canal, in the commune of Glomel (Côtes-d'Armor, Brittany), was widely reported on social media - the Telegram list *Oiseaux Rares France*, various *Facebook* pages, the Faune France database and the *Ornithomedia* website - and in the media (TF1, France 3). This is the first record in France of this Nearctic species, which has already been observed in several other Western European countries. The presence of this bird in Brittany has raised various questions, which can be answered by comparing this record with other Western Palearctic data, both geographically and chronologically.



Belted Kingfisher, Côtes-d'Armor, Brittany, December 2025 (© Quentin Soliman)



Belted Kingfisher, Côtes-d'Armor, Brittany, December 2025 (© Didier Godreau)

I - Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*

This kingfisher breeds across much of the United States and Canada, from California to Alaska in the west and from Florida to Labrador in the east (Fig. 1); it winters in the southern regions of its breeding range where the waters remain open in winter, as well as further south, as far as the southern coasts of the Caribbean Sea (Cramp & Simmons 2020, Kelly *et al.* 2020). Although southern populations are mostly resident, northern birds undertake true migratory movements, which may involve transatlantic crossings in autumn, as is the case for many Nearctic passerines. A study of Belted Kingfishers ringed between 1923 and 2024 in the United States and Canada (Gabrey 2024) measured the longest distances travelled by the species :

- 2,403 km from New York (September 1966) to the Dominican Republic/Haiti (March 1967),
- 2,070 km from Ontario (July 1966) to Florida (October 1966),
- 1,748 km from Massachusetts (October 1959) to Florida (April 1962),
- 1,667 km from Vermont (June 2002) to Georgia (September 2002),
- 1,529 km from Indiana (June 1924) to Texas (November 1924),
- 1,125 km from New Jersey (April 1981) to Prince Edward Island (May 1981).

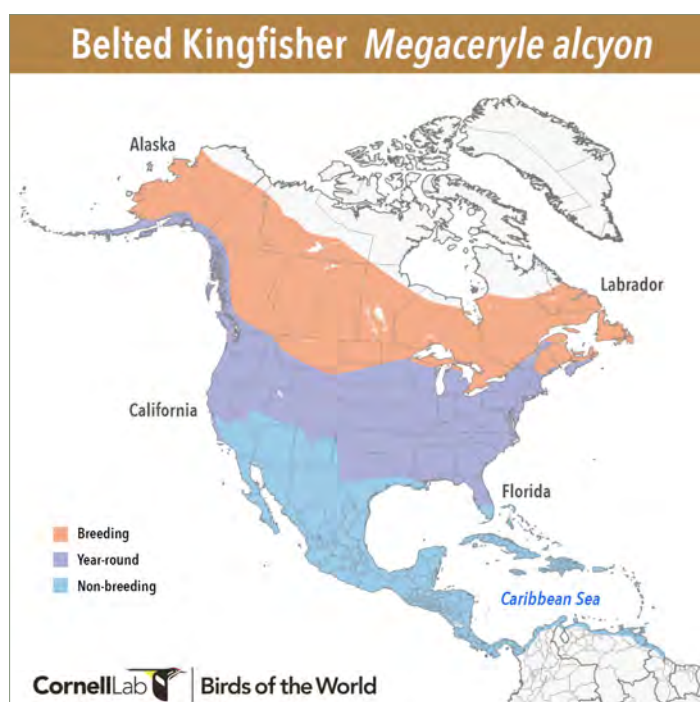


Fig. 1. Range of the Belted Kingfisher (Source: *Birds of the World*)



Belted Kingfisher, Arizona, February 2023 (© Shawn Cooper)

II - Chronological list of Western Palearctic records

The first Western Palearctic records of the species were obtained at the end of the 19th century in the Azores (Pedro Ramalho/CRP-SPEA *in litt.*) and the Netherlands (Snoukaert van Schauburg 1900). Since then, the Belted Kingfisher has been observed 39 times in the Western Palearctic: mainly in the Azores archipelago (18 records), but also in Iceland (6), Ireland (4), Northern Ireland (2), Great Britain (5), Spain (3) and, recently, France (1). Here is the complete list of these records as of 31 December 2025, classified in chronological order and presented as follows: • Year, country - County, district or region: locality, number and sex of individuals, dates of presence (source of data). If necessary, the data is annotated.

[• **1845 Ireland** - Co Meath: Annesbrook, female (killed), 26 October; Co Wicklow: Luggala and Lough Dan, male (killed), 20 November (Seth-Smith 1919, Alexander & Fitter 1955).] These two records were quickly called into question at the time. In 1899, Saunders, who «knew of no occurrences in Greenland, Iceland or on the European continent» wrote that «even assuming the accuracy of the records, the bird had probably escaped from confinement». In 1908, Ussher considered that «the circumstances connecting with them [i. e. these two records] are open to suspicion». Jourdain (1919), after reporting the comments of Saunders and Ussher, gave some credence to these records by referring to an observation in the Azores (undated), one in Iceland in 1901 and one in the Netherlands in 1899, and stating that «two at least of these occurrences, and probably the third also, are beyond the possibility of suspicion and render the occurrence of this species in the British Isles far more probable than was the case when Saunders and Ussher wrote on the subject». Ruttledge (1975), quoted by Mullarney (1981), wrote much later: «Two records based on specimens, said to have been collected in Ireland in the autumn of 1845, were recently removed from the Irish list when critical examination of the skins - in 1974, by Derek Goodwin, Robert Hudson, Dr David Snow and the late Kenneth Williamson - produced evidence that the birds had either been killed earlier in the year than has been claimed or had been held in captivity».

However, in light of the records obtained since the late 1970s, questions can be raised about the analysis of these two Irish records, which are ultimately perfectly consistent with the pattern of the species' appearance in Europe, both geographically and chronologically. The skins analysed in 1974 by Goodwin, Hudson, Snow and Williamson were almost 130 years old... so were the «signs of captivity» referred to by these ornithologists in rejecting the data real, or were they the result of natural deterioration of the skins? Furthermore, although

these ornithologists were renowned and entirely credible, they certainly based their opinion on the extreme rarity of the species in Europe at the time. In 1974, there were still only three European records, all of which were very old: one from the Netherlands in 1899, one from Iceland in 1901 and one from Great Britain in 1908. This is also the opinion of Bob Watts (*in litt.*), secretary of the Northern Ireland Rare Birds Committee, for whom the « *birds reported as shot in October & November 1845 (...) are very likely (...) genuine records* ». Similarly, Des Higgins (*in litt.*), secretary of the Irish Rare Birds Committee, considers that these two 19th-century records « *may very well be genuine vagrants* », while pointing out that it is not « *inconceivable they both escaped from the same cage either* ». In conclusion, these two Irish records from 1845 may be worth re-assessing in light of current knowledge...

- **1899 Azores** - Flores: exact location unknown, female (shot), March 1899. The bird is in the collections of the Carlos Machado Museum in Ponta Delgada under reference number 1564 (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **1899 Netherlands** - Gelderland: Rheden, male (killed and stuffed), 17 December (Snoukaert van Schauburg 1900).



Belted Kingfisher, male, Rheden, Netherlands, December 1899 (© H.H. ter Meer Jr.)



Belted Kingfisher, Ohio, September 2021 (© Brad Imhoff)

- **1901 Iceland** - Vestmann Islands (Vestmannaeyjar): Heimaey, 1st-cy male, late September. This individual was observed for several days before being shot (Ingvar Atli Sigurðsson/IRC *in litt.*).
- **1908 Britain** - England: Sladesbridge, Wadebridge, Cornwall, female (killed), November (Stevenson 1919, Seth-Smith 1919, Jourdain 1919).
- **1978 Ireland** - Co Mayo: River Bunree, Ballina, female, 1st-winter, from 10 December 1978 to 3 February 1979 (Mullarney 1981, Sharrock & Grant 1982). On the afternoon of 3rd February, the bird was shot by a local resident who was passionate about taxidermy... the latter was prosecuted and convicted, and the stuffed kingfisher was entrusted to the Natural History Museum in Dublin (Mullarney *op. cit.*).
- **1979 Britain** - England: Sladesbridge, Cornwall, male first winter, from 2 October 1979 to June 1980, (Rogers *et al.* 1980) and Boscathnoe Reservoir, Penzance, adult male, presumed to be the same individual, from 23 to 29 August 1980 (Rogers *et al.* 1981).
- **1980 Northern Ireland** - Co Down: Ardilea House, Inner Dundrum Bay, Newcastle, immature female (killed), 12 October 1980. The bird was killed and the specimen is preserved at the Ulster Museum (*Irish Birds* 3-1: 11, Bob Watts/NIRBC *in litt.*).
- **1984 Ireland** - Co Clare: Ballyvaughan, female, from 28 October to early December 1984 and (presumably the same) near Killaloe, Tipperary, from 6 February to 21 March 1985 (*Irish Birds* 3-1: 116 & 3-2: 319, Des Higgins/IRBC *in litt.*).
- **1996 Azores** - São Jorge: Ponta da Caldeira, 1 individual, 21 October (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **1998 Iceland** - Gullbringusýsla: Gerðar í Garði, female, 17-18 May, and Gljúfrasteinn og nágrenni í Mosfellssveit, female, July to 15 September. These two records are believed to refer to the same individual (Ingvar Atli Sigurðsson/IRC *in litt.*).
- **1998 Iceland** - Austur-Skaftafellssýsla: Árbær á Mýrum, female, 18 to 24 June (Ingvar Atli Sigurðsson/IRC *in litt.*).
- **2001 Azores** - Faial: Port of Horta, Port of Pim, male, 2 October to 9 December (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2002 Iceland** - Mýrdalssýsla: Kaðalstaðir í Staffholtstungum, female, 1st year, 24 February. Found exhausted, it died the next day (Ingvar Atli Sigurðsson/IRC *in litt.*).
- **2003 Iceland** - Vestmann Islands (Vestmannaeyjar): Vestmannaeyjabær, male, 10-12 October (Ingvar Atli Sigurðsson/IRC *in litt.*).



Fig. 2. Movements of the American Belted Kingfisher in Staffordshire



Belted Kingfisher, first-year male, Staffordshire, April 2005 (© Chris Jones)

- **2005 Britain** – England: Tixall, Staffordshire, male, first summer, 1 April; England: Eastington Ponds, Yorkshire, male, first summer, 2 April; Scotland: Peterculter, male, first summer, 4–8 April (Broadbent *et al.* 2005, Fraser *et al.* 2007). The BBRC considers that these three records refer to a single individual. This shows that it was in excellent condition, as it travelled 135 km north-east between Tixall and Eastington in one day, and another 385 km north to Scotland over the following two days (Fig. 2).
- **2006 Azores** – Graciosa: Santa Cruz da Graciosa, female, from 9 December 2005 to 22 March 2006 (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2007 Azores** – Flores: Porto das Lajes, 1st year, 17 October (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2009 Spain** – Murcia: Cartagena, female, 1st year, from November 2009 to 9 March 2010 (Dies *et al.* 2011).
- **2010 Azores** – Pico: Lajes do Pico, female, 16 September (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2010 Azores** – Terceira: Paul da Praia, female, from 29 September to 19 December 2010 (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2011 Azores** – Pico: Lajes do Pico, female, 26 December 2011 to 30 January 2012 (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2012 Ireland** – Co Galway: Lough Fee and Kylemore Abbey, male 1st winter, 5 and 6 October (Fahy 2013).
- **2012 Azores** – Santa Maria: Ribeira de São Francisco, male, from 19 October 2012 to 23 March 2013 (Tipper *et al.* 2019, 2022, Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2015 Azores** – Terceira: Paul da Praia da Vitória, male, from 1 November to 10 December (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2016 Northern Ireland** – Co Londonderry: Mountsandel Forest, The Cutts, River Bann, Londonderry/Derry, male, 22 April (Bob Watts/NIRBC *in litt.*).
- **2017 Azores** – Corvo: Porto do Boqueirão, male, 3–6 October (Tipper *et al.* 2022, Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2018 Britain** – England: Porth Hellick, St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, Cornwall, male 2nd year or older, 18 April (Holt *et al.* 2019).
- **2019 Iceland** – Gullbringusýsla: Álafoss í Mosfellssveit, female, 12 November 2018 to 13 April 2019 (Ingvar Atli Sigurðsson/IRC *in litt.*).
- **2020 Azores** – Pico: Lajes do Pico, female 1st year, 30 October 2020 to 13 April 2021 (Tipper *et al.* 2022, Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2020 Spain** – Canary Islands: Arrecife, Lanzarote, male 1st winter, from 8 to 13 November (Pardo de Santayana Trueba *et al.* 2023).
- **2020 Ireland** – Co Cork: Dunboy, Castletownbere, male 1st year, from 9 November 2020 to 25 April 2021 (Lyne 2021, Flynn & O'Donail 2022).
- **2021 Azores** – Flores: Santa Cruz das Flores, female, 25 to 30 March 2021 (Robb *et al.* 2022, Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2021 Azores** – Terceira: Paul da Praia da Vitória, female, from 20 October 2021 to 6 April 2022 (Robb *et al.* 2024, Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2021 Britain** – England: River Ribble, Redscar Woods, Brockholes LWT, Lancashire & North Merseyside, male 1st year, 8, 14, 25–26 and 28–30 November 2021 and 9 March 2022; England: Leeds Liverpool Canal, Chorley/Withnell Fold area, male, 12, 17 and 29 December; England: River Darwen, Roach Bridge, Samlesbury, male, 20 December 2021 to 6 January 2022, 29 January to 4 February 2022, 10 to 16 February and 17 March to 19 April 2022; England: Knights Bottom Lake, Lancashire, 28 December 2021, 1–3 January 2022 and 19 April 2022 (Holt *et al.* 2022, Bacon *et al.* 2023). The BBRC considers that all these data refer to a single individual.
- **2023 Spain** – Basque Country: Lekeitio, Biscay, male, 30 September to 20 October (Pardo de Santayana Trueba *et al.* 2024).
- **2023 Azores** – Flores: Santa Cruz das Flores, female, 30 October (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2024 Azores** – Flores: Flores, exact location unknown, male, 20 February to 2 March (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2024 Azores** – Corvo: da Ponte, male, 4 and 5 October (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2025 Azores** – São Miguel: Lagoa das Furnas, male, 5 to 15 October (Pedro Ramalho/CPR-SPEA *in litt.*).
- **2025 France** – Brittany: Glomel, Côtes-d'Armor, 1st year, 8 to (at least...) 30 December.

III - Discussion

III-1 Origin of the birds – The natural arrival of the Belted Kingfisher in Glomel (Côtes-d'Armor) has been questioned by some observers, as was the case for the Irish birds of 1845, and as is often the case when a North American bird is discovered in Europe, especially when it is a species not known to migrate long distances. However, if we plot all the Western Palearctic records for the Belted Kingfisher on a map (Fig. 3), we see that they are consistent with those of other Nearctic species seen in Europe, namely a predominance in the Azores, Iceland and the British Isles, and some data on the Atlantic coast. The data is therefore consistent with the species arriving naturally, whether or not it was ship-assisted, again as is the case for all Nearctic landbirds. Conversely, this distribution of data does not correspond at all to that of birds escaped from captivity, which would appear randomly across the European continent, including inland. However, all Western Palearctic records of the Belted Kingfisher have been obtained on or near the coast. The most inland sightings are those of Rheden (Netherlands, December 1899), 110 km from the North Sea, and Tixall (Staffordshire, April 2005), 91 km from the Irish Sea. The record in Glomel (Côtes-d'Armor) is approximately 53 km from the Atlantic Ocean, both north and south of Brittany. These distances, including that of the Netherlands, are not unusual when one considers the species' ability to travel both in North America (see §1) and in Europe (case of the Staffordshire bird, fig. 2).



Fig. 3. Distribution of the Western Palearctic records of Belted Kingfisher

Furthermore, the chronological distribution of data (Fig. 4) reveals a peak in autumn – mainly in October and to a lesser extent in November and December – which is entirely consistent with the usual pattern of appearance of Nearctic passerines (and allies) in Europe. However, the very marked peak in October is due to the high number of data from the Azores, where birds arrive earlier than in Western Europe (without data from the Azores, the peak of arrivals in Europe is in October-November, which corresponds to the migration period of the species in North America). The discovery in early December of the Belted Kingfisher in Brittany therefore fits perfectly into this pattern of occurrence of the species in Europe.

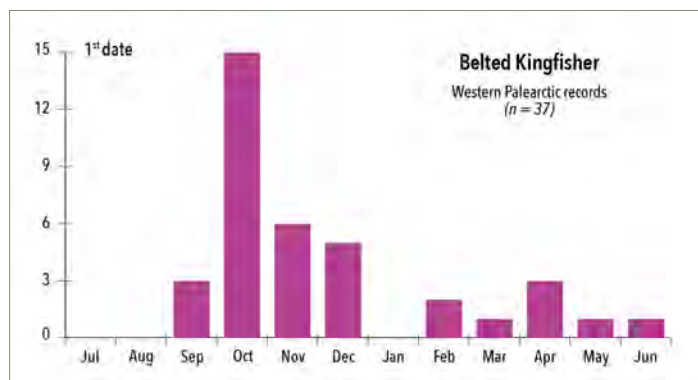


Fig. 4. Chronological distribution of data (dates of discovery) for the Belted Kingfisher in the Western Palearctic

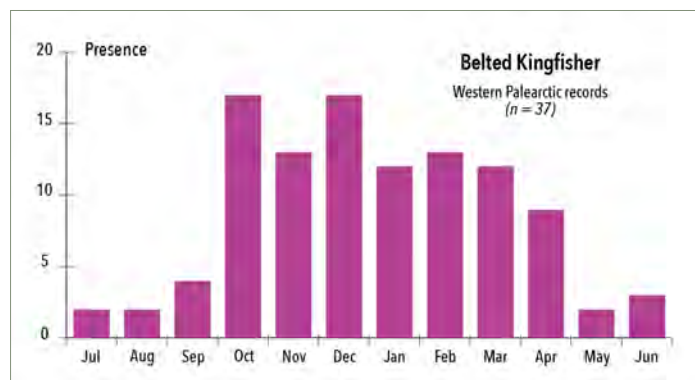


Fig. 5. Graph showing the presence of Belted Kingfishers observed in the Western Palearctic region.

The few spring records that fall outside this pattern may obviously concern birds that arrived the previous autumn and were found late, as suggested by Fraser *et al.* (2007) in relation to the bird in Staffordshire (April 2005). Unlike cuckoos, New World warblers and other insectivorous Nearctic passerines, Belted Kingfishers have a high survival rate and many individuals remained for many months where they arrived or even some distance away. This is probably due to the species' piscivorous diet, which provides it with sufficient food resources in all seasons, unlike insectivorous birds. Figure 5 shows that a large proportion of Belted Kingfishers arriving in the Western Palearctic in autumn survive the winter and are still present the following spring. Thus, less than a quarter (22%; $n = 37$) of individuals were observed on a single day, while 14% stayed between one week and one month, 16% between one and three months, and 24% between three and six months, with the record being held by the British bird of 1979, which stayed for almost a year (332 days). What will happen to the bird in Brittany?



Belted Kingfisher, female, Azores, February 2022 (© Radoslaw Gwozdzi)

III-2 Age and sex criteria – The Belted Kingfisher found in Brittany was identified as a female as soon as it was discovered, and quickly identified as a first-year bird due to its reddish-brown breast band. On Faune France database, when the sex of the bird was specified ($n = 88$), it was recorded as female in 78% of cases and as male in 22% of cases. The main argument put forward for classifying it as female was the presence of a « *beginning of a collar under the reddish-brown breast band* », and many observers probably simply repeated what more experienced birdwatchers had said. However, after a few days, some began to question the sex of the bird, and comments such as « *why female?* », « *strong resemblance to young males [seen in photos on eBird]* », « *absence of the characteristic reddish bar of a female but (...) presence of reddish flanks nonetheless* », « *this immature bird could well be a male after all (70% chance) – unfortunately contradicting 90% of the comments, which would make it a young female* »...

Having identified the bird as a male rather than a female, I consulted the guides to verify whether my impression was correct. Sibley (2014) provides no details other than an illustration showing the adult male and female and the juvenile (without specifying sex), while the illustration and text in Collins Bird Guide (Svensson *et al.* 2023) only refer to adults. Kelly *et al.* (2020) indicate that the male has a single grey-blue breast band, while the female has, in addition to this, reddish flanks and a reddish band on the lower breast. As for age criteria, they specify that juveniles have a slate-coloured breast band tinged with cinnamon or brown, but also a darker crest than adults, more white on the wing coverts, a more extensive white tip on the secondaries and (like adult females) white spots on the central pair of tail feathers. As for Nils van Duivendijk's guide (2024), shows photos of adults and juveniles of both sexes and indicates that first-cycle birds have typical reddish spots in the grey-blue breast, and that these are more limited in males than in females, as is the extent of the reddish colour on the flanks. Nothing conclusive, therefore, to determine with certainty whether the Breton bird is a male or a female...



Belted Kingfisher, adult male, Ohio, April 2021 (© Brad Imhoff)



Belted Kingfisher, first-year male, Quebec, August 2021 (© Jules-Alex Barville)



Belted Kingfisher, adult female, Quebec, April 2025 (© Frédéric Lelièvre)



Belted Kingfisher, first year female, Washington, August 2023 (© Eric Ellington)

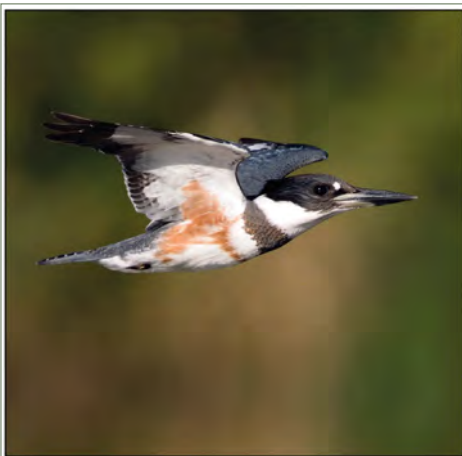
Continuing my investigations, I finally found the solution to the problem in Cramp & Simmons (2020). Like the various guides I consulted, these authors cite the reddish-washed breast band to distinguish a juvenile from an adult, and the cinnamon-red band on the breast, separated from the uniform blue-grey breast band by a white collar, to differentiate the female from the male. But above all, I found in the description of the plumage a clearly visible detail that allows males and females to be distinguished, regardless of their age... It is the colouring of the axillaries! Cramp & Simmons (*op. cit.*) write that in adult males, the axillaries are «white» and that «some are partially marked with grey-blue», while those of the adult female are «often entirely or partially tinged with cinnamon-red» and that in the immature female there is «a lot of red on the flanks and often on the axillaries». This criterion is also cited by Pyle (1997), who writes that «the longest underwing axillar» is cinnamon in females and white in males. I therefore searched eBird for photos of Belted Kingfishers in flight to verify this feature, which proved to be valid in all the photos I consulted, a selection of which is shown hereafter.



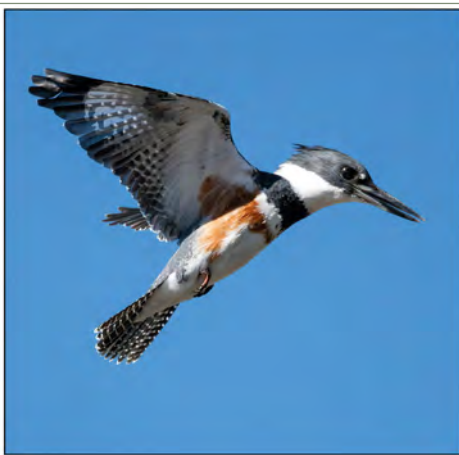
Belted Kingfishers, adult males - From left to right: California, November 2022 (© Sam Zhang), Illinois, April 2024 (© Graham Deese) and Virginia, March 2022 (© Matt Felperin)



Belted Kingfishers, first-year males - From left to right: Maryland, July 2023 (© Stephen Davies), Florida, November 2025 (© B.J. Worth) and British Columbia, July 2024 (© John Gordon)

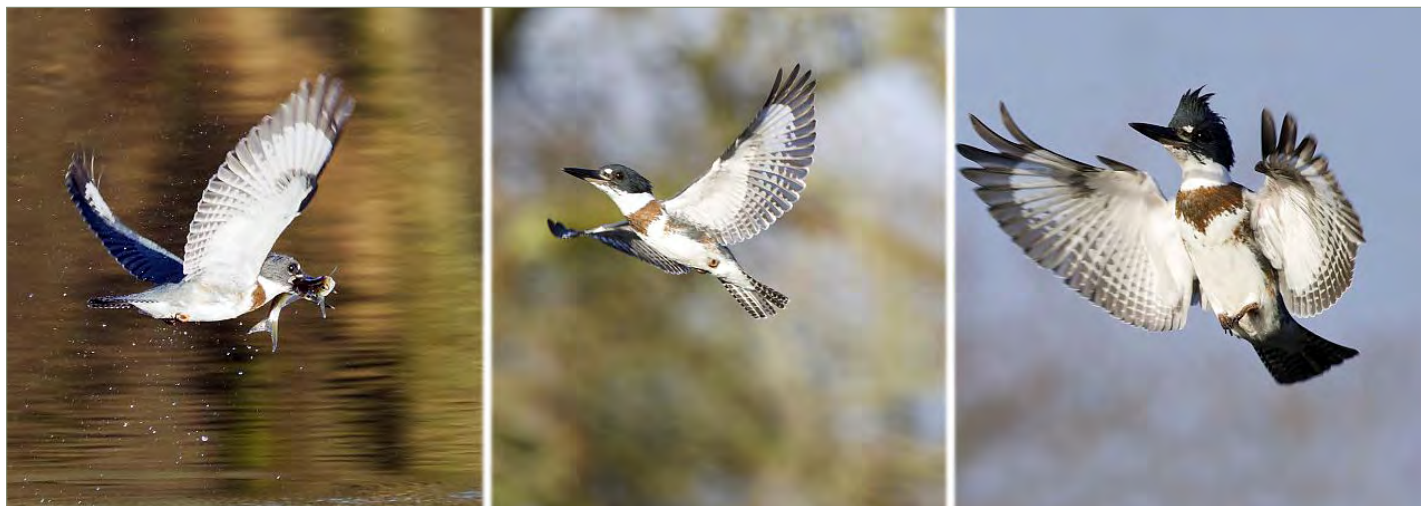


Belted Kingfishers, first-year females - From left to right: Arizona, February 2021 (© Neil Rucker), California, February 2023 (© Peter F.) and Colorado, November 2018 (© Bryan Calk)



Belted Kingfishers, adult females - From left to right: Indiana, August 2020 (© Peter F.), New Jersey, September 2022 (© Ben Ashin) and Washington, September 2024 (© Jefferson Ashby)

If we look at photos of the Breton bird in flight (for example, below), we can see that its axillaries are white with at most a few grey-blue markings, but no reddish brown. The few small reddish brown spots on the sides of the body are limited to the flanks but do not reach the axillaries. This indicates that this individual is a male, not a female. The presence of rusty colouring in the breast band is characteristic of juvenile plumage: this is therefore a first-year male. As for the hint of a second rusty breast bar, this is a feature visible in various photos of juvenile males found on the web (e.g. on eBird) or in the recent guide to European birds (van Duivendijk 2024). Pyle (1997) also points out that young males can have «*partial rufous bands*».



Belted kingfisher, first year male, Glomel, Côtes-d'Armor, Brittany, December 2025 (© Olivier Prigent)

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