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Some Notes on the Little Kingfisher

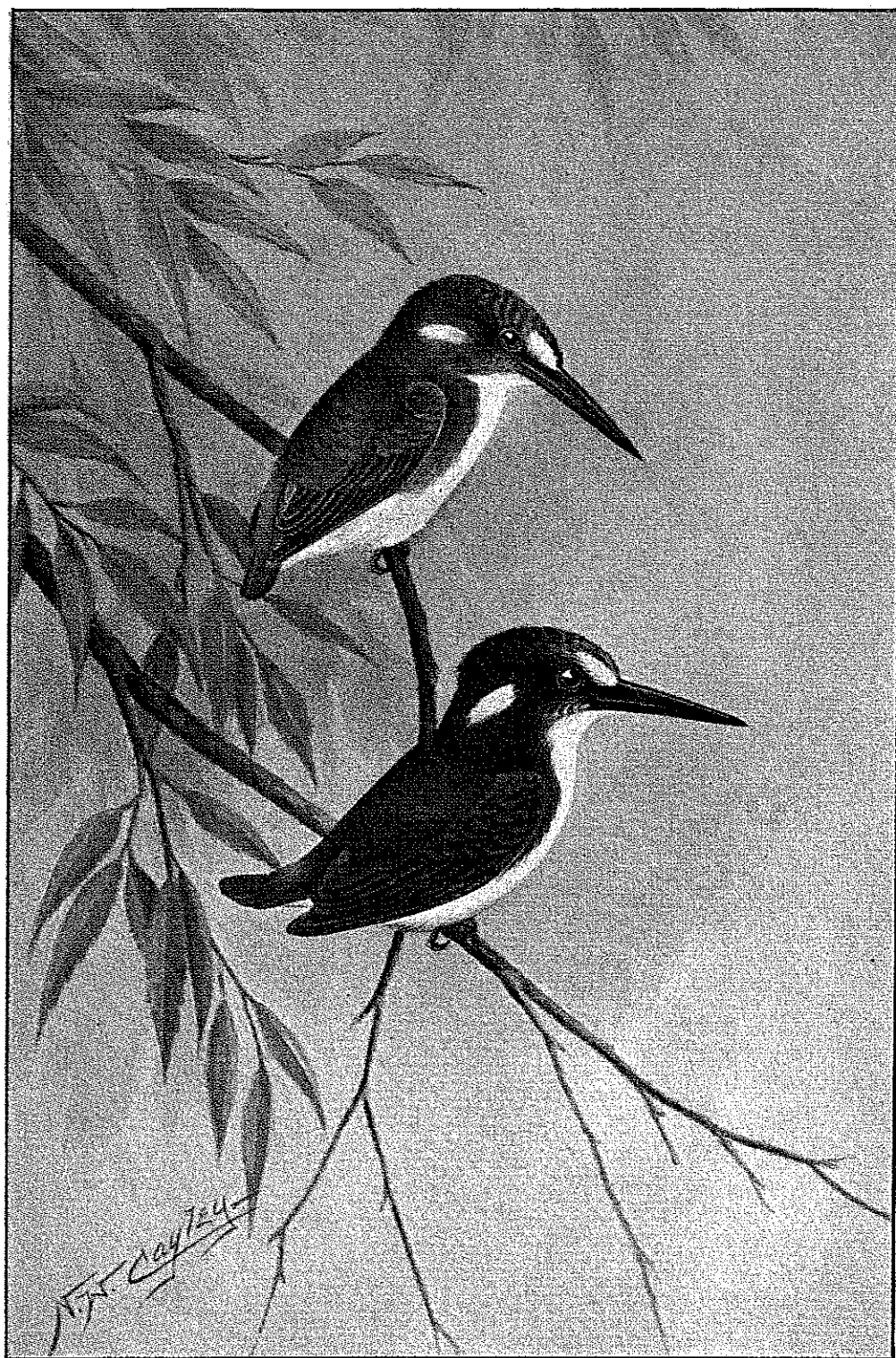
(*Alcyone pusilla*)

By R. S. MILLER, R.A.O.U., Melbourne.

The habitat of this species is entirely tropical and limited to the Molucca Islands, New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Northern Territory, and North Queensland. Occurring only in sparsely populated areas, it is, naturally, known to few bird observers, and as it usually frequents the mangrove swamps, where conditions are at all times most unpleasant, observations of the bird are few and far between.

Kendall Broadbent stated that about 1890 at Cardwell, North Queensland, it was a common species on the little creeks near the coast, leaving the coast in November to breed in the hills. With that in mind I anticipated the possibility of finding these birds in the Kuranda district, North Queensland, when on a visit there in November and December, 1930.

On the Barron River and small tributary streams Kingfishers were plentiful, but they were either the Azure Kingfisher (*Alcyone azurea*) or the Forest Kingfisher (*Halcyon macleayi*). After a week of fruitless search, I realised that the lower country around Cairns would be more likely to give results, as almost all records of the Little Kingfisher were made in coastal districts. After two days' searching without success, two small boys led me to a locality where they had seen a bird answering to the description of the Little Kingfisher, and, sure enough, on a dead twig twenty feet above a deep pool in a running stream sat the object of my search. The pool was a large one, deep in the stream bed, but shallow on the other side, and there wading in the water in the shadow of thick high scrub were three Egrets (*Egretta alba*) and two Straw-necked Ibis (*Threskiornis spinicollis*). To one who has known these birds in the Murray swamps, they seemed entirely out of place in that dense scrub.



Little Kingfisher
Alcyon pusilla

Neville W. Cayley, pinx.

The Kingfisher apparently had no mate in the locality as on each of four days on which I visited the pool I saw but the one bird. The branch on which I first saw it was the Kingfisher's favourite perch, and it occupied the one position for the main part of the day. As soon as the declining sun cast shadows on its perch, however, the bird moved to another position in the sunlight.

A few days later (December 8) I located a pair of Little Kingfishers on the Barron River, about eight miles from Cairns. They were fishing in a clear rocky pool in the middle of the stream, making short journeys backwards and forwards to a root of an overturned tree lying in the water. The flight of the birds was not as swift as that of the Azure Kingfisher—instead of the speedy dash direct to the desired spot, it seemed wavering and unsteady—but when diving into the pool after fish, nothing could have been more unerring; the bird seemed to be almost a blue flash disappearing into the water to reappear after every dive with a small fish in its bill. On leaving the water the flight to the bank was made in more leisurely fashion, the bird disappearing each time behind the bole of a large tree. After watching for a while to assure myself that the bird actually stayed near the tree, I moved up closer, to meet a vicious swoop by one of the birds. On the far side of the tree, between two roots, was a termites' nest, built on the ground, and in the centre of this was the entrance hole to the nest of the Kingfishers. Carefully enlarging the entrance, I inserted my hand and brought out four young Kingfishers, almost ready to leave the nest. The following is a brief description of their plumage at this stage:—Head, black, with greenish sheen; back, sides of head and neck, greenish black, with bluish tips to feathers; wings and tail, black above, lighter below; loreal spot and spot on side of neck white; under surface and under tail coverts white; patch of blackish brown on sides of neck and breast; bill black, legs and feet greyish brown; iris dark brown.

One young bird had a small fish about two inches long protruding from its bill. The young were able to support themselves quite comfortably when placed on my finger, and one fluttered back into the nest. Two days later (December 10) they left the nest, and on December 19 could even dive clumsily after fish, although they were still fed by the parents.

When excited at my presence, the parent birds uttered a cry which might be described as a shrill whistle quickly repeated. Except when the Kingfishers were disturbed by my actions at the nest, I only once heard either bird call, and in this case it was the same whistle, uttered once only. The digestive organs of the bird must work very rapidly, as at one period the parent birds carried eight small fish to the

nest in one hour, and they were feeding the young all through the day.

The love of the sun before-mentioned was again noticed with this pair of birds, and even the young, after they had emerged from the nest, seemed unharmed by long exposure to the fierce tropical heat. The young birds when in the nest seemed utterly unconscious of the fact that the mound was still occupied by the termites. As in the case of the Forest Kingfisher, bird and insect seem to live together in perfect harmony. As far as I could ascertain no other food than small fish was taken by the birds although probably water insects and crustacea form portion of their diet.

Probably Mr. W. R. McLennan has had more experience of this bird than any other collector or observer, and, writing to Dr. W. MacGillivray, he states—"On the 17th February, 1911, in a big swamp behind Charo mangroves, I flushed a Little Kingfisher from its nest in a mass of earth adhering to the roots of a fallen tea-tree in the middle of the swamp. The nest contained five eggs, slightly incubated. The tunnel was six inches long and a little over one inch in diameter, the chamber circular, about four and a half inches in diameter." This description of the nesting chamber corresponds in size with that which I observed, but the tunnel was, of necessity, shorter.

Eggs taken by Mr. McLennan were "five in number to a sitting, almost globular in form, the shell being close-grained, highly lustrous and pearly white," and measuring $.67 \times .6$ inches.

The plumage of adult birds of both sexes is alike, and a brief description of a typical skin is as follows:—Back, upper tail coverts, sides of head and neck, rich ultramarine; feathers of crown and upper wing coverts black, edged greenish blue; wings and tail, dark brown with feathers, more or less edged with ultramarine; loreal spot, under-surface, under wing coverts, under tail coverts, and small tuft of plumes on the side of neck white, the last washed with orange; patch on sides of neck and breast ultramarine; bill, black; legs and feet dark grey; total length, 120 mm.; wing, 50 mm.; tarsus, 8 mm.; culmen, 28 mm.; tail, 23 mm. Mr. McLennan describes the iris as dark brown. The above description is of the North Queensland bird—those obtained in the Northern Territory and Cape York have rich greenish blue replacing the ultramarine on the better-known form.

Birds figured are:—Upper: Male, No. O.28843, Barron River, N. Queensland. Coll. George Sharp, 14/11/12. Lower: Male, No. O.3360, Herberton district, N. Queensland. Coll. Messrs. Cairn and Grant, December, 1889. Both from the Australian Museum, Sydney.