

Stop 6 – The Green Kingfisher

The edge of the San Antonio River, on Mission San Juan Capistrano's Yanaguana Trail, is one of the best places in the national park to see the green kingfisher. You may hear its call well before you see this small bird – a clattering rattle of hard ticking noises.

The green kingfisher often settles on the mustang grape vines or box elder branches above the shaded water, gazing down into the river for its next meal. Watch for its shiny green body and bright white tail as the bird darts back and forth, skimming the surface of the water with lightning speed. This bird is about 7 and a half inches long and weighs less than an ounce. Few birds have such an oversized head and extra-long bill – like a large sparrow with a heron's beak. The male has a chestnut breast band.

You are now standing in the middle of its breeding ground. The green kingfisher's habitat stretches from South Texas and Arizona to the rain forests and mangroves of Central Argentina. It favors slow flowing waters and wooded lagoons. This tiny bird is quite an engineer. It constructs a horizontal tunnel-like nest up to one yard, or one meter, long in the dirt along the river bank.

With a little luck, you will hear the green kingfisher's call and see it burst from its perch for a quick, low flight. You might even watch it snatch away a fish or insect meal. If it's spring, the green kingfisher will be very active establishing its territory and finding a mate. In winter, you might see a solitary green kingfisher staring at its own reflection in the water...patiently waiting.