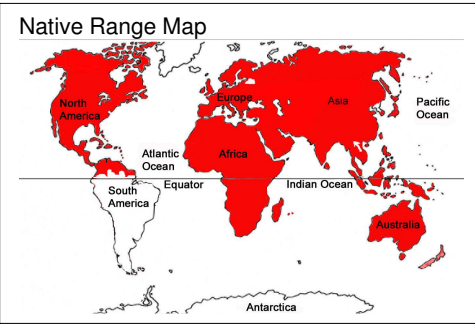


# Caspian Tern

Native Range Map



Kingdom: Animalia  
Phylum: Chordata  
Subphylum: Vertebrata  
Class: Aves  
Order: Charadriiformes  
Family: Laridae  
Genus: *Sterna*  
Species: *caspia*



Photo courtesy of Jane Patrick

## Habitat

- **In the Wild:** Caspian terns are a widespread species found on all continents except Antarctica. They breed and/or winter near coastlines and inland along rivers, lakes and marshes. In North America, Caspian terns breed along the Pacific, Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and inland along the Great Lakes, in the western interior, and central Canada. Caspian terns are partial, medium-distance migrants. Those from North America winter along the southern portions of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, as far south as Colombia and Venezuela.
- **Exhibit Location:** Diversity of Birds

## Characteristics

- Length: 18-21 inches; Weight: 1.2-1.7 pounds; Wingspan: 47-53 inches
- The Caspian tern is the largest of the terns. Males and females look alike.
- Gull-like in appearance, the Caspian tern is easily distinguished from other terns due to its large size and very large, thick, bright red bill. The face, neck, breast and belly are white. The head has a black cap. The back and upper wings are pale grey, and the under wings are grey with darker tips. The tail is relatively short, and legs are black.
- The juvenile has a deep orange bill and pale legs. The cap is brownish with white streaks.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** Average 12 years (max. 12 ½ years recorded); **In Captivity:** Up to 15 yrs.

## Behaviors

- Caspian terns are not very sociable, except during breeding season when they generally nest in large, densely packed colonies of up to several thousand pairs. Most colonies have more than 100 pairs. In other seasons, the Caspian tern often occurs alone or in small groups of 2-5.
- This species is more aggressive than other terns, but physical contact is rare. Alarm calls and attack flights are usually sufficient to avoid physical attack. During breeding season, Caspian terns exhibit territorial behavior and aggressively defend nest sites. Colonies work together to drive away predators.
- Caspian terns are highly vocal, particularly on breeding grounds.
- The Caspian tern forages by hovering over shallow waters and plunge-dives when a fish is spotted. The tern often submerges completely.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** Insects and fish

## Reproduction

- Caspian terns breed for the first time around 3 years of age.
- Breeding habitat is typically open, fairly flat islands or similar environments, because eggs and young are vulnerable to ground predators. Pacific coast populations formerly nested mainly in inland marshes, and are now mainly found on human created habitats like salt pond dikes and levees along the coast.
- Courtship rituals are elaborate, and include a variety of aerial movements, fish offerings, and vocalizations. Caspian terns are generally monogamous at least through the breeding season.
- Caspian terns often nest in mixed-species colonies with other birds, especially other terns and gulls.
- Nests are usually made in a vegetation-free area by both parents. The nest is a depression in the ground large enough to hold 2-3 eggs. The depression is commonly made in sand, but nests can also be found on

driftwood, in dead and decaying vegetation or in depressions in bedrock. The nest is often lined with dried vegetation, broken shells or small pebbles.

- The female lays 1-3 pinkish or buff-colored eggs, marked with small brown or black spots and speckles. Incubation, by both parents, lasts about 26 days. Both parents care for the young, and feeding may extend up to 9 months after fledging.
- Caspian terns are sensitive to disturbances at nest sites, and may abandon eggs or become separated from young if excessively upset from competition with gulls or harassment by predators or humans.

### Diet

- **In the Wild:** almost entirely fish, with some insects and crayfish
- **At the Zoo:** Various fish species

### Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Least Concern; **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- Caspian terns have a large global population of 180,000-320,000 individuals.
- North American populations have increased in most parts of the range due to the protection of the species and traditional nesting sites, and to human alterations in habitat. In the 1980s and 1990s there were 33,000-35,000 pairs nesting in North America, compared to 9,500 in the 1970s to early 1980s.
- In Europe and Africa the species has declined, and has become rare or absent in parts of its former range due to the scattered nature of breeding colonies, and disturbance and predation in nesting areas. Caspian terns are vulnerable to contaminants, habitat degradation, and water level changes.
- Conservation efforts are usually aimed at nesting areas, and include providing artificial sites, suppressing vegetation, and limiting access to colonies.
- The largest breeding colony of Caspian terns is off the coast of Oregon. Increasing numbers of terns here have caused problems with young salmon releases, some being endangered species. Efforts are being made to move them away from the fish stocking programs.
- Predators (eggs and chicks): gulls, owls, cats, dogs, skunks, raccoons, snakes
- Predators (adults): bald eagles, foxes, coyotes

### Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- *Sterna caspia* is also known as *Hydroprogne caspia*.
- Young birds begin vocalizing while still in the egg.
- If fish offered to young is dropped on the ground, the adult washes it before offering it again.
- While diving and fishing abilities develop shortly after fledging, young Caspian terns appear to have a difficult time learning to catch fish efficiently. Even 2-year-olds miss prey more often than adults.

### Sources:

- BirdLife International (2006). Species factsheet: *Sterna caspia*. Retrieved November 15, 2006. Web site: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/species/index.html?action=SpcHTMDetails.asp&sid=3258&m=0>
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology, (2003). Caspian tern. Retrieved February 5, 2007, from Cornell Lab of Ornithology All About Birds Web site: [http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Caspian\\_Tern.html](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Caspian_Tern.html)
- Cuthbert, F.J., & Wires, L.R. (1999). *Birds of north america*. Philadelphia: The Birds of North America, Inc.
- USGS (2006). Biological and ecotoxicological characteristics of terrestrial vertebrate species residing in estuaries: Caspian tern. Retrieved November 15, 2006. Web site: <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bioeco/casptern.htm>