

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

A Remarkable Inland Specimen Record of Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) from Albany, New York

Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) is a pelagic gull that breeds in coastal areas throughout the northern part of the Northern Hemisphere. In New York State they are winter visitors seen by ocean watchers on Long Island and those venturing out on boats well beyond our shores. Away from the coast, small numbers are reported each winter from large inland water bodies, especially Lake Ontario and the Niagara River area. They occasionally stray farther from large water bodies, as was the case for an individual that was seen by dozens of Capital Region birders this past September (2022) at The Crossings Park of Colonie, just outside the city limits of Albany, NY.

This bird was first seen (and photographed) on 8 September but was initially misidentified as a Bonaparte's Gull. On 13 September, the bird was identified as a Black-legged Kittiwake by Craig Driggs, who put the word out to the regional birding community. That same day it was seen actively feeding on small fish from the surface of the pond by dozens of birders (see Figure 1, page 46 for a photo of the bird in life). Many observers remarked that the bird did not appear healthy and even speculated that it may have a broken wing or other injury that prevented it from flying, even when approached closely. The following morning, it was clear to all observers that the bird, standing on the shore with its eyes closed, was sick or injured. It managed to take to the water, but after a few minutes hung its head underwater and drowned. My physical examination of the salvaged bird did not reveal any apparent injury or broken bones and so the bird was taken to the nearby NYSDEC Wildlife Pathology Lab where it was swabbed and tested for avian influenza. The test failed to detect an influenza infection. During specimen preparation, I found no internal injuries or macroscopic parasite infections. The bird was an adult female (no bursa of Fabricius, fully ossified skull, ovary 12mm x 3 mm). The stomach was empty and the bird was slightly emaciated (223.5 g). The lungs were saturated with watery fluid.

This record is unusual because it is a first for this species in Albany County, because the bird was an adult, and because it's the first known specimen from New York State since the 24 October 1999 specimen: a partial skeleton and spread wing preserved by the Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates (CUMV 49275) from a badly decomposed bird found on the Lake Ontario shore at Fair Haven Beach State Park. The 2022 Albany specimen is preserved at the New York State Museum (NYSM 19750) and is the first from New York with associated frozen tissue samples for genomic analyses (Figure 2). It's the second report of any kind of Black-legged Kittiwake for *Kingbird* Region 8.



Figure 2. Study skin and spread wing of NYSM 19750, a Black-legged Kittiwake salvaged from a small pond in a city park in Albany, NY, on 14 September 2022. This adult specimen documents the recent replacement of inner primaries P1-6, with P7 still in sheath, and P8-10 badly worn and yet to be replaced. A partial skeleton and a frozen tissue sample for genomic analyses were also preserved from this specimen.

Specimen and other records from inland New York—DeKay’s (1844) short species account does not mention any inland records, only stating that “this species is more abundant on the shores of Rhode Island and Massachusetts than on this coast.” Eaton (1910) regarded it as a common late-fall migrant and winter visitor to the Long Island coast, but also as “apparently rare on the inland waters of the State”, noting specimens from Auburn in Cayuga County, on 4 January 1854 (citing Hopkins 1856); Oak Orchard in Orleans County on 10 April 1881; and from Oneida Lake in Oswego County on 9 November 1890 (Bagg 1894). John Bull (1974) noted that none of the three inland specimens listed by Eaton were extant, and listed eight additional inland specimen records, all immatures except one, taken between 1959 and 1967, and all collected or salvaged from the Lake Ontario-Niagara River area between 3 September and 10 January. Two inland state records from 1968 are the first reports away from the Great Lakes: an immature bird (black-tipped tail, black angular pattern on wing) seen flying up the Hudson River north of Castleton on 15 March (first record for *Kingbird* Region 8; Bundy 1968), and an immature bird photographed on Seneca Lake on 31 December (Walsh 1969).

A kittiwake in the hand is still a remarkable event anywhere in New York, but in recent decades well-documented observation records of Black-legged

Kittiwakes from the Great Lakes and Niagara Frontier have become an almost annual occurrence. In 1980, well before the eBird era began, NYSARC announced that it would no longer review reports of Black-legged Kittiwake from upstate New York. Inland New York winter sightings reported on eBird include birds seen on Oneida Lake in 1976, The Hudson River at Cornwall Bay in Orange County in 1981, and on Cayuga Lake and nearby Dryden Lake in 2002. Kittiwakes were subsequently seen on Cayuga Lake in 2007, 2011, 2012, Onondaga Lake in 2017, Seneca Lake in 2021, and on Oneida Lake in 2013 and 2021. In 2022 Black-legged Kittiwakes were seen on Cayuga Lake, the New York side of Lake Champlain at Willsboro Point in Essex County, the Cannonsville Reservoir in Delaware County, and the Hudson River at Beacon in Dutchess County.

More remarkable than the recent surge in winter sightings throughout New York are the recent reports from 3 May 2023: First seven adults were seen flying in tandem over Lake Champlain just south of Ticonderoga in Washington County, then two adults about 20 miles further north at Port Henry in Essex County, and later in the afternoon on Lake Clear near Saranac Lake in Franklin County. On 7 May a lingering adult kittiwake was photographed at Crown Point, across Bulwagga Bay from Port Henry. Are we experiencing surge of inland Black-legged Kittiwake vagrancy, or are birders of the eBird era more alert to the possibility of a Black-legged Kittiwake wandering about, fraternizing with our less pelagic gull species?

My thanks to Zach Schwartz-Weinstein for assisting with the salvage of the kittiwake specimen and for alerting me to the 1968 Region 8 Kittiwake report in *The Kingbird*.

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Black-legged Kittiwake, Cannonsville Reservoir, *Delaware*, 13 Nov 2022, © Jeanne Cimorelli. Rare inland away from the Great Lakes, this was Delaware County’s first record (in eBird).



Black-legged Kittiwake, The Crossings, Colonie, *Albany*, here 13 Sep 2022, © Scott Stoner. Figure 1 for article, pp. 15-17.