

ABOUT THE COVER: BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE

"Bearing up against the heaviest gale, it passes from one trough of the sea to another as if anxious to rest for an instant under the lee of the billows . . ." This description by John James Audubon captures the essence of this lovely gull. The Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) is a pelagic species, a leisurely flyer, buoyant and graceful in calm conditions, but with powerful, deep, and stiff wing beats in rough weather. They are rarely observed inland but are sometimes seen from shore in winter at locations such as Cape Ann and outer Cape Cod. They are a common winter species off the Massachusetts coast.

The Black-legged Kittiwake has a virtually circumpolar breeding distribution. In our area they breed as far south as the Gulf of St. Lawrence. They nest in colonies on steep cliffs with their nests of moss, grass, and seaweed plastered to narrow cliff shelves with mud. Black-legged Kittiwakes are monogamous, often pairing with their mates from the previous breeding season. The males have a "choking" advertising display, and there is much fighting over nest sites and stealing of nesting material. Their brood size is usually two, and their eggs are creamy-buff and spotted or blotched brown or gray. The male and female both incubate for about a month, and the young fledge about six weeks later. There is often fierce competition between the siblings, sometimes resulting in the death of one of the young birds.

The kittiwake is a gregarious and sociable species, feeding on marine invertebrates, fish, and offal. They commonly follow fishing boats, and their three-syllable call, from which they get their name, can sometimes be heard along with sharp aggressive cries. They are frequent victims of harassment from marauding jaegers.

Identification of adult Black-legged Kittiwakes is not difficult. They are smaller than Ring-billed Gulls, with white bodies and gray mantles, yellow bills, and black wingtips, as though dipped in ink. Immature birds, like the one pictured on the cover, can be tricky to identify and confused with other immature gulls, such as Bonaparte's or Sabine's gulls. Juvenile and first winter birds are best separated from immature birds of other species by their gray back and wings (others species have some brown color) and black nape. They gain the adult plumage in their third year, but look much like adults after their first winter.

Black-legged Kittiwakes begin migrating south from the breeding grounds in August, but do not become common off the Massachusetts coast until mid-October. They are often called "frost gulls" or "winter gulls" because their arrival often coincides with heavy frost and the onset of winter weather. The kittiwakes leave for their breeding grounds in March and April. W.E.D