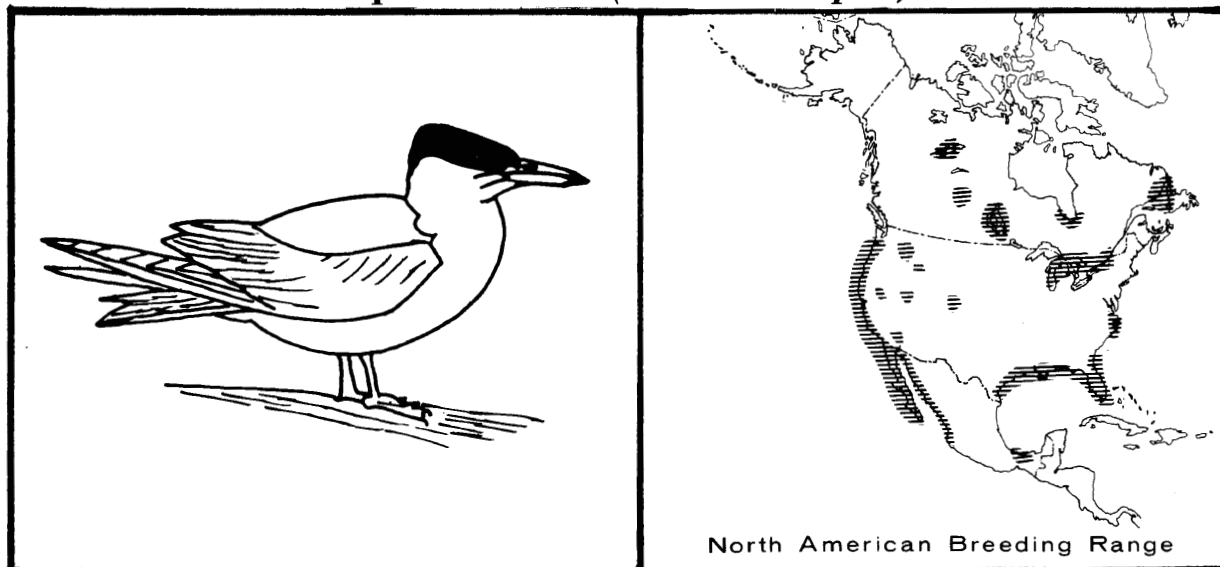


## Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*)



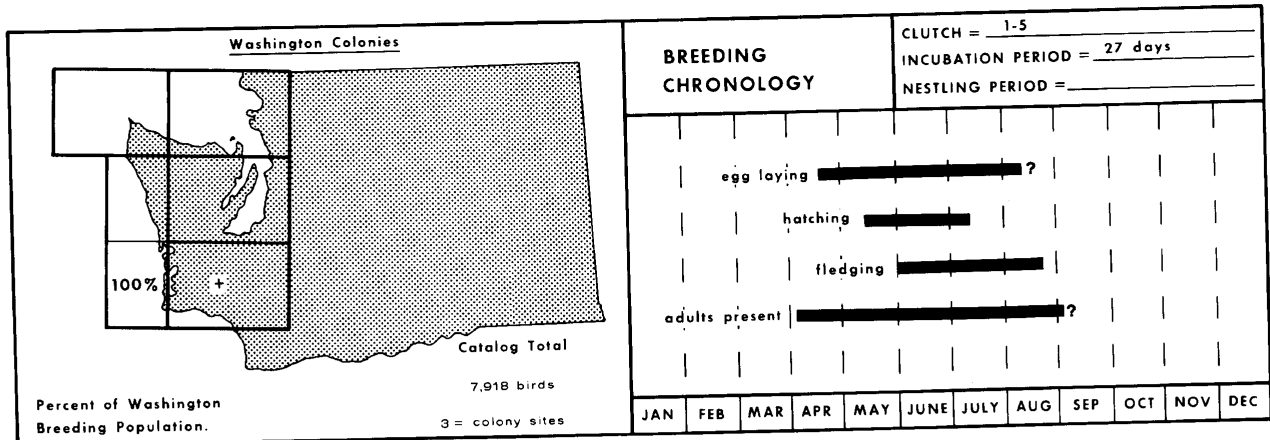
Caspian Terns are one of the largest and most widespread species of terns in the world. They are found in both the temperate Northern and Southern hemispheres. On the west coast of North America they nest as far north as Grays Harbor in Washington and inland as far north as Great Slave Lake in Canada. The nesting population in Washington is now by far the largest on the west coast north of Mexico, with only a few hundred birds recorded breeding in California (Sowls et al. 1980).

The species was recorded nesting in central Washington near Moses Lake in 1930 (see Jewett et al. 1953). About 1957 it was found nesting in Grays Harbor (Alcorn 1958) and has become established as one of the most abundant nesting marine birds in Willapa Bay and Grays Harbor since then. The spread of this species has been remarkable, both as a nesting

bird and as nonbreeders and post-breeding dispersants. Godfrey (1966), for example, felt it unusual in British Columbia; in recent years, however, adult-plumaged birds are numerous in spring and early summer in many locations in western Washington and British Columbia.

Caspian Terns nest on low sand or gravel islands accreted by wave action and usually with a minimum of vegetative cover. Two to four eggs are laid in a small depression in the sand lined with bits of vegetation. Like other terns and gulls, this species is a colonial nester, and it nests near gulls in many situations.

This large tern apparently feeds almost exclusively on fish, which it catches by plunging from several meters above the surface, frequently submerging in order to secure the prey. Smith and Mudd (1978) found Caspian Terns had



delivered small perch, chum salmon, staghorn sculpin, and other fishes to nestlings in Grays Harbor in May and June. The birds probably also feed on species like anchovies which are extremely abundant at other seasons in the area.

#### WASHINGTON COLONIES

Since the discovery of nesting Caspian Terns in Washington, the species has shifted colony sites, likely due to changes in available nest site habitat. Goose Island, site of the first known colony, Sand and Whitcomb Islands in Grays Harbor, and Gunpowder Island in Willapa Bay have all been occupied, but the terns recently (1982) nested only on Sand and Gunpowder Islands. It is possible the species nested earlier in western Washington as it has been recorded for many years (Jewett et al. 1953) during the summer in marine habitats.

#### HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY

The Caspian Tern is present in relatively large numbers in

western Washington during the nesting season. Its harsh cries and the begging call of chicks following adults are now among the most conspicuous seabird sounds in Grays Harbor and Willapa Bay during the summer and into September. However, while Caspian Terns have increased at rates probably greater than Glaucous-winged or Western Gulls in recent years, they are much more precarious in their existence as nesting birds in Washington. This is due to their being much more vulnerable to disturbance on the nesting colonies, to habitat loss, and to disruption of food webs. Most colony sites are protected, but entry by boaters, fishermen, sightseers, and researchers unfamiliar with biology and behavior of terns are potential threats. The islands used for nesting are vulnerable to ravages of winter storm waves which have created, moved, and eliminated the sites over time. Caspian Tern colonies, even during their relatively brief history in Washington, have relocated several times, sometimes inexplicably. The first known colony on Goose Island peaked in numbers in 1970, and no birds were found there after 1976. Whitcomb Island

presumably received the Goose Island population starting in 1974, with numbers building to 2,000 by 1976, but by 1981 the terns were gone from there. Sand Island was chosen in 1976, with large numbers present in 1982, when 3,000 birds were also

found on Gunpowder Island in Willapa Bay. While food resources appear to be adequate and stable for this species, disruption or contamination of these could have profound effects on the status and abundance of nesting populations using Washington's marine waters.

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**FIELD NOTES**

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