

= American bittern =

The American bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) is a species of wading bird of the heron family (*Ardeidae*) . It has a Nearctic distribution , breeding in Canada and the northern and central parts of the United States , and wintering in the southern United States , the Caribbean islands and parts of Central America .

It is a well @-@ camouflaged , solitary brown bird that unobtrusively inhabits marshes and the coarse vegetation at the edge of lakes and ponds . In the breeding season it is chiefly noticeable by the loud , booming call of the male . The nest is built just above the water , usually among bulrushes and cattails , where the female incubates the clutch of olive @-@ buff eggs for about four weeks . The young leave the nest after two weeks and are fully fledged at six or seven weeks .

The American bittern feeds mostly on fish , but also eats other small vertebrates as well as crustaceans and insects . It is fairly common over its wide range but its numbers are thought to be decreasing , especially in the south , due to habitat degradation . However the total population is large , and the International Union for Conservation of Nature has assessed its conservation status as being of " Least Concern " .

= = Description = =

The American bittern is a large , chunky , brown bird , very similar to the Eurasian bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*) , though slightly smaller , and the plumage is speckled rather than being barred . It is 58 ? 85 cm (23 ? 33 in) in length , with a 92 ? 115 cm (36 ? 45 in) wingspan and a body mass of 370 ? 1 @, @ 072 g (0 @. @ 816 ? 2 @. @ 363 lb) .

The crown is chestnut @-@ brown with the centers of the feathers being black . The side of the neck has a bluish @-@ black elongated patch which is larger in the male than in the female . The hind neck is olive and the mantle and scapulars are dark chestnut @-@ brown , barred and speckled with black , some feathers being edged with buff . The back , rump and upper tail @-@ coverts are similar in color but more @-@ finely speckled with black and with grey bases to the feathers . The tail feathers are chestnut @-@ brown , with speckled edges , and the primaries and secondaries are blackish @-@ brown with buff or chestnut tips . The cheeks are brown and there is a buff superciliary stripe and a similarly colored mustachial stripe . The chin is creamy @-@ white with a chestnut central stripe , and the feathers of the throat , breast and upper belly are buff and rust @-@ colored , finely outlined with black , giving a striped effect to the underparts . The eye is surrounded by yellowish skin and the iris is pale yellow . The long , robust bill is yellowish @-@ green , the upper mandible being darker than the lower , and the legs and feet are also yellowish @-@ green . Juveniles resemble adults but the sides of their necks are less olive .

= = Taxonomy = =

The American bittern was first described in 1813 by the English clergyman Thomas Rackett from a vagrant individual he examined in Dorset , England . No subspecies are accepted today , however , fossils found in the Ichetucknee River , Florida , and originally described as a new form of heron (*Palaeophoyx columbiana* ; McCoy , 1963) were later recognized to be a smaller , prehistoric subspecies of the American bittern which lived during the Late Pleistocene (Olson , 1974) and would thus be called *B. l. columbianus* . Its closest living relative is the pinnated bittern (*Botaurus pinnatus*) from Central and South America .

The generic name *Botaurus* was given by the English naturalist James Francis Stephens , and is derived from Medieval Latin *butaurus* , " bittern " , itself constructed from the Middle English name for the Eurasian bittern , *botor* . Pliny gave a fanciful derivation from *Bos* (ox) and *taurus* (bull) , because the bittern 's call resembles the bellowing of a bull . The species name *lentiginosus* is Latin for " freckled " , from *lentigo* , " freckle " , and refers to the speckled plumage .

Many of the folk names are given for its distinctive call ; In his book on the common names of American birds , Ernest Choate lists " bog bumper " and " stake driver " , and other vernacular

names include " thunder pumper " and " bog bull " .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The range of this bittern includes much of North America . It breeds in southern Canada as far north as British Columbia , the Great Slave Lake and Hudson Bay , and in much of the United States and possibly central Mexico . It migrates southward in the fall and overwinters in the southern United States , the Caribbean Islands and Mexico , with past records also coming from Panama and Costa Rica . As a long @-@ distance migrant , it is a very rare vagrant in Europe , including Great Britain and Ireland . It is an aquatic bird and frequents bogs , marshes and the thickly @-@ vegetated verges of shallow @-@ water lakes and ponds , both with fresh and brackish or saline water . It sometimes feeds out in the open in wet meadows and pastures .

= = Behavior = =

The American bittern is a solitary bird , and although common in much of its range , usually keeps itself well @-@ hidden and is difficult to observe . It usually hunts by walking stealthily in shallow water and among the vegetation , stalking its prey , but sometimes stands still , in ambush . If it senses that it has been seen , the American bittern remains motionless , with its bill pointed upward , its cryptic coloration causing it to blend into the surrounding foliage . It is mainly nocturnal and is most active at dusk . More often heard than seen , the male bittern has a loud , booming call that resembles a congested pump , and which has been rendered as " oong , kach , oonk " . While uttering this sound , the bird 's head is thrown convulsively upward and then forward , and the sound is repeated up to seven times .

The exact process by which the bittern makes its distinctive sound is not fully understood . It has been suggested that the bird gradually puffs out its neck by inflating its esophagus with air accompanied by a mild clicking or hiccuping sound . The esophagus is kept inflated by means of flaps beside the tongue . Once this action is completed and the esophagus is fully inflated , the distinctive gulping sound is made in the syrinx . When the sound is finished , the bird deflates its oesophagus .

Like other members of the heron family , the American bittern feeds in marshes and shallow ponds , preying mainly on fish , but also consuming amphibians , reptiles , small mammals , crustaceans and insects . It is a territorial bird and has a threat display which involves slowly erecting long , white , previously @-@ concealed , plumes on its shoulders , to form wing @-@ like extensions that nearly meet across its back , resembling a ruff . The bird then stands still in a threatening posture , or stalks the intruder in a crouching position , with its head retracted and a gliding gait .

This bird nests solitarily in marshes among coarse vegetation such as bulrushes (*Scirpus*) and cattails , with the female building the nest and the male guarding it . The nest is usually about 15 cm (6 in) above the water surface and consists of a rough platform of dead stalks and rushes , sometimes with a few twigs mixed in , and lined with bits of coarse grass . Up to about six eggs are laid and are incubated by the female for twenty @-@ nine days . The eggs are bluntly ovoid in shape , olive @-@ buff and unspeckled , averaging 49 by 37 mm (1 @-@ 93 by 1 @-@ 46 in) in size . The chicks are fed individually , each in turn pulling down the female 's beak , and receiving regurgitated food directly into its beak . They leave the nest at about two weeks and are fully @-@ fledged at six to seven weeks .

= = Status = =

This bird 's numbers are declining in many parts of its range due to habitat loss . This is particularly noticeable in the southern part where chemical contamination and human development are reducing the area of suitable habitat . However , the bird has an extremely large range and a large total population , and the International Union for Conservation of Nature has assessed its conservation status as being of " Least Concern " . The American bittern is protected under the United States

Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 . It is also protected under the Canadian Migratory Birds Convention Act of 1994 to which both Canada and the United States are signatories .