

Least Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis*



Folk Name: Mud Clown

Status: Migrant and Former Breeder

Abundance: Very Rare

Habitat: Wetlands and marshes

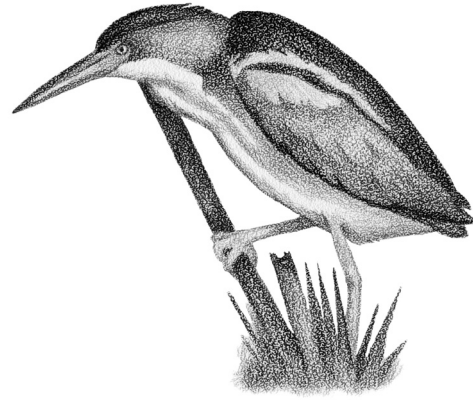
The Least Bittern is a slender dove-sized wading bird that skulks about in the midst of shallow, densely vegetated marshes and wetlands. It is colored a bit like its larger cousin, the American Bittern, and its camouflage allows it to blend in so well that it is often very difficult to see, especially as this bittern is more active at night than during the day. One South Carolina birder described the Least Bittern as a “small, thin, furtive” bird that “often straddles reeds” and makes a gentle dove-like *coo-coo-coo* sound in the marsh. It is the smallest heron in the Carolinas.

The authors of *Birds of North Carolina* reported that in the early twentieth century, the Least Bittern was breeding in marshes throughout the entire state. They wrote: “Least Bitterns have been observed in the State by virtually all field ornithologists who have spent some time in their haunts” and the authors believed these birds so commonplace that “it seems unnecessary to record all the regions where it has been seen.”

The distribution of this species in the state is very different today. The Least Bittern now breeds regularly only in the Coastal Plain and the extreme eastern Piedmont of North Carolina and along the coast of South Carolina. This dramatic reduction in breeding range is due to the intentional draining of wetlands and the loss of wetland habitats and marshes that were associated with natural, undammed river and stream corridors.

The Least Bittern was once a breeding bird in the Central Carolinas. The earliest report from the region is provided by James H. Carson, a Charlotte birder, who reported “frequently” finding this species in Mecklenburg County during the late 1920s. Carson shared his records with Elizabeth Clarkson who designated this bird as a “summer resident” in the 1944 edition of her county checklist. She noted Least Bitterns would “build a platform nest of grasses, etc., right in among rushes or small bushes over water or very close to it.” In 1970, Clarkson edited her entry to read “rare summer resident” and then to “formerly rare summer resident” in the last edition published in 1986.

Sporadic breeding may have continued in the region as late as the early 1990s. On May 12, 1989, Dick Brown found a Least Bittern in a wet meadow at what is now Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County. He found two at the same location, one described as “perhaps” a juvenile on August 4, 1989. Brown speculated that these birds may have nested there. There was also speculation



by local birders that three Least Bitterns seen together in southern Mecklenburg County on May 5, 1990, could have represented a family group. The birds were found by David Wright at a cattail wetland in the Martin-Marietta Quarry, off of Nations Ford Road.

Recent records of Least Bittern in the region have been sparse. Heathy Walker reported hearing what she believed were four separate birds calling at the Martin-Marietta marsh, south of Charlotte, on October 10, 1992. David Campbell found one at Riverbend Park in Catawba County on May 12, 2001, and another was seen at that park on October 4, 2002. Dwayne Martin described the latter bird as a “small golden-brown heron with streaks on neck.” Ron Clark photographed a Least Bittern at



Least Bittern at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge. (Kevin Metcalf)

Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on April 27, 2011. This bird remained there until at least 1 May. A Least Bittern with a fractured leg was found in a yard near Huntersville on May 17, 2011, and turned over to a vet for treatment.

A juvenile was photographed at the McAlpine WWTP in Pineville on September 6, 2012. On April 14, 2013, Chris Talkington had three American Bitterns and one Least Bittern that was "heard for a long time," at Pee Dee

NWR. This species is still listed as a summer resident on the refuge checklist, but despite the availability of appropriate habitat, it does not appear that there has been any confirmation of breeding. Lastly, John Scavetto photographed a Least Bittern in the Town of Pineville on October 6, 2015. This bird was observed skulking in cattails in a small pond off Hawfield Way and appeared skittish because lawn mowers were active nearby.