

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



Company School Painting depicting Caspian Tern, *Hydroprogne caspia*

Calcutta, India, c.1800

Watercolour on W Elgar paper

28.5cm high, 34cm wide

A5498

With a wingspan of up to 60 cm, this magnificent specimen is the largest tern in the world. The bird has a black cap, pale grey neck and darker grey wings. The bill is a vivid orange with a dash of black towards the tip. The solid black cap indicates that the present bird was painted in the summer, as during the winter months the cap is reduced to black streaks. The delightful genus name “water swallow” derives from the Ancient Greek hudros and Latin progne.

Caspian terns hunt fish in salt and freshwater. Hovering well above their prey, they dip their heads before commencing a lightning-fast dive into the water. Despite their names, Caspian terns breed in Asia, North America, Europe and Australia. A vocal species, the birds emit loud croaking sounds and their young are known to call for food, despite being well capable of independence.

The artist of the present work celebrates the bird’s generous stature as its beak and tail feathers terminate just short of the page margins. As the tail extends and gently fans out, a variety of wide, elongated and patterned plumes emerges. A darker shadow is cast as one feather blocks the light shining through the feather above it. This detailing not only provides volume and three-dimensionality, but also indicates the hand of a painter who has taken great care to observe the subtle details of their subject. Rather than just forming one of a series of ornithological paintings, this work truly conveys the artist’s sincere interest in and keen admiration for this elegant bird.

Written in pencil below the bird: ‘*Sterna Caspia*’ and beneath this, ‘Caspian tern.’

For additional ornithological studies made for Lord Valentia, see Sotheby’s Sven Gahlin Collection Lot 36 a drawing of a bustard, and Lot 37 a watercolour of a crow-pheasant, both made for Lord Valentia;

Sotheby's, London, 31 May 2011, The Stuart Cary Welch Collection, Part Two, lot 115; see also Welch 1976, no.26; Welch 1978-I, nos.18a-c.and Leach 1995, no.7.96, pp.760-2. For two bird studies donated by Viscount Valentia to Lord Wellesley, see British Library in London (Wellesley Collection, NHD 29, vol. iv, f.21,27)

Literature

Bikram Grewal et al. 2016. Birds of India - A Pictorial Field Guide. Om Books International.