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Documentation for the sighting of a bird which I believe was a Black Legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

by Scott Kinzey (observer)

Date of Sighting: 14-DEC-1999

Approximate Time: 1500

Location: Ohio River at the Montgomery Dam tailwaters in Beaver County

Weather: cold (33F?), light but steady rain, light wind

Optics Used: Bausch and Lomb Elite 8X42 Binoculars

Distance from observer to bird: very approximately 160 to 200 yards, the river isn't all that wide and I was about 30 yards from the bank, the bird was circling 1/2 way out in the river and very briefly as close as 1/4 of the way out

I was scanning through and counting Ring Billed and Herring gulls with binoculars at this site when I picked up a bird with striking plumage. I focused in on the bird and recognized it as having the plumage of the first year smaller gulls. I have seen many Bonaparte's gulls including first winter plumage. Right away, I noticed a black or blackish marking on the lower hindneck that I knew was a key mark for Black Legged Kittiwake. I continued to watch the bird fly in astonishment, could it be? The bird was flying during the entire sighting.

I became very excited and frantic. I am relatively new at birding (4 years) so I knew that being certain of the ID and having it accepted would take a lot of effort. As I watched the bird fly I tried to make as many mental notes as I could while my girlfriend fetched my spotting scope and camera. These are the mental notes that I made (before consulting any literature).

1. blackish W pattern on wings (the first eye-catcher)
 2. neat, blackish mark on lower hindneck at least as wide as the head (this put me in rare bird mode)
 3. blackish leading edge of wing
 4. bright white area immediately behind the black leading edge (inner primaries)
- Note: 3 and 4 left me with this impression. It was as if the bright white area on the leading edge of a Bony's wing was shifted back and replaced by black.

This was all I had to go on. The bird stayed in view for less than 20 minutes and some of that time was spent alerting my girlfriend and getting out my scope and camera and calling local expert and Allegheny County Compiler Mike Fialkovich on my cell-phone for ID assistance. I had forgotten that my field guide was tucked away in the trunk.

Over the next few weeks I consulted literature to help me with this ID. I have read and re-read the accounts for Kittiwake and Little Gull in PJ Grant's gull guide and looked at photographs. I also checked the National Geo Guide, Harrison's SEABIRDS guide and Pennsylvania Birds Volume 7, Issue 4 pages 135-36. I have also spoken with Paul Hess.

I eliminated Bonaparte's Gull because of the mark on the lower hindneck and Sabines gull because of the definite W pattern on wings formed in part because of the dark carpal bar. Also, I would know a Sabine's if I saw it, this bird was not clear cut. Red Legged Kittiwake does not have the blackish carpal bar forming the W pattern.

This left me with first winter Black Legged Kittiwake and juvenile/first winter Little Gull. With such little to go on, this separation was difficult for me. This is what I have:

- * PJ Grant mentions that the Little Gulls moult to first winter plumage is usually complete by November. Therefore, my Dec 14 bird, if it was a Little Gull would have not been in juvenile plumage and had dark markings near the lower hindneck. Also, other dark markings

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would be present on juvenile Little Gull plumage that I hope I would have noticed such as on the cap, mantle, and scapulars.

* An article in Pennsylvania Birds Volume 7 issue 4 pages 135-36 was encouraging as it states "...leading wing coverts are quite dark and highlight the whiteness of the inner primaries and secondaries and the Black W is better defined [on Kittiwake]. This combination produces a sharper gray-black-white pattern than on first winter Little Gull." This matches well with my points #3 and #4 above and my memory of my general impression of the bird.

I was not able to get a photograph and I looked for the bird 2 days later and did not find. It was not found on the Xmas Count later that week. An interesting note is that a Black Legged Kittiwake was identified on the Ohio River near Cincinnati, Ohio earlier in the month and Bob Shutsky identified one on the Sesquehanna River later in the month.

Scott Kinzey
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Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Ballot - Round One

Species: Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

Date of Sighting: 14 December 1999 to 14 December 1999

Location: BEAVER

County: OHIO RIVER AT MONTGOMERY DAM

Observer(s): Scott Kinzey

Date of Submission: 1999

Submitted by: Scott Kinzey

Written Description: Yes

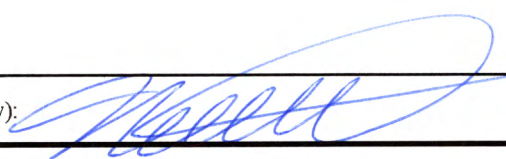
Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Recording: No			Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead			X					
D. Couchman			X					
P. Hess								X
R. Ickes			X					
B. Reid			X					
P. Rodewald			X					
M. Sharp			X					
TOTALS			6					1
DECISION			X					

Comments: 6/0/1

Signature (Secretary): 

Date: 5/6/01