

THE PRACTICED EYE

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Photographs from VIREO



Black-legged Kittiwake and Red-legged Kittiwake

BRITISH BIRDWATCHERS HAVE an admirable way with words, or with the lack of words, in subtly making the point that modern birdwatching began in Britain. Thus, they have only one wren, so they call it “the Wren.” Looking down the roster of British birds, we find “the Teal,” “the Cuckoo,” “the Swift,” “the Kingfisher,” “the Jay,” “the Waxwing,” and so on. In every case, *they* (the British, I mean, not the birds) know which species they are talking about. Recently there has been a push to add modifiers to those names, to bring official British nomenclature into line with the rest of the planet, but the *unofficial* usage there is unlikely to budge.

One of the un-modified names on the British list is “Kittiwake.” This one would serve almost anywhere. Say “kittiwake” in Spain or Sweden, in Newfoundland or New Jersey, in California or Korea, and any English-speaking birder will know exactly which bird you mean: that small sea-going gull, *Rissa tridactyla*, whose three-syllabled cry of *ki-ti-waak* was the source of the name.

But there is a second type of kittiwake tucked away in the corner of the world east of Siberia and west of Alaska. To be precise on a global scale, we need a modifier for either species. So we North Americans officially refer to the widespread one as the Black-legged Kittiwake, and to the Bering Sea specialty as the Red-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa brevirostris*).



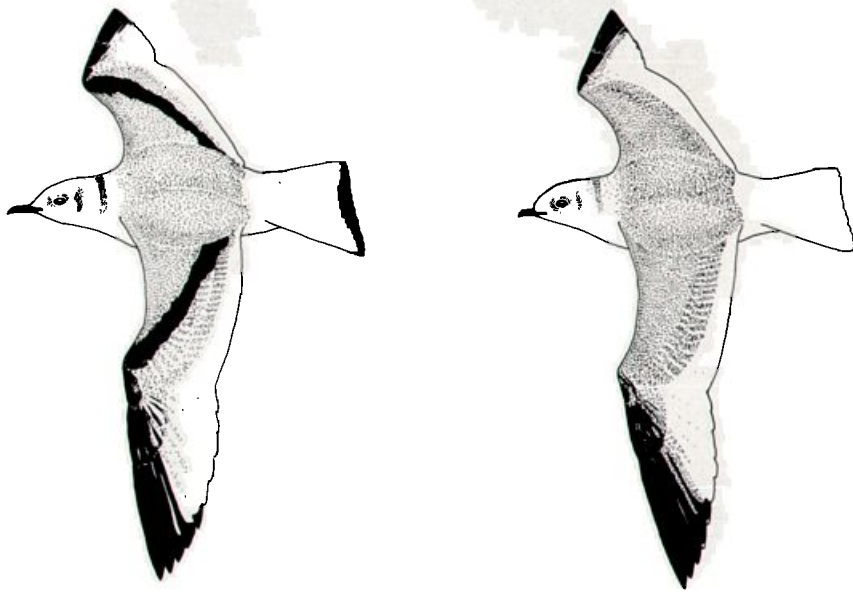
Adult Black-legged Kittiwake in worn summer plumage. Photograph/P.G. Connors/VIREO (c05/1/058).

This *Practiced Eye* looks at how to distinguish “the other kittiwake” (Red-legged) from “the standard kittiwake” (Black-legged).

First, the bad news. Despite their names, leg color is not absolutely reliable as a means of separating the kittiwakes. Cases are on record of adult Black-leggeds with legs of yellow, pink, and even red. So a report of a Red-legged out of range would have to account for other field marks.

Fortunately, there are a number of other distinctions, all fairly subtle, that combine to make a very different overall appearance. The comments below all apply to adults unless otherwise noted (young birds are actually *more* distinctive).

Seen from either the upperside or the underside, the Red-legged has the darker wings of the two species. Of course, this is a relative thing: by itself it means very little, unless the two are flying side by side. The light can be



Young kittiwakes in first-winter plumage, to show flight pattern. Left, Black-legged Kittiwake; right: Red-legged Kittiwake. Illustration/Kenn Kaufman.



Adult Red-legged Kittiwake. Photograph/J.P. Myers/VIREO (m01/22/032).



Adult Black-legged Kittiwake in flight. Effects of lighting here cancel out much of the effect of pale primaries. Photograph/Russell Hansen/VIREO (h10/3/006).

tricky in the far north, and even the Black-legged can look very dark-backed when seen against a backdrop of ice or sunlit water. However, the amount of *contrast* in the outer part of the wing produces a pattern that is distinctive for each kittiwake.

Field guides often stress the “dipped-in-ink” wings of the Black-legged Kittiwake. It is true that the neat black triangles on its wingtips are distinctive in flight at close range—but at a distance, they do not look very different from the black wingtips of other gulls. Much more noticeable at long range is the general *pale*ness of the outer part of the wing. Looking at the upperside, the coverts of the inner part of the wing are the same medium-dark gray as the back, but the primary coverts and the secondaries are a paler gray and the primaries themselves are paler still, appearing almost silvery-white in some lights. Thus, going outward from the body, the upperside of the wing seems to fade from gray almost to white before it abruptly meets the black at the tip. This lightness of the primaries is one of the things that the eye picks up first when Black-legged Kittiwakes are seen at long range over the sea.

The adult Red-legged is only slightly



Adult Black-legged Kittiwake overhead. Photograph/V. Hasselblad/VIREO (h06/1/063).

darker on the back than the Black-legged, and it has similar black triangles on the wingtips. But it shows no trend toward paler gray on the outer primaries; the same dark gray extends out the wing to meet the black at the tip, with far less contrast than in the Black-legged. As a result, the black wingtip is not so obvious. However, the white *trailing edge* of the wing is much more noticeable on the Red-legged, especially on the primaries.

The underside of the wing shows a comparable kind of difference between the two species. The Black-legged has very white underwings, virtually unmarked except for the black tips. On the Red-legged the underwings are extensively dusky, especially on the primaries and primary-coverts, for a strikingly different effect on birds overhead.

As with so many other cases involving similar species, shape is also a good field mark. The specific name of the Red-legged, *brevirostris*, means "short-billed"; its bill is not only shorter than that of its relative, but also looks more blunt at the tip. Accenting this effect is the steeper forehead of the Red-legged. The distinction in head and bill shapes gives the two kittiwakes very different facial



Red-legged Kittiwakes coming in to land. Photograph/J.P. Myers/VIREO (m01/22/028).



Adult Red-legged Kittiwake. Photograph/Dan Roby and Karen Brink/VIREO (r05/1/074).



Adult Red-legged Kittiwake in flight. Distant shot, for general impression. Photograph/J.P. Myers/VIREO (m01/22/030).



Adult Black-legged Kittiwake at nest, with two juveniles, nearly full-grown. Photograph/Dan Roby and Karen Brink/VIREO (r05/1/072).



Adult Black-legged Kittiwake in flight. Distant shot, for general impression. Photograph/ J.P. Myers/VIREO (m01/22/029).

expressions at close range, and even flying at a distance the Red-legged may look shorter-headed. Standing, the Red-legged looks more compact, with shorter legs.

Wing shape on flying birds is a hard thing to measure, but to me the wings of the Red-legged Kittiwake often look more angled at the wrist, and narrower toward the tip, than those of the Black-legged. These could be partly illusions caused by the prominent white trailing edge on the primaries, which “pinches in” the dark gray area to a narrow triangle. Even if it is an illusion, however, it still adds to the distinctive appearance of the bird in flight.

Although immature gulls in general

are usually assumed to be difficult, young kittiwakes are actually easier to separate than the adults. In addition to the shape differences described above, the young Red-legged is distinguished by the *lack* of the black diagonal bar on the inner wing (“carpal bar”) that is almost always shown by the Black-legged Kittiwake during its first year. The neatly tri-colored wings of the young Red-legged may be more reminiscent of the Sabine’s Gull (*Xema sabini*). Also, the young Black-legged has a black band at the tip of its tail until it is in essentially adult plumage; the Red-legged Kittiwake lacks this, being the only North American gull that has a completely white tail at all ages.

Readers of *American Birds* are unlikely to have much use for these field marks except in Alaska, because the Red-legged Kittiwake seldom wanders any distance. But nothing is impossible—as demonstrated by an adult Red-legged that showed up in mid-summer a few years ago in southern Nevada, near Las Vegas! I’m no gambler, but I’m willing to bet that that record won’t be repeated!

VIREO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, is the world’s first and foremost scientifically-curated collection of bird photographs. Established in 1979 the collection now holds well over 100,000 images, representing nearly half of the world’s bird species. For more background, see the feature on VIREO by J.P. Myers *et al.* in *American Birds* Volume 38 Number 3, May-June 1984.