

Another tourist flying through

by Cade Kellam



Caspian Terns, with their tell-tale coral red bill, were recently seen on Tustumena Lake in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (credit: Carol Griswold).

A cloudy morning on Tustumena Lake calms the gelid winds that can roar down off the glacier. As our boat heads east, our team of five biologists from the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge are preparing for the day's venture along the shore line. Water laps against the side of the boat, as we continue a project to map landcover types of the Kenai Peninsula. The crew sits silently finagling with our GPS units and iPads ready to beeline to our points.

Skimming over the wave-less waters of Tusty, a rare moment on this unforgiving lake, I look out starboard to see a large sleek bird making powerful steady wing beats. The large bird looks similar to an Arctic Tern often seen on the rivers and lakes of the peninsula. As the bird continues to keep up effortlessly with the boat speeding along, I notice that it lacks the scissor-shaped tail and smaller stature of Arctic Terns. Now very intrigued with identifying this mystery bird,

I fight the wind from the moving boat to make my way back to the cab where Todd Eskelin, a refuge biologist and local birding expert, informs me in excitement that it's a Caspian Tern, *Hydroprogne caspia*.

A Caspian Tern is a very rare sighting on the Kenai Peninsula. I fetch a pair of binoculars to get a closer view. By this time there are now three of the terns racing alongside our boat. Their long and slender wings cut through the air, while they beat them down repeatedly matching the lolling of the engine. With the birds being only about 40 yards away, I can make an excellent observation!

The bird leads with its stout dark red beak that faintly tips out in black, the most tell-tale feature of a Caspian Tern. Between wing beats I catch the ghost white underside. They hold their dark black legs high and tight to the underside of their body. The white extends from the nape to the belly, but becomes a grayish tint as it moves to the wings and dorsal side of the bird. A jet black cap extends just under the eye and around the head. The bird is fairly large, but still appears delicate in its structure. They are a masterful balance of power, speed, and endurance.

After digging further into literature about the Caspian Tern, I learned what a remarkable sighting it was to have that day. This species of tern is the largest of the tern species, having wingspans from 127 cm to 145 cm! Like most terns, Caspians are almost always found along coastlines, and have an extensive distribution from North and Central America to the northern reaches of South America. There are even separate migrating populations of Caspian Terns found in Africa, Northern Europe, the Middle East and throughout Asia.

The birds we see on our continent rarely make it up this far north during summer breeding season. The Caspian Terns we saw that day were merely lost tourists. The denser populations of Caspians are found on the east and west coast, and in the Great Lakes.

Most of North America's Caspian Terns summer in Canada and migrate along our coastlines to winter in the southern U.S. and Central America.

The Caspian Tern breeding season runs from around April to June. Typically, the male will attempt to attract the female via head bobs and offerings of fish—not something I would suggest to the young (human) males of Soldotna.

Like all terns and most shore birds, Caspians are ground nesters. Their nests are typically composed of scrapes in the ground lined with small rocks and leaf litter. The Caspian Tern can be ferociously protective of their nests, dive bombing any potential predators with their spear-like beak! Another use of their thick beak is catching and tearing apart fish, which constitutes the majority of their diet.

Caspian Terns are an understudied species. Although we know about their basic biology and phenology, there is much to be learned about our feathered friend from the south. Caspians are said to be monogamous but, due to the little we know about them, I would speculate they engage in offsite copulation and promiscuity, both of which are common in similar birds. Making observations and asking penetrating questions are important attributes to becoming a better scientist and naturalist.

Whether out on Tusty, Skilak Lake, or just hiking, be sure to keep a vigilant eye out for our flying travelers. The presence of them and other fauna are one of many reasons that this state is so special. Alaskans know firsthand all about tourism, but do not forget to enjoy the ones who won't run you off the road too often.

Cade Kellam, an undergraduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbank, is a biological intern this summer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Find more information at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/> or <http://www.facebook.com/kenainationalwildliferefuge>.