

Bitterns are specialised for living in swamps; typically short-necked and camouflaged brown with dark and pale streaks, especially on underparts. Sexes alike. When disturbed, they 'freeze', with body and bill pointing skywards, sometimes swaying with raupo or reeds moving in the breeze.

LITTLE BITTERN *Ixobrychus minutus*

Rare Australian vagrant

30 cm, 85 g. *Very small bittern*. Adult male has large buff wing patches contrasting with black flight feathers, back and tail; ginger sides to face and neck. Adult female like male, but black replaced with brown. Juvenile yellowish buff, heavily streaked dark brown. Flight as in Australasian Bittern; adults show prominent pale patches on dark upperwings. **Habitat:** Freshwater wetlands. One NZ record: Westport, February 1987. [Sp 115]



HERONS, EGRETS and BITTERNs Ardeidae

About 65 species; 10 in the New Zealand region, including 5 breeding species. An endemic species, the New Zealand Little Bittern *Ixobrychus novaezelandiae*, became extinct in the late 1800s.

This family occurs worldwide, mainly in the tropics. Their broad-winged flight is ponderous but strong, though the smaller species are faster. Apart from the bitterns and night herons, they are active by day. They have a slender body and long neck and legs; night herons have a stouter body and a shorter neck. All have a straight, dagger-like bill and a short tail. The bill, on a long, often kinked neck, is ideal for seizing or skewering fish.

Patches of powder down are on the breast and rump in bitterns, and the thighs also in egrets. The middle of the three forward-pointing toes has serrations along the side like the teeth of a comb and is thought to remove fish-slime and mud during grooming and preening. All species give a low-pitched croak when alarmed but feed silently.

Egrets and herons are very similar: for example, all have bare facial skin, often distinctively coloured. Egrets are white; herons are usually grey: the distinction is useful but not absolute. Egrets are gregarious and breed in colonies, often mixed with other egrets and with ibises; true herons are solitary. Both typically have plumes when breeding. Their nests are untidy platforms of sticks and twigs. Incubation starts with the first or second egg, and so chicks are of different ages and sizes. Adults feed the young with regurgitated food, not offering whole food. The young start breeding at one or two years old, sometimes still in immature plumage.

Herons, egrets and bitterns feed mainly on fish; also frogs and insects. Larger species may take small mammals and birds as chance offers.

Reading: Hancock, J. & Elliott, H. 1978. *The Herons of the World*. London: London Editions. Hancock, J. & Kushlan, J. 1984. *The Herons Handbook*. London: Croom Helm.

115. LITTLE BITTERN *Ixobrychus minutus*

Plate 26

Size: 30 cm, 85 g

Geographical variation: Of the four sub-species, *dubius* of Australia and southern New Guinea is the form recorded from New Zealand. The little-known New Zealand Little Bittern *Ixobrychus novaezelandiae*, which is presumed extinct, was much larger (53 cm).

Distribution: Breed widely in Europe, Africa, Asia, southern New Guinea and Australia. One New Zealand record: a juvenile that walked past a Westport supermarket in

February 1987 and was caught, examined and released.

Behaviour: Usually more secretive than the much larger Australasian Bittern, and males do not boom, advertising instead with a hoarse, monotonous croaking. In Australia, they skulk in thick reedbeds, flooded shrubland and other dense vegetation in swamps, marshes, the edges of freshwater wetlands.

Reading: O'Donnell, C.F.J. & Dilks, P. 1988. *Notornis* 35: 153-157.