

## The Return of the Woodland Kingfisher

For bird enthusiasts, few moments capture the magic of nature quite like hearing the first call of the Woodland Kingfisher after its long migration. It's a sound that carries with it the promise of summer and the rhythm of life renewing itself. The clear, melodic trill seems to announce to the world, "I'm back!" For me, the arrival of the first Woodland Kingfisher of the season is not just an auditory delight but a deeply emotional experience—a marker of time and a reminder of the interconnectedness of the natural world.

This year, I was lucky to hear my first Woodland Kingfisher on November 25th, exactly the same day as last year. This uncanny consistency never fails to amaze me, as though the bird carries an internal clock perfectly synchronized with the seasons. It felt like a reunion with an old friend, one who has travelled thousands of kilometres yet still remembers to return.

The Woodland Kingfisher (*Halcyon senegalensis*) embarks on an incredible journey every year, migrating from its wintering grounds in equatorial Africa to breed in Southern Africa. Covering vast distances, it navigates across varied landscapes, guided by instinct and environmental cues. Its migration is timed perfectly with the rains in Southern Africa, ensuring a bounty of insects for feeding and raising chicks.

What makes the Woodland Kingfisher so iconic is not just its striking appearance—vivid turquoise-blue feathers and a contrasting black and white body—but its unmistakable call. This piercing "ti-ti-trrrrrr" rings out from treetops and thickets, often marking the true start of the wet season for many of us.

The arrival of migratory birds like the Woodland Kingfisher is one of nature's most remarkable phenomenon's. These birds undertake vast journeys, crossing continents, oceans, and deserts to reach their destinations. For the Woodland Kingfisher, this annual migration ensures it can take advantage of seasonal food resources in different regions.

But the Woodland Kingfisher isn't the only migratory marvel returning at this time of year. Southern Africa plays host to several other feathered travellers, each with its own unique charm and ecological role. Others include:

### Amur Falcon

Perhaps one of the most astonishing migratory journeys belongs to the tiny Amur Falcon. These petite raptors travel an incredible 22,000 kilometers round-trip between their breeding grounds in northeastern Asia and their overwintering areas in southern Africa. Along the way, they cross the Indian Ocean in a nonstop flight of over 3,000 kilometers, relying on fat reserves and favorable winds.

Spotting a flock of Amur Falcons soaring above grasslands or perching on powerlines is always a highlight. Their journey is a testament to endurance and the power of nature's design.

### European Bee-eater

The dazzling European Bee-eater brings a splash of color to our landscapes. These birds, adorned in a rainbow of hues, migrate from southern Europe and parts of Asia to southern

Africa for the summer. Their aerial acrobatics as they catch insects mid-flight are a joy to watch, and their soft, rolling calls add a gentle melody to the summer soundtrack.

#### Red-chested Cuckoo

The hauntingly beautiful "Piet-my-vrou" call of the Red-chested Cuckoo signals its return from central and eastern Africa. This bird is known for its brood parasitism, laying eggs in the nests of other species like the Cape Robin-Chat. For many South Africans, its distinctive call is as iconic as the Woodland Kingfisher's trill, evoking memories of childhood summers and lazy afternoons.

#### Barn Swallow

The graceful Barn Swallow is another well-loved migrant. These birds travel from Europe and Asia to escape the cold winters, gracing our skies with their elegant swoops and chirping calls. Their synchronized flight patterns and communal roosts are a spectacular sight, especially at sunset.

Migratory birds like the Woodland Kingfisher and its counterparts are vital indicators of environmental health. Their movements depend on well-functioning ecosystems across multiple continents, making them particularly vulnerable to habitat loss, climate change, and pollution. Each time I hear that first call of the season, I am reminded of the fragility of these ancient cycles and the responsibility we share in protecting them.

For me, the return of these migrants is more than just an annual event. It's a personal celebration of resilience, adaptation, and the beauty of life. These birds tie us to distant lands and remind us that our actions at home can ripple across the globe, affecting creatures thousands of kilometres away.

As I listened to the Woodland Kingfisher's call this year, I couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude. How fortunate are we to live in a world where such miracles exist? Each call is a tiny victory—a symbol of survival against the odds.

This season, I encourage everyone to take a moment to appreciate these incredible travellers. Whether you're hearing the cheerful chatter of the European Bee-eater or watching the Amur Falcons gather before their return flight, let's not take these moments for granted.

Because every call, every sighting, is a reminder that nature, though enduring, needs our care. The Woodland Kingfisher's journey—and that of so many migratory birds—depends on healthy ecosystems. By protecting wetlands, forests, and grasslands, we ensure that these seasonal symphonies continue to play for generations to come.

So, how excited do I get when I hear that first call? More than words can express. It's the sound of hope, the essence of summer, and a testament to the wonders of our natural world. Does the first call of the Woodland Kingfisher excite you too? Let me know.