

FEATURE ARTICLES

STATUS OF RED-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*RISSA BREVIROSTRIS*) IN BRITISH COLUMBIA WITH NOTES ON ITS OCCURRENCE IN CANADA AND THE CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES

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Abstract

Twenty-four extralimital records involving at least 45 individual Red-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa brevirostris*) in North America, outside the species' known breeding and winter ranges in Alaska, were compiled for the period 1899 to 2007. Over the 109 years, the species still remains a vagrant in southern near shore areas along the Pacific coast and a very rare seasonal migrant well offshore. Recently Red-legged Kittiwake has become an irregular spring visitor to extreme north coastal British Columbia in the vicinity of Tarr Inlet. There are two inland records, from the Yukon Territory and Nevada.

Most extralimital occurrences were of adults ($n = 26$ birds; 76.9%) and over half of all records ($n = 13$; 54.2%) were of kittiwakes found dead or dying. Almost half of all records (46%) were reported during the winter period December through February.

Introduction

Red-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa brevirostris*) is a small pelagic larid that breeds at only five to six sites in the world, all in the Bering Sea. The Alaskan population, estimated at 126,000 birds, and the Russian population, estimated at 42,348 birds, accounts for the entire world's population of about

168,000 individuals (Byrd et al. 1997). Productivity fluctuates between nesting colonies and years, possibly in relation to fluctuations in prey availability. The non-breeding component of the kittiwake's life is poorly known and it is suspected that most of the post-breeding population disperse to deeper waters in the North Pacific Ocean for the winter (Byrd and Williams 1993).

Along the Pacific coast of North America, south of the kittiwake's breeding range, the species has been reported more frequently in recent years from both near shore and offshore locations (Appendix). This paper reports on the current status and seasonality of these extralimital occurrences.

Occurrence and Status for Canada and the Continental United States

Outside Alaska, records of post-breeding Red-legged Kittiwakes in North America are rare partly due to their pelagic habits and the lack of qualified observers at sea, especially in winter. Vagrant kittiwakes have been recorded in two Canadian provinces and four coastal and interior states (Figure 1), with Washington and Oregon accounting for most ($n = 24$; 62.5%) of the records. Vagrants have been recorded in all months of the year except April, September, and November. Nearly half of all records (46%) are from the winter period December through February (Figure 2).

During the 109 years between 1899 and 2007, the 24 records involving at least 45 individual birds are all from different years, with 79% of these occurring between 1974 and 2005 (Appendix). We suspected that occurrences might be correlated with El Niño-Southern Oscillation events and corresponding shifts in food resources. For the period 1941-2005 there have been 10 such significant events, in 1956, 1965, 1968, 1971, 1975, 1983, 1985, 1991, 1992, and 1996 (see Campbell et al. 2006). Vagrant Red-legged Kittiwakes have been reported in four of those years: 1983, 1991, 1992, and 1996.

A brief overview of records, and status for each province and state, follows with full details for new British Columbia occurrences. Specific details for each accepted record are listed in the Appendix.

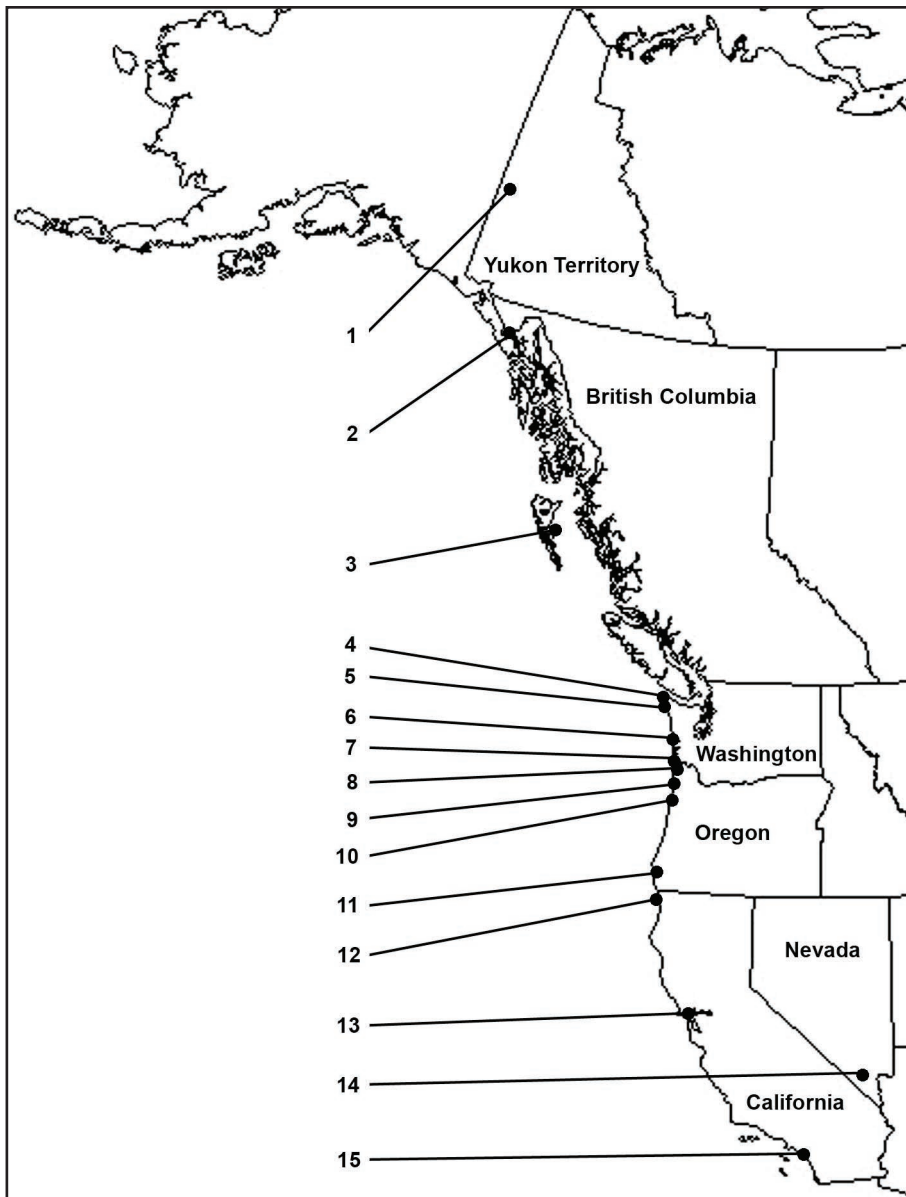
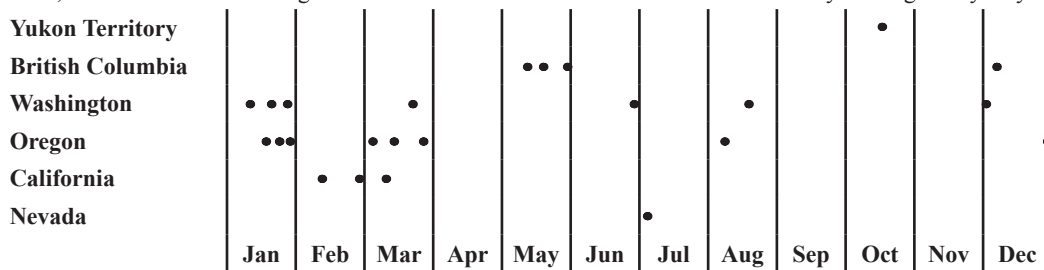


Figure 1. Locations of vagrant Red-legged Kittiwake in Canada and the continental United States, 1899-2007. Numbers, from north to south, refer to: Yukon Territory: (1) Yukon River at Forty Mile; British Columbia: (2) Tarr Inlet and (3) Sandspit; Washington: (4) Tatoosh Island, (5) Lake Ozette, (6) Grays Harbour and 60 km west of Westport, and (7) Leadbetter Point and Columbia River; Oregon: (8) 24 km (15 mi.) west of Tillamook Head, Cannon Beach, and DeLake, (9) Nehalem and Rockaway Beach, (10) Lincoln City, (11) Waldport and Coos Bay; California: (12) Klamath River, (13) Ross and (15) Anaheim; Nevada: (14) Corn Creek.

Figure 2. Vagrant occurrences, by month, of Red-legged Kittiwake in Canada and the continental United States, 1899-2007. The Washington record for June was a bird observed for several days through early July.



Yukon Territory

The only record, 109 years old and the first for Canada, was an immature bird found dead on the banks of the Yukon River, at Forty Mile, on 15 October 1899 (Sinclair et al. 2003).

Red-legged Kittiwake is currently considered *Accidental* in the Yukon Territory (Sinclair et al. 2003).

British Columbia

Red-legged Kittiwake was officially added to the avifauna of British Columbia in 2001 although

the bird was photographed eight years earlier at Sandspit, Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii), on 6 December 1992 (see Campbell et al. 1990b, 2001). There are three recent acceptable records, all in May and from the same location, of at least 24 Red-legged Kittiwakes observed and photographed (Figure 3) by birders during cruises to Tarr Inlet in the extreme north coastal portion of the province. The Red-legged Kittiwakes were associating with Black-legged Kittiwakes (*R. tridactyla*), behaviour that is well documented (Siegel-Causey and Meehan 1981).

All photographs have been catalogued and added to the British Columbia Photo File for Wildlife



Figure 3. One subadult (left) and two adult Red-legged Kittiwakes standing on blocks of ice in Tarr Inlet, BC. 10 May 2002 (Ron Walker). BC Photo 3624.

Records (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).

Six additional sightings have been reported for the province from the vicinity of Vancouver Island: Clover Point (7 June 1979), Triangle Island (15 June 1989), west of Tofino (4 July 1969, 7 September 1971 and 11 November 1992), and Ucluelet (2 January 2003). Complete details have not been received for some sightings and other submitted descriptions were reviewed by ornithologists and were not accepted.

It is noteworthy that during extensive near shore and pelagic bird surveys along the British Columbia coast over the past decade, K.H. Morgan (pers. comm.) and his observers have not recorded a Red-legged Kittiwake.

Following definitions listed by Campbell et al. (1990a), Red-legged Kittiwake is currently considered a *Casual Vagrant* to the outer coast in British Columbia. The species has yet to be observed in pelagic waters.

Washington

The first Washington record was a bird observed at Leadbetter Point on 27 January 1974. During the following 33 years, through 2005, an additional six occurrences were reported: in 1978, 1991, 1998, 1999, 2000 (Figure 4), and 2005 (Mlodinow 2005). Three records were in January, one in March, one from late June to early July, one in August, and one in December (Appendix).

There is another published record for the San



Figure 4. Bird watchers off the coast of Washington were treated to a very unusual event when an adult Red-legged Kittiwake landed near their fish boat, 60 km west of Westport, WA. 19 August 2000 (Charlie Wright).

Juan Islands. A “*kittiwake with bright red legs was observed for several minutes in good weather in Upright Channel on 1 August 1960*” (Alcorn 1962). This observation was later treated as hypothetical by Lewis and Sharpe (1987) who state “*it is unlikely that this Bering Sea breeder, which rarely leaves its stormy home, will ever be confirmed in our area.*” The record was not included by Larrison and Sonnenberg (1968) in their book on Washington birds.

Red-legged Kittiwake is currently considered a “*Very rare migrant and winter visitor on the outer coast and oceanic waters*” in Washington (Wahl et al. 2005).

Oregon

The earliest record for the continental United States, and the entire Pacific coast of North America south of Alaska, was from Oregon. On 28 January 1933, an adult female Red-legged Kittiwake, badly oil-smearred, was found dead on the ocean beach at DeLake (Gabrielson 1933). This occurrence coincided with an unusual southward movement of northern seabirds that washed ashore either dead, or dying, many of which were oiled.

Over the next 74 years, seven additional records were reported: in 1951, 1955, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1989, and 1999. All kittiwakes were adults and found dead or injured on ocean beaches with the exception of a bird photographed on a fish boat at sea west of Tillamook Head (Watson 1989). Three records were in January, three in March, one in August, and one in December (Appendix).

Red-legged Kittiwake is currently considered a *Vagrant* in Oregon (Marshall et al. 2006).

California

The first state record was an adult male captured 20.9 km (13 mi) inland at an apartment complex in Anaheim, Orange County, on 28 February 1996 (K. Garrett, pers. comm.). It died in a rehabilitation centre on 15 March 1996 and was preserved as a specimen in the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles (McCaskie and San Miguel 1999). The second record was obtained under similar circumstances. An emaciated subadult female (at least in its third

year) was found in a residential area of Ross, Marin County, on 13 February 2001 and died during the night in a rehabilitation centre (Garrett and Wilson 2003). The third record was of one bird seen at the mouth of the Klamath River roosting with 20 to 30 Black-legged Kittiwakes on 9 March 2003 (Cole et al. 2006) (Appendix).

Following status designations listed by Small (1994), Red-legged Kittiwake is currently considered a *Vagrant* in California.

Nevada

The most inland occurrence south of Alaska was a bird found dead at Corn Creek, near Las Vegas (Roberson 1980) (Appendix).

Red-legged Kittiwake is currently considered *Accidental* in Nevada (Roberson 1980).

Condition, Age, and Sex

Over 54% ($n = 13$) of all records were of birds found dead or in a weakened condition. Causes appear to be malnutrition but one bird was oiled. Of 17 birds whose ages were recorded, 13 (76.5%) were adults, one was a subadult (5.9%), and three were immatures (17.6%). Two carcasses were identified as female, and one carcass as male.

Summary

Red-legged Kittiwake is truly a vagrant in North America south of Alaska with no predictable pattern of seasonality or location, although nearly half occurred in winter, December through February. However, kittiwakes showing up recently in Tarr Inlet, British Columbia, near the Alaska border, may now be an annual event in spring. The species still remains accidental at inland locations in the Yukon Territory and Nevada.

Full details, including condition when found, age, and sex were not recorded for all of the 24 vagrant occurrences. However, most documented records were of birds found dead, malnourished, or oiled (42%) and in adult plumage (76.5%). Of three carcasses examined, two were female, one was male.

The potential effects of climate change on the marine ecosystem, including the availability of

food and decreasing extent of sea ice for marine-associated birds, is of great concern to biologists (Johannessen et al. 1995, Meehan et al. 1999). Therefore, documenting full details of extralimital occurrences of Red-legged Kittiwake, as well as other marine birds, is encouraged.

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Michael I. Preston (BCFWS) for preparing the figures and Charlie Wright for permission to publish his photograph.

Field descriptions for unsettled British Columbia records were reviewed by the authors, G. Vernon Byrd, Jeff Williams, and Martin Renner (United States Fish & Wildlife Service, Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, AK), and Michael Force (Peachland, BC).

M. Ralph Browning provided details for the specimen in the United States National Museum. Kimball L. Garrett provided additional details for the specimen in the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and Sharon Birks for the status of the Burke Museum specimen. Don Roberson helped clarify the Nevada record by supplying additional references.

G. Vernon Byrd reviewed the manuscript.

About the Authors

Wayne is a retired ornithologist and an active Director of the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies.

Spencer is a Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. His research has focused on the breeding biology and feeding ecology of seabirds in British Columbia and the northern Bering Sea region, social behaviour of foraging in tropical birds, and the behavioural and evolutionary interactions between avian brood parasites and their hosts. Spencer is a founding member of the Pacific Seabird Group and Society of Canadian Ornithologists/Société des ornithologistes du Canada. A Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, he is currently Editor of *The Auk*.

Terry has organized and conducted offshore seabird trips from Grays Harbor, WA for 35 years. He has censused seabirds there as well as on several extended research cruises across the North Pacific, and in the Bering Sea, between Japan, Alaska, Hawaii, Peru and Panama. He was co-principal marine bird investigator of a study by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and EPA surveying and establishing baseline population status in inland marine waters of Washington state in 1978-1979.

Terry has written many scientific papers and reports and is author of *Birds of Whatcom County*, a co-author of *A Guide to Bird Finding in Washington*, and the senior editor of the recently published *Birds of Washington: status and distribution*. He has participated in the Bellingham Christmas Bird Count for 40 years and the Breeding Bird Census for 30 years.

Ron is an experienced naturalist and published photographer who enjoys world travel for cultural and natural history experiences.

Appendix. Additional details of records of Red-legged Kittiwake in Canada and the continental United States, 1899-2007.

Yukon Territory (1 record)

15 October 1899 – an immature female was found dead on the banks of the Yukon River, at Forty-Mile, by C. L. Hall. The carcass was salvaged and preserved (MVZ 4909) in the collections of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology in Berkeley, California (Grinnell 1909). Because Grinnell was not familiar with this pelagic species he published a detailed description of the bird. A photograph of the specimen, confirmed as an immature, was published by Sinclair et al. (2003).

British Columbia (4 records)

10 May 2002 – from 10-12 birds were associating with about 50 Black-legged Kittiwakes in Tarr Inlet. Most birds were flying while a few were standing on blocks of floating ice (Figure 3) (see Walker 2007).

18 May 2004 – at least four well described adults were watched flying back and forth low over the water with about 15 Black-legged Kittiwakes in Tarr Inlet (Florence MacKinnon, pers. comm.).

29 May 2005 – a similar number of Red-legged and Black-legged Kittiwakes was present, foraging and resting, as reported on 10 May 2002 in Tarr Inlet (Walker 2007).

6 December 1992 – a weakened adult was found and photographed (see Campbell et al. 2001), at Little Spit Point in Sandspit, Queen Charlotte Islands. The following day, on 7 December, the bird was found dead and partially eaten (Campbell et al. 2001).

Washington (7 records)

10 January 2005 – an immature (Aversa 2005) was observed at Fort Canby State Park at the mouth of the Columbia River (Mlodinow et al. 2005).

19 January 1991 – an adult observed flying off Grays Harbour (Tweit and Johnson 1991).

27 January 1974 – 1 adult observed at Leadbetter Point (Tweit and Skritez 1996).

21 March 1998 – 1 unaged bird observed flying about 60 km offshore (Tweit and Lillie 1998).

28 June to 5 July 1999 – an immature was present in the vicinity of Tatoosh Island for eight days (Tweit

et al. 1999).

19 August 2000 – an adult was photographed (Figure 4; White 2000) about 60 km west of Westport while on a pelagic birding trip. Photographs are available at <http://www.hometown.aol.com/blkittiwake/rkittiwake.html>. The date published by Mlodinow and Tweit (2001) as 12 August was incorrect. The correct date (19 August) was published by Aversa (2000).

1 December 1978 – one was found dead at Lake Ozette (Tweit and Paulson 1994). The specimen is in The Evergreen State College collection in Olympia, WA (# TESC 207).

Oregon (8 records)

16 January 1989 – an oiled and weakened adult was found on Rockaway Beach, Tillamook County, and taken to a rehabilitation center where it later died (Gilligan et al. 1994, Nehls 2006).

24 January 1982 – an adult was found dead on the beach at Lincoln City, Lincoln County (Gilligan et al. 1994, Nehls 2006).

28 January 1933 – an adult female was found on a beach at DeLake, Lincoln County. The bird was decomposed and “torn” by gulls. A wing and a foot was salvaged and added to the I.N. Gabrielson collection (# 2200; Gabrielson 1933) that was later transferred to the United States National Museum collection in Washington, DC and prepared as specimen no. 589514 (Gabrielson 1933, Gabrielson and Jewett 1940, Nehls 2006).

5 March 1999 – one found dead at the north spit at Coos Bay, Clatsop County following an oil spill (Ford et al. 2001).

12 March 1955 – an adult female was found dead on the beach near Nehalem, Tillamook County (Walker 1955, Gilligan et al. 1994). The carcass was slightly damaged by gulls but it was preserved and added to the collections in the Royal Ontario Museum as specimen no. 81826 (Nehls 2006).

25 March 1951 – a dead adult was found on the beach at Waldport, Lincoln County (Munro 1953). Most of the flesh and viscera had been eaten by gulls so the sex could not be determined. The wings and feet were preserved to substantiate the record and deposited in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, ON as specimen no. 81827 (Nehls 2006).

7 August 1983 – a live adult was photographed on the railing of a fish boat 15 nautical miles (24 km) west of Tillamook Head, Clatsop County (Watson 1989, Gilligan et al. 1994).

30 December 1981 – an adult (sex undetermined) was found dead on the beach at Cannon Beach, Clatsop County (Gilligan et al. 1994). It was added to the Burke Museum skeletal collection at the University of Washington in Seattle, as specimen no. 39589 (Nehls 2006; S. Birks, pers. comm.).

California (3 records)

13 February 2001 – an emaciated subadult female (in at least its third calendar year) was found in a residential area of Ross, Marin County and taken to a rehabilitation centre where it died during the evening (Garret and Wilson 2003, Hamilton et al. 2008). The specimen was preserved in the collections of the California Academy of Sciences (CAS 88973) and a photograph was published in *North American Birds* (Glover et al. 2001).

28 February 1996 – an adult was captured in Anaheim, Orange County, and died in captivity on 15 March 1996. The male was preserved as a specimen (LACM 109199) in the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles (McCaskie and San Miguel 1999). The left testis was 9 x 4 mm and the right testis was 6 x 3 mm (both dark). The bird weighed 245 g, was starved, with light fat and showed some wing moult (K.L. Garrett pers. comm.; Hamilton et al. 2008).

9 March 2003 – a single unaged bird was spotted roosting with a flock of 20-30 Black-legged Kittiwakes at the Klamath River mouth in Del Norte County (Cole et al. 2006).

Nevada (1 record)

3 July 1977 – Roberson (1980) reported a bird was “found dead far inland at Corn Creek, near Las Vegas” and in the same year Balch (1980) says “a sick adult was found on 3 July 1977 at Tule Springs, Nevada”. We assume these statements refer to the same bird.
