

Caspian Tern

Hydroprogne caspia

A birder's delight, with its bright red bill, graceful flights, spectacular fish-catching dives, and raucous calls, the Caspian Tern breeds on every continent except Antarctica. It is found in widely scattered populations: Pacific Northwest; Atlantic Coast from Newfoundland to Virginia; Gulf Coast; central Canada; Great Lakes, including Lake Champlain; and west-central interior of the United States (Cuthbert and Wires 1999). An excellent pioneer of new nesting sites, the Caspian Tern has been seen on Lake Champlain with increasing frequency since 1990 and began nesting on Young Island in 2000 (D. E. Capen unpubl. data).

Caspian Tern nesting colonies are often in close proximity to those of Ring-billed Gulls (Weseloh 2007). They prefer open nest sites with little or no vegetation. Eggs are laid in a shallow scrape, often ringed with small stones. Like gulls, they nest on islands that are free of mammalian predators and human disturbance. Ideally, food supplies are nearby, but the Caspian Tern may forage up to 50 kilometers (30 miles) away from the nesting colony (Weseloh 2007). Almost exclusively a piscivore, the Caspian Tern has been frequently observed feeding on smelt on Lake Champlain (D. E. Capen pers. obs.), but the recent population explosion of non-native alewife offers another substantial food source (Cuthbert and Wires 1999).

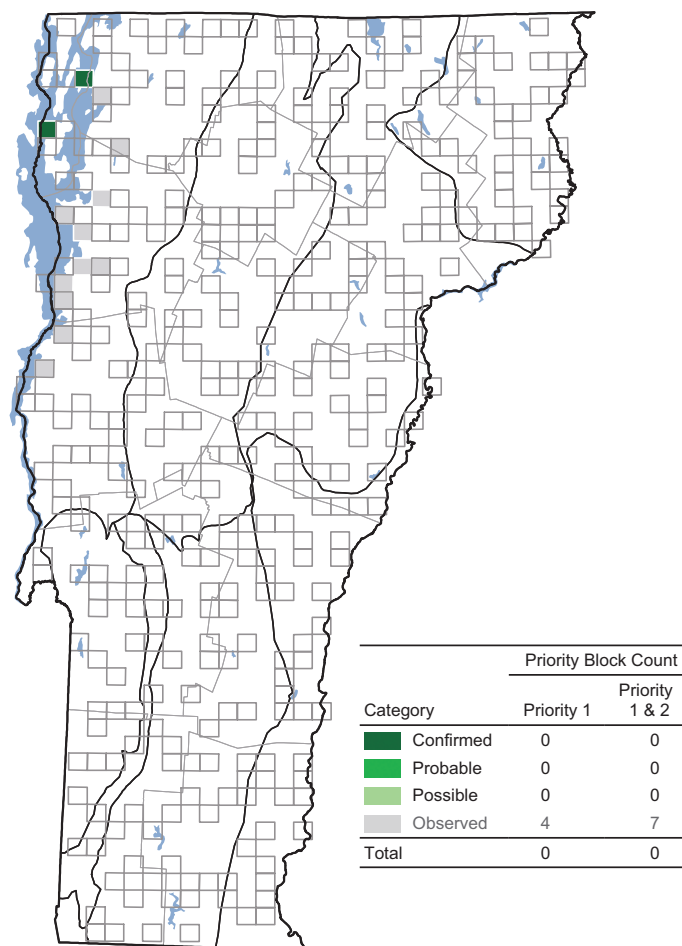
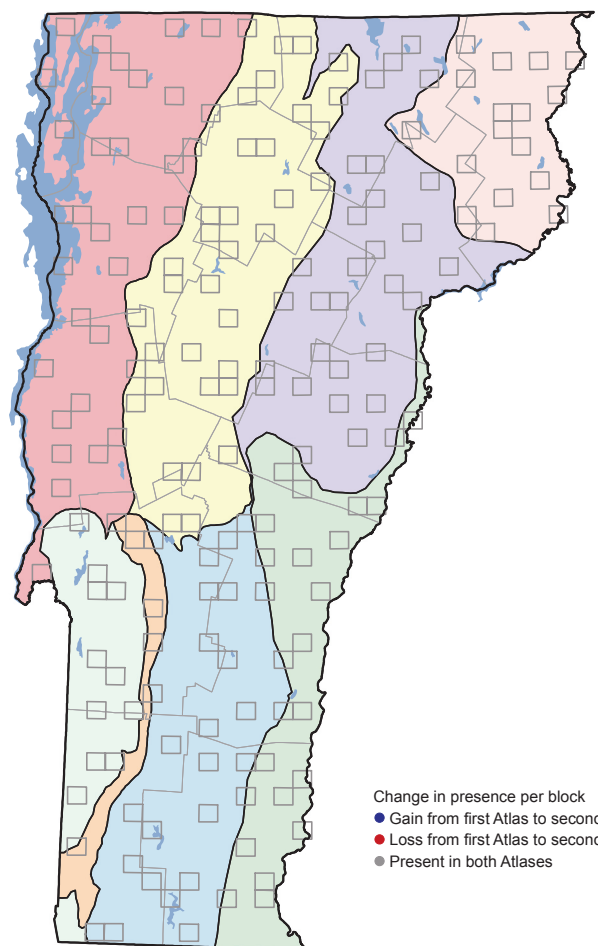
The Caspian Tern has nested on three islands in Lake Champlain: Young and Popasquash islands in Vermont, and one of the Four Brothers Islands in New York. The initial nest on Young Island in 2000 fledged at least 1 bird. Attempts in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2008 were unsuccessful. In August 2009, adults were observed feeding 2 flightless young (D. E. Capen pers. obs.), the second successful nesting confirmed on Young Island. The only nest on Popasquash Island, in 2001, was abandoned. The Caspian Tern has been more successful on Four Brothers Islands: in 2005, 15 to 20 nests produced an estimated 15 fledglings (D. E. Capen unpubl. data). The population has continued to grow: 39 nests in 2006; 50 in 2007; 34 in both 2008 and



2009; and 46 in 2010. Each year, hatching and fledgling success were rated as excellent.

The entire North American population of the Caspian Tern is estimated at 70,000 (Wires and Cuthbert 2000), distributed among 19 of 37 Bird Conservation Regions (MANEM 2006, Kushlan et al. 2002). The species was not confirmed nesting during the first New York atlas. Two breeding locations were confirmed, however, during the second atlas. In addition to the previously mentioned Four Brothers Islands (Smith 2008), Little Galloo Island in Lake Ontario, which documented 112 nests in 1986, had stabilized at 1400 nests by 2005. The species' breeding population has nearly tripled around the Great Lakes since the early 1960s and continues to expand eastward (Wires and Cuthbert 2000). A 33 percent drop in Caspian Tern nests on Lake Huron during this period suggests that terns colonize areas with ample supplies of food. Drastic declines in baitfish populations among the Great Lakes (Gorman and Bunnell 2008) may result in a continued shift in Caspian Tern colonies, perhaps leading to future growth on the islands of Lake Champlain.

In Vermont, the Caspian Tern still is considered very rare, reflecting its precarious position in the state. Successful nesting on Young Island likely has suffered from disturbances associated with control of Double-crested Cormorants and Ring-billed Gulls. If the disturbance to terns associated with cormorant and gull control can be eliminated, a viable breeding population might be established in the state. Colonial birds can be particularly susceptible to the spreading of disease; recently, type E botulism broke out in Caspian Tern populations in the



CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	0	+0	+0
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+0	+0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+0	+0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+0	+0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+0	+0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+0	+0
Totals	0	0	+0	+0

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	0	0
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0

eastern Great Lakes. Smith (2008) reported that 672 adult Caspian Terns were found dead on Little Galloo Island during the type E botulism outbreak in 2005 and 2006. A population nesting on Lake Champlain islands could serve as a buffer against such disease outbreaks.

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