

EURASIAN BITTERN

SCIENTIFIC NAME: **Botaurus stellaris**

CONSERVATION STATUS: **Least Concern**

FACT FILE

- CLASS: AVES
- ORDER: PELECANIFORMES
- FAMILY: ARDEIDAE
- GENUS: BOTAURUS
- CAMOUFLAGE CHAMPION
- LENGTH: 69-81 CM
- WINGSPAN: 100-130 CM
- WEIGHT: 1.3 KG
- VARIED DIET
- LAYS 4-6 EGGS



Voice

The mating call or contact call of the male is a deep, sighing fog-horn or bull-like boom with a quick rise and an only slightly longer fall, easily audible from a distance of five kilometres (three miles) on a calm night. The call is mainly given between January and April during the mating season. Breeding surveys are carried out by noting the number of distinct male booms in a given area. Prior to modern science, it was unknown how such a small bird produced a call so low-pitched: common explanations included that the bird made its call into a straw or that it blew directly into the water. It is now known that the sound is produced by expelling air from the oesophagus with the aid of powerful muscles surrounding it

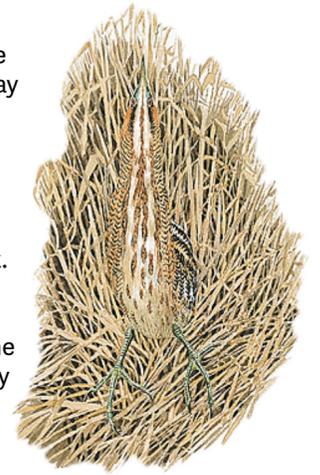


Stocky, brown heron found in extensive reedbeds. It is typically very secretive and seen mainly as single birds in flight early and late in the day. Stealthy and easily overlooked, the cryptic plumage blends well with reeds. Note tawny-brown face and neck, blackish cap, streaked upperparts. The males bizarre “booming” song often reveals their presence. Male bitterns begin to boom as early as late January to establish territories and attract mates.



GHOSTS OF THE REEDBEDS

Usually solitary, the Bittern has a secretive nature, keeping largely hidden in the reeds and coarse vegetation. It forages by walking stealthily or remaining still above a body of water where prey may occur. It is a shy bird and if disturbed points its bill directly upwards and freezes in that position, causing its cryptic plumage to blend into the surrounding reeds, an action known as **bitterning**. While in this position, the shield of elongated feathers on throat and breast droop downwards and hide the neck, so that the outline of the head and body is obscured. I was once treated to this magic trick in the Camargue. One dropped into a fairly wide channel not far from me. It was winter so the reeds had been cut back and therefore patchy and open. I went to get a closer look. 10 minutes I spent walking back and forth along a 2 metre thick bunch of reeds. I knew it hadn't walked or flown away as I had good views of the exit points before getting to its position. I was beginning to question my own sanity, did I really see one fly in? I was totally flummoxed, sat on the bank and scratched my head in disbelief. Only then, did I spot two beady little eyes monitoring my every movement from behind that skyward facing bill. It was no more than 3 feet away from me and totally blew my mind. Imagine what it must feel like for the poor creature that suddenly gets gobbled up by this cryptic phantom.



In flight, its wings are broad and rounded and its legs trail behind it in typical heron fashion. Its neck is extended when it takes off, but is retracted when it has picked up speed. It seldom flies, except when feeding young, preferring to move through the vegetation on foot. Its gait is slow and deliberate and clambers over reeds by gripping several at a time with its toes. It is most active around dawn and dusk.

The phantom's victims

Bitterns have a varied and diverse diet, not surprisingly being that difficult to spot. Recorded prey include eels up to 35 cm, mice and voles, small birds and fledglings, frogs, newts, crabs, shrimps, molluscs, spiders and insects. Members of over twenty families of beetle are eaten, as well as dragonflies, bees, grasshoppers and earwigs. Occasionally vegetable matter like aquatic plants are consumed.

Getting jiggy with it

Males mate with up to five females. The nest is built in the previous year's standing reeds and consists of an untidy platform some 30 cm across. It may be on a tussock surrounded by water or on matted roots close to water and is built by the female using bits of reed, sedges and grass stalks, with a lining of finer fragments. The eggs average 50 by 40 mm in size and are non-glossy, olive-brown, with some darker speckling at the broader end. Four to six eggs are laid in late March and April and incubated by the female for about twenty-six days. After hatching, the chicks spend about two weeks in the nest before leaving to swim amongst the reeds. The female rears them without help from the male, regurgitating food into the nest from her crop, the young seizing her bill and pulling it down. They become fully fledged at about eight weeks.

THE MAIN THREAT TO THE SPECIES IS THE REDUCTION IN AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY OF PHRAGMITES-DOMINATED SWAMPS AND OTHER MARSHES DUE TO DRAINAGE AND ABANDONMENT OF TRADITIONAL USES FOR REEDBEDS.

Environmental

In the past, continued drainage of land for agricultural uses and excessive water abstraction, while the main current threat to the habitat comes from neglect and lack of management, which allows reedbeds to dry out and become unsuitable for bitterns.

Reedbeds represent an early successional stage from open water to woodland, and without careful management and control of water levels they will naturally dry out as leaf litter and silt accumulate within the reed, eventually allowing the establishment of shrubs and trees.

Pollution

Water pollution has reduced reedbed viability and food availability within them. This can result in reed dieback, development of anoxic sediments and algal blooms, all of which can adversely affect feeding opportunities and food availability. Salt water intrusion caused by sea level rise and breakdown of sea defences can be very damaging because of the resultant tidal fluctuations in water levels and reduced food availability.

In recent decades bitterns have been exposed to several potentially damaging pollutants such as organochlorine pesticides, PCBs and mercury. The birds accumulated some of these at high levels into their bodies. This threat is no longer considered to affect the population.

