

FIELD NOTES

Caspian Tern Nesting in Florida, 1973 and 1974

Prior to 1973, all Florida nesting records of Caspian Terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*) were from two localized areas in Pinellas County (Schreiber and Dinsmore 1972). In 1973 this species was reported nesting in Brevard County on the east coast of Florida (Ogden, 1973). Also in 1973, Dinsmore found a Caspian Tern scrape containing 2 eggs on the east side of the Pinellas Bayway within 3 meters of a nest found in 1972.

On 30 April 1974 Dunstan observed 2 adult Caspian Terns along the shoreline at a Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*) colony on Pelican Point, a spoil island in Hillsborough Bay, Hillsborough County. No evidence of nesting was found at that time, but on 5 May we saw adults in the same area and found 4 fresh scrapes, 2 containing eggs. The colony increased in numbers until 4 June, when 16 nests contained eggs or young. The tern colony extended along the beach ridge for approximately 20 meters. Inland from the tern scrapes, Laughing Gulls nested in denser vegetation. Nests of the 2 species were within one meter of each other.

Eleven nests contained 2 eggs each and 5 contained one egg each for a total of 27 eggs laid ($x = 1.7$). A mean clutch size of less than 2 is suggested by Bent (1921) and Miller (1943) for the Caspian Tern in Louisiana and California, respectively; but Ludwig (1965) found a mean of 2.81 for the species in the Great Lakes region.

We found the first chick on 27 May, and 18 had hatched out by 20 June. Nestlings remained in or near the scrape until they were approximately one week old. After that time they were difficult to find. On a number of occasions, pulli took to the water to avoid capture (Chaniot 1971; Schreiber and Dinsmore 1972). Between visits to the island, 2 single-egg clutches disappeared; these eggs may have hatched and the young moved away from the nest. One egg of a 2-egg clutch disappeared after remaining unhatched for 36 days. Of the 18 chicks known to have hatched by 20 June, 2 were found dead less than 3 days after hatching.

On 24-26 June, heavy rains, high winds, and tides in excess of one meter above normal occurred in Tampa Bay, destroying 4 nests that contained 6 eggs and probably drowning many chicks. Only 3 young are known to have survived. Two days after the storm, 9 adults and 7 fresh scrapes (without eggs) were present; however, on subsequent trips we observed only 5 adults and the scrapes were abandoned. Our first record of a chick able to sustain flight and avoid capture was on 4 July, 5-6 weeks after the first egg hatched. By 30 July, all Caspian Terns had left the island.

Although Caspian Terns are not known to have nested in Hillsborough County previously, Dinsmore's sighting on 3 August 1973 of a young Caspian Tern, capable of flight and begging for food from an adult at McKay Bay, suggests that Caspian Terns may have nested in Hillsborough County in 1973.

On 20 July 1974 Schreiber found an adult and an almost fledged Caspian Tern chick in a Laughing Gull colony on a spoil island along the Intercoastal waterway, about 1¼ kilometers north of Devilfish Key in Charlotte Harbor, Charlotte County.

It is interesting to note that the further expansion of the Caspian Tern's nesting range in Florida has followed the pattern suggested by Schreiber and Dinsmore (1972). That is, all nesting took place on spoil islands and was in association with colonies of other species of Charadriiformes. Except for the first nesting record for Florida in 1962 (Woolfenden and Meyerriicks 1963), all nesting has been with Laughing Gulls.

We thank A. J. Meyerriicks and H. W. Kale for their suggestions regarding this manuscript.

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