

# BIRD OF THE MONTH

Article & photo by Jeannie Marcure

## THE SOUNDS OF SUMMER

In an effort to improve my birding skills, I've recently been trying to learn to identify birds by their calls. For someone lacking musical training or talent, this is a daunting task, so it makes sense that I'd have a special fondness for any bird that makes this job easier by calling out its name. One of my local favorites that has this obliging habit is the Killdeer and the repeated 'Kill-deah' call often helps me spot this busy little shorebird. Upon some investigation I learned that the call is actually the origin of the bird's name.

At 10 inches, the Killdeer is about the same size as a Robin. This medium-sized shorebird has a short neck, moderately long legs and a long tail and wings. The back is brown and the throat and neck are white. The under parts are white with two black chest bands. There is a white band on the forehead with a black stripe above it and a white eye stripe behind each eye. In flight an orange rump and upper tail may be seen. Like other plovers, the Killdeer has three forward facing toes and a partially developed hind toe.



Here in the Flathead, the Killdeer is common and can often be seen far from water. It is a voracious consumer of all kinds of insects and most of the feeding is done by sight while walking. Near water they are often seen along the shore edge, probing the shallow mud for insects and small invertebrates. Watch for the characteristic bobbing as it walks along probing for food. Killdeer are also commonly seen in agricultural areas and on the lawns and parks of suburban and urban areas.

Killdeer nests are made on an open scrape, often in gravel, with little or no surrounding vegetation and very little lining material. Here in the Flathead I've found Killdeer nests in pastures, along lake shores and near the driveway to my neighbor's house. The three or four tan and brown spotted eggs blend perfectly into the surrounding habitat, making the nest almost invisible. In fact you may not realize that you are near a nest until one of the adults appears in front of you dragging an apparently broken wing. The Killdeer will struggle along in front of you as if it can barely walk, let alone fly. One or both wings may drag pathetically, but if you attempt to rescue the bird it will manage to stay just a step or two ahead of you as it leads you farther and farther

from the nest. When the bird feels that you are far enough away to no longer be a threat to the nest, the wing will miraculously heal and the bird will fly away. Another interesting behavior is sometimes observed in pastures where the threat to nests is not humans but horses or cows. In this instance the Killdeer will fluff up and display its tail over its head to appear larger and then make runs at the animals in an attempt to drive them away from the nest.

Most newly hatched birds are altricial (blind, naked and helpless upon hatching) and rely entirely on their parents for food until they fledge. Killdeer babies, however, like many other shorebirds, are precocial and hatch covered with downy feathers and their eyes open. As soon as these downy feathers dry, they start scurrying around looking for food. This amazing behavior is made possible by the fact that the eggs of precocial birds such as the Killdeer are much larger. For example, although the adult Robin and Killdeer are nearly the same size, the Killdeer's egg is twice as large. This means that there is more food for the em-

bryo and that it can remain in the shell longer. Robins typically incubate in about fourteen days while Killdeer incubation takes around twenty-eight days. This means that a newly hatched Killdeer chick is actually two weeks ahead of a newly hatched Robin chick in development. In appearance, the chick looks much like a miniature version of the parents except that it only has only one dark band on the chest rather than the distinguishing two bands of the adults. Since they can't fly, newly hatched Killdeer chicks still need their parents for protection and guidance and typically remain with them for close to a month until they fledge.

[www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide) says the Killdeer is one of the most successful shorebirds because of its tolerance of people and human-modified habitats. This close association with people, however, does make them vulnerable to poisoning from pesticides and collisions with cars and buildings.

This summer I hope you'll take time from your busy schedule to stop and listen for the Killdeer's distinctive call. I think it will quickly become one of your favorite sounds of summer!