

American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*



Folk Name: Pump Thunder, Grass Hen, Stake Driver

Status: Migrant, Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

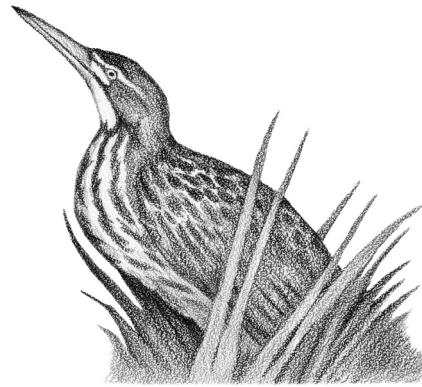
Habitat: Wetlands and marshes

The American Bittern is a very shy, solitary, and secretive wading bird that is occasionally found visiting cattail wetlands in the Central Carolinas. At 28 inches, it is our third largest wader. Colored in stripes and streaks of brown, black, white, and tawny, American Bitterns are very well camouflaged and are very hard to spot; consequently, they are often overlooked. These stealthy birds can also be identified by their unique springtime call which has been variously described as sounding like: “dun-kee-doo,” “Plunk-a-lunk,” “oong-ka-choonk,” or “umph-te-gooh.”

Leverett Loomis provided our first documentation of this species in the Central Carolinas. He collected two specimens in winter in Chester County in the late 1870s. On April 13, 1931, William McIlwaine recorded the earliest account of an American Bittern in Mecklenburg County. He was exploring a swampy area adjacent to Briar Creek when a “large bird rose with a grunting sort of sound.” McIlwaine wrote: “At first I thought it was a Little Blue Heron; but no! the color was wrong; it was sort of spotted tan; or mottled.” He identified it as an American Bittern. The bittern flew around the swamp, started back towards him, and then glided gently up and away, along an adjacent stream.

In 1944, Elizabeth Clarkson designated the American Bittern as an “uncommon winter visitor” in Mecklenburg County and listed 12 May as the latest spring date it had been recorded. American Bitterns were reported on six Stanly Spring Bird Counts between 1955 and 1971, with three reported on April 19, 1957. Individuals were reported on two Iredell SBCs in 1965 and 1978, two Mecklenburg SBCs in 1961 and 1967, and one York SBC in 1967. H. Lee Jones also reported one in Charlotte on April 29, 1961.

Two American Bitterns were reported in the region in the early 1980s. One bird was sighted during fall migration on October 18, 1980. Another was discovered in the spring on April 23, 1983. This bird landed on the roof of a house in a residential neighborhood in Charlotte. David Wright reported this forlorn-looking bird struck its traditional “concealment pose,” standing upright and motionless with its bill pointed straight up into the air, in hopes it would blend in with its surroundings. Unfortunately, as it was on a roof, there were no cattails to be found, and the bird was utterly exposed against the background of the sky.



Heathy Walker reported one at Creech’s Pond on the York–Mecklenburg county line on February 14, 1989, and two were found there in April of that year. There was speculation these birds had spent the entire winter there. Taylor Piephoff found one at the Charles T. Myers Golf Course in east Charlotte on May 4, 1989. This bird was flushed from a patch of cattails and willows on a small pond, and it returned to the same spot later in the day.

On May 12, 1989, Dick Brown discovered American Bitterns skulking about in a wet meadow on the edge of what is today called Lake Don T. Howell, in western Cabarrus County. Mecklenburg Audubon members reported finding “several” bitterns there throughout that summer. At times, the birds were observed performing courtship displays and they were often heard giving their territorial “pump” call. Brown observed another bittern in the same location on 4 August. He speculated that it was



American Bittern in Mecklenburg County. (Jeff Lemons)

possible a pair had nested there, but he had been unable to obtain conclusive evidence of breeding. On November 4, 1989, David Wright spotted an American Bittern in a wetland just off Gilead and Cook Farm roads in northern Mecklenburg County.

There have been more than 30 reports of American Bittern from the region since 2000. Sightings have ranged from one to four birds. Spring reports ranged from 26 March through 9 May. Fall reports ranged from 30 August to 22 November. There have been several December reports including a bird that wintered at the Concord Mills wetland in Cabarrus County from early December through at least January 2014.

Several reports were of special interest during this period. On March 26, 2009, one American Bittern hit a front glass window of a restaurant in the Town of Matthews. The bird was stunned and turned over to a local wildlife rehabilitator who cared for it and released it after 48 hours. This was the second bittern she had rehabilitated from the region. A very cooperative bittern

showed up beside the boardwalk at the wetland adjacent to Kirk Farm soccer fields in Charlotte on March 26, 2011. This bird lingered for over a month so that many birders were able to simply walk up and fairly easily view and photograph it. Up to two bitterns returned to that site several times in subsequent years.

On April 23, 2013, on Wildlife Drive at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge, Will Stuart photographed two American Bitterns engaged in an elaborate courtship display. He watched their activity for several hours and noted: "The first thing that caught my eye was the bright white shoulders of one of the bitterns. I was able to capture some of that plumage display despite some very harsh late afternoon light. It seems this is a breeding display of the American Bittern." Biologists are hoping to one day get confirmation of breeding at the refuge as appropriate habitat is available. American Bitterns have been found in the summer nearby in the "Grassy Islands complex" near Mountain Creek along the upper part of Blewett Falls Lake. Nesting is possible.