



Birds of Barrington:

KILLDEER

Thinking of the Midwest and its birds, one does not readily envision shorebirds, those species generally associated with coastal beaches. But every August and September, many shorebirds that have nested in the Arctic refuel on the margins of Midwestern lakes and rivers. Among them is a sort of inland shorebird—an oxymoron, but as good a description as any—the Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferous*).

Unlike many of its cousins, Killdeer do not migrate to Arctic tundra to breed. They can be found nesting in around Barrington in summer months, usually on open ground, especially on gravel, or even on pebble-covered rooftops. Well do I remember the time that I nearly crushed a Killdeer nest and eggs that lay camouflaged on a friend's gravel driveway on Sutton Road.

The Killdeer is a member of the plover family. Its relatives include Black-bellied, Golden, and Semi-palmated Plovers, all of which nest in far northern latitudes; Piping Plovers which breed on the shores of the Great Lakes, prairie potholes of the Plains, and Atlantic Ocean; and Wilson's Plovers, found on south Atlantic beaches. In contrast, the Killdeer often nests far from water, even though it technically is classified as a shorebird.

It is a striking bird. Like its plover cousins, the Killdeer is a bird of rounded contours, though it is longer and sleeker than the others. I often tell beginning birders who are trying to distinguish plovers from sandpipers that “plovers are plump”. The Killdeer's head is round, its back brown, underparts white, and it sports two striking black chest bands. When it flies, or when an adult attempts to direct potential nest intruders with a broken-wing act, the flared tail reveals handsome chestnut feathers.

But even more striking than its field marks is the call of the Killdeer, from which comes its name: Kill-DEER! Kill-DEER! Kill-DEER! The call is shrill, piercing, and unmistakable. Often you will hear a Killdeer long before you see it.

Killdeer are short-distance migrants. They do not make the ultra-long flights that many shorebirds do between Southern Hemisphere wintering grounds and breeding territory in the extreme Northern Hemisphere. Instead, Killdeer winter largely in the southern part of our country, sometimes extending to Mexico and northern South America. They return early to the Barrington area, often arriving in late March. Their clarion call is a welcome sign of spring.

Like all shorebirds, Killdeer nest on the ground—in fields, parking lots, sandbars, lawns—most often on gravelly areas which provide good camouflage for their mottled eggs. Like other shorebird hatchlings, the chicks are precocial, which means that they hatch with eyes wide open and ready to run about. One friend describes the babies aptly as fluffballs on toothpicks. Should you unwittingly approach too close to a chick or nest, one or both parents will noisily feign a broken wing in an effort to distract and lead you away.

Nesting season has ended for local Killdeer, as it has for other summer breeders. In September you can predictably find Killdeer on the mudflats of Baker's Lake or at Flint Creek Savanna or simply high above, beating their way south, announcing their presence and identity with Kill-DEER! Kill-DEER! Kill-DEER!

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