

Breeding of the Caspian Tern in South West Africa

The Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* is recorded by Winterbottom (1971) as occurring along the South West African coast from Oranjemund to Swakopmund, and inland on the Zambesi River at Katima Mulilo. Clinning & Jensen (in press) have recorded the species from the Kunene River mouth and it occurs irregularly at Hardap Dam (pers. obs.). Winterbottom (1971) gives no records of Caspian Terns breeding in South West Africa. This note summarises all known recent breeding records of Caspian Terns in the Walvis Bay - Swakopmund area, including some already published by Becker (1976).

(1) Walvis Bay (22 59S, 14 31E)

Becker (1976) found four nests, each with one egg, at Pelican Point during December 1964. He regarded this as the start of a larger breeding colony as there were at the time some forty birds in the area, most of which were still in moult. On 2 March 1975 two pairs of Caspian Terns were found nesting on a sandbank at Walvis Bay Sewage Works. One nest contained three eggs and the other two chicks, with feathers just appearing, and an addled egg. These eggs and chicks later disappeared, probably eaten by stray dogs from the nearby town. On 13 March 1976 six pairs of terns had nests on the same bank, four nests had two eggs each and two had three eggs each. These eggs all disappeared within a week, again probably eaten by dogs. Later in 1976 modifications were made to the sewage ponds. Several new access roads were built to enable tourists to view the birds more easily. One of these roads joined the tern breeding bank to the mainland and as a result there have been no subsequent breeding attempts by Caspian Terns.

(2) Swakopmund Salt Works (22 39S, 14 30E)

On 16 March 1975 a colony of 35 Caspian Tern nests was found on an earth wall at the Swakopmund Salt Works. Sixteen of these nests contained two eggs each, five had three eggs, six had two small chicks and eight were empty. Twelve small, mobile chicks were counted. The bank on which this colony was situated was adjacent to the main coast road and protected by a narrow channel of shallow water. In order to minimise disturbance and not attract undue attention to the colony it was not entered again but regularly viewed from the road. Most pairs apparently only raised a single chick. At least 23 flying young were counted in the colony and by mid-June all the birds had dispersed and were no longer roosting there. In early March 1976 Caspian Terns were again noticed sitting on this bank. On 20 March 1976 there were 18 nests with eggs, nine with one egg, seven with two, and two with three. There were an estimated 60 adult birds present and numerous empty scrapes. In early April the colony was deserted when either jackals or stray dogs gained access to the breeding bank. Caspian Terns did not breed at the Salt Works in 1977 or 1978.

(3) Sandwich Harbour (23 33S, 14 20E)

On 8 January 1977, in the company of M. Waltner during the Western Cape Wader Study Group visit to S.W.A., a single Caspian Tern nest containing three eggs was found on a small sand island

in the southern mud-flat area at Sandwich Harbour. The subsequent fate of this nest is not known. On 22 December 1977 a Caspian Tern nest containing three eggs was found on the same bank in exactly the same spot as the previous season's nest. On 10 January 1978 this nest was empty and no sign was found of either chicks or adults in the area. The isolated site makes it unlikely that mammalian predators were involved. Possibly the eggs or newly hatched chicks were taken by Kelp Gulls, 14 pairs of which had nests on the same island at the time.

During February and March 1978 it was reported that a number of Caspian Terns was present on an island in the mouth at Sandwich Harbour, apparently sitting on nests. I was unfortunately away for most of this period and did not visit the island. In May and June flocks of up to 40 Caspian Terns, containing some immatures, were roosting on the sand spit adjacent to the mouth.

McLachlan & Liversidge (1978) record breeding by Caspian Terns in December - January and in July. It appears from the above observations that in South West Africa although breeding may start as early as December, the main breeding season does not start until March. The birds are amazingly naïve in their choice of breeding sites and as a result suffer heavy predation losses. Sandwich Harbour has at present only a single mouth, the island normally present having been joined onto the southern sand spit. Unless the situation has changed by next March (1979) the birds will have to find another nesting site. Should they return to the Swakopmund Salt Works it is planned to erect a predator-proof fence or to deepen and widen the channel between the bank and the road.

References

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