

Caspian Tern nests for first time in Illinois

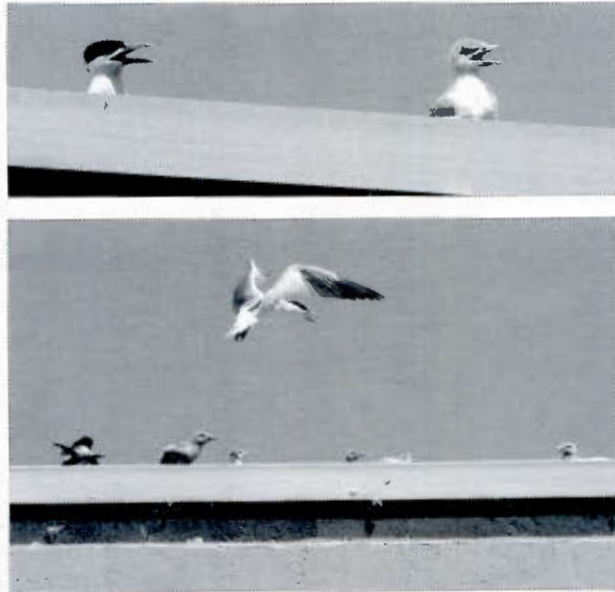
by Steven D. Bailey

On 1 July 2009, Steve Huggins discovered a breeding colony of Caspian Terns (*Sterna caspia*) with at least 50 unfledged young atop a Chicago, Illinois building near Navy Pier, Cook County. Huggins told Douglas F. Stotz about his discovery, and Stotz visited the location on 6 July 2009 to find 230 adults, 13 young with black caps (possibly fledged), and 54 smaller young.

Huggins returned 9 July 2009 at lunchtime while working at the location to count 51 young on the roof and seven that had fallen off the roof and were being fed by adults on the grass near the building. In addition, Huggins saw five immature birds flying. The adult count was 172 with five or six birds that were apparently still incubating eggs. This sighting constitutes the first confirmed nesting of Caspian Terns in Illinois. The exact location is not being disclosed because it is on private property, which is strictly patrolled.

Historically, Caspian Terns have been considered regular migrants in small numbers through Illinois, even in the Chicago area. Nelson (1876) mentions a 9 June 1876 individual as being "very unusual" in the lateness of its appearance in the Chicago area. Nelson considered the species a migrant.

A few birds were suspected to have nested in Cook and Lake Counties in the late 1970s (Bohlen 1989). However, adults and young are already migrating by at least early July, with young still begging



for food from their parents. During the late 1970s and afterward, few birds summered, with a maximum of perhaps, 10 birds, far lower than the numbers that now summer in Chicagoland.

Given the large numbers of these terns that have been summering in the Chicagoland area within the last decade, it was suspected that the species might be nesting on some offshore islet or manmade structure along the Chicago lakefront.

Indiana's first nests of this species were documented in East Chicago, Lake County, on 24 June 1997, fewer than five miles from Chicago and the Illinois state line. A minimum of 41 nests, 20 downy young and 137 adults were found nesting on the LTV Steel plant landfill directly adjacent to the Indiana Harbor Ship Canal along the edge of Lake Michigan (Brock and Castrale 1997). They were nesting with a colony of breeding Ring-billed Gulls. This colony increased to 248 tern nests with 100+ fledglings

at the above, sole-known nesting site 8 June 2005 (Kleen and Keller 2006). These terns appear to be increasing their numbers and breeding distribution in the region along with the ballooning gull population.

The Caspian Tern has gradually and steadily increased in Illinois from the eight individuals found at four Chicago locations in 1991 (Kleen 1992) and five there at four locations in 1996 (Kleen 1997). None were even reported there during the summers of 1993-95 (Kleen 1994, 1995, 1996).

Literature Cited

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— Steven D. Bailey
*Institute of Natural Resource
Sustainability
Illinois Natural History Survey
University of Illinois
Champaign IL 61820
sdbailey@illinois.edu*