

# FIRST DOCUMENTED OBSERVATION OF RINGED KINGFISHER IN ARIZONA

BY JEFF COKER, VAIL, AZ 85641 ([UWVIPER@AOL.COM](mailto:UWVIPER@AOL.COM))

On 9 September 2018 a Ringed Kingfisher (*Megaceryle torquata*, Figure 1) was observed at Dankworth Pond, Graham County, Arizona. This sighting is the first reported record of this species for Arizona. The bird remained in the general geographical area for approximately the next 6 months.

The initial discovery of the Ringed Kingfisher was a very brief encounter. At approximately 0845 (MST) on 9 September 2018, I was birding along the southeast shore of Dankworth Pond just west of the small marsh with the pond's outflow pipe (N 32° 43' 08.89", W 109° 42' 14.76"). I looked to the north above the cattails (*Typha* spp.) and observed a kingfisher for about 2 seconds as it flew south across the pond towards me at a height of about 3.0-4.5 m above the surface before it dove behind the cattails and disappeared from my sight. The bird had a solid dark rufous/chestnut colored belly, a wide bold white band on the chin/neck, dark slate blue on the back, and a very large bill. My initial impression was that it was a Belted Kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*), but I knew that species did not have an all-rufous belly. The rufous belly was indicative of Ringed Kingfisher, a species unexpected in southeast Arizona. I quickly walked back to the east along the pond's shore, climbed on a picnic table, and scanned the pond, focusing on the southeast corner. I did not observe the bird. I then walked counterclockwise around the pond, stopping at a picnic table on the western shore from which I could observe the entire pond obstruction free. For the next 75 minutes I kept the pond under observation but did not see the bird. During my brief observation of the bird I did not hear it vocalize. I sent an email about my sighting to Kelly Wright, a birder and state park ranger assigned to Dankworth Pond/Roper Lake State Park and told her to keep her eyes peeled for a possible Ringed Kingfisher at both Dankworth Pond and Roper Lake, which is located 4 km north of Dankworth Pond. I returned the next day to Dankworth Pond with Diane Drobka. We spent approximately 2.5 hours birding the pond without relocating the bird I'd seen the previous day.

On the evening of 4 October 2018, Wright (2018) heard, observed, and photographed a female Ringed Kingfisher at Roper Lake (N 32° 45' 16.51", W 109° 42' 07.56"). Since I was not confident in my initial observation on 9 September, I reported it only to Wright and Drobka. Thanks to Wright's keen ear and photographic ability she was able to take a diagnostic photograph of the bird (Figure 2) and get the word out to the greater birding community.



Figure 1. Ringed Kingfisher 20 February 2019. Photo by Lyndie M. Warner



Figure 2. Ringed Kingfisher, Roper Lake 4 October 2018, first photo. Photo by Kelly Wright



Figure 3. Ringed Kingfisher, clearly shows rufous belly 12 October 2018. Photo by Gary H. Rosenberg

During a stakeout of Roper Lake by many birders on the morning of 6 October, the Ringed Kingfisher was observed frequenting a small pond on private property just to the north and across Roper Lake Road from the entrance to Roper Lake State Park (N 32° 45' 36.07" W 109° 42' 23.32"). Throughout the day it was heard giving its machine-gun-like "klek, klek, klek, klek, ..." alarm call, which was recorded by McCabe (2018). At dusk the bird was observed flying to the west.

On 8 October the Ringed Kingfisher was observed at the private pond at the northeast corner of Lebanon Loop and Cactus Flat Roads (N 32° 45' 06.91", W 109° 43' 27.83"), 1.9 km from Roper Lake. After the initial excitement and rush of birders wanting to see a first state record, it was seen and reported off and on for the next few months in the area between Cactus Flat and just south of Swift Trail Junction. Due to the Ringed Kingfisher's propensity both to sit tucked in the branches of trees and to sit still for hours, as well as ranging over a wide area, the bird tried the patience of many birders who had to make multiple trips and wait for hours to finally observe her.

The last known observation of the Ringed Kingfisher was on 3 March 2019 in the vicinity of the farm pond at the corner of Lebanon Loop and Cactus Flat Roads.

With Wright's photographs and those taken later by others, the kingfisher's identity was never in question (Figures 1-7). The straight and heavy bill (dull ivory at the proximal half of the lower mandible and base of the upper mandible) was longer than the head, and the solid-rufous belly and undertail coverts and larger size distinguish this species from the Belted Kingfisher, which is commonly found in southeastern Arizona in migration and winter, often in the same habitat. The female Belted Kingfisher has only a rufous breast band and rufous along the sides of the belly. The slate-blue breast, rufous underwing coverts, and rufous undertail coverts (Figures 3 and 4) distinguished this bird as a female Ringed Kingfisher (Alsop 2001).

Throughout the 6-month period the Ringed Kingfisher was observed, it changed from juvenile plumage to definitive basic plumage (Brush 2009). When first observed in mid-October 2018, the breast was a mix of cinnamon and slate-blue/gray feathers (Figure 5). By mid-February 2019, the breast had molted to almost pure slate-blue feathers (Figure 6).

The initial observation by Wright was made possible when the Ringed Kingfisher alerted its presence with the monosyllabic 'klek'. On the occasions the author observed the Ringed Kingfisher at the farm pond at the intersection of South Lebanon Loop Road and West Cactus Road, it was often the call that gave the bird away. The Ringed Kingfisher's rattle call is slower and lower pitched than



Figure 4. Ringed Kingfisher 20 February 2019.  
Photo by Lyndie M. Warner



Figure 5. Ringed Kingfisher 12 October 2018.  
Photo by Gary H. Rosenberg



Figure 6. Ringed Kingfisher 15 February 2019.  
Photo by Diane Drobka



Figure 7. Ringed Kingfisher with prey fish  
1 December 2018. Photo by Jeff Coker

that of the Belted Kingfisher (Howell 1995, Sibley 2017). In addition to the 6 October recording (McCabe 2018), David Stejskal's 12 October recording clearly captures the call (Stejskal 2018).

I observed the Ringed Kingfisher on 5 occasions for a total of about 1 hour. The bird was adept at sitting motionless for long periods of time. Without carefully scanning the trees lining the ponds and lakes, hearing its call, or some luck, it would often go undetected. This was the case following Wright's posting of the first photos when observers spent many hours scanning Roper Lake before hearing and finally observing the bird in the area of the pond to the north of Roper Lake. At the farm pond at the corner of Lebanon Loop and Cactus Flat Roads, it would often be observed perched high in the cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*) tree in the far southwest corner or buried back near the trunk of the small cottonwood at the northern end of the eastern shore. On 1 December 2018 it was observed by the author (Figure 7) and on 13 February 2019 by Johnson (2019) attempting to eat a rather large fish compared with the bird's size. During my observation, it beat the fish against its perch repeatedly, about every 30-60 seconds. I also observed it dive from a wire into an irrigation ditch parallel to Cactus Flat Road, but it was unsuccessful in capturing any prey. Although Ringed Kingfishers are known to capture fish 20-200 mm long, the usual range is between 80-200 mm in length (Brush 2009).

The Ringed Kingfisher roamed an area near Cactus Flat and Swift Trail Junction that included Roper Lake State Park (Figure 8). This area is located approximately 11 km south of Safford. The bird was first observed at Dankworth Pond before being observed 4 km farther north at Roper Lake and other ponds in the area. This area is approximately 7.64 km<sup>2</sup>, and the average elevation is 964 m. Numerous small ponds are in the Cactus Flat and Swift Trail Junction area. Having flown over the area multiple times in a helicopter and seeing the many habitat possibilities there, the author can understand why the bird went undetected for long periods of time. It preferred bodies of water with tall trees along the shore. At Dankworth Pond it was observed perched in the tall pine (*Pinus* sp.) at the northwest corner of the pond. Figure 9 shows the cottonwoods lining the farm pond at the intersection of Lebanon Loop and Cactus Flat Roads. With the abundance of perches in the area, the relative flatness of the terrain, and the lack of vertical embankments, this area is comparable to the habitat in the Ringed Kingfisher's overwintering range in the lower delta of the Rio Grande River in Texas (Brush 2009).

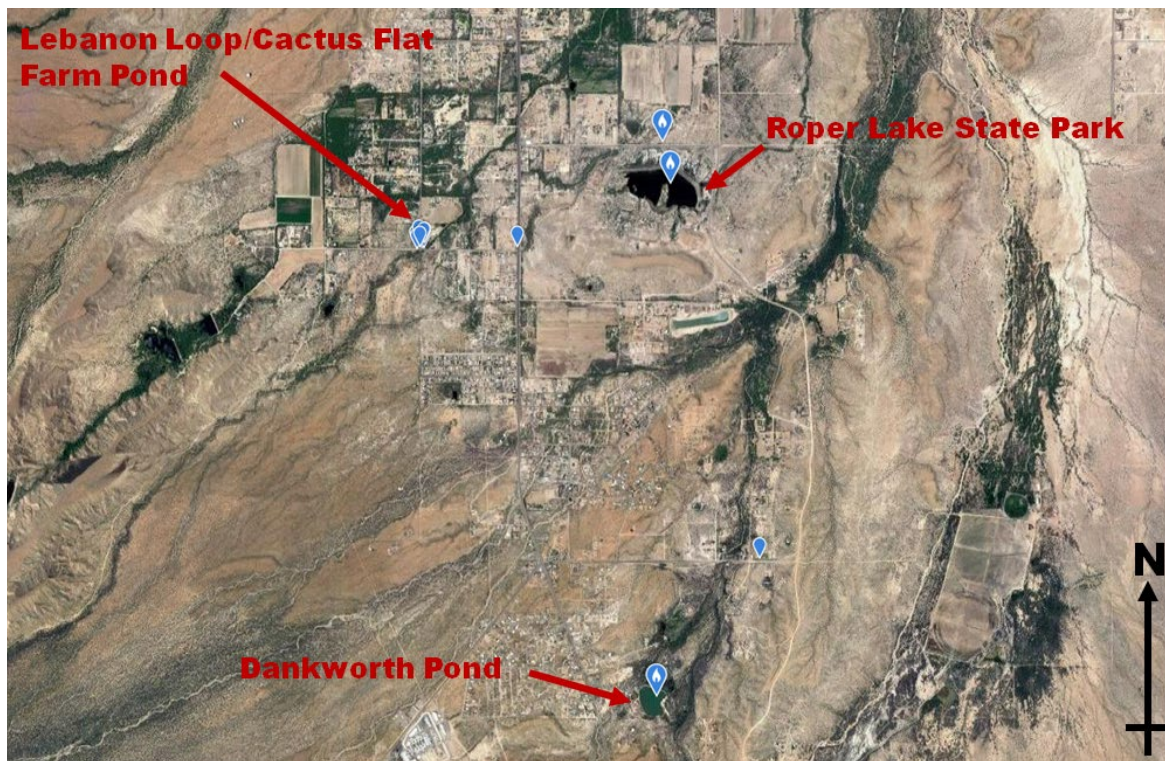


Figure 8. Cactus Flat to Swift Trail area showing locations of eBird sightings with most common areas labeled.



Figure 9. East side of pond at the northeast corner of Lebanon Loop and Cactus Flat Roads. Photo by Jeff Coker

Although the Ringed Kingfisher is widespread in the Neotropics from Mexico to Chile, the North American breeding range is limited to southern and central Texas, where it has been expanding over the past 50 years (Brush 2009). The current northernmost regular location is the South Llano River, southwest of Junction, Kimble County, Texas (N 30° 27' 16.77", W 99° 47' 39.87"), which is 974 km from Roper Lake (Chodacki and Skipper 2019). Ringed Kingfishers in North America are not known to migrate. Wandering individuals have been documented in Oklahoma (Gryzbowski 1998) and Florida and Louisiana (Brush 2009). The closest reported Ringed Kingfisher to the Arizona observations was at Imperial Reservoir, Pecos, Texas (W 31° 18' 34.03", W 102° 48' 27.93") (Kostecke 2001), which is 668 km from Roper Lake. The northernmost regular location in Mexico is Mazatlan, Sinaloa, about 1,100 km south-southeast of Graham County.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Kelly Wright, Diane Drobka, Gary H. Rosenberg, and Lyndie M. Warner for allowing the use of their photographs; Brian Johnson, Janine McCabe, and David Stejskal for their eBird contributions; and Chris Benesh, Tim Brush, Doug Jenness, and Roy May for their editorial assistance.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Alsop, F.J. 2001. Birds of North America. Covent Garden Press, New York, New York.
- Brush, T. 2009. Ringed Kingfisher (*Megaceryle torquata*), version 2.0. In The Birds of North America (A.F. Poole, Editor), Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY. <https://birdsna.org/Species-Account/bna/species/rinkin1>
- Chodacki, G.D., and B.R. Skipper 2019. Partition of foraging habitat by three kingfishers (Alcedinidae: Cerylinae) along the South Llano River, Texas, USA. *Waterbirds* 42:231-236.
- Gryzbowski, J. 1998. eBird checklist. <https://ebird.org/checklist/S42736857>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, NY. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. (Accessed: 30 September 2019).
- Howell, S.N.G., and S. Webb. 1995. A guide to the Birds of Mexico and Central America. Oxford University Press Inc., New York.
- Johnson, B. 2019. eBird checklist. <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S52666323>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, NY. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. (Accessed: 30 September 2019).
- Kostecke, R. 2001. eBird checklist. <https://ebird.org/tx/checklist/S26456224>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, NY. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. (Accessed: 30 September 2019).
- McCabe, J. 2018. eBird checklist. <https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S49034120>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, NY. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. (Accessed: 30 September 2019).
- Sibley, D. 2017. Sibley Birds 2nd Edition, Birds of North America Application. Mydigitalearth.com. (Accessed 30 September 2019).
- Stejskal, D. 2018. eBird checklist. <https://ebird.org/checklist/S49143695> eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, NY. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. (Accessed: 30 September 2019).
- Wright, K. 2018. eBird checklist. <https://ebird.org/checklist/S48938309>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, NY. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. (Accessed: 30 September 2019).