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

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.

WHITE-BELLIED AND CHOCOLATE-BACKED KINGFISHERS

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.
The Brown-hooded Kingfisher 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 Syblos 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 uppervings 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 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 deeply demarcated dark eyestripe and white cheeks than Brown-hooded Kingfisher.

The call of the Brown-hooded Kingfisher is a clear, whistled ‘tse pi pi pi’ whereas that of Grey-hooded Kingfisher is a weaker and faster ‘tse ti ti ti ti ti’. The call of Striped Kingfisher has a much clearer trilling component – ‘wee trrrrrrr’. – 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.

These species are characterized by having blue backs, fairly uniform blue or grey heads, and un streaked 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, 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.

Field separation of African and Woodland 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: unfortunately, their calls are very different. That of the Woodland Kingfisher is a shrill, piercing ‘trip trrrrr’ and is one of the most characteristic sounds of the savanna. The call of the African Mangrove Kingfisher is an accelerating ‘tsee tsee trrr ttt’ which progresses from a whistled introduction to a trill resembling that of a Brandt’s tern.
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 Kingfishers 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 Zaire, but the range of 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.