

Kingfishers are small to large birds with a dumpy body, short neck, short legs, large head, and a bill that looks too large and heavy. Sexes alike. Often but not always associated with water. They sit patiently on a branch, powerline or other prominent perch and dart or glide to snatch prey from the ground surface, or to plunge into shallow water. Calls are harsh.

**KINGFISHER (Kotare) *Halcyon sancta***

**Abundant native**

24 cm, 65 g. *Small deep green-blue and buff bird*; green grading to blue on the head and upperparts. Pale yellowish-buff to off-white underparts and collar round back of neck. Immature duller with buff feather edges on upperparts and brownish mottling on chest. Often seen perched on powerlines, or on branches and rocks near water. Call a loud penetrating 'kek-kek-kek-kek'. **Habitat:** Forest, river margins, farmland, lakes, estuaries and rocky coastlines; movement towards the coast in winter. **Breeding:** Oct–Feb. [Sp 281]



**KINGFISHERS**

**Alcedinidae**

About 86 species worldwide; 1 is native to New Zealand, and 1 is introduced and also possibly a vagrant.

and dart down to the ground, or dive into water, to catch their prey. Despite their name, kingfishers do not necessarily eat fish; some species are entirely terrestrial.

The kingfishers are brightly coloured birds with a plump body, short legs, tail and neck, a large head and a long, broad and dagger-like bill. Their flight is fast and direct. They often perch on posts, branches and powerlines

They nest in tree hollows or earth banks, which they excavate by repeatedly flying at the vertical surface and spearing with their bill; the skull has special shock-absorbing structures.

**281. KINGFISHER *Halcyon sancta***

**Plate 63**

**Other names:** Kotare, Sacred Kingfisher, New Zealand Kingfisher

**Size:** 24 cm, 65 g

**Geographical variation:** Of eight subspecies in Australia, New Caledonia, the Loyalty, Lord Howe, Norfolk and Kermadec Islands and New Zealand, the New Zealand subspecies is *vagans*.

**Distribution:** Widespread on the Kermadecs, North, South and Stewart Islands and most offshore islands, but not the Chathams or subantarctic islands. Uncommon well inland and in the southern South Island. They occupy many habitats, especially bush patches near the coast, in tidal estuaries, and in mangrove swamps in the north. They also live in developed farmland with scattered trees, and breed inland along river and stream edges or by lake shores, along forest margins and well into forests, both native and exotic. In winter, most birds that breed at high altitude or in forests move to lowland farms and the coasts.

**Population:** Common and widespread, especially in coastal districts and lowlands in winter.

**Conservation:** Protected native. Although Kingfishers occasionally live well into forests, they have probably benefited from the clearance of forest and the creation of forest-edge habitats and riparian margins of willows and poplars along rivers and near lakes. Artificial structures such as powerlines and posts in estuaries are excellent elevated perches to hunt from.

**Breeding:** Kingfishers nest in rotten tree trunks, knotholes or hollow branches, in the soil held by the roots of blown-over trees, in riverbanks, roadside cuttings, heads of slips,

and coastal cliffs. The nest is in a chamber at the end of a short tunnel that slopes slightly upwards. To start a tunnel, they sit on a branch slightly above and several metres from the site and fly straight at it, neck outstretched and uttering a peculiar whirring call, and strike it forcefully with the bill tip. They continue until the hole is big enough to perch in, and the rest is pecked and scooped out. Eggs are laid in October–January. They lay 3–5–7 white eggs (29 x 24 mm), which the female mostly incubates for 20–21 days. The chicks fledge at 26–27 days old.

**Behaviour:** Usually solitary or in pairs, spaced widely apart when breeding and when perching on posts or powerlines between feeding flights. Their usual call is a loud, penetrating 'kek-kek-kek-kek'.

**Feeding:** On tidal mudflats, diet is mainly small crabs, especially *Helice crassa*; in fresh water, tadpoles, freshwater crayfish and small fish; in open country and forest, earthworms, large insects such as cicadas, weta, stick insects, dragonflies, chafers, wasps and beetles, spiders, lizards, mice and small birds, especially Silvereyes. They often perch for long periods on any elevated object such as a rock, post, powerline, driftwood or bare branch, especially those that overlook pasture or tidal mudflats. When a bird sees prey, it suddenly darts with a direct, descending flight, snatches its victim and immediately returns to its perch, carrying the food crosswise in its bill. Larger animals may be battered against the perch. They regurgitate pellets of indigestible material below their perch and nest hole.

**Reading:** Fitzgerald, B.M. *et al.* 1986. *Notornis* 33: 23–32. Hayes, L.M. 1989. *Notornis* 36: 107–113.