

First breeding record of Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* in Israel

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Plate 1. The island, off the Eilat hotel district, 29 April 2008. © Mikolaj Koss

On 15 April 2008 a juvenile and an adult Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* were observed in Eilat, Israel. They were resting on an island (Plate 1) in the lagoon close to the 'North Beach', an area adjacent to the hotel district. The island is small with a few date palms growing on it. The banks of the lagoon are a well-frequented camping and barbecue site. The observation raised suspicions that the species had bred on the island, as it was very unlikely that a 2008 juvenile would move with its parent to Eilat at that time of year. The next day we observed two tourists that had swum to the island, a distance of c45 m, flush the juvenile bird and we saw that it was unable to fly. Its plumage was juvenile-barred on the upper body with white wedge-shaped streaks on the fore crown. We immediately also swam to the island and, as the bird was unable to fly, caught it easily with our hands. We found that the remiges were fully grown by blowing up the underwing coverts and examining the rachis sheathes. We ringed it, photographed the individual (Plates 2–4), returned it to the island and released it.

Subsequently, on 2 May, the ringed juvenile was seen pleading for food from an adult, and flying together with it as well as being fed by it. This was observed in the vicinity of the fish farms located in the northeastern part of the Israeli side of gulf of Aqaba, less than 1 km from the nest-island. We assumed that the adult was one of its parents.

The possibility that Caspian Tern might breed in Israel has been considered before. In 2007, there were several observations by birdwatchers in Eilat of juvenile Caspian Terns pleading for food from adults. Shirihai (1996) observed food-begging in 1989 but considered the species to be locally scarce in the northern part of the gulf of Aqaba, representing



Plates 2–4. The unfledged Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*, 16 April 2008, Eilat. © Mikolaj Koss

dispersal of non-breeders from Sinai and northern Red Sea areas. The closest known breeding site to Eilat is at the southern entrance of the gulf of Aqaba (Shirihai 1996). This is the first confirmed breeding record for the Eilat region.

The Caspian Tern is a monotypic, widespread breeder on most continents (Olsen & Larsson 1995). In the Western Palaearctic, it breeds on sheltered continental coasts or inland waters, but the range of the species has declined in recent years (Snow & Perrins 1998). In the Middle East the species breeds on the islands scattered the length of the Red Sea and the Persian gulf. We consider this Eilat breeding record of Caspian Tern to be the result of more than a decade of open-sea aquaculture projects that resulted in artificially high densities of fish off Eilat's beaches. The recent removal of these fish cages will probably make the breeding of sea- and shore birds on the Eilat/Aqaba shoreline, including Caspian Tern and Striated Heron *Butorides striata* (Yosef *et al* 2002, Yosef & Zduniak 2005), less likely.

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