

Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) -- Documentation

In the late morning of Friday, November 23, 1990, I discovered a first-year Black-legged Kittiwake at the South Hawarden Ponds (called the "South Pits"), located just to the southwest of Hawarden, in western Sioux County. These pits cover a sizable area of water (they represent the largest bodies of water in Sioux County). I had come to the ponds to check out the late November birds. Snow Geese were flying overhead, a Double-crested Cormorant was still preening itself, and a late Great Blue Heron was fishing along the shore. About four or five Ring-billed Gulls were flying about as well.

As I was checking out the birds I noticed the strange gull. Its wing pattern was distinctive, and I right away noticed its slightly forked tail with the dark band at the tip. Naturally I thought of something exotic like a Sabine's Gull or a Kittiwake (I have seen many Kittiwakes but have yet to see a Sabine's Gull!).

After flying back and forth the gull landed on the water some 300 yards in front of me. I drove my car closer, until I got within 100 yards of the bird. It was preening itself. I could see the important details easily though my (Nikon 9x25) binoculars, but used my Zoom Balscope 60 to make sure. The bird was to the northeast of me, so the light was good.

The bill of the bird was relatively small and black. There was a smudge behind the eye. Very noticeable was the dark band across its nape. As the bird rested, a dark bar ran lengthwise across its wing, from the low shoulder to the tip of the dark primaries. As the bird preened, it would occasionally extend its wings, displaying a dark "W" across its wings.

As it was on the water, a Ring-billed Gull came down and landed a few feet away. This made it easy to compare size: the Kittiwake was just a bit smaller and more slightly built than the Ring-bill.

I observed the bird for about 20 minutes on the water. It then took to the air again, flying back and forth, showing off its neat W wing pattern (ending in dark wing tips) and its slightly forked tail. I observed it for another 15 minutes or so.

The bird certainly was not a Sabine's Gull: it did not have the distinctive triangular wing pattern the field guides show, and, judging by the field guides, the Sabine's Gull has a more deeply forked tail. Nor was this bird a Bonaparte's Gull: the clear dark bar across the back of its neck and the slightly forked tail rule it out. Besides, the Bonaparte, a common migrant here, is definitely much smaller than the Ring-billed Gull. The bird I was

observing was only slightly smaller than the Ring-bill. Any kind of tern can be ruled out as well. (The Caspian Tern, a larger bird in any case, always has a red bill, and the Forster's Tern has a deeply forked tail and no "W" across the wings. I might mention that two weeks ago I was in Savannah, Georgia, and had opportunity to observe large flocks of Royal Terns and Forster's Terns, along with a few Sandwich Terns.)

In some ways it was not a surprise to me to find a Black-legged Kittiwake in northwest Iowa. Three years ago, on June 6, 1987, I discovered an adult Black-legged Kittiwake in central South Dakota (at Lake Louise, near Miller, SD). At that time I communicated with various birders about this sighting, including Tom Kent in Iowa City. Kent reviewed the Kittiwake sightings in the central plains for me. There are at least half a dozen records of the bird in Iowa alone (cf. Iowa Birds), most of them in late fall. The summer bird in South Dakota was obviously a much more unusual case. The South Dakota Rare Bird Committee, however, accepted my documentation of that adult Kittiwake (Class 2: "Documented by written description considered as correct or beyond reasonable doubt").

Finally, I should mention that the Black-legged Kittiwake is not a new bird for me. I have seen it in four distinctively different places: along the northern California coast (in winter), along the north Atlantic coast (in Canada, in summer), off the northwest coast of Europe (in winter), and the unusual sighting in South Dakota, reported above.

If there are any questions about this documentation, please contact me.

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November 23, 1990