

General Field Notes

JAMES F. PARNELL, Department Editor

Department of Biology, University of North Carolina at Wilmington,
Wilmington, N.C. 28401

JULIAN R. HARRISON, Associate Editor

Department of Biology, The College of Charleston, Charleston, S.C. 29401

The Black-legged Kittiwake in the Carolinas

GILBERT S. GRANT

Department of Biology, University of California
Los Angeles, California 90024

MICOU M. BROWNE

2728 Cambridge Road, Raleigh, N.C. 27607

JAMES F. PARNELL

Department of Biology, UNC-Wilmington
Wilmington, N.C. 28401

12 October 1974

Very little is known about the distribution of the Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) along the coast of the Carolinas. The winter range of the species according to the American Ornithologists' Union (1957) is "... south to southern New Jersey (Atlantic City), and the Bermudas, rarely to eastern Florida (Jupiter)." Watson (1966) states that the kittiwake is a migrant past Bermuda from November to March, is a vagrant along the east coast of Florida from January to March, and migrates south to the Tropic of Cancer. A study of recent records indicates, however, that this bird may occur along the coast of the Carolinas in fair numbers.

While there are no published records for South Carolina, there have been 17 sightings in North Carolina since 1940. The first sighting by R.H. Pough (1940) on 5 February 1940 off Cape Hatteras was erroneously recorded as a specimen by Pearson, et al. (1959). The species was not recorded again until 27 December 1952 when P.B. Street (1953) saw two or probably three about 35 miles off Kitty Hawk and again on 3 January 1953 when Street saw four more kittiwakes 21 miles E of Cape Hatteras. The 12-year lull in sightings between 1940 and 1952 probably represents a paucity of observers rather than kittiwakes as noted by Jones (1967) with the Razorbill (*Alca torda*) during this same period of time. Four years later F.C. Richardson (1957) and others saw a single immature kittiwake on 2 February 1957 at Oregon Inlet. On 1 February 1959 three birds (two immatures, one adult) were seen on the beach at Cape Hatteras by J.E. Ames (1959) and five others. These birds were oiled but able to fly. Four immature kittiwakes were observed on 14 February 1959 on the beach at Cape Hatteras by P.W. Sykes (1959), and on 29 March 1959 two immatures were found on the south shore of Cape Hatteras by T.L. Quay, P.W. Sykes, and J.F. Parnell. Again the next day, 30 March 1959, a single immature bird was seen (T.L. Quay, pers. com.).

The species was not recorded again until 1967 but has been seen almost annually since then. On 19 December 1967 an immature Black-legged Kittiwake was collected about 30 miles off the mouth of the Cape Fear River and turned over to J.F. Parnell. The bird was placed in the collection of the North Carolina State Museum of Natural History (NCSM-4018) and constitutes the first specimen taken in North Carolina. On 10 November 1968, at least five immature kittiwakes were observed from a charter fishing boat off Wrightsville Beach. The first two were sighted 6 miles offshore, one was 8 miles off, one was 10 miles off, and the farthest one was 13 to 14 miles offshore. Two were observed on the return trip. The birds were studied at close range by M.M. Browne, G.S. Grant, R.J. Hader, W.

Post Jr., and eight others (Parnell 1969a). The winds were from the northeast at 20 to 30 knots. Following a continuation of the northeast winds on 12 November 1968, J.F. Parnell (1969a) observed single kittiwakes at five different points between 10 to 15 miles off Smith Island and the mouth of the Cape Fear River. On 13 March 1969 E. Pond (Parnell 1969b) found a Black-legged Kittiwake dead on the beach at Cape Lookout. A total of 31 were recorded by many observers on the Bodie-Pea Island Christmas Bird Count on 30 December 1971 and 2 were found on the Wilmington Christmas Bird Count on 18 December 1971 (Teulings 1972). Two kittiwakes were found by R.L. Ake, D. Sonneborn, and H. LeGrand on the Bodie-Pea Island Christmas Bird Count on 30 December 1972 (Sykes 1973) and 43 (1 adult, 42 immatures) were recorded there by many observers on the 31 December 1973 count (Potter 1974). A phenomenal 85 Black-legged Kittiwakes were seen resting in the surf off Coquina Beach, Dare County, on 16 February 1974 by R.A. Rowlett and B. Edsburg (Teulings 1974).

The recent Bodie-Pea Island sightings were enhanced by more thorough ocean coverage facilitated by access to a U.S. Coast Guard vessel on count day. Adequate winter pelagic coverage probably would reveal that the Black-legged Kittiwake is much more common immediately offshore than suspected. Recently, R.A. Rowlett (1973) has found the Black-legged Kittiwake to be the most abundant gull a few miles off the Maryland coast. His observations are the result of a series of winter pelagic trips aboard cod fishing headboats. Rowlett recorded over 200 on 3 February 1972, and about 500 were found off Maryland on 2 and 3 February 1974 (Scott and Cutler 1974). Unfortunately, cod fishing is not economically feasible south of Maryland and boats for hire in winter are somewhat scarce and unpredictable due to inclement weather, low demand, and preventive maintenance scheduling. The recent North Carolina sightings indicate that kittiwakes are there, and efforts should be directed toward more winter pelagic birding trips in order to gain a better understanding of our coastal avifauna. Efforts to add the Black-legged Kittiwake to the South Carolina state bird list should be initiated as it undoubtedly occurs offshore there during winter.

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[Dept. Ed.—A second North Carolina Black-legged Kittiwake was collected by James F. Parnell and Frank Chapman on 12 December 1975 about 2 miles E of Wrightsville Beach. The adult bird was taken from a flock of about 12 adults and is now in the collection of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.]