The EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds
THEIR DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

Edited by
Ward J M Hagemeijer
Michael J Blair

Published for the European Bird Census Council by T & A D POYSER
The Kingfisher inhabits the whole Indo-Malayan region, including North Africa. It avoids steppe, desert and tundra or—latitude (tundra, taiga) ecosystems. As a sedentary breeder, it is absent only from Iceland, some Mediterranean islands such as Malta and the Balearics, and over 400m asl, save perhaps in the Caucasus. It is very rare in Scotland and in Scandinavia occurs only below 600m. It is absent in a few Swedish lowland Baltic areas. Only two subspecies, the nominate atthis and trigonum occur in Europe.

Its basic habitat requirement is the availability of clear water rich in fish shorter than 10cm (Hallett-Libois 1987). Furthermore, it rarely catches fish from the hover, preferring perch and branches from which to dive for prey. It therefore occurs along the edges of streams, rivers, canals, ditches, lakes, ponds and reservoirs and even in bays, estuaries or along the seashore. During the breeding season, the Kingfisher requires suitable trees in which to excavate a nesting chamber close to water. It prefers sandy or clay banks, more than 1m high, possessing a vertical or concave aspect. Occasionally its nest is between the roots of fallen trees. Nests are generally well-spaced along rivers at an average density of 1–3 bp/10km stretch in favourable years. Circumstances may make several pairs crowd into 1bp. In 1989, 4bp were recorded on a 650m-long islet in the eastern Seine (France) (Libois & Hallett-Libois 1994). In 1995. In contrast, breeding holes more than 1km apart can belong to one pair or to a bigamous male (pers obs). Territory size is highly variable, depending not only on food and nest-site availability, but also on the general population level and probably on individual behavioural traits. As determined by radio-tracking in Belgium, the home ranges of three nesting birds were respectively 0.1km (male, 45 days of survey), 1.4km (male of 1.1km, 15 days) and 1.8km (male, 270 days) (pers obs, A. Loncin, pers com). Consequently, densities are low everywhere, and the mean expected 1000 bp/50km grid square and probably not exceeding a few hundred per square at best.

Numbers fluctuate heavily from year to year according to the climatic conditions (rainfall, temperature) prevailing in the preceding breeding season (Libois & Hallet-Libois 1989), as far as they influence reproductive success (Libois 1994). Numbers also depend on the severity of winter frosts. It is therefore difficult to assess actual numbers precisely on a large scale. Similarly, accurate population trends are elusive unless determined over a long period of time. In the Belgian breeding season, the habitat was reduced after the severe 1986/87 winter increased to 43 in 1992 but reduced to 25 in 1991 (pers obs). Large fluctuations therefore seem characteristic. Winter losses can be offset by an annual production of 2–3 broods and the female’s mean lifetime reproduction rate of 9.7 fledglings, even given a mean annual mortality of 71–73% (Banzel & Drüke 1989).

Loss of suitable feeding and nesting habitat through water pollution, drainage and irrigation schemes is the main threat to the species; it causes sharp local declines which may be insignificant, depending on the scale of change. Eastern and continental populations are mainly migratory, moving southwards after the breeding season. Some populations are partially migratory, whereas western populations are dispersive or sedentary. Immatures disperse in all directions; exceptionally, some return to breed where they hatched (pers obs). In W Europe, dispersion distance is usually under 200km. Long-distance movements are well-oriented to the S or W (Euring databank). British populations appear to be relatively isolated because very few have been recorded on the Continent (Morgan & Glue 1977).

Roland Libois (B)

This species account is sponsored by Vogelbescherming Nederland, Zeist, NL.