

Caspian Tern Night Roost on Roof

Jean Iron

At 2030h on 18 August 2000, I arrived at Polson Street on Lake Ontario in Toronto, Ontario. Getting out of my car I heard the distinctive calls of adult and juvenile Caspian Terns (*Sterna caspia*) flying noisily overhead toward the nearby flat roof of a recycling plant on the east side of Toronto Harbour (Figure 1). Between 2030h and 2105h, I counted 119 Caspians going to roost. Even as it got dark, it was easy to pick out the Caspians from the Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) by sight and their distinctive calls.

Realizing that I had missed many early roosting Caspians the day before, I returned to count the birds between 1900h and 2100h on 19 August. I counted 175 Caspian Terns coming from Lake Ontario out of the southwest, south and southeast to roost on the flat roof. There were many vocal juveniles. The majority of birds arrived during the 40 minutes before dark. Great Black-backed (*L. marinus*), Herring (*L. argentatus*) and Ring-billed Gulls also roosted on the roof. The roof must have been packed with birds. The Heermann's Gull (*L. heermanni*), which was present at the Toronto Harbour from 14 November 1999 to 16 September 2000 (Pittaway 2000), probably roosted regularly on the roof. At 2000h on 31 August, I

saw the Heermann's fly from Polson Street and land on the roof among the gulls and Caspian Terns.

The peak count of Caspians was on 24 August 2000 with 256 Caspian Terns landing on the roof between 1946h and 2045h. At 2015h, a large flock of 83 came in together. In the twilight, several adult Caspians flew about calling raucously with fish in their bills. On 27 August, Tania Havelka of Canadian Wildlife Service and I counted 151 Caspian Terns flying to the roof.

Discussion

Caspian Terns normally roost on rocks, beaches, sandbars, natural mudflats, spits and small islands (Cuthbert and Wires 1999). I have also observed them resting during the day on artificial structures; for example, concrete and rock jetties, levees at sewage lagoons, artificial islands, and the parking lot at Polson Street. Pittaway (1987) observed Caspian Terns resting during the day at a dump with Ring-billed Gulls. A search of the literature found no reference to roof roosting (see Bent 1921, Cramp 1985, Cuthbert and Wires 1999). D.V. Chip Weseloh (pers. comm.), a colonial waterbird expert with the Canadian Wildlife Service, has not heard of roof roosting in Caspian

Table 1: Caspian Tern high count on 24 August 2000 at Toronto roost.

Time	Flying North to Roof Roost	Flying South to Lake Ontario
1900h – 1930h	0	0
1930h – 1945h	0	9
1946h – 2003h	29	0
2004h – 2014h	28	0
2015h – 2023h	135	0
2024h – 2034h	58	6
2035h – 2045h	6	0
Total	256	15

Table 2: Caspian Tern roost counts, August and September 2000, at Toronto.

Date	Time	Number
18 August	2030h – 2105h	119
19 August	1900h – 2100h	175
24 August	1900h – 2045h	256
27 August	1915h – 2040h	151
29 August	1900h – 2030h	121
31 August	1910h – 2030h	70
5 September	1920h – 2030h	46
11 September	1800h – 1935h	1
18 September	1800h – 1930h	2
19 September	1900h – 1930h	0

Terns. However, roof roosting and nesting is reported in Herring and Ring-billed Gulls (Blokpoel and Smith 1988, Blokpoel et al. 1990).

Most of the Caspian Terns observed roosting in Toronto probably originate from the large colonies on Georgian Bay. Pittaway (1987) described a migration route from Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe to Lake Ontario. In recent years, Caspians have colonized artificial sites such as in Hamilton Harbour and Toronto's Leslie Street Spit (Tommy Thompson

Park), but breeding numbers are small on Lake Ontario. For example, Glenn Coady (pers. comm.) reported 18 Caspian Tern nests on the Leslie Street Spit in Toronto in 2000. Caspian Terns are increasing on the Great Lakes and the outlook for them appears good (Iron 1995).

After fledging, juvenile and adult Caspian Terns disperse to linger at traditional feeding areas (Cuthbert and Wires 1999) such as along the shores of Lake Ontario in the Toronto area. Coady and Smith (2000) report the peak number of



Figure 1: Flat-roofed building at Toronto Harbour utilized by Caspian Terns as a night roost site. Photo by Jean Iron.

Caspian Terns in Toronto was 311 on 25 August 1987. On the Leslie Street Spit on 6 August 2000, Glenn Coady (pers. comm.) reported 129 Caspians at midday and Roy Smith (pers. comm.) reported 105 in early afternoon, so numbers were increasing before my evening counts began. The Spit is about five minutes flying time from the roof night roost. Coady and Smith (pers. comm.) saw Caspian Terns perched on the roof roost during the day, but they were unaware at the time that it was used for night roosting.

Little information exists about the important stopover sites and habitats used on migration by Caspian Terns (Cuthbert and Wires

1999). The Toronto night roost site contributes new information about a significant stopover spot. Protection of this site is important because hundreds of birds depend upon it as a safe night roost. Toronto's waterfront development plans and its bid for the 2008 Olympics could put this important roost in jeopardy.

In conclusion, migrating adult and juvenile Caspian Terns, peaking at 256 birds on 24 August 2000, roosted on the flat roof of a recycling plant in Toronto. This location is ideal as it is elevated and undisturbed, and has a protective raised wall around the rim, making it safe from disturbance from people, dogs, cats, coyotes, foxes and raccoons. The

roost is also close to productive feeding areas on Lake Ontario off the Leslie Street Spit. My observations in Toronto document the first report of Caspian Terns night roosting on the flat roof of a large building. Night roof roosting has probably been happening here for a long time and it probably occurs elsewhere as well.

Acknowledgements

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