

**RED-LEGGED KITTIWAKE** *Rissa brevirostris*

**Conservation Status**

**ALASKA: Highly Imperiled**

**N. AMERICAN: High Concern**

**GLOBAL: Vulnerable**

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
June-Sep	1-3	23-32 d	38-48 d	cliff ledge	pursuit plunge, surface dip	fish, invertebrates, zooplankton

**Life History and Distribution**

The Red-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa brevirostris*) is a small gull that breeds at only five to six locations in the world, all in the Bering Sea. They nest on ledges of vertical sea cliffs up to 900 feet high with other species of seabirds, including their more common relative, the Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*).

Adult Red-legged Kittiwakes are mostly white, but the upper surface of the wings and back are dark gray. Wings are tipped with black, the legs and feet are fire engine-red, and the bill is yellow. This species can be distinguished from Black-legged Kittiwakes by the leg color, a shorter and more curved bill, and darker back and upper wing color. Also, the forehead is steeper giving them a round-shaped head and distinctive profile. Both males and females look alike.

Small fish found in surface waters are the primary diet of Red-legged Kittiwakes. Sometimes they form large feeding groups called “melees” with Black-legged Kittiwakes. Prey are captured by plunging into the water or dipping on the surface. Both species feed day or night, but the Red-legged Kittiwake has a larger eye, making it better adapted to night feeding. Parents also trade nest duties, mostly at night.

In Alaska, they nest on St. George, St. Paul, and the Otter islands in the Pribilof Islands, and on Bogoslof and Buldir islands in the Aleutian Island chain. The St. George colony in Alaska contains over 80% of the world’s population. The second largest breeding colony is in Russia on the Commander Islands.

**Alaska Seasonal Distribution**

AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern	-	-	-	-
Southcoastal	-	+	+	R
Southwestern *	U	C	U	U
Central	-	+	-	-
Western	-	R	+	-
Northern	-	-	-	-

C= Common, U= Uncommon, R= Rare, += Casual or accidental, - = Not known to occur, \* = Known or probable breeder, Sp= Mar-May, S= June and July, F= Aug-Nov, W= Dec-Feb. © Armstrong 1995.



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During the breeding season this species is usually found over deep water from 600 to 6,000 feet deep. Very little is known about the migration of Red-legged Kittiwakes away from breeding areas. The winter range is thought to be the North Pacific Ocean where it is believed they feed in even deeper water.

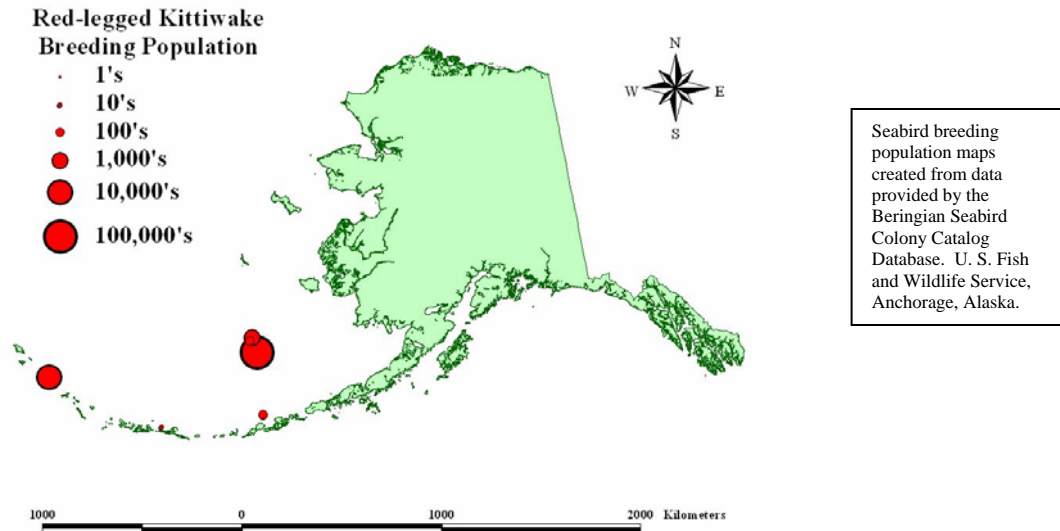
**Population Estimates and Trends**

The Alaskan breeding population is estimated at 209,000 birds. In the Pribilof Islands, Red-legged Kittiwakes declined significantly on St. Paul Island (-2.6% per annum) between 1976-2002, but exhibited no trend on St. George Island. In 1996, a new Red-legged Kittiwake colony was established on Koniuji Island in the Shumagin Islands, but declined -15.6% per annum and was almost completely abandoned in 2003. This species exhibited a positive trend (+3.2% per annum) on Buldir Island between 1974 and 2003.

The Russian breeding population is estimated at 4,000-5,000 birds and numbers may also be increasing there.

**Conservation Concerns and Activities**

Reasons for large population fluctuations in the Pribilof Islands are not well understood. Possibly, fluctuations are due to irregular food supplies near



colonies, but the causes of the food variability are unknown.

Little is known about the species away from breeding sites, so other unknown factors may also have influenced its population trends.

Oil pollution from spills and chronic oiling from ship bilge dumping are other ongoing concerns for the species. An oil spill near St. George could have a tremendous impact on the majority of the world's breeding population.

The potential introduction of rats (*Rattus spp.*) from ships could also pose a serious threat to Red-legged Kittiwakes.

Native subsistence hunting and eggging do occur on the Pribilof Islands, but effects on the population are unknown.

### Recommended Management Actions

- Maintain an Alaska-wide population of at least 200,000 individuals.
- Maintain a population monitoring program.
- Develop and utilize an index of abundance at key locations.
- Measure irregularity in the food supply.
- Determine wintering locations.
- Evaluate disturbance at key colonies.
- Work with state and federal agencies and fisheries councils to minimize the negative impacts of fisheries interactions.
  - Review plans for emerging fisheries to identify potential problems and solutions.

- Reduce disturbance around colonies through the use of buffer zones.
- Support efforts to minimize the incidence of fuel spills near breeding and wintering areas and measure contaminants in Red-legged Kittiwake eggs.
- Continue a rat prevention program in the Pribilof Islands using outreach and education.
- Work with the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (AMBCC) to monitor subsistence use of Red-legged Kittiwakes.

### Regional Contact

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### References

Armstrong 1995; Barton and Lindquist 2003; Byrd and Williams 1993a; Byrd *et al.* 1997; Dragoo *et al.* In Press; Dragoo *et al.* 2001; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002; Stephensen and Irons 2003; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006, 2002; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Internet Website (2005); Williams and Byrd 2001.  
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