

Common Kingfisher Conflict

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Introduction

The Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* is a not uncommon, non-breeding visitor and passage migrant to Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia (Wells 1999; Woodall 2020). While juveniles might stay together, wintering adult birds are well known to establish territories (Wells 1999; Woodall 2020). At times, in establishing territories, the territorial conflict can be fierce and prolonged (Peaker 2024).

We were recently privileged to observe a territorial conflict and describe it here.

Observation

A Common Kingfisher (Bird 1) had settled at the various ponds at the Bayfront Plaza, Singapore. It remained 'stable' (unchallenged) for a few weeks from late August to early September 2025. Then another bird arrived (Bird 2) in early September 2025, who also seemed to have settled in the similar ponds (Plate 1). The original Common Kingfisher (Bird 1) was no longer seen in the area, based on limited observations over a few days. Both these Common Kingfishers appeared to be adult females from the orange present on the lower half of their beaks (more prominent in Bird 1); although we believed that the second bird to arrive (Bird 2) was a younger bird and could be differentiated by the 'flat-top' to the head plumage.



Plate 1: Older Common Kingfisher (left) & newcomer (right), Bayfront Plaza, Singapore, Sept 2025.

Then came 12 September 2025. We had anticipated a regular day, with attempts to sight either of these two birds. What was sighted instead were two Common Kingfishers, perched in the same area (Plate 2) – Bird 2 ('flat-top') and a third bird (Bird 3). The three birds had unique enough plumage differences to distinguish them (Plate 1). Bird 3 appeared to be an older bird. What seems to be an ordinary sharing of a perch, felt 'wrong'. Both birds did not budge apart from 'jitters', nor was there any diving for prey. The prolonged wait seemed to be a standoff of sorts. This was the scene from around 0900 and continued for the next 2-3 hours, with no

major movement. Through the hours of standoff, they both watched each other's movements. Bird 3 seemed to be more watchful and sensitive to any movement of Bird 2.



Plate 2: Common Kingfisher standoff – Bird 2 (left) & newcomer (Bird 3, right), Bayfront Plaza, Singapore, Sept 2025.

The prolonged standoff continued. The young bird (Bird 2) could be seen constantly looking down at the fish below, perhaps it was getting hungry and there was prey within reach, but no dives were observed. Instead, any significant movement by Bird 2 brought a response from the older one (Bird 3), for example a wing display.

What happened next was too fast for us to react to. Bird 2 perhaps took courage to dive or to move to another perch. However, it was attacked by Bird 3, who went for the head (Plate 3). A fight began and we felt the panic in the air. Both birds fell from their perch into the pond below.

With an intent to show who is in power, Bird 3 did a move that took all of us by surprise – it appeared to attempt to drown Bird 2, dunking it into the water, leveraging on its body weight (Plate 4). The dunk and tussle went on for a few seconds with both birds ending up submerged (Plate 5). A video of part of the conflict can be seen here:

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DOhhLbxD7gD/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==. Everything was happening too fast for us to discern what was going on. From our images, there were at least three or four drowning attempts before Bird 2 managed to get out of the water, but not without the grip of Bird 3 still held strongly. They eventually broke free of each other, Bird 3 retreated back to the original perch, while Bird 2 to a new perch. However, the conflict did not end there. There was continued conflict with chasing as they flew quickly, randomly weaving about the trees and foliage. The dispute continued for most of the

afternoon; one crashed into a wall but was unhurt. It appeared to end when a third kingfisher (possibly Bird 1) flew into the conflict (no images to confirm).

On who won the turf? It was the newcomer (Bird 3) - based on visual confirmation over multiple days since the conflict; no other Common Kingfisher was sighted in nearby ponds.

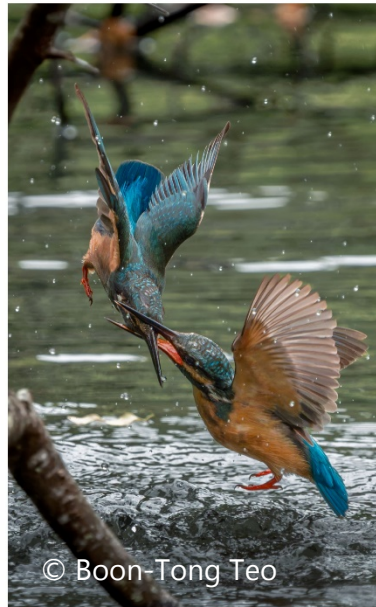


Plate 3: Conflict between the two Common Kingfishers, Bayfront Plaza, Singapore, Sept 2025.

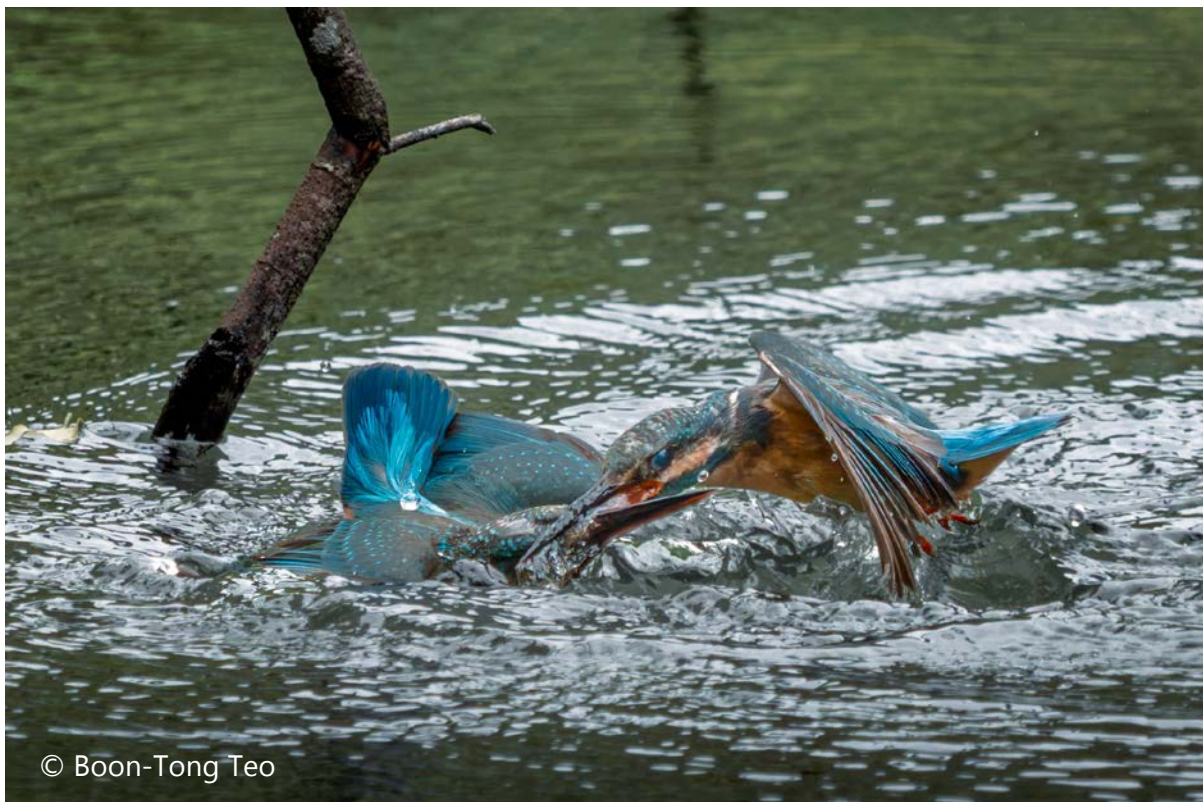


Plate 4: Common Kingfisher conflict – Bird 3 (right) appeared to be trying to drown Bird 2, Bayfront Plaza, Singapore, Sept 2025.



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Plate 5: Common Kingfisher conflict, Bayfront Plaza, Singapore, Sept 2025.

Discussion

Our observation confirms the territorial behaviour of wintering Common Kingfishers. Territorial conflicts put severe strain on these migratory kingfishers. They are said to consume 50 to 100% of their body mass daily (Wells 1999; Woodall 2020; Peaker 2024). Hence, the conflict is a test of endurance.

Acknowledgement

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References

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