

FIELD NOTES

Inland Sighting of Black-legged Kittiwakes

Marjorie W. Rines

The weather in late October 1999 had been unusually pleasant, and the forecast for October 30 promised more of the same. When I woke up, however, there was a dense fog, so I postponed my planned visit to Arlington Reservoir and poked around in some of the local thickets waiting for the fog to lift. When I found two redpolls foraging nearby, I called my friend Renee LaFontaine to come over and enjoy them with me. Around 10 o'clock we decided to go over to the reservoir to check it out.

The fog was just starting to lift when we arrived, and by the time we had walked halfway around, we could see almost all the way across. I noticed a tightly bunched flock of eleven gulls in the middle of the deepest section, and raised my binoculars. The birds were ruffling their wings and bobbing up and down, possibly bathing. From the buoyant posture in the water and the dark smudge behind the eye, it was obvious that these were not Ring-billed Gulls.

"Bonaparte's!" I announced. Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*) was the obvious choice for a flock of hooded gulls. While this species is rare inland, individuals and small flocks are occasionally seen. Renee is relatively new to birding, and took my word for it. We watched them for a while, and then went to the car to pick up the telescope for a better view.

This is the embarrassing part, because I continued to think first-winter Bonaparte's, even with a better view. I eliminated both Black-headed (*L. ridibundus*) and Little (*L. minutus*) gulls, but did not consider any others. I was not wholly comfortable with the look of these birds, but we agreed to consult the field guide when we returned to the cars. In the meantime, we reviewed the field marks verbally. "Look at that strong black bar on the wing," I said, "and look at that black on the nape."

We got back to the cars, but completely forgot to consult the field guide. It wasn't until a few hours later that I remembered to do so. I opened my book, looked at Bonaparte's, and realized something was really wrong. I leafed through the gulls, puzzled. When I got to the kittiwakes, I stopped dead, and a creeping feeling of idiocy came over me. I had just blown off a flock of inland Black-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) as Bonaparte's Gulls.

Cursing myself for sloppy birding, I rushed back to Arlington, but when I got there around 2:00 the flock was gone. I scanned every gull, and — thank heaven — a single bird remained. I studied it carefully, making written notes and looking for pertinent field marks. It seemed quite content to simply sit there, no longer in the middle of the pond, but resting at the edge of a small island with the Ring-billed Gulls. At one point a family came to feed the ducks, and when they tossed food into the water, all the gulls lifted in

the air to try to steal some food. The kittiwake was not interested in the food, but lifted briefly with the rest of the gulls, probably startled by the sudden movement.

I went home to pick up my digital camera and, on second thought, grabbed a loaf of bread. I returned to the reservoir, and was able to photograph the kittiwake through the lens of my telescope; hardly award-winning photographs, but clearly recognizable. I used the loaf of bread to lure the gulls into lifting off the island again, and it worked. The Ring-bills rushed in to grab the bread, and the kittiwake lifted long enough for me to get an excellent view of the distinctive wing pattern: a black "M" formed across its wings, with no black trailing edge, as there would have been in a first winter Bonaparte's Gull.



Digital image by the author of Black-legged Kittiwake at Arlington Reservoir, taken with a Sony Mavica digital camera, through the zoom eyepiece of a Swarovski telescope

It's difficult to imagine what these birds were doing ten miles inland following several days of exceptionally nice weather. Black-legged Kittiwakes are pelagic birds, and I have only been able to discover three inland records in the state, all reports of single birds. In *Birds of Massachusetts* Veit and Petersen report an individual shot in Bridgewater November 13, 1909, and Seth Kellogg (editor of *Bird News of Western Massachusetts*) tells me of two reports in the western part of the state: an individual in Holyoke on October 27, 1942, and a more recent report of an individual at Onota Lake in Pittsfield on November 9, 1997. There are no records of multiple Kittiwakes at inland locations in Massachusetts. 🐦

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