

East Sand Island, Columbia River Estuary, Oregon

Ornithological Highlight: Largest Caspian Tern colony in the world, with about 30% of the total North American population, 75% of the west coast population, and 10% of the global population.

Location: Columbia River estuary between Oregon and Washington

Size: 53 acres

Ownership: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Habitats: open sand, where the terns nest

Land use: dredge spoil from dredging the estuary

Site description: East Sand Island was originally a natural island but through dredge spoil dumping has been expanded to 53 acres; it was last used for this purpose in 1983.

Birds: East Sand Island has the largest nesting colony of Caspian Terns in the world. The colony numbers approximately 9,100 pairs. Occurring also is the largest post-breeding concentration of the endangered west coast population of Brown Pelican north of San Francisco. The East Sand Island colony is the only Caspian Tern breeding colony anywhere along the coast of the Pacific Northwest as previous breeding sites have been deliberately or naturally destroyed. Caspian Terns formerly nested in large colonies on islands in Willapa Bay and Grays Harbor, and along the coast of Puget Sound near Everett and Tacoma, Washington, and on Rice Island, also in the Columbia River Estuary. The colonies at Rice Island and along the coast of Puget Sound near Everett and Tacoma, Washington have been intentionally eliminated. The Terns no longer nest in Willapa Bay and Grays Harbor.

Conservation issues: The National Marine Fisheries Service, Idaho Fish & Game Department, US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), and several native American tribes hold nesting Caspian Terns responsible for declines in salmon stocks in the Northwest. Noting there was no sound science linking terns to salmon declines or to impeding salmon recovery of listed species, in April 2000 American Bird Conservancy, National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, and Seattle Audubon Society filed suit in the U.S. District Court in Seattle, to enjoin the USACE and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from destroying the Caspian Tern colony on Rice Island, at that time the largest such colony in the world. Despite the opposition of conservationists and even their own fishery scientists, the National Marine Fisheries Service and other agencies pushed the Corps to force all Terns to relocate to East Sand Island, which is 16 miles closer to the ocean, where the birds might eat fewer hatchery-raised and wild smolts of federally listed coho salmon and steelhead. The Rice Island colony held about 20,000 nesting Terns in 1998. Through seeding of bare sand habitat and fencing with flagging to scare

terns, Rice Island was made unsuitable for nesting. At East Sand Island, 4.5 acres of bare sand habitat was scarified and decoys and sound attractants were employed. In 2001, all Caspian Terns nesting in the Columbia River estuary used 3.9 acres of restored habitat on East Sand Island. The estimated size of the East Sand Island colony (9,100 pairs in 2001) was not significantly different from 2000, suggesting that the tern breeding population is no longer increasing. The total number of Caspian Terns nesting in the Columbia River estuary increased in 1998, 1999, and 2000, while numbers of nesting terns were stable or slightly declined in 2001. The East Sand colony is now the world's largest. In 2001, 50% less salmonid juveniles were consumed. While large numbers of Caspian Terns occur in the Columbia River basin relative to the North American population as a whole, the Caspian Tern is not abundant anywhere in its range; there are only 7 sites in North America with breeding colonies of ≥ 1000 pairs.

The court had issued a preliminary injunction because the Corps failed to prepare a full Environmental Impact Statement. ABC and other conservationists filed suit only after repeated pleas to federal and state officials for such an EIS over three years were ignored as the Corps continued to extirpate terns from the Rice Island. On August 7, 2001, the Federal Court entered a final judgment in favor of the plaintiffs. The Judge based the decision on the failure of the USACE to comply with NEPA requirements and complete an EIS before further activities could be conducted by federal defendants to alter Caspian Tern or cormorant habitat in the Columbia estuary, or before any take or harassment of Terns or Cormorants could occur. The federal defendants appealed to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. Settlement negotiations led to an agreement wherein the case was settled and the injunction dismissed on April 2, 2002. Federal defendants agreed to complete an EIS by March 2005; to scarify and keep at least 6 acres of open sand habitat on east Sand island for Tern breeding at least until the EIS is completed in March 2005; to conduct predator control as necessary on East Sand Island; and to conduct a tern population assessment, a tern-salmon predation analysis, and a site assessment to locate viable additional nesting sites outside the Columbia estuary. The USACE has prepared 6.5 acres of suitable habitat for the 2002 breeding season. Although nesting success increased significantly in 2001, conservationists are concerned with concentrating such a large proportion of the breeding population at a single colony site due to the risks from disease, storms, predators, human disturbance, and oil spills.

Visitor information: There is no public access to the island. For information, contact Gerald Winegrad at 202/452-1535, gwwabc@erols.com.

Sources:

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