

Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Killdeer

Common Name: Killdeer

Scientific Name:
Charadrius vociferous

West Virginia Status: The killdeer is a common spring and fall migrant, a fairly common summer resident which probably nests in every county, and a fairly common winter resident along the lower Ohio Valley and Kanawha Valley areas. It occasionally will winter in other parts of the state where a combination of some open water, usually in the form of boggy springs, and some open grasslands occur.

Description: This robin-sized (9-11 inches long) shorebird is easy to identify, with its two black bands separated and bordered by white on the neck, a white patch above the bill, and with a black stripe running from eye to eye. Also has a distinctive white eyestripe behind each eye. Its wings and tail are long. In flight, the rump and upper tail are orange. Both sexes look alike. The killdeer's piercing, repeated "kill-DEE" call is as unique as its appearance. It definitely earns its species name - vociferous!

Habitat: Though considered a shore bird, the killdeer readily uses open areas in West Virginia. Such open areas include sandbars, mudflats, pastures, cultivated fields, athletic fields, airports, golf courses, gravel parking lots and graveled roofs. They have been known to provide a learning opportunity for students when they have nested in a school yard.

Range: The killdeer is one of the most successful and widespread shorebirds in the Western Hemisphere. They breed in Canada from British Columbia to Newfoundland, southward through the United States to southern Mexico and the Caribbean. Disconnected populations also breed in Costa Rica, coastal Peru, and Northwestern Chile.

They winter from the southern half of the United States south to the northern tip of South America.



Joe Kosack/PGC Photo

Diet: It mainly eats earthworms, grasshoppers, beetles and snails. Occasionally will eat small mammals and seeds. Characteristic search method involves running, stopping, waiting, bobbing head and then running again.

Nesting Requirements: Though somewhat limited by the state's hilly terrain and forest cover, killdeer take advantage of various types of open areas. The "nest" is simply a scrape in the ground, sometimes with some lining material. It nests in the open with little or no surrounding vegetation. Nests have been found in the middle of gravel roads, on newly turned soil, and along the borders of country roads.



David Fattah

Life History: Female lays a clutch of 4 buff-colored eggs with spots. Incubation period is 22-30 days. The young are able to leave the nest as soon as their down dries, and are independent after 20-30 days.

The migrating population in West Virginia begins to concentrate on ponds and lake shores in last August, with several dozen sometimes gathering at one site. These birds typically depart in October.

The killdeer is well known for its broken-wing display. When a predator approaches the nest, the adult drags its wing and hobbles away from its nest, distracting the predator from the young in the exposed nest. When it is a sufficient distance from the nest, the bird "recovers" and flies away, calling loudly. To prevent large hoofed animals from crushing the eggs, the killdeer fluffs up its feathers, displays its tail over its head, and runs at the animal in hopes of making it change its path.

Threats and Prospects: The killdeer's fondness for human modified habitats is a double-edged sword. It means that its potential habitat is increasing as a result of human development. On the other hand, it means that it is vulnerable to pesticide poisoning, lawnmowers, and collisions with vehicles and buildings. Some breeding bird surveys suggest populations may be declining in some western states.

Clutch of four eggs laid in gravel

Information compiled by Art Shomo, editor.