



Malachite Kingfisher

Kuifkopvisvanger

Alcedo cristata

The Malachite Kingfisher is concentrated over the mesic east of the subcontinent, extending westwards along the Kunene and, more obviously, Orange rivers. Its continental range takes it as far to the northeast as Ethiopia and Sudan, while in the west it ranges to Senegal, Gambia and Guinea, but to a large extent it is replaced by close congeners in the rainforest belt.

It is replaced in the Comores and on Madagascar by *A. vintsioides*. Other closely related forms are present on the islands of the Gulf of Guinea and in the rainforest belt (Clancey 1992b). Four races are accepted in *A. cristata* (Clancey 1990a), two of which occur in southern Africa: the nominate race occupies most of the region, but in the upper Zambezi tributaries (Okavango, Kwando, Linyanti, Chobe and Zambezi upstream from Victoria Falls) it is replaced by *robertsi*, and in Mozambique by *cyanostigma*.

In southern Africa it is only likely to be confused with the comparably sized Pygmy Kingfisher *Ispidina picta* which has rufous on the face extending above the eye, is uncrested and has the pileum almost black, finely banded with ultramarine, and with the red bill shorter and more robust. The Pygmy Kingfisher also occupies a different habitat, frequently far removed from water. Juvenile Malachite Kingfishers can be confused with Halfcollared Kingfishers *A. semitorquata* because both have black bills.

It is of solitary disposition, generally to be encountered along the edges of a waterbody, perching low down on reed or papyrus stems and the leafy fronds of bushes and trees. It is not particularly shy and, when flushed, flies low over water soon to perch again.

Habitat: It is largely piscivorous and intimately associated with aquatic environments, especially river and stream banks where the water is both sluggish and liberally overhung by trees, shrubs and recumbent riverine grasses and weedy vegetation. Many favoured sites only become available to it after the onset of the main rains when it frequents

seasonal streams which later dry out and force the birds to move to new hunting grounds. It often resorts to reedbeds and occurs at sewage farms, ornamental ponds and small farm dams. Suitable sites with steep banks for nest tunnels are required. It is generally found below 2000 m. The highest reporting rates were from the Okavango, Miombo, Eastern Zimbabwe Highlands and the East Coast Littoral.

Movements: When not breeding it wanders to exploit the availability of food. Influxes of birds at sites along the KwaZulu-Natal coast at the onset of the dry season are probably of birds moving off the plateau as the result of the drying out of seasonal streams and wetlands, as also occurs in Zimbabwe (Irwin 1981). Young birds disperse widely, including nocturnal flights during which they may crash into windows (Fry *et al.* 1992). The models show no evidence for large-scale migration.

Breeding: Maclean (1985c) recorded nesting August–February, and Tarboton *et al.* (1987b) gave October–March for the Transvaal. Zimbabwe data given by Irwin (1981) agree with Maclean's findings but not with those of the atlas which also describe a long breeding season spanning August–May with a late-spring/early-summer peak. Breeding of race *robertsi* in the Okavango is primarily in winter and early spring (May–October), just after the peak of the floods (Skinner 1996a). The atlas data also suggest later breeding with increasing latitude, except in Zone 4 where winter rainfall probably determines an earlier breeding season.

Interspecific relationships: It replaces the Halfcollared Kingfisher in all the river systems in more arid and less mountainous areas, such as the Okavango Delta, in the upper and middle Limpopo drainage and the Orange and Vaal river drainages.

Historical distribution and conservation: It is widespread and not threatened at present, but is locally vulnerable to river pollution, application of pesticides and habitat destruction.

P.A. Clancey

Recorded in 1366 grid cells, 30.1%

Total number of records: 17 405

Mean reporting rate for range: 15.8%

Reporting rates for vegetation types



