

Caspian Tern

Hydroprogne caspia

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



An adult Caspian Tern in non-breeding plumage (photo: Steve Merrett)

This is a very large tern with a diagnostic large red bill. No other large tern in Australia has a red bill (NB some small terns sometimes do). The bill has a sub-terminal black tip (that is, not black all the way to the end of the bill). Adult birds in breeding plumage have a black cap extending through the eye and all the way to the back of the neck, dark legs, and grey-white plumage. In non-breeding plumage the black cap is heavily white-streaked. Both sexes look alike.

Juvenile birds have a duller orange-red bill and a white-streaked black cap which does not extend all the way to the back of the neck. Their legs are paler than those of adults, and their upperparts plumage is darkly scaled. When juveniles moult into immature birds, the upperparts scaling mostly disappears and their legs darken.

Despite the almost worldwide range of the Caspian Tern and its multiple breeding sites in many continents, there are no recognised sub-species. That might not make it unique, but presumably it would place it into a rather small group.

In Australia, the bird has been recorded coastally just about everywhere, and also at most of the larger inland waterbodies. There are many breeding locations in Australia, but remarkably few in NSW, and none have been confirmed in the Hunter Region. Reports of begging youngsters are not breeding records; youngsters are keen beggars apparently.



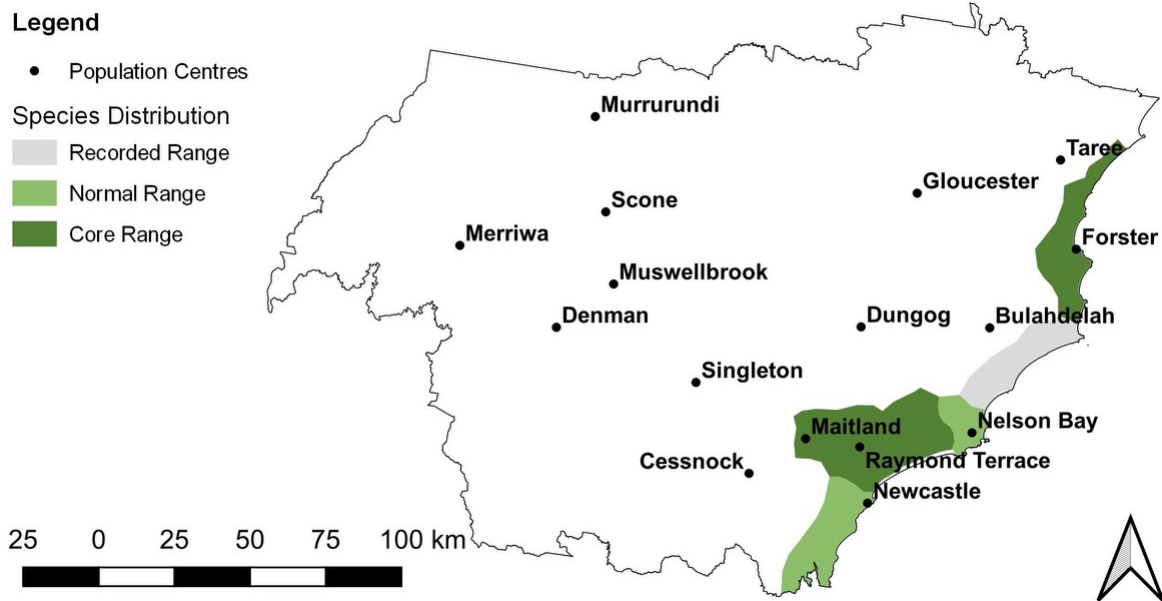
A young Caspian Tern begging to an adult, which is in non-breeding plumage (photo: Jim Smart)

Regional Status

In the Hunter Region almost all of the records are from coastal locations. There seem to be no records from apparently suitable inland water bodies (such as Lake Liddell). The NSW Atlas found no obvious seasonal differences in reporting rates, but our local records clearly show that their numbers in the Hunter Estuary and Port Stephens increase substantially in autumn/winter. That suggests a movement of birds from their breeding grounds elsewhere in

NSW or beyond. Banding studies have shown that adults and young move long distances.

There often are reports in the Hunter Region of begging youngsters. However, there are no known local breeding sites – the nearest known one is at the Menindee Lakes. Most of the adult birds that we see locally are in non-breeding plumage.



Distribution map for Caspian Tern (map by Dan Williams).

Feeding

Caspian Terns are carnivorous, feeding exclusively on fish, and only by day. They hunt by “shallow plunging” – hovering less than 15 m above water then diving to snatch their prey, which usually they swallow mid-flight. Juveniles normally dive from lower heights. Caspian Terns are also reported to hunt crickets in paddocks, and to probe in mudflats for prey items. It’s interesting that they use a “foot-trembling” technique for the latter, which is a technique used by several shorebird species.



An adult Caspian Tern in breeding plumage – photographed at its breeding grounds in the Diamantina area of Queensland (photo: Alwyn Simple)

About the name

Caspian Tern

This is a globally widespread species but the type specimen (i.e. the museum specimen used by scientists to describe it and show it to be a distinct species) was collected at the Caspian Sea. The origin of “tern” is obscure but it probably derives from the old Norse word *perno*, which evolved to become “stern” for the Saxons. All modern Scandinavian languages have words similar to “tern” for birds of this guild.

Hydroprogne cassia

The genus derives from the Greek word *hudro*, water, and the Latin word *progne*, a swallow. Thus, it is the “Caspian water swallow”. The names of several other genus of terns allude in some way to swallows – no doubt because of their forked tails and rapid flight patterns.



A flock of Caspian Terns at Stockton sandspit, showing a range of ages and plumages (photo: Rebecca Citroni)

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