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Kittiwakes - bridging the Tyne

Tyneside's special seabirds

The kittiwakes that nest on the Tyne Bridge are a special and unique attraction to Newcastle, because they are the most inland breeding colony of these seabirds anywhere in the world.



Gone Fishing

Unlike some gulls, kittiwakes do not scavenge on rubbish dumps. They feed at sea or along the Tyne, picking small fish or other marine creatures from the surface of the water.



Underneath the Arches

Kittiwakes normally nest on narrow ledges on precipitous sea cliffs. In the 1950s, a few birds started to nest on buildings along the Tyne using man-made ledges instead of their usual cliff edges. The Tyne Bridge became a regular nest site and the presence and breeding success of the kittiwakes is a sign of good quality feeding and nesting sites around the river.

Life on the ledge

The claws of Kittiwakes are longer and stronger than those of other gulls, giving them a more secure footing on their ledge. Their cup-shaped nests are precariously balanced on the narrow ledges and are made out of seaweed and other plant material firmly cemented together with mud. The female lays up to three eggs. The chicks are cute, creamy white balls of downy feathers. The parents feed the chicks for about six weeks until they leave the nest. At the end of the summer, the young kittiwakes leave the Tyne to spend the winter at sea.



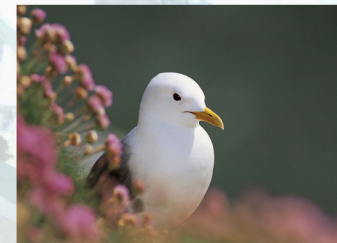
'Sea' Gull

Kittiwakes are real seafarers and spend most of their lives out at sea. In winter, many travel across the Atlantic as far as Canada and Greenland. They return to their breeding colonies in the spring and are only present on Tyneside between March and August.



What's in a Name?

It's easy to hear how this gentle-looking gull gets its name. Listen to them calling their own name – 'kitti-wa-aaake'. In flight, they have a grey back and are white underneath. They have a small yellow bill and their black wing tips look as if they have been dipped in ink!



Changing fortunes

A low point for kittiwakes came when their feathers were used by Victorian hat makers to decorate ladies' hats. Legal protection ended this slaughter and the population increased. However, numbers have fallen recently in some places due to a shortage of sandeels, the kittiwake's favourite food. This is a worrying sign of possible problems in the seas around the UK and highlights the importance of ensuring continued success for the kittiwake colonies around the Tyne.

• Drawings by the Newcastle RSPB Wildlife Explorers Club - 'The Kittiwakes' • Background illustration by Rachel Edwards • Photographs by David Morris; and RSPB Images

