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First Ringed Kingfisher in Oklahoma: northernmost record for the United States

By JOHN DOLE

On the evening of 29 September 1998 Edwin Glover noticed a large bird perched on a utility wire that runs between his house and a nearby pond in Stillwater, Payne County, Oklahoma. The bird appeared larger than the Belted Kingfishers (*Megaceryle alcyon*) and Mourning Doves (*Zenaida macroura*) that normally perched on the wire. The next morning, 30 September, Glover observed the bird on the wire with his binoculars. He determined that the bird was a kingfisher but was much larger and had a longer, thicker bill than a Belted Kingfisher. Glover also observed the slate-blue upper parts, rust-colored lower parts, and white collar. When the bird flew, he was able to see the white and rust-barred underwing coverts. Realizing that the bird was unusual, possibly a Ringed Kingfisher (*Megaceryle torquata*), Glover called Joyce Konigmacher and



Fig. 1. Ringed Kingfisher at Stillwater, Payne Co., Oklahoma. Photograph by James W. Arterburn on 2 October 1998.

myself. The next day, 1 October, Konigmacher, Florence Wass, Carolyn Hunger, and I observed the bird at approximately 1600 as it flew across the pond, calling loudly. The bird perched in the open on a short dead limb of an elm (*Ulmus americana*) tree, about 10 m above the ground. We were able to obtain excellent views and confirmed that the bird was a Ringed Kingfisher.

On the evening of 1 October, I reported the sighting to the Oklahoma Rare Bird Alert. On 2 October, James Arterburn, Joseph Grzybowski, Martha Kamp, Jo Lloyd, James Thayer, Glover, and I observed the bird shortly after dawn, and Arterburn photographed it (Fig. 1). Later on 2 October, James and Marion Norman and I were treated to quite a show in the early afternoon as a Coopers Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) made a pass at the Ringed Kingfisher. However, the kingfisher was as large as the hawk, and the two birds circled each other for a few seconds before the hawk departed. The kingfisher continued to fly around and call animatedly for several minutes before returning to a perch. Carl and Rosemary Wisk made the last sighting of the bird in the late afternoon of 2 October. Several people searched unsuccessfully for the kingfisher on 3 and 4 October. The search included other nearby ponds, Sanborn Lake, and Boomer Lake.

The bird was noticeably larger than the similar Belted Kingfisher. Other distinguishing marks included a large bill that was dark gray with a pale gray base. The bill was slightly longer from the base to the tip than from the base of the bill to the back of the head. On Belted Kingfishers the length of the bill is slightly shorter than the distance from the base of the bill to the back of the head. The head and upperparts were blue-gray with a white spot immediately in front of the eye. A white collar encircled the neck. The underparts were rust colored, except for the throat which was white. The upper breast was a lighter rust color than the belly and suffused with blue-gray. The lower breast had a narrow white lower breast band flecked with rust. The undertail coverts and wing linings were rust-colored. The primaries and tail were barred black and white.

The call was louder, deeper, and slower than that of a Belted Kingfisher. The Belted Kingfisher's call is a rattle of continuous notes while the Ringed Kingfisher's call is more a series of distinct notes.

The bird was most likely an immature, possibly a female, based on the description in Stiles et al. (1989) which states that immatures resemble adult females but have the slaty feathers of the chest edged and suffused with rufous. Immatures also have a white breast band that is more distinct on females, a paler rufous belly, and upperparts finely streaked with black. Fry et al. (1992) indicate that the juvenile Ringed Kingfisher is like the female but with upperparts streaky and underparts paler, the gray upper breast washed with rufous, and the underwing coverts partly white. While the upperparts of the Ringed Kingfisher in Stillwater were not noticeably streaky, the upper breast was paler rufous than the belly and suffused with blue-gray, and there was a rust-flecked white breast band.

There are three named subspecies of the Ringed Kingfisher: *Megaceryle t. torquata*, *M. t. stictipennis*, and *M. t. stellata* (Fry et al. 1992). The Oklahoma bird was assumed to be *Megaceryle t. torquata*, which ranges from southern Texas to central Argentina. Although minor plumage differences distinguish each of the subspecies, we did not check for these characteristics in the Oklahoma bird. The ranges of the other two subspecies are limited to the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, and possibly St. Kitts and Grenade (*M. t. stictipennis*); and Chile and southern Argentina (*M. t. stellata*; Fry et al. 1992).

The pond that the Ringed Kingfisher frequented was about 0.25 ha in size and surrounded by tall trees. The pond is situated such that the backyards of several homes are adjacent to it. The landscapes of the homes are mature with many tall trees and shrubs. The pond typically supports one or more Belted Kingfishers, indicating that it is generally suitable habitat for kingfishers.

The preferred habitat of the Ringed Kingfisher is heavily wooded areas near water such as wide, slow-moving rivers, lowland lakes, marshes, estuaries, brackish coastal lagoons, and mangroves (Fry et al. 1992). Fry et al. (1992) also note that Ringed Kingfishers can occasionally occupy water gardens in cities.

This sighting and Arterburn's photograph of the Ringed Kingfisher were accepted by the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee on 5 December 1998. A search of the official state lists for the southern United States failed to produce any records of the Ringed Kingfisher other than in Texas, indicating that the Oklahoma bird is the first documented record of the Ringed Kingfisher for North America outside of Texas. The Ringed Kingfisher has a tendency to wander, especially in the fall, and has been recorded in Texas as a vagrant in Bastrop, Fort Bend, Terrell, Tom Green, Travis, Victoria, and Washington counties (Kaufman 1996; M. Lockwood, pers. comm.; Texas Ornithological Society 1995). The Ringed Kingfisher has been slowly expanding its range outside of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas (Kaufman 1996; Lockwood, pers. comm.). While we will never know the exact reason the Oklahoma Ringed Kingfisher was found approximately 1000 km north of its normal range, one possibility is that Texas, including the Rio Grande Valley, and southern Oklahoma were experiencing a severe drought which may have forced the bird out of its normal fall range. During October and November 1998, several out-of-range Ringed Kingfishers were reported in Texas at Mitchell and Calaveras Lakes (near San Antonio), Brazos Bend (southwest of Houston), and Austin (up to four birds; Lasley et al. 1999).

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