ALCEDO ISPIDA, Linn.

Kingfisher.

Alcedo Ispida, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 179.

As the blue of the Turquoise forms a pleasing contrast among minerals, and the drooping blue-bell imparts colour to our shady woods, so is the Kingfisher conspicuous for its brilliancy among our native birds. Still, with all its beauty, it is by no means the finest of its family; for in those countries where nature is more lavish of her gifts, other and still lovelier species exist. The great group of birds to which it belongs are so varied that they are naturally divisible into many distinct genera; they are, moreover, so widely dispersed that not only each of the great continents of the globe, but all or nearly all the islands are also tenanted by Kingfishers, as these birds are generally called. This familiar term, however, is a most inappropriate one, inasmuch as but few of them take fish, or live in the vicinity of water,—some of the species even being found on the hot scoriæ of volcanic mountains, such as occur in the Island of Ascension; and I believe none of them ever drink. Our bird and its allies, for which the generic name of Alcedo has been retained, and the members of the genus Ceyx are the most truly aquatic of the entire family; for they frequent exclusively the neighbourhood of brooks and rivers, and feed principally on fish, aquatic insects, and diminutive Crustaceans.

A sight of the Kingfisher on its native waters, transient though the view may be, is necessary before a just conception of its beauty can be formed; for the specimens generally seen in our museums, or as an ornament in our drawing-rooms, convey but a sorry idea of the loveliness of the living bird. By nature shy, and in habits solitary, few but naturalists or anglers have had an opportunity of noticing the speck of glancing blue which with arrow-like swiftness descends the gloomy beck or overtops the gushing waterfall, or the red gleam which shines forth from the stranded snag in the river or the post standing upright in the stream; and none but those who are familiar with the actions and habits of our native birds are aware that the diminutive object hanging over the river on quivering wings is the Kingfisher, poising itself above a little fish, on which it presently darts with unerring aim. The observer of nature sees the stoop, if he awaits the rising, and can follow with his eye the flash of blue which skims away like a brilliant beetle; he will perceive it suddenly stop on a stone or dead limb of a tree, near the water's edge, and, if near enough, may see the minnow, the glistening bleak, or young trout beaten to death before it is either swallowed or carried to the clamorous and expectant brood which are being reared on a shelving bank near at hand, or on the side of a pit in the neighbouring wood. In England the Kingfisher occurs in every district where there is water: even the smallest streamlet will attract it; and thus the clear swift-flowing Wandle, the murky Brent, the Colne, and the Kennett are all enlivened with its presence. Old Father Thames, however, feeds more Kingfishers than any of his tributaries; and on that beautiful river, particularly from Windsor to Henley, it is sufficiently abundant to admit of every one gratifying his wish who may be desirous of seeing the bird in a state of nature. That its numbers would be far greater, and that every mile would be enlivened with its passing flight and shrill note, there is not the slightest doubt, could the destructive hand of the collector be stayed; for then our queen of rivers and its beautiful woods and meads would form a sanctuary wherein the bird might remain free from molestation. In Scotland, although it may be observed in every county, it is more scarce than with us; in Ireland it is occasionally met with in suitable localities throughout the island, but is nowhere numerous.

For the following interesting note on the occurrence of the Kingfisher in Argyleshire I am indebted to the kindness of the Duke of Argyll:—

"This bird visits Argyleshire only occasionally, at distant intervals, and, so far as I have observed, never remains long. I attribute this entirely to one circumstance, viz. the absence in the rapid streams of our country of the numerous species of fish common in English rivers, and which constitute the chief food of the Kingfisher. The bleak, the dace, the roach, the minnow, and others whose fry swim in the shallows, or near the surface in lowland rivers, are entirely wanting in Argyleshire. We have nothing but the various species of Salmonidæ; and their fry conceal themselves so well among the stones and rocks of the rapid waters in which they are produced, that they must afford a very scanty supply to such methods of capture as those practised by the Kingfisher.

"Two years ago a Kingfisher staid some weeks at Inverary, and frequented partly a lake of brackish water, which is well supplied both with trout and marine fish. The last time I observed the bird, it was sitting on a bunch of seaweed; and the brilliancy of its colouring, set off by so dark a background, attracted the eye from a great distance. I have never observed it except in autumn."