

The flight of the kingfisher is intriguing

By ART BRIGGS-JUDE
The wind was like November's, fresh and gusty. It pushed the sullen overcast above the trees like heavy smoke. It set the tallest pines in motion and rattled the curled bark on the birches. Before me in the marsh, the chilling breeze moved the swampgrass in waves, while the brown cattails strained against each successive blast.

Fighting the turbulence, the kingfisher flew low over the bog to its chosen stub above a pond of open water. From this vantage point it could usually spot a fat chub or two, but today the water surface was pebbly making the fishing difficult. Even the frogs on which it often dined seemed to have all disappeared. The heavy-billed bird swung its head downwind and rattled a vigorous call. Only the wind answered. It made him shudder as it ruffled his unkempt crest more than usual and caused his blue-gray breast band to flare up and become less noticeable.

For a long time the feathered fisherman sat motionless as if wondering. Were these cool gusts the forerunners of more and colder ones to follow? Frigid gales that would ice the pools forcing him south to a warmer but stranger land?

But this was his real home; he was born here. In the same tunnelled bluff from where he had taken his first flight, he helped feed five of his own demanding youngsters this past season. Even now they were probably with his mate, finishing their fishing lessons along the lakeshore, while he alone remained to police and patrol.

He gazed again across the forest-rimmed swampland. Here he was king, at least most of the time anyway.

By keeping a sharp eye

skyward, the kingfisher could avoid the sinister moving marsh hawk and save face with the smaller birds whom he liked to buzz on occasion. Only the kingbird rebelled openly, and as its actions were more bluff than bite, he continued to pester this black and white flycatcher whenever the mood dictated.

The fact he hadn't seen the kingbird for a week or more now gave the kingfisher more food for thought.

Suddenly the bird on the streamside perch stiffened. Five black ducks swept past, then wheeled and splashed in, their spray carried before the stiff breeze. Company at least, but wasn't this too a sign of autumn, when the wildfowl were flocking?

He listened impatiently for a while to their "dug-a-dug-a" babbling, then called loudly again across the marshy wastes. Receiving no reply, he dropped from the limb. Now flying with his customary irregular wingbeats, the kingfisher cleared a cedar point and disappeared.

For some unknown reason, the ducks too sprang into the air with a clatter of wings. A couple of warning quacks and a steady climb put them over the tallest waving trees and out of sight.

I hunched my shoulders and stood up. My dog, who moments before had been curled and shivering, shook her ears and stretched. Together we started back the way we had come. No doubt the autumn marsh would be a resting place for many birds during the next month or so.

More ducks would arrive and still-legged herons would wade the shallows. Yet in my mind I hoped the high diving kingfisher would also find the weather fitting to hang around himself for a few months. Then at least we'd know it wouldn't be cold enough to freeze the pond.

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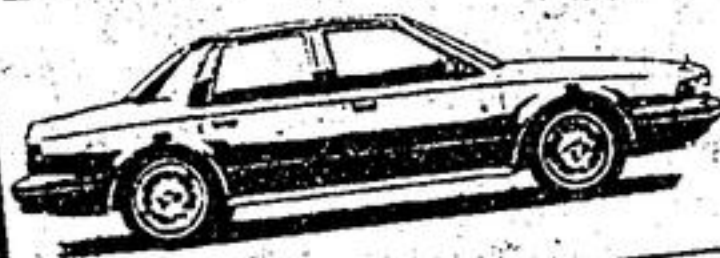
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