

## Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*



**Folk Name:** Cheweeka, Tilldee, Killdee

**Status:** Resident

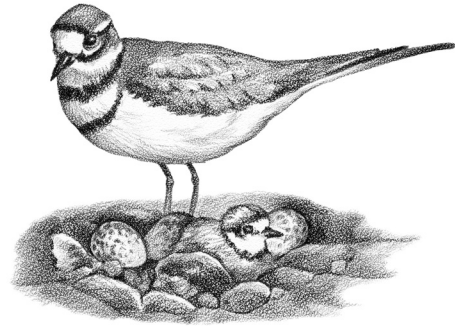
**Abundance:** Fairly Common to Common

**Habitat:** Open, flat land with bare ground, sparse grass, or short grass

The Killdeer is a common bird known to many residents in the Piedmont. It is the only type of plover that is a resident bird here. It is commonly found around schools, shopping centers, parks, golf courses, and office buildings—practically anywhere with flat ground and short grass. It gets its common name from its loud call which sounds like *killdee killdee killdee*. The Killdeer has an obvious orange-red rump patch and two black bands on its breast which distinguish it from all of our other plovers.

Killdeer are regularly recorded on both Christmas counts and spring counts throughout the region. Christmas count totals have often exceeded 100 birds, occasionally 200 birds, and one count at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in January 2010 tallied an impressive 525 Killdeer. Numbers are generally higher here in winter as they are at times bolstered by visitors pushed down from the North.

The Killdeer and the American Woodcock are the only two types of shorebirds that regularly nest in our region. Since Killdeer are common, widespread, and often noisy, their general nest locations are often noticed and reported by people who don't usually spend time watching birds. However, finding the actual nest is quite a challenge. Killdeer lay their eggs directly on the ground in open areas of sand, gravel, or sparse vegetation. They rely on camouflage to hide their eggs and will perform an elaborate "broken-wing" distraction display to draw away predators that approach. They generally lay four eggs. On June 20, 1928, William McIlwaine photographed



a Killdeer nest and nestlings he had been watching in Charlotte and shared this account:

Two eggs had hatched, and two had not. This nest was right out in the middle of a cotton field. The only cover near was a little cotton plant with about six leaves. And that had not been there long. The mother tried hard to get us away, running at us as though she would attack, and then veering off to limp along with a broken wing. I got a very poor picture. There is not enough contrast to do any good.

Despite their best efforts, however, many of these nests are destroyed by raccoons, other predators, or people. A number of Killdeer nests have been discovered and photographed in the region over the years. The fluffy precocial young, which are able to run immediately after hatching, are often a favorite object of attention by photographers and nature watchers of all ages.

Dr. Herbert Hechenbleikner, a noted local professor of biology at Charlotte College, discovered a Killdeer nest on top of the gravel roof of Central High School in July of 1958. The roof was 40 feet off the ground with pavement



*Killdeer protects its nest. (Jeff Lemons)*

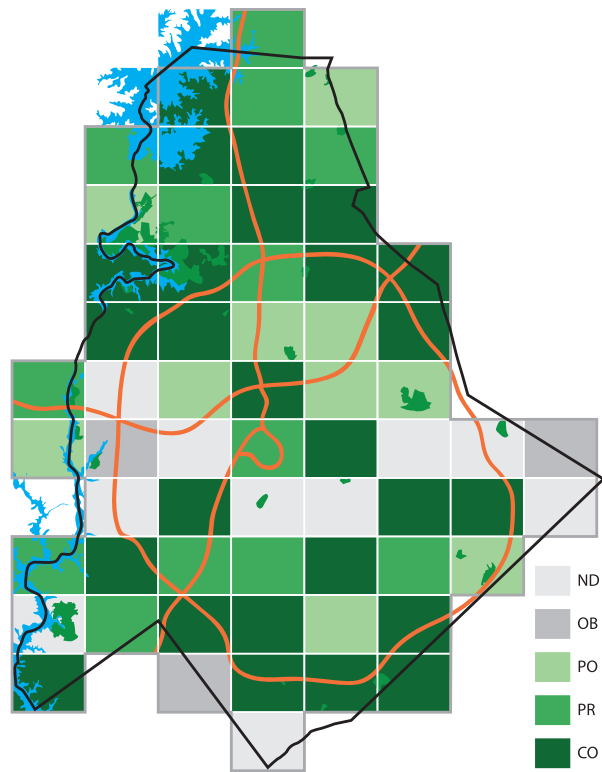


*Killdeer chick in late May. (Jeff Lemons)*

surrounding the building and a large athletic field nearby. The nest contained four eggs. White pebbles covered the extent of the flat roof. The adults had pushed up a small mound of gravel, and the female laid eggs that hatched on July 2, 1958. All four precocial nestlings were found dead on July 4th after they had apparently been unable to climb over the 2-foot-high coping installed around the top of the building.

Killdeer appear to have adapted well to rapid urban development throughout this region. The results of the Mecklenburg County BBA indicate they remain a widespread breeding bird. On April 15, 2011, John Scavetto shared this comment about the start of the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas project:

My first confirmed breeder for the BBA—Killdeer. ...Yes I am still excited even though it is a Killdeer. I have been watching this female on nest for 19 ½ days. When I went on Tuesday she was gone and could not be found. I thought something had happened to her and her nest. But today, I went back in the afternoon and found Mom with four of her young walking no more than 50 feet from where she had nested originally. Shot some pictures of the little guys. She was extremely upset with my presence, so I made it short and left right away.



### Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Widespread (PR/13, CO/26)

(Photo: Bill Archer)

## Spotlight on Local Research: Killdeer and Nesting Material Color Selection

The results of a special study of Killdeer nests were published in the July 1977 issue of *The Auk*, the prestigious journal of ornithology. The study was authored by Robert C. Kull of the UNC Charlotte Biology Department. Kull tested the color selection of nesting material by Killdeer. He designed a controlled experiment to determine if Killdeer had a preference for black or white substrate material when creating their ground nest. He “put 20 Killdeer nests in Mecklenburg Co., North Carolina through three tests during the breeding season of 1974 and 1975.”

Kull’s study provided clear evidence that Killdeer in this region select white objects as substrate for their nest, and they actively remove black objects. This study helped to corroborate what



many birder’s had anecdotally observed for years. Killdeer actively choose to line their nests with tiny bits of white objects such as shells, bones, pebbles, wood chips, white crushed rock, tiny sticks, shotgun wads, gum wrappers, cigarette butts, shards of paper, and more. Kull speculated there might be two possible reasons Killdeer do this. They are either attempting to better camouflage their nest and eggs or they are helping to cool their nests, as white reflects sunlight more efficiently.