

The American Bittern is an uncommon breeder in freshwater wetlands in the Hudson River Valley.

Conservation Status

This heron is listed as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need and as a Species of Special Concern in New York. Additionally, the Mid-Atlantic/New England Maritime Regional Waterbird Plan regards it as a Species of High Concern. Breeding Bird Survey data indicate that it is uncommon throughout the state. This is also reflected by NY Breeding Bird Atlas data, which indicate a declining range in the Hudson River Valley.

Identification

This medium-sized heron has a stout body, short legs, and a white neck. The upperside of the bird is brown speckled with black. The undersides are streaked with brown and white. A long black patch extends from below the eye down the side of the neck. During the breeding season, males emit a loud, easily-heard call, which sounds like "pump-er-lunk." This unique call is often preceded by a series of clicking and gulping sounds.



Habitat

The American Bittern breeds in freshwater wetlands with shallow water and tall, dense emergent vegetation, such as cattails, bulrushes, sedges, and reeds. These conditions tend to be found in large marshes, scrub-shrub swamps, and wet meadows. This bittern can be found in wetlands as small as 2.5 acres, but is more abundant in larger wetlands that provide both feeding resources and protective cover for nesting.

Food

The diet of this bird includes insects, amphibians, crayfish, as well as small fish and mammals. It forages by waiting motionless for its prey to pass by, then darts forward and seizes the prey in its bill. The prey is killed by biting or shaking and swallowed head first.

Nesting

The nest is built on the ground or is raised slightly on a tussock of emergent vegetation surrounded by water. It is built by the female and constructed of reeds, sedges, and other nearby plant material.

Threats

- Destruction of wetland habitat by draining or filling.
- Reduction of food due to eutrophication, siltation, chemical contamination, and human disturbance.
- Alteration of natural habitat due to invasion by exotic plant species such as purple loosestrife or phragmites, which may reduce suitable nest sites.

Management Recommendations

- Preserve freshwater wetland habitats, particularly large (greater than 25 acres), shallow wetlands with dense growth of native emergent plants.
- Reduce or eliminate chemical contamination, siltation, eutrophication, and other forms of pollution that harm the birds or alter their food supply.
- Protect wetlands from drainage through land purchases, conservation easements, tax incentives, management agreements, and enforcement of wetland-protection regulations.
- Maintain water levels at around 2 feet throughout the breeding season (April-August). Avoid complete drawdowns before mid-August. During molting, bitterns need relatively deep, stable waters to provide adequate food and protection from predators. Use slow drawdowns to mimic natural wetland succession.
- Maintain a wide vegetative buffer around wetlands to protect breeding habitat and to deter nest predators.



Tidal marsh in the Hudson Valley

This management summary is adapted from Gibbs et al. 1992 and NatureServe 2008.

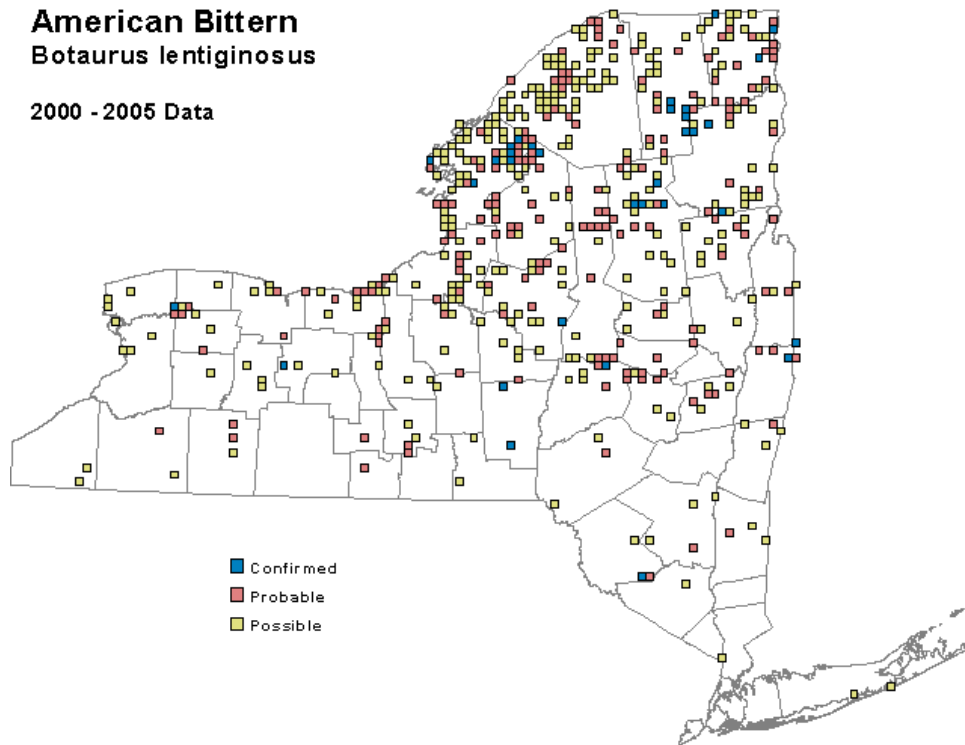
For additional information, see the following references:

- Brown, M., J. J. Dinsmore. 1986. Implications of marsh size and isolation for marsh bird management. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 50:392–397.
- Gibbs, J. P., and S. Melvin. 1992. American Bittern Species Management Abstract. Nature Conservancy, Arlington, VA. <http://conserveonline.org/docs/2001/03/ambi.doc>.
- Gibbs, J. P., S. Melvin and F. A. Reid. 1992. American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*), *The Birds of North America Online* (A. Poole, ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/018>.
- Gibbs, J.P. and S. Melvin. 1992. American Bittern. Pages 51-88 in Schneider, K. J. and D. M. Pence, eds. *Migratory Nongame Birds of Management Concern in the Northeast*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Newton Corner, MA.
- NatureServe. 2008. NatureServe Explorer: an online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.0. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>.

NYS BREEDING BIRD ATLAS COMPARATIVE DATA

American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*

2000 - 2005 Data



American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*

1980 - 1985 Data

