

KILLDEER

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Killdeer photo Ron LeValley
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Killdeer get their name from the shrill, wailing *kill-dee* call they emit so often. Eighteenth-century naturalists noticed how noisy Killdeer are, giving them names such as the Chattering Plover and the Noisy Plover.

This species is not of a retiring disposition, making its presence known by loud calls and cries to which it owes both its common and scientific names, Killdeer and *Charadrius vociferous*. Its striking markings and handsome plumage render it easy to see in motion, which is often the case. Double breast bands make its identification easy. As stated in my article last month, sadly none of the related species, Snowy Plover, has

nested along our coast for five years, but Killdeer do. The population numbers tell a story. Some ornithologists estimate the North American population of all varieties of Snowy Plovers, including the threatened Western group, at about 18,000 which others consider an overestimate. By contrast, in excess of one million Killdeer share our world. Their ability to exploit a wide range of agricultural and semi-urban habitat has helped keep them abundant and widespread in their range and no doubt their feisty nature contributes to their success.

When a Killdeer stops to watch an intruder, it has a habit of bobbing up and down as if it has hiccups. These birds will frequently use a "broken-wing act" to distract predators from eggs and young. The bird walks away from its nest holding its wing in a position that simulates an injury and then flaps around on the ground emitting distress calls. The predator, spotting an apparently easy prey, is attracted away from the nest. If the marauder does not follow, the Killdeer will move closer and get louder until the predator responds. This is repeated until both is far from the nest, and the killdeer suddenly "heals" and flies away.

Pastures attract Killdeer, especially after rain forces earthworms to the surface. When a pasture harbors a Killdeer nest and grazing animals, this feisty species reacts in two different ways. When encountering sheep and goats the incubating bird stands in the nest, raises its wings high, and wails till encroaching grazers disperse. To guard against large hoofed animals, the Killdeer uses a quite different tactic, fluffing itself up, displaying its tail over its head, and running at the beast, even pecking its head, to attempt to make it change its path. Despite this

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continued



Killdeer eggs photo w:User:Basil

occasional harassment of livestock, farmers consider Killdeer beneficial as they eat insect pests.

A mated pair selects a nesting site through a "scrape ceremony". The male lowers his breast to the ground and scrapes a shallow depression with his feet. The female then approaches, head lowered, and takes his place. The male then stands with body tilted slightly forward, tail raised and spread, calling rapidly. Mating often follows. Duplicating the ritual in several places may help to confuse predators. She lays four to six eggs, buff-colored and heavily marked with blackish-brown. Both parents incubate for twenty-two to twenty-eight days. Killdeer lay their eggs into an empty nest, but add other generally light colored materials later on.

They pick up some items as they are leaving and toss them over their shoulder into the nest. In one nest in Oklahoma, more than 1,500 pebbles had accumulated this way.

Gravel rooftops attract Killdeer for nesting, but can be dangerous places to raise a brood. Chicks may be unable to leave a roof because of high parapets and screened drain openings. Adults eventually lure chicks off the roof, which can be dangerous – although one set of chicks survived a leap from a seven-story building. Killdeer chicks hatch with a full coat of buffy down feathers and a single black breast band. Chicks walk out of the nest as soon as their feathers dry.

Killdeer feed primarily on invertebrates, such as earthworms, snails, crayfish, grasshoppers, beetles, and aquatic insect larvae. Inland, they follow farmers' plows to retrieve any unearthed worms or insect larvae. They also eat seeds left in agricultural lands. An opportunistic forager, Killdeer have been observed hunting frogs and eating dead minnows.

Migratory in northern areas, they winter as far south as northern South America and may turn up as rare vagrants in western Europe late in the year. Unlike the majority of our shorebirds, the Killdeer stays year-round. The Killdeer is one of the most successful of all shorebirds because of its fondness for human modified habitats and its willingness to nest close to people. This is all very well for Killdeer, but what about the effect the same human modified habitats have on less adaptable species such as their fellow Charadrius species, the Western Snowy Plover?

Killdeer chick. Note the single breast band. Photo Ron LeValley

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