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Botaurus lentiginosus

(American bittern)

Information

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Classification



2007/03/04 08:34:34.387 US/Eastern

By Marie S. Harris

Geographic Range

During the breeding season, the American Bittern ranges from the Mid-United States to northern Canada. Its wintering range stretches from the south Atlantic coast across the Gulf coast and west to southern California.

Biogeographic Regions:

nearctic  (native .

Habitat

In the breeding range, the American Bittern inhabits areas of freshwater wetlands with tall emergent vegetation, shorelines, and vegetative fringes. The bird prefers beaver-created wetlands to those of glacial origin.

Terrestrial Biomes:

forest ; rainforest .

Physical Description

The American Bittern is a medium-sized heron with a stout body and a neck, short legs, and a white neck. The upperside of the bird is brown finely speckled with black. The undersides are heavily streaked with brown and white. There is a long black patch that extends from below the eye down the side of the neck.

Some key physical features:

endothermic ; bilateral symmetry .

Reproduction

Kingdom: [Animalia](#)
 Phylum: [Chordata](#)
 Subphylum: [Vertebrata](#)
 Class: [Aves](#)
 Order: [Ciconiiformes](#)
 Family: [Ardeidae](#)
 Subfamily: [Botaurinae](#)
 Genus: [Botaurus](#)
 Species: **Botaurus lentiginosus**

The American Bittern is considered monogamous; however, it is possibly polygynous under some circumstances. Pair formation occurs in early May when the female arrives at the nesting site. The female then chooses the nest site, which is usually in dense emergent vegetation over water that is 4-5 cm in depth. The nest is built by the female and is constructed of reeds, sedges, cattail, or other emergent vegetation. Egg laying is performed daily with one egg laid in the morning. Incubation begins before the full clutch is laid and lasts 24 to 28 days. Brooding and feeding duties are performed solely by the female. The hatchlings leave the nest after one to two weeks, but they receive supplemental feedings by the adults up to four weeks after hatching.

Key reproductive features:

iteroparous ; gonochoric/gonochoristic/dioecious (sexes separate); sexual ; oviparous .

Behavior

Little is known about migration patterns of the species. Northern populations that occupy areas where temperatures can reach below freezing are known to migrate. Southern populations occupying regions where temperatures are milder, however, appear to be non-migratory. Members of the species appear to be highly asocial, with minimal pair bonds between the sexes. Foraging is completely solitary.

Key behaviors:

motile .

Food Habits

The basic diet of the American Bittern includes insects, amphibians, crayfish, and small fish and mammals. When foraging, it relies mostly on stealth, waiting motionless for its prey to pass by. Its coloration adds to its ability to go undetected by prey. When its prey is in reach, the bird darts forward and seizes the prey in its bill. The prey is then killed by biting or shaking and is swallowed head first. Microhabitats for foraging include vegetation fringes and shorelines. Even-aged stands of older, dense or dry vegetation are avoided.

Economic Importance for Humans: Negative

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Economic Importance for Humans: Positive

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Conservation Status

The American Bittern population is undergoing a substantial decline due to loss and degradation of habitat. The species was listed as a Nongame Species of Management Concern by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in 1982 and 1987. It is listed as a species of special concern in the state of Michigan. Eutrophication, siltation, chemical contamination, and human disturbance have significantly reduced habitat quality by damaging the food supply. Changes in wetland isolation and stabilized water regimes are also eroding habitat quality. Acid rain is also another significant threat to the species due to its damaging effects on wetlands.

Other Comments

Within the thick vegetation of its habitat, the American Bittern uses resounding calls to communicate. The eerie calls for which it is known has won the species many nicknames: stake-driver, thunder-pumper, and mire-drum. The species remains relatively unstudied due to its secretive nature and inaccessible habitats.

Contributors

Marie S. Harris (author), University of Michigan.

IUCN Red List: [\[link\]](#):
Least concern.

US Migratory Bird Act: [\[link\]](#):
Protected.

US Federal List: [\[link\]](#):
No special status.

CITES: [\[link\]](#):
No special status.

State of Michigan List: [\[link\]](#):
Special Concern.

References

Gibbs, J.P., et. al., The Birds of North America No.18. The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, 1992.

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