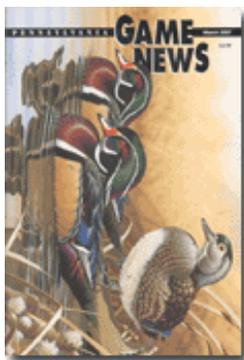




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Least Bittern



USFWS Photo/Jill Parker

CURRENT STATUS: In Pennsylvania, endangered; Migratory Bird of Management Concern in the Northeast.

POPULATION TREND: Least bitterns (*Ixobrychus Exilis*) are locally uncommon breeders in the Tinicum area in Philadelphia County; at Presque Isle State Park in Erie County; and in larger emergent wetlands in the state's northwestern counties. They are rare in suitable

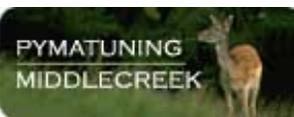
habitat elsewhere in the state. Least bitterns are declining in areas where their largest historical populations have been found. At Tinicum, only a few pairs have been nesting in recent years. In the late 1950s, however, as many as 27 nests were recorded there. Least bitterns were first designated as a threatened species in 1979. In 1997, the species was downgraded to endangered.

IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS: The smallest member of the heron family, the least bittern is 11 to 14 inches in length and has a 16- to 18-inch wingspan. This primarily black and tan bird has a blackish-green cap and back, brown neck and underparts, and a white throat. The least bittern is most readily identified in flight by conspicuous, chestnut-colored wing patches. A rare, darker phase also exists. When disturbed, the least bittern is more likely to run than fly, and like its relative, the American bittern, it also has the habit of freezing with its bill pointed straight up when alarmed.

BIOLOGY-NATURAL HISTORY: The least bittern nests in wetland areas throughout the eastern United States and along the Pacific coast. It spends the winter from our southern states south to Colombia, South America. This species is a regular migrant through the state, but it nests regularly in our northwest and southeast corners only, and possibly in a few other scattered locations, but not regularly or in significant numbers. The least bittern arrives in Pennsylvania in April and builds its platform nest of reeds and grasses near open water. Four or five pale blue or green eggs are laid in the six-inch nest in mid or late May. The young hatch in just under three weeks.

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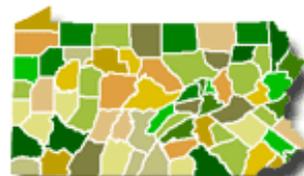
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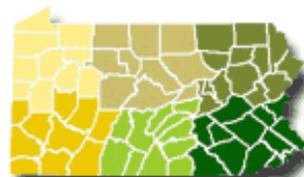
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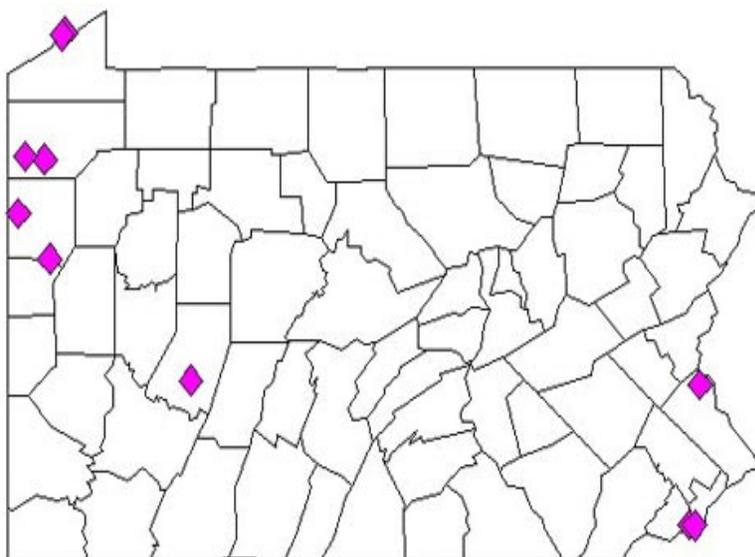
PREFERRED HABITAT: Least bitterns thrive in dense marshland environments containing cattails and reeds, along the coast and inland, where they feed primarily on small fish, amphibians, insects and small mammals. They frequent brushy wetlands more frequently than their larger cousin, the American bittern.

REASONS FOR BEING ENDANGERED: Nesting opportunities for this species in Pennsylvania are limited and decreasing as the wetland habitat it needs has been extensively drained or impounded. Loss of tidal marshes along the Delaware River has been key to the bird's decline in the state. Its future is largely dependent upon safeguarding the state's remaining large marshes.



©Photo/Dr. Jacob Faust

MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS: Areas where this species is known to nest should be uncompromisingly protected. Surveys to further determine where least bitterns nest are ongoing. Marshland habitats, when possible, should be managed to provide additional nesting habitat.



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