Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon*

HABITAT AND RANGE: Closely tied to water, belted kingfishers can be found along any sizable flow or pond throughout the Northern Appalachians. Our most widespread kingfisher, it breeds from coast to coast, from Florida to Alaska. A year-round resident in the region, kingfishers will move throughout the winter in search of unfrozen waterways.

DESCRIPTION AND NOTES: The belted kingfisher is a unique and showy bird. It is larger than a jay and similar in its slate-blue plumage that contrasts with its white belly. All individuals have a blue collar, but only the females have the namesake rust-colored "belt" around the breast. A showy crest of feathers and a heavy, daggerlike bill all add to the kingfisher's striking appearance. The kingfisher often gives away its presence before being seen with its carrying, rattling call. Unique among other birds in the region, the kingfisher constructs its nest by tunneling into the soft earth along the banks of its favorite waterway. The eggs are laid in a small nesting chamber at the end of the tunnel, which can sometimes reach over ten feet in length. Its diet consists mainly of fish, which it hunts by scanning the water from a favored perch before plunge diving into the water in pursuit. The belted kingfisher is doing quite well across its range but often falls victim to fishing lines left hanging in trees along the margins of water. The scientific species name for the belted kingfisher, *alcyon*, comes from ancient Greek mythology about Alycone the daughter of the wind god, Aeolus. After her husband died in a shipwreck, Alcyone dove into the ocean in grief. The gods took pity on the couple, turning them into a pair of kingfishers that continue to dive together into the streams, rivers, and lakes of the world.

— *Kasey Jueds*

Belted Kingfisher

First hidden, then sudden
and low over river, and never
when I asked, but
maybe when I needed
most: *there,*
your sudden and plunge
and skittering call
calling me back
to myself, to the secret
interior deep as the tunnel
you excavate in sand,
in steep streambanks

that grow scarcer
each year, as rivers
are channeled
and dammed.
A *limiting factor,*
ecologists name it, when
the scarcity of one resource
can mean an entire species'
decline. *Controlled,*
people say, of a river
unwilded. In ancient
Ireland, tunnels in earth
led to a ritual
chamber, a sacred
center occasionally
illumined by sun.
Like your burrow,
carved between roots,
slender entryway
ending in the hollow
where your eggs
are laid, nestless,
on dirt. Lay me down
near the clear water
where you fish
by sight, where
you dive and shatter
your own reflection
again and again.
Lay me down
in the sound of you
calling—stutter
like a child's
wind-up toy—sound
that fills every hollow
between houses
and clouds, sound
that says there's nothing
that isn't river now.



Red Squirrel *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*

HABITAT AND RANGE: The American red squirrel is found throughout Canada and the mountains of eastern and western United States. They prefer coniferous forests and rely on the seeds and cones of evergreen trees as an important food resource.

DESCRIPTION AND NOTES: Also called chickaree or boomer, names that evoke the loud chattering sounds they make, red squirrels are the smallest tree squirrel in the Appalachians. Red squirrels will most likely be heard before they are seen. This small squirrel (eleven inches long including its tail) is bold and agile and will scold other squirrels, predators, and people from an arboreal perch. Red squirrels are most closely associated with coniferous forests, and they particularly like the cones of spruce and fir, which they will collect while they are still green. Red squirrels cache these cones in middens and will feed on the stored food throughout the cold winter months. Red squirrels are territorial and defend their nesting locations and stored food supplies. They will not hesitate to chase and attack any perceived threat—regardless of size. As their name conveys, red squirrels have a deep red coat and display a black stripe along their flanks during the summer months. They are active at all times of day and temperatures, and their calls make them conspicuous in the forest canopy. Although pine seeds are favored foods, red squirrels will also eat and cache black walnuts, acorns, fungi, and hickory nuts. They remain fiercely territorial except during the breeding season in early spring and summer. Squirrel kits are born one month after the breeding season and are independent by their first autumn. Juvenile red squirrels may have to travel several miles to set up their own territories.

Sarah Barber

Red Squirrel

How she can stand it
when the spruce by the road
are too new for nests
and the woodlot is all hardwood,
hemlock, downed white pine—
when even in the back field's
stand of Scotch pine dogs
nose in at the midden,
at scattershot cone scales
on an old log, at the bolt hole

in snow—when no chick-
chick-chickarees guard
her solitary larder—when
I've stomped all over everything
in my big black boots.



Common Eastern Firefly *Photinus pyralis*

HABITAT AND RANGE: The common eastern firefly is found in woodland borders, fields, lawns, and other habitats throughout the eastern United States.

DESCRIPTION AND NOTES: Few sights in the Northern Appalachians are more magical than the flashes of thousands of fireflies on a summer evening. Here, these fireflies, or "lightning bugs," are likely to be common eastern fireflies, which is the most common firefly in the eastern United States. Fireflies are not "flies" or "bugs" but soft-bodied beetles, and they use different flash patterns to communicate warnings to predators and displays for potential mates—or prey. The females of some species mimic the flashes of other firefly species to lure males to their untimely ends. Often identified as *Photinus pyralis*, the name common eastern firefly actually refers to a group of three physically identical species, called the *Photinus pyralis* group. These three species—*P. pyralis*, *P. australis*, and *P. scintillans*—are impossible to identify using morphological characteristics alone, but they *are* distinct behaviorally and geographically and thus can be identified correctly when they are alive and in their natural habitat. At dusk in late June and July in the Northern Appalachians, look in open fields for a low-flying firefly that flashes and dips, making a long, yellow, lazy J-shaped pattern in the air. That is *Photinus pyralis*, the most common of the three species in the common eastern firefly species group. In Pennsylvania, where a firefly is the state insect, the small town of Tionesta holds a firefly festival every June. Here, the dazzling displays of a different species, the synchronous firefly (*P. carolinus*) are so popular that registration for the free festival is by lottery only.

Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Firefly Nocturne

I never feared the dark. I welcomed it, let it rush
into my unbuttoned blouse. When I was a girl,
I learned the light of a firefly signals *summer*.
Signals *heart*. *Bare skin*. There is a certain sparkle
of beetles that knows how to blink in synchronicity—
a visual heartbeat in the darkest owl-filled atria
of a forest. Once, we held our own universe
in the morning rain. And like the firefly, I've mistaken
too many cars too many street and porch lights
for small moons. In late spring, the first branchlets

of bee balm and calendula color the air. Eventually peeping frogs shiver awake when it turns warm again. When we are old, I hope the firefly conversation we have still thumps and thumps. I hope it's still green-gold.

