Nesting of Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* in Little Rann of Kachchh

Ashwin Pomal & Pratap Sevak


Ashwin Pomal, Pomal Jewellers, Vonkla Falia, Bhuj 370001, Kachchh, Gujarat, India. Email: aspomal@yahoo.co.in.

Pratap Sevak, Bhacha Gandhi Society, Savasher Naka, Anjar 370110, Kachchh, Gujarat, India. Email: pratapsevak@gmail.com.

Manuscript received on 4 February 2010.

**Introduction**

The Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* was recorded breeding for the first time in India on Khijadia bet of the Little Rann of Kachchh in 1992–1994 (Tiwari *et al.* 1997). Shri Bhikhabhai Gagabhai Paredhi (Bhikha Bhagat), a resident of Nanda bet (23º32'38"N 71º7'4"E) on the northern fringe of the Little Rann of Kachchh, Gujarat, had originally discovered that nest. He has always been vigilant for colonies of Caspian Terns, and after 15 years has once again found a breeding colony on the same Khijadia bet on 16 September 2009.

Caspian Terns were known to breed locally in Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, and in winter spread out sparingly more-or-less throughout the Indian Subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1983). Ranjitsinh (1992), and Tiwari *et al.* (1997) have since recorded it breeding in India. Subsequently, Grimmett *et al.* (1998) have shown it breeding in Gujarat, and Kazmierczak (2000) has shown it as a summer visitor, with a single ‘red cross’ in Gujarat, India. Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) considered it a resident in south-western Afghanistan, and the western coast from Baluchistan to western Gujarat, and Sri Lanka (northern and south-eastern coasts of the island).

The first evidence of Caspian Tern breeding within Indian Territory were remains of eggshells, and a dead chick found at a deserted colony near Pung bet in the Little Rann of Kachchh (Ranjitsinh 1992). Later, a knowledgeable villager had recorded breeding Caspian Terns at Khijadia bet in 1992 and 1993, which was confirmed by Tiwari *et al.* (1997), and also informed that Caspian Terns had been nesting at the same site (Khijadia bet) for three years.

Tiwari *et al.* (1997) had also shown possibilities of its nesting at Lakhpat and Chhari Dhandh on the north-western edge of Kachchh. The only other nesting site of Caspian Tern within Indian Territory is Charakla saltpan of Tata Chemicals near Mithapur (Jamnagar district, Gujarat), where it was recorded nesting in June 2003 (Bhatia 2004). Caspian Terns have been nesting at Charakla saltpans every year during 2003–2009 (Satish Trivedi, verbally). Now, there are several records of Caspian Tern nesting at Khijadia bet of Little Rann of Kachchh and Charakla saltpans because the area is accessible to vigilant birdwatchers. We may find many more nesting sites of Caspian Tern if these areas are monitored regularly.

**Study area**

Tiwari *et al.* (1997) have described the Little-, and Great Rann of Kachchh in detail. The word bet is used for a slightly elevated land, with or without vegetation, above the extensive plain sand-flat of the Rann. During the south-western monsoon (June–September), when the Rann gets inundated, the bet (= island) becomes inaccessible to ground predators, and hence a safe haven for ground nesting birds, like terns. Khijadia bet (23º30'7.85"N
71º8’57.30”E), on which the Caspian Terns were recorded breeding, is c. 3 km south of Nanda bet on the northern fringe of the Little Rann of Kachchh (Fig. 1). The bet is about 19 km west of where Ranjitsinh (1992) had found eggshells, and dead chicks of Caspian Tern, in December 1988 (Tiwari et al. 1997).

Observations

From Nanda bet, Bhikha Bhagat watched Caspian Terns carrying fish in their beaks (Fig. 2) and regularly flying southwards in early September 2009. Based on his earlier experience, he knew that this indicated an active breeding colony. When AP telephoned him on 16 September 2009, he was actually on his way to locate the breeding colony and he was quite sure about finding the same. Excited by this news, we confirmed from Bhagat about nesting colony of Caspian Tern and decided to visit the site with other birdwatcher friends (Narendra Gor, Dinesh Panchal, Bhavesh). On 17 September, we travelled about 200 km and reached Bhagat’s residence in Nanda bet at 2000 hrs. After a delicious traditional dinner, we stargazed up to 0130 hrs. The amazing sky was brilliant with stars, milky-ways and the occasional passing of small meteorites.

Next morning we awoke at 0500 hrs and got ready for the mission under the leadership of Bhikha Bhagat. As per his instructions, we carried snacks, water, camera, and binoculars. We had to walk about 3 km in three feet of water. At 1000 hrs we started for Sukhpar bet, reaching it at 1200 hrs, after walking 2 km. We had left our shoes on Nanda bet, and the hot soil gave us a trying time. Moreover, our supply of drinking water was almost finished. We still had to walk 3 km, on hard ground, to reach our destination. The ground was burning hot and walking on grass was risky as there were lots of spikes. Somehow, managing between those two options, we reached our destination at 1345 hrs. After lunch at Bhikha Bhagat’s residence, we returned to Bhuj in the evening.

We reached the western edge of Khijadia bet at 0845 hrs. This bet was c. 200x50 m in size, and was raised slightly above water. We could see about 125 Caspian Terns and 100 Whiskered Terns flying and calling on the eastern edge of the bet. We also saw Caspian Terns feeding their young. Many of the Whiskered Terns were in breeding plumage but there was no evidence of them breeding. The atmosphere was alive due to their constant chirping.

We counted 64 nests in the colony, which was spread on the eastern part of the bet. The distance between two nests was hardly 30–45 cm, and the distance of nests from the water was just 45–60 cm. The nest was a depression in the soil, 10 cm in diameter and two centimeters in depth, without any nest material. Birds were incubating on in six nests, containing one egg each.

At 1000 hrs we started for Sukhpur bet, reaching it at 1200 hrs, after walking 2 km. We had left our shoes on Nanda bet, and the hot soil gave us a trying time. Moreover, our supply of drinking water was almost finished. We still had to walk 3 km, on hard ground, to reach our destination. The ground was burning hot and walking on grass was risky as there were lots of spikes. Somehow, managing between those two options, we reached our destination at 1345 hrs. After lunch at Bhikha Bhagat’s residence, we returned to Bhuj in the evening.

Discussion

Breeding season: Going by the age of the chicks (20–25 days) that we saw on Khijadia bet, and keeping in mind the on going incubation at six nests (9.4%), we assume that the majority of chicks might have hatched in the last week of August 2009. If 20–22 days were the incubation period (Ali & Ripley 1983), the probable period of the colony’s development would be around mid-July. Hence, on Khijadia bet, the Caspian Terns bred during July–September 2009. Tiwari et al. (1997) had recorded their nesting on Khijadia bet during November–December. Tiwari et al. (1997) opined that precise time of nesting appears to be primarily controlled by the appearance of temporary islands for nesting, which in turn are dependent on the flooding regime of the Rann. The terns could breed during south-west monsoon, probably because of below average annual precipitation resulting into minimum fluctuations in flooding regime around the island.
The breeding season of the Caspian Tern recorded on Khijadiya bet is quite different from the Charakla saltpans (May–June) of Jamnagar district, Gujarat (Bhatia 2004). It is June-July in Pakistan (Roberts 1991–1992), and between May and June in Sri Lanka (Ali & Ripley 1983).

**Population size:** On 18 September 2009, we counted 64 nest depressions, and 150 adult Caspian Terns around the colony at Khijadiya bet. This is much less than the number of nests / pairs recorded breeding on the same bet by Tiwari et al. (1997) in 1993 (200 nests), and 1994 (300 nests). At Charakla Saltpans, Bhatia (2004) recorded 452 nests in June 2003, and 1,600 adult terns on the colony in July 2003.

**Acknowledgements**
Bhikha Bhagat had discovered this colony in 1993 and had shown it to J. K. Tiwari, S. N. Varu, and P. Majithia (Sanctuary Superintendent, Wild Ass Sanctuary). After sixteen years, he has discovered breeding colony of Caspian Terns at the same place and we feel proud to be witness of this second breeding record in the Little Rann of Kachchh. We are thankful to R. L. Meema (Conservator Forest, Kachchh Circle), J. G. Bava (Dy. Conservator Forests, Wild Ass Sanctuary), L. N. Jadeja (Dy. Conservator Forests, Eastern Kachchh), J. D. Godhia (Range Forest Officer, Adesar), and J. K. Tiwari (CEDO) for special information. I especially thank B. M. Parasharya for encouraging us to publish this information by preparing this note and adding relevant discussion and references on the subject.

**References**

---

**Fig. 5. Caspian Tern adults and young.**

Birding adventures in Kachchh, Gujarat

Ramki Sreenivasan

Email: frogmouth@gmail.com.

---

For the third time in three minutes, the jeep spins 360 degrees in the slithery mud. I try, with minimal results, to stay as calm as Lakkubhai, the veteran driver of our ‘Sumo’ SUV. Outside, the rain continues to pour in sheets, converting the entire terrain into slurry. Though such storms are not common in Kachchh, they still constitute the bulk of the rainfall, in this semi-desert environment, during the monsoon.

Matters were a world apart that morning of 1 September 2008, when we had set out for the Banni grasslands—at 3,847 kms², the largest expanse of flat land in the country. The day had started as a beautiful, sunny one till mid-afternoon. We were slurping the last of the tea from saucers, they don’t do cups in Kachchh, when the western horizon suddenly turned an ominous shade of grey-brown. We hurriedly returned the tea-ware to the nomadic camel herder who had, so kindly, brewed fresh camel-milk tea for us, and made an undignified dash for the jeep.

Earlier over lunch, Jugal Tiwari, our bird-guide, had warned, “If it rains in the Banni, then we’re truly stuck. There are no roads here and the soil quickly turns into slush.” As the skies continued to darken, we were well aware that the closest metallked road was probably 40–50 kms away. Jugalbhai hurried us on, and though we implicitly trusted his intuitive knowledge of the land, some-