

The Least Bittern is an uncommon breeder in freshwater and tidal marshes in the Hudson River Valley.

Conservation Status

The Least Bittern is listed as a Threatened species in New York and as a Species of High Concern in the Mid-Atlantic/New England/Maritimes Regional Waterbird plan. Its secretive habits make it difficult to assess actual populations.

Identification

This bittern has a buffy face and neck with a white throat and belly. The male has a black back and cap, and bright buffy wings with conspicuous pale patches. The female is similar to the male, but has a brown back and cap. The male's advertisement call, most frequently heard in spring, is a dove-like cooing "tut-tut." When encountered, Least Bitterns typically burrow like rodents through dense vegetation, fly away weakly over marsh vegetation with legs dangling, or "freeze" with their bill pointed upward, feathers compressed, and eyes directed forward.



Habitat

The Least Bittern is found in freshwater and brackish marshes with tall, dense vegetation such as cattails, sedges, reeds, bullrushes, sawgrass, smartweed, arrowhead, buttonbush, and other semi aquatic vegetation, and bogs. They can also be found at the edges of lakes and rivers with emergent and tall vegetation, but prefer marshes with scattered bushes or other woody growth. Least Bitterns seem tolerant of human presence, and may persist in highly urbanized areas.

Food

Least Bitterns forage by stalking along the open-water side of emergent vegetation, grasping clumps of plants with their long toes and curved claws. They also build small foraging platforms at rich feeding sites, catching fast-moving prey, mainly small fish and dragonflies, with their small, thin bills. An extremely narrow body permits this bittern to pass easily through tangled vegetation. Its diet consists of small fishes, snakes, frogs, tadpoles, salamanders, leeches, slugs, crayfish, dragonflies, and occasionally shrews and mice.

Nesting

Least Bitterns nest on a nesting platform, with a canopy made by pulling down and crimping surrounding vegetation. Nests are formed by bending down live and dead stalks and adding short stems and sticks on top. Sticks are typically arranged on a nest foundation in spokelike manner. The foundation is often a clump of vegetation from a previous year or an old nest of another bird.

Threats

- Loss of wetland habitat, in particular emergent marshes, due to development and agriculture. New York State has lost over half of its wetlands since colonization. Net losses of wetlands in the Hudson Valley continue.
- Degradation of habitat by fragmentation, invasive plants, and nutrient enrichment.
- Run-off from development and agricultural practices may negatively impact prey.

Management Recommendations

- Preservation, protection, and improvement of wetland habitats, particularly large (more than 25 acres), shallow wetlands with dense growth of robust, emergent vegetation.
- Prevention of chemical contamination, siltation, eutrophication, and other forms of water pollution.
- Control of invasive species (e.g., purple loosestrife) and predators at breeding sites.
- Make minor alterations to existing management schemes at state and federal-owned wetlands to enhance nesting habitat for these birds.

For additional information, see the following references:

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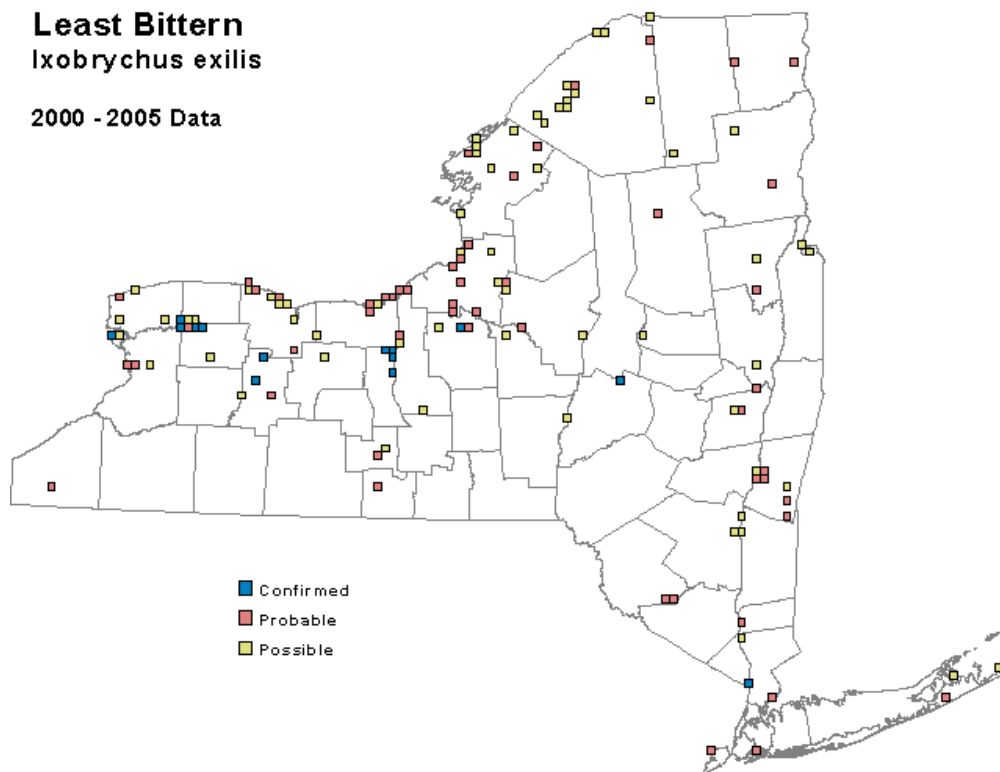
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Weller, M. W. 1961. Breeding biology of the Least Bittern. *Wilson Bulletin* 73:11–35. <http://elibrary.unm.edu/sora/Wilson/v073n01/p0011-p0035.pdf>

NYS BREEDING BIRD ATLAS COMPARATIVE DATA

Least Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis*

2000 - 2005 Data



Least Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis*

1980 - 1985 Data

