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FIRST DOCUMENTED BREEDING COLONY OF CASPIAN TERNS ON THE COPPER RIVER DELTA, ALASKA

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Since 1980, along the Pacific coast of North America, the population of the Caspian Tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*) has more than doubled in size (Suryan et al. 2004), and the species' range has been steadily expanding north (Gill and Mewaldt 1983). The Caspian Tern first reached southeast Alaska in 1981 (Gibson and Kessel 1992), and two years later it was recorded in south-central Alaska with the sighting of two birds in eastern Prince William Sound (Isleib and Kessel 1989). Caspian Terns have long been suspected of breeding in the Prince William Sound/Copper River delta area, but despite annual observations of the species, including increasing numbers of hatching-year birds and systematic surveys by boat and small plane (Bishop 1999, 2002), nesting in the region has previously gone unconfirmed. Here we report the first nesting of Caspian Terns in south-central Alaska on the Copper River delta and the species' largest nesting colony in Alaska.

The Caspian Tern was first observed in the Prince William Sound/Copper River delta region in the summer and fall of 1983, including a sighting of two birds in Orca Inlet (adjacent to the western edge of the Copper River delta) on 14 August 1983. On 12 August 1988, a flock of about 20 Caspian Terns in Orca Inlet included two hatching-year birds—the first such juveniles recorded in the region. Caspian Terns have since been recorded annually around Prince William Sound and the Copper River delta, including frequent and increasing accounts of hatching-year birds in August and September (Bishop 1999, 2002; pers. obs.).

In early June 2005, while fishing commercially offshore of Kokinhenik Bar, a barrier island off the Copper River delta, Tyee and Teal Lohse observed a large number of Caspian Terns flying overhead. After going to shore and walking a short distance from the beach we discovered a large nesting colony of Caspian Terns and estimated that it contained at least 100 pairs, but a precise count was not done. During that visit we did not have a camera to document the discovery, and further visits to the site were not possible during the summer of 2005. The following spring, on 15 May 2006, Tyee Lohse and Aaron Lang returned to Kokinhenik Bar and counted approximately 30 Caspian Terns loafing in pairs on the beach near the colony; however, engine problems prevented further investigation at that time.

On 4 June 2006, Tyee and Trae Lohse returned to the tern colony discovered in June 2005 and again found Caspian Terns nesting there. The colony is located on the east side of Kokinhenik Bar (60° 14' N, 145° 10' W; Figure 1), approximately 100 m west of the Kokinhenik navigational light and about 500 m from the outside beach. When we approached within 70 m, the adults flew from their nests and circled high overhead. They were very vocal, giving rasping cries, and unlike Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) they did not dive on us as we approached the colony. We counted 118 nests scattered in a roughly circular area approximately 20 m across. The nests were small depressions in the sand with no nesting material added, and they were tightly arranged, most spaced less than 1 m apart. Each nest contained one to three eggs, most commonly two. The eggs varied in color from dark olive with heavy brown spotting to very pale, nearly white, with light spotting. There appeared to be possible nest depressions that did not contain eggs. The nesting area is flat, sandy, and sparsely

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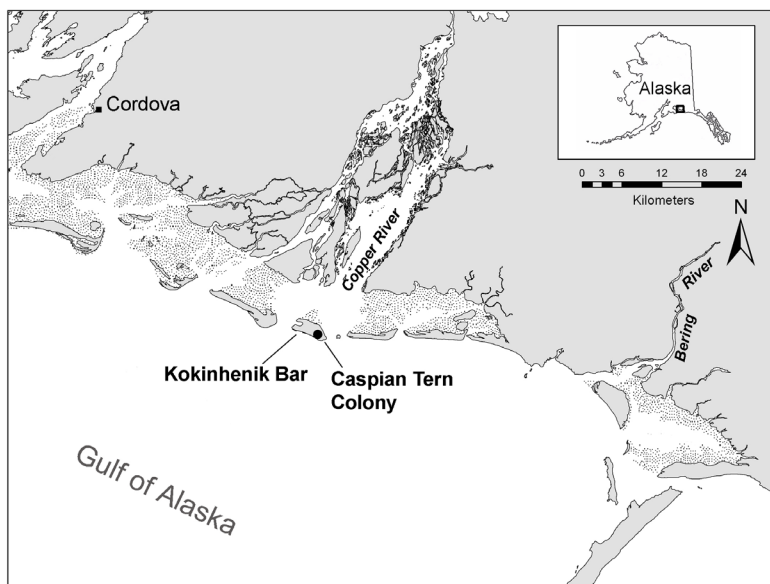


Figure 1. Copper River Delta showing the location of the Caspian Tern colony on Kokinhenik Bar. Dotted shading near shores indicates tidal mudflats.

vegetated. Kokinhenik Bar measures approximately 4 km by 2.5 km at high tide, and the highest point on the island is <10 m above mean high water. The entire island is sparsely vegetated and covered throughout with large pieces of driftwood. Glaucous-winged Gulls (*Larus glaucescens*) also nest commonly on the island; however, their nests were mainly on the dunes closer to the beach—none were located within the tern colony. Bishop (2002) surveyed Kokinhenik Bar in June 2002 and found no evidence of Caspian Terns on the island, reporting only Glaucous-winged Gulls nesting there. This difference suggests that Caspian Terns have colonized Kokinhenik Bar quite recently. During this visit we photographed the colony (Figure 2) and took photos and video of the circling adults.

To date there have been five other known nestings of Caspian Terns in Alaska. Alaska's first nests were found in 1996 on Neragon Island, north of Cape Romanzoff, in the Bering Sea, where three nests were found; three nests were again found on Neragon Island the following summer (McCaffery et al. 1997). In 2005, nesting was observed on the central Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta near the mouth of the Kashunuk River, approximately 96 km south of Neragon Island (see R. E. Gill, this issue). In southeast Alaska nesting has been observed in two locations: at Taku Inlet, near Juneau, where in 2000 at least four nests were found (Johnson 2003), and in Icy Bay, approximately 200 km east along the coast from Kokinhenik Bar, where 25 pairs of Caspian Terns were found nesting in 2006 (M. Kissling pers. comm.).

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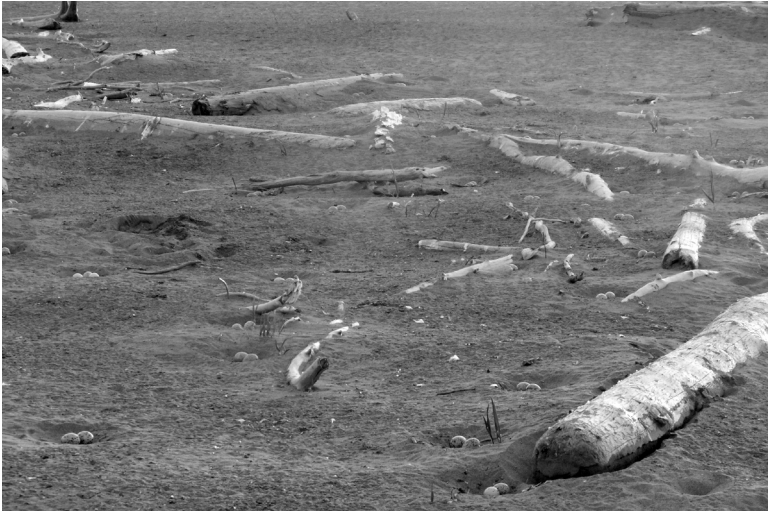


Figure 2. Caspian Tern colony on Kokinhenik Bar, Copper River Delta, Alaska, 4 June 2006, showing at least 34 of the 118 nests.

Photo by Trae W. Lohse

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