



Photos, Drawing, and Text by *Heidi Meier*  
[meierdvm@hotmail.com](mailto:meierdvm@hotmail.com)

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## : Bird Brief :

## *Killdeer (Charadrius vociferus)*

**ORDER:** Charadriiformes (13 Families)

**FAMILY:** Charadriidae (68 Species)

Kill-DEER, Kill-DEER, Kill-DEER. This high shrill series of calls is from the most common inland plover, the Killdeer. The species name *vociferus* originates from Latin meaning “yelling” or “shouting.” These noisy birds arrive mid-March and find summer habitats in fields, mud flats, and along freshwater shores. This shorebird has **disruptive** or striking coloration with double black bars on the bright white chest and neck, a short and straight bill, and a red orbital ring. It is difficult to differentiate the male from the female because sexual dimorphism is subtle. I begin looking for them running-stopping-scanning, much like an American Robin, in early March at the Lake Express Car Ferry and at Veteran’s Park. Soon, we will see the fluffy fledglings walking close to their parents.

Seasonal monogamous pair bonding is underway. The male performs a butterfly-like aerial display for nearly an hour just above his territory. Mating and nesting will begin if a female is attracted to this behavior. They will then form a shallow, scrape nest in gravel or pebbles.

I am always amazed that the eggs do not crack during incubation in the small rocks! Additionally, I am always amazed that I can *never* see the eggs if a parent has moved off the nest. The spotted eggs look identical to the stones; it is perfect camouflage! The pigmented spots are produced by glands in the female oviduct. Spots are made when the traveling egg stops in the oviduct for a period of time.

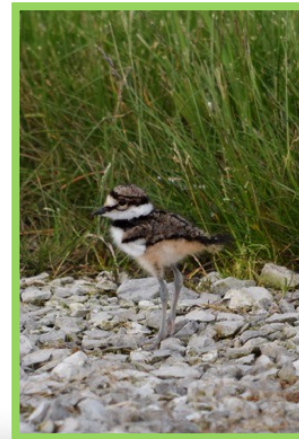
How do eggs avoid getting too warm or too cold, especially in an open nesting location free from shade or cool cavities? Killdeers can sense egg temperature with receptors in the brood patch. If the eggs are too warm, the parent will wet or soak their belly then resume incubation. This helps to evaporate heat and cool down the egg. Additionally, the parent will often turn the eggs in an attempt to maintain a constant temperature. Turning the eggs also helps prevent the developing embryo from sticking to the inside of the shell.

Both parents incubate the eggs. The male will incubate at night and the female will tend to the eggs during the day. Like many ground nesting birds, the parents protect the nest from predators by using a behavior called the **predator distraction display**. When a predator is near the nest, the parent will



distract it by pretending to have an injured wing; luring the predator toward *them* and away from the nest.

The ***cryptic precocial*** young are able to move away from the nest soon after hatching. The hatchlings look like miniature versions of the adult and will stay with the parents, or just the male, until they are over 20 days of age. The parents are very patient and allow the hatchlings to explore great distances on their own. However, the young come racing back when they hear a warning call from their parent. I love watching the adults gently coax their babies along and show them water, food sources, and safer places. It is similar to herding cats!



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