

SASKATCHEWAN'S FIRST BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE

PAUL CHYTYK, 115 Rink Avenue, Regina, Saskatchewan. S4R 5W2



Figure 1. *Black-legged Kittiwake*, two views

Robert K

The day of 13 November 1988 was overcast along the ice-edged shore of Buena Vista Beach at the south end of Last Mountain Lake. The -5°C temperature was made crisp by a breezy 15 kmph wind from the southeast. Freeze-up had begun 3 days previously and the newly formed ice-sheet had already made its way up to the eastern half of Buena Vista Beach. Markus Deutsch and I were birding with Robert Kreba in search of northern water birds that often show up during the last days before freeze-up.

Mark and I walked along the abandoned railway trestle which twists along the southern rim of the valley-enclosed lake, while Bob was over 1 km away, walking toward us from the west. It was approximately 2 p.m.; the sun was still veiled by thick clouds. As we scanned the ducks on the choppy water, a small to medium-sized white gull flew along the shore towards us. I pointed the bird out to Mark and we both glassed it with our

binoculars expecting to see a Bonaparte Gull.

Instead, flying approximately 75 m front of us, was a white gull with a conspicuous black half-collar across the front of its neck and a small black facial patch behind its eye. As the bird banked close to shore, it revealed a pale grey "saddle" across the centre of its back. The black of the outer primaries extended along its upper wing coverts to pierce the centre of the grey saddle, forming a broken black "M" across its back. Its underparts were a clean white, which contrasted with its boldly patterned back. Its delicate thin black bill, black legs and narrow black tail band were the other distinguishing characteristics of this elegant gull.

Bewildered as to the identity of the bird, I anxiously asked, "What is it?" Markus, an exceptional birder from West Germany who was familiar with the species from the Atlantic coast of Europe, calmly

German word for "kittiwake," and I began to scan the ducks farther out on the water. Not understanding, I watched as the bird came to rest on the edge of the ice, not more than 20 m below our boat's location. As I fumbled to get my binoculars on the bird before it flew away, I failed poor Mark to give me the bird's scientific name. Through my scope I saw the bird perched possessed an ink-black slash of feathers through the centre of its folded grey wing. Mark, being very forgetful as he too scoped the bird, admitted that he could not remember the English translation for the bird's name. The bird lifted from its icy perch and periodically made its way back towards the east and flew away from view.

After losing sight of the bird, I immediately retraced back towards the west, in a desperate search of Bob Kreba. After I found Bob, we sprinted back to find a disappointed-looking Mark, who had been unable to relocate the bird. We continued to walk east in search of our quarry, but to no avail, as our expedition gave way to frustration.

Twenty-five minutes had passed since Mark and I had first seen the bird, when suddenly we caught sight of it skillfully maneuvering along the ice-edge in the middle of the lake. We got our scopes on the bird and watched as it meticulously made its way towards us. As he scrambled for his camera, Bob confirmed Mark's initial identification by shouting, "It's a Black-legged Kittiwake!"

The bird circled in front of us for approximately 2 minutes as Bob finished off a roll of film on the cooperative bird. With a 60 mm lens we knew that Bob had just documented the first Saskatchewan sighting of a first-winter Black-legged Kittiwake (Fig. 1).

While circling overhead, the kittiwake moved on its flight west and disappeared from view. As we walked towards

our vehicle, elated with our discovery, we once again saw the bird as it flew along the ice-encrusted shore. Once we arrived at our vehicle we were able to confirm our observations with reference to the National Geographic Society's *Field guide to the birds of North America*. After close inspection of the plates and text, there was no doubt as to the identity of the bird we had just seen; it was indeed a first-winter Black-legged Kittiwake.

After phoning other Regina birders, we decided to drive farther west hoping to relocate the bird at Regina Beach. Unsuccessful at Regina Beach, we drove farther west to Little Arm Bay, roughly 10 km from the original sighting. The time was now 4 p.m.; two hours had passed since Mark and I had first seen the bird. As we scanned Little Arm Bay with our scopes, we were amazed to find the kittiwake roosting in the water along the ice-edge!

Through Bob's 15-60x scope we had smashing views of the bird which rested less than 15 m in front of us. After studying it through our scopes, Mark and I commented that the bird's black collar appeared noticeably wider than when we first saw the gull roosting at Buena Vista Beach. We concluded that the bird's posture was exaggerating the width of its black collar and, subsequently, we did not think more of this observation.

Since the film had all been used at Buena Vista Beach, we were unable to take any more photographs of the roosting bird. Not wanting to frighten it away, we decided to leave the area, even though the bird appeared quite tame and indifferent towards our presence.

Carol Bjorklund and Martin Bailey were able to relocate the kittiwake at Little Arm Bay only 15 min. after we had left. They were able to obtain three photographs of the bird resting in the water. Unfortunately, the bird had moved to the opposite shore and the pictures

taken with the 200 mm lens were not conclusive.

The next day was colder with temperatures dipping down to -8°C overnight. The ice-edge had advanced to Regina Beach, only 3.5 km away from Little Arm Bay where the kittiwake had last been seen. Buena Vista Beach was now totally frozen over. The winds had shifted overnight and were now coming from the northwest at 20 kmph.

That morning Tom Riffel located the kittiwake flying along the shore of Little Arm Bay at 10 a.m. He watched the bird as it hovered directly over the top of the ice-edge and then plummeted at a 90-degree angle to land on the ice — right next to a **second** first-winter Black-legged Kittiwake!

He observed the two birds for approximately 20 min. roosting "bill to bill" from one another. He noted that one of the kittiwakes had a definitely wider and darker black half-collar than the other. This suggested that the kittiwake that we had seen the day before at Little Arm Bay (which we thought had a thicker collar than the bird we saw at Buena Vista Beach), was indeed a second kittiwake. Tom showed the kittiwakes to two local residents of Kinookimaw Beach and then he returned to Regina Beach to notify other Regina birders.

Trevor Herriot was the last person to see the kittiwakes on 14 November, when he found one of the birds at Little Arm Bay at 5 p.m. He noted that the bird he saw had a very large, solid black collar. After he had watched it for 10 min. roosting in the water, the bird flew upward and landed roughly 10 m up on the shore among some fallen trees. Previously, the kittiwakes had always been seen resting in the water close to the ice-edge, or standing on the ice-shelf. Trevor continued to watch the bird on the shore for another 10 min. until dusk.

That night the temperature dropped to -12°C and encased Little Arm Bay in a steel-blue sheet of ice. Saskatchewan's **first documented** Black-legged Kittiwakes were not seen again.

Although the above sighting constitutes Saskatchewan's first record of a Black-legged Kittiwake, its occurrence was totally unexpected. A review of *American Birds* records from the past 15 years (1973-1988), revealed a total of 17 sightings (4 summer and 13 fall) of Black-legged Kittiwakes in the "prairie region" (Alberta, Manitoba, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota).

Alberta has two summer and two fall records. Single birds were seen in May 1977 and June 1982. The fall records were of birds found dead in November 1976 and December 1979.

Manitoba lists the Black-legged Kittiwake as a summer "accidental" at Churchill where a single bird was seen in August 1980.

Montana has one fall and one summer record. Single birds were seen in December 1978 and June 1980.

North Dakota has five fall sightings. Single birds were seen in December 1979 and 1981, November 1984 and December 1986. An unusual sighting of up to three immature birds was seen in October through to November 1980.

South Dakota also has a total of five sightings. Single birds were seen in November of 1973, 1983 and 1985. Two birds were seen in November 1982, one or more in December 1988.

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