



Semi Double

Spring again, and it's so pleasant to see the world outside my workshop window becoming greener day by day! We haven't had a particularly difficult winter - I shoveled no snow at all this year! - but it is nonetheless time for a change. I can't imagine what it must be like to live in a place that has no vivid seasons; how boring that must be!

The arrival of spring is from my perspective a mostly positive experience (let's not talk about cedar pollen just now, though!), but for some of the other residents of this river bank, it can be a very stressful time. Because I spend so much time sitting at my window facing the river, I get to see some of the dramatic episodes that take place here.

The kingfishers - kawasemi in Japanese - are one of my favourite neighbours; I have talked about them before in these stories, and surely will again. They are so beautiful in appearance, and their fishing habits are so interesting, that it is next to impossible for me to continue working when one of them makes an appearance. Luckily for me that doesn't happen every day! I never see them here during the winter, so I assume that they migrate to a warmer area once it gets cold in autumn, and return again in the spring.

The kingfishers that I see from my window seem to have quite well-established routines; one of them may appear at almost exactly the same time every day for weeks on end, coming to perch on the same tree branch each time. I have always assumed that the kingfishers living in this area have come to some kind of 'agreement' about what territory 'belongs' to each bird. This morning, I learned a bit more about this, as I saw them for the first time this year, and it was an occasion for the bit of drama that I mentioned.

I saw one of them sitting on the riverbank opposite my workshop, and although my windows are still shut tightly and he couldn't possibly hear me, I shouted out a greeting, "Welcome back! Glad to see you here again!" He of course ignored me completely, focussing his attention on the water below. We have had a bit of rain over the past few days, so there is a good flow of water just now, presumably containing plenty of things of interest to a kingfisher.

While I was watching him though, another kingfisher came along, the same size and same colouring; if I hadn't seen them together, I would have assumed that it was the same bird. The new bird flew directly at the first one, forcing him into the air, and the 'fight' began. It was just like watching some kind of movie about jet fighters; the two of them flashed through the air at incredible speed, twisting and turning as they went. I have no idea if the same one was in pursuit all the time, or if they managed to change places. They zoomed (that's the only possible word to describe the way that they flew) all over the area in front of my window, sometimes hidden among the trees, then bursting out into the open again.

It ended just as quickly as it had begun; one of them 'gave up' and flew away straight up the river, with the other in hot pursuit. A few seconds later, the pursuer returned - alone - and perched on the river bank. I couldn't tell which one it was, the original visitor, or the latecomer. But the battle was clearly over. Nobody had been hurt, but the outcome was clear; this area was now the territory of this bird, and the other one would stay clear. Would he now starve to death with no access to food, or would he manage to establish possession of some other section of the river? I have no idea ...

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

I have read that kingfishers live quite a long time for such small creatures, upwards of 15 years or so. Do they have to go through this type of fight every spring, with newcomers always appearing to try and take possession? I suppose that they do; it seems that most animals in the wild live this way. As long as they remain physically strong enough, they can maintain a normal 'home and family', but once they slip - even just a little - others are waiting to pounce and take over.

The young challenger takes all, and the older one loses everything; there is no inbetween. At age 57, this is not a topic I think I wish to explore much further ...

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>