

The Courageous Killdeer

By: Kayla Pringle

The Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferous*) is one of the charismatic (and noisy!) birds in North America. Chances are you've heard a killdeer before, even if you've never seen one. Killdeer calls are high-pitched and their alarms make a sharp *dee* sound. If you listen closely, it sounds like they are saying their own name, "killdeer!" in a high-pitched tone.

Killdeers belong to the family Charadriidae, which includes plovers, lapwings, and dotterels. I love killdeers because they are plovers that you can see without going to the beach. I am not originally from the gulf coast area, but I was still able to see (and hear) killdeers growing up in North Texas. Fun fact: killdeers spend the least amount of time near water out of all shorebirds. Some common areas you might find killdeers are golf courses, lawns, parking lots, and football fields! Killdeers can also be found in open areas like sandbars, mudflats, and grazed fields.

Killdeers have some typical features of plovers, including a round head and large eyes. They have a short bill, long wings, and slender legs. They are a brown-tan color on top and have a white belly with two black bands on their chest. They are about the same size as an American Robin, but with longer legs and wings!

The Killdeer's diet includes invertebrates like crayfish, earthworms, snails, grasshoppers, beetles, and aquatic insects. They are often seen following farmers' plows in hopes of locating these invertebrates in the soil. Some have even been observed foraging for frogs and minnows.

As far as nesting behavior goes, killdeers nest on the ground, elevated slightly higher than the rest of their habitat. They are known to make multiple nests before laying eggs to confuse predators. They lay 4-6 eggs and have 1-3 broods per breeding season. The incubation period lasts for 22-28 days and their eggs are buff-colored with black markings on them. When hatched, chicks are relatively independent since they can walk out of their nests as soon as their feathers are dry.

Killdeers are famous for their broken-wing displays. When a predator is near the nest, a parent, usually the male, will act like their wing is broken, to lure the predator away from the nest. So if you ever see a killdeer, or any other plover, acting this way, it probably means their nest is close by. So watch your step and carefully leave the area!

Killdeer pairs typically stay together for a few years, then find a new breeding partner later on. Their conservation status is of low concern, but this doesn't mean they are completely in the clear! Like most bird populations, killdeer populations have declined by 26% since 1966. The main reason killdeers are more successful than other shorebirds are because of their willingness to be close to human inhabitants. Because of this, they are still vulnerable to pesticide use and car collisions.

Next time you are out on the golf course or near the family farm, keep your eyes and ears open for killdeers!

Photo credit: Celeste Silling

Photo caption: Killdeer are often spotted in parking lots, golf courses, or lawns.