

Caspian Terns Facts



1. Caspian Terns are threatened and are protected under the **1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act**.
2. The Caspian Tern is the world's largest [tern species](#).
3. The Caspian Tern's diet consists almost entirely of [fish](#).
4. Unlike many other tern species, the [Caspian Tern](#) retains its black cap during the winter (non-breeding plumage).
5. The Caspian Tern occurs on [all continents](#) except Antarctica.
6. Caspian Terns are [highly vocal](#). Chicks vocalize while they are still in the egg!
7. Caspian Terns are fastidious when it comes to feeding their young. Adults rinse their bills after feeding their babies. If an offered fish is accidentally dropped on the ground, the adult will rinse it off with water before re-offering it to the baby tern.
8. Starting from day one, chicks are fed whole fish, which they swallow headfirst
9. The oldest known wild Caspian Tern lived to be more than 29 years and 7 months old.

Info shared by Barry McKenzie

CATEs (Caspian Terns) live world-wide. Most are migratory. Our Rat Island birds breed here but spend the winter along the Pacific coast from Southern California south along Mexico and Central America to Columbia and Ecuador. European birds migrate south to Africa.

The Rat Island birds begin arriving in April with almost all on site by mid-May. Breeding occurs in late May and early June. The birds are monogamous and remain paired with the same mate for the duration of the breeding season. 50% of birds will bond and breed with the same individual in subsequent years. The nest is a simple scrape in the dirt lined with shell fragments and grass created by both parents. 1-3 eggs are laid. Egg incubation is an average of 4 weeks with both parents doing duty on the nest. Young birds begin to fly at about 5 weeks of age. Until they can fly, young birds are extremely vulnerable to predation by eagles, crows, ravens, gulls, and coyotes. Parents will defend the nest unless forced to fly off by threat to themselves. About a month after learning to fly, the young accompany one (or both) parents on their first southward migration.

Even after learning to fly, young birds remain dependent on adults for feeding until they are several months old (the longest period of parental feeding of any tern).

Caspian Terns reach breeding maturity at 3 years of age. Average life expectancy for CATE is 16 years. In a typical breeding colony, about 60% of the breeding birds had themselves hatched in a different colony (but still in the general area). Data specific to the Rat Island birds is simply not available.

If a nesting attempt fails, less than 50% of pairs try again during the same season (depends on how early in the season failure occurred). Sometimes an entire colony is abandoned due to disturbance; a breeding colony at Grays Harbor is thought to have been abandoned due to repeated Bald Eagle predation (which could be an issue for Rat Island).

In 2022, fewer than 10 young Caspian Terns were successfully fledged from Rat Island. For comparison, a healthy colony will fledge about 60% of young hatched.

In June 2023, observers estimated 1000 individuals on Rat Island.

In June 2023, I (Barry McKenzie) photographed a banded CATE flying off the Ft Flagler spit that was banded as a hatchling in 2007. It was banded near Walla Walla, WA in 2007. That bird is 16 years old and in healthy breeding condition!

Feeding Behavior

When foraging flies high over water, hovers, then plunges to catch fish below surface. Less often flies low, dips down to catch prey at water's surface. May steal food from other birds.



Eggs

1-3, rarely 4 or 5. Pale buff, spotted with brown or black. Incubation is by both parents (female may do more), 20-22 days. Young: May leave nest a few days after hatching, move to nearby shore. If colony is undisturbed, young may remain at nest until ready to fly. Both parents bring food for young. Age at first flight about 30-35 days; young may remain with parents as long as 8 months.

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Diet

Mostly fish. Often concentrates on a few abundant fish species in a given locale (for example, shiner perch on California coast, alewife on Great Lakes). Also eats insects, sometimes eggs or young of other birds.

Nesting

First breeds at age of 3 years. Nests in colonies, sometimes in isolated pairs. Male may fly low over colony carrying fish; female follows. On ground, courtship feeding (male feeds female). Nest site is on bare ground, among driftwood or debris, perhaps sometimes on floating mats of dead vegetation. Nest (built by both sexes) is shallow depression, sometimes with rim or lining of debris.

Mass: 1.4 lbs (Adult)

Length: 19 – 21 in.

Wingspan

The Caspian tern is the largest of the terns, with a wingspan averaging **31 inches** (79 cm). Its size, stout red bill, and lack of a deeply forked tail distinguishes it from other white terns found in the state.

Lifespan: 12 years

Predators

Adult Caspian terns may fall prey to birds of prey, such as bald eagles, and terrestrial predators when roosting or on a nest, such as **coyotes and red foxes**. When a predator approaches a nesting colony, Caspian terns raise an alarm call and will often join together to mob the predator.