Kingfisher's Kindergarten

by William Long

Koskomenos the kingfisher still burrows in the earth like his reptile ancestors; therefore the other birds call him outcast and will have nothing to do with him. But he cares little for that, being a clattering, rattle-headed, self-satisfied fellow, who seems to do nothing all day long but fish and eat. As you follow him, however, you note with amazement that he does some things marvelously well—better indeed than any other of the Wood Folk. To locate a fish accurately in still water is difficult enough when one thinks of light refraction; but when the fish is moving, and the sun glares down into the pool and the wind wrinkles its face into a thousand flashing, changing furrows and ridges,—then the bird that can point a bill straight to his fish and hit him fair just behind the gills must have more in his head than the usual chattering gossip that one hears from him on the trout streams.

This was the lesson that impressed itself upon me when I first began to study Koskomenos; and the object of this little sketch, which records those first strong impressions, is not to give our kingfisher's color or markings or breeding habits—you can get all that from the bird books—but to suggest a possible answer to the question of how he learns so much, and how he teaches his wisdom to the little kingfishers.

Just below my camp, one summer, was a trout pool. Below the trout pool was a shaded minnow basin, a kind of storehouse for the pool above, where the trout foraged in the early and late twilight, and where, if you hooked a red-fin delicately on a fine leader and dropped it in from the crotch of an overhanging tree, you might sometimes catch a big one.

Early one morning, while I was sitting in the tree, a kingfisher swept up the river and disappeared under the opposite bank. He had a nest in there, so cunningly hidden under an overhanging root that till then I had not discovered it, though I had fished the pool and seen the kingfishers clattering about many times. They were unusually noisy when I was near, and flew up-stream over the trout pool with a long, rattling call again and again—a ruse, no doubt, to make me think that their nest was somewhere far above.

I watched the nest closely after that, in the intervals when I was not fishing, and learned many things to fill one with wonder and respect for this unknown, clattering outcast of the wilderness rivers. He has devotion for his mate, and feeds her most gallantly while she is brooding. He has courage, plenty of it. One day, under my very eyes, he drove off a mink and almost killed the savage creature. He has well-defined fishing regulations and enforces them rigorously, never going beyond his limits and permitting no poaching on his own minnow pools. He also has fishing lore enough in his frowsy head—if one could get it out—to make Izaak Walton's discourse like a child's babble. Whether the wind be south or northeast, whether the day be dull or bright, he knows exactly where the little fish will be found, and how to catch them.

When the young birds came, the most interesting bit of Koskomenos' life was manifest. One morning as I sat watching, hidden away in the bushes, the mother kingfisher put her head out of her hole and looked about very anxiously. A big water-snake lay stretched along a stranded log on the shore. She pounced upon him instantly and drove him out of sight. Just above, at the foot of the trout pool, a brood of sheldrake were croaking and splashing about in the shallows. They were harmless, yet the kingfisher rushed upon them, clattering and scolding like a fishwife, and harried them all away into

a quiet bogan.

On the way back she passed over a frog, a big, sober, sleepy fellow, waiting on a lily-pad for his sun-bath. Chigwooltz might catch young trout, and even little birds as they came to drink, but he would surely never molest a brood of kingfishers; yet the mother, like an irate housekeeper flourishing her broom at every corner of an unswept room, sounded her rattle loudly and dropped on the sleepy frog's head, sending him sputtering and scrambling away into the mud, as if Hawahak the hawk were after him. Then with another look all round to see that the stream was clear, and with a warning rattle to any Wood Folk that she might have overlooked, she darted into her nest, wiggling her tail like a satisfied duck as she disappeared.

After a moment a wild-eyed young kingfisher put his head out of the hole for his first look at the big world. A push from behind cut short his contemplation, and without any fuss whatever he sailed down to a dead branch on the other side of the stream. Another and another followed in the same way, as if each one had been told just what to do and where to go, till the whole family were sitting a-row, with the rippling stream below them and the deep blue heavens and the rustling world of woods above.

That was their first lesson, and their reward was near. The male bird had been fishing since daylight; now he began to bring minnows from an eddy where he had stored them, and to feed the hungry family and assure them, in his own way, that this big world, so different from the hole in the bank, was a good place to live in, and furnished no end of good things to eat.

The next lesson was more interesting, the lesson of catching fish. The school was a quiet, shallow pool with a muddy bottom against which the fish showed clearly, and with a convenient stub leaning over it from which to swoop. The old birds had caught a score of minnows, killed them, and dropped them here and there under the stub. Then they brought the young birds, showed them their game, and told them by repeated examples to dive and get it. The little fellows were hungry and took to the sport keenly; but one was timid, and only after the mother had twice dived and brought up a fish—which she showed to the timid one and then dropped back in a most tantalizing way—did he muster up resolution to take the plunge.

A few mornings later, as I prowled along the shore, I came upon a little pool quite shut off from the main stream, in which a dozen or more frightened minnows were darting about, as if in strange quarters. As I stood watching them and wondering how they got over the dry bar that separated the pool from the river, a kingfisher came sweeping up-stream with a fish in his bill. Seeing me, he whirled silently and disappeared round the point below.

The thought of the curious little wild kindergarten occurred to me suddenly as I turned to the minnows again, and I waded across the river and hid in the bushes. After an hour's wait Koskomenos came stealing back, looked carefully over the pool and the river, and swept down-stream with a rattling call. Presently he came back again with his mate and the whole family; and the little ones, after seeing their parents swoop, and tasting the fish they caught, began to swoop for themselves.

The first plunges were usually in vain, and when a minnow was caught it was undoubtedly one of the wounded fish that Koskomenos had placed there in the lively swarm to encourage his little ones. After a try or two, however, they seemed to get the knack of the thing and would drop like a plummet, bill first, or shoot down on a sharp incline and hit their fish squarely as it darted away into deeper water. The river was wild and difficult, suitable only for expert fishermen. The quietest pools had no fish, and where minnows were found the water or the banks were against the little kingfishers, who had

not yet learned to hover and take their fish from the wing. So Koskomenos had found a suitable pool and stocked it himself to make his task of teaching more easy for his mate and more profitable for his little ones. The most interesting point in his method was that, in this case, he had brought the minnows alive to his kindergarten, instead of killing or wounding them, as in the first lesson. He knew that the fish could not get out of the pool, and that his little ones could take their own time in catching them.

When I saw the family again, weeks afterwards, their lessons were well learned; they needed no wounded or captive fish to satisfy their hunger. They were full of the joy of living, and showed me, one day, a curious game,—the only play that I have ever seen among the kingfishers.

There were three of them, when I first found them, perched on projecting stubs over the dancing riffles, which swarmed with chub and "minnies" and samlets and lively young red-fins. Suddenly, as if at the command go! they all dropped, bill first, into the river. In a moment they were out again and rushed back to their respective stubs, where they threw their heads back and wriggled their minnows down their throats with a haste to choke them all. That done, they began to dance about on their stubs, clattering and chuckling immoderately.

It was all blind to me at first, till the game was repeated two or three times, always starting at the same instant with a plunge into the riffles and a rush back to goal. Then their object was as clear as the stream below them. With plenty to eat and never a worry in the world, they were playing a game to see which could first get back to his perch and swallow his fish. Sometimes one or two of them failed to get a fish and glided back dejectedly; sometimes all three were so close together that it took a deal of jabber to straighten the matter out; and they always ended in the same way, by beginning all over again.

Koskomenos is a solitary fellow, with few pleasures, and fewer companions to share them with him. This is undoubtedly the result of his peculiar fishing regulations, which give to each kingfisher a certain piece of lake or stream for his own. Only the young of the same family go fishing together; and so I have no doubt that these were the same birds whose early training I had watched, and who were now enjoying themselves in their own way, as all the other Wood Folk do, in the fat, careless, happy autumn days.

Source:

Long, William. “Kingfisher's Kindergarten.” *A Little Brother to the Bear.* Boston: Ginn and Company, 1903. Electronic.