

Threatened Fauna of the Hunter & Mid Coast



Australasian Bittern

{Botaurus poiciloptilus}

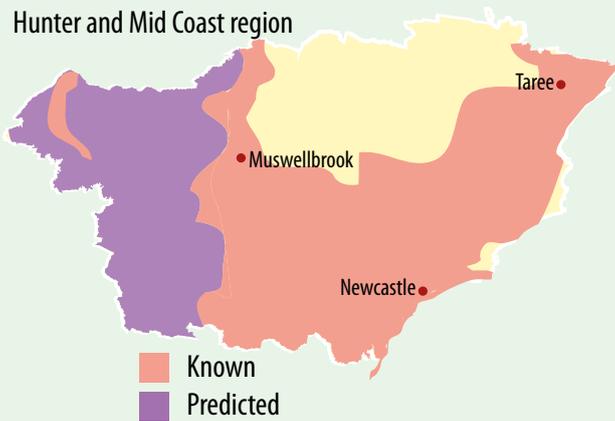
The bird is widespread but uncommon in intact freshwater wetland habitats along south-eastern Australia.

The Australasian Bittern is highly secretive and notoriously difficult to observe, which makes identifying the true extent and distribution of the species problematic. When it notices it's being watched, it will either fly away from the observer or drop down low to stay concealed, sometimes holding its bill directly skyward to blend in with the surrounding vegetation.

The Australasian Bittern is also known as the 'Bunyip Bird', Brown Bittern or Bull Bird, and can often be confused with juvenile Nankeen Night Herons and other bittern species.

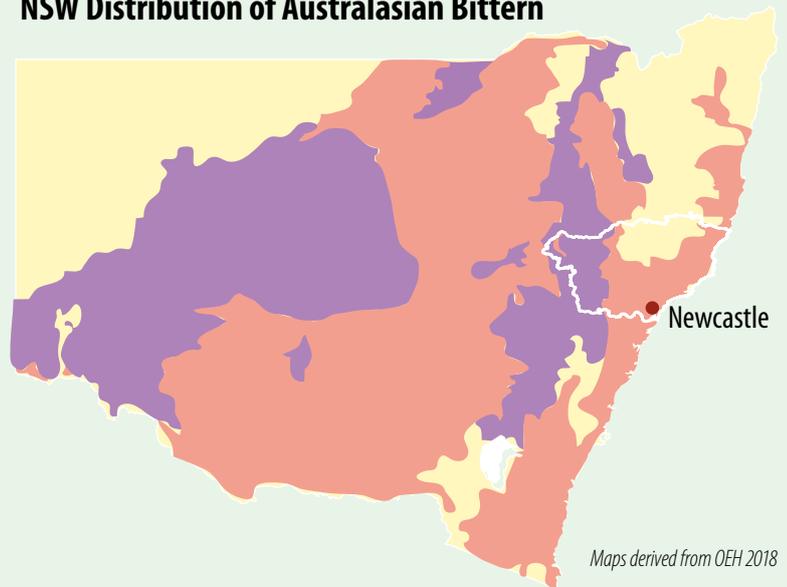
To remain hidden, Australasian Bitterns will sway with the breeze to imitate surrounding vegetation.

Hunter and Mid Coast region



The areas shown in pink and purple are the sub-regions where the species or community is, or known to occur. They may not occur throughout the sub-region but may be restricted to certain areas. The information presented in this map is only indicative and may contain errors and omissions.

NSW Distribution of Australasian Bittern



Maps derived from OEH 2018

Are Australasian Bittern's found near you?

Australasian Bitterns are found on mainland Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand and New Caledonia. Locally, the Hunter Estuary Wetlands is a known location for the species, with additional records noted across the region between Newcastle and Old Bar, usually within 40km of the coastline. It is possible that populations of Australasian Bitterns occur in parts of the Hunter Region and have not been detected. More searches and monitoring of the species is required across our coast and wetlands.



Why is this species important?

Australasian Bittern populations are a good indicator of healthy undisturbed and diverse aquatic ecosystems including freshwater wetlands, sedge-lands and sometimes in brackish swamps. Australasian Bitterns feed on fish, frogs, yabbies, mice and insects. They also disperse seeds of wetlands plants to other locations as they move around.

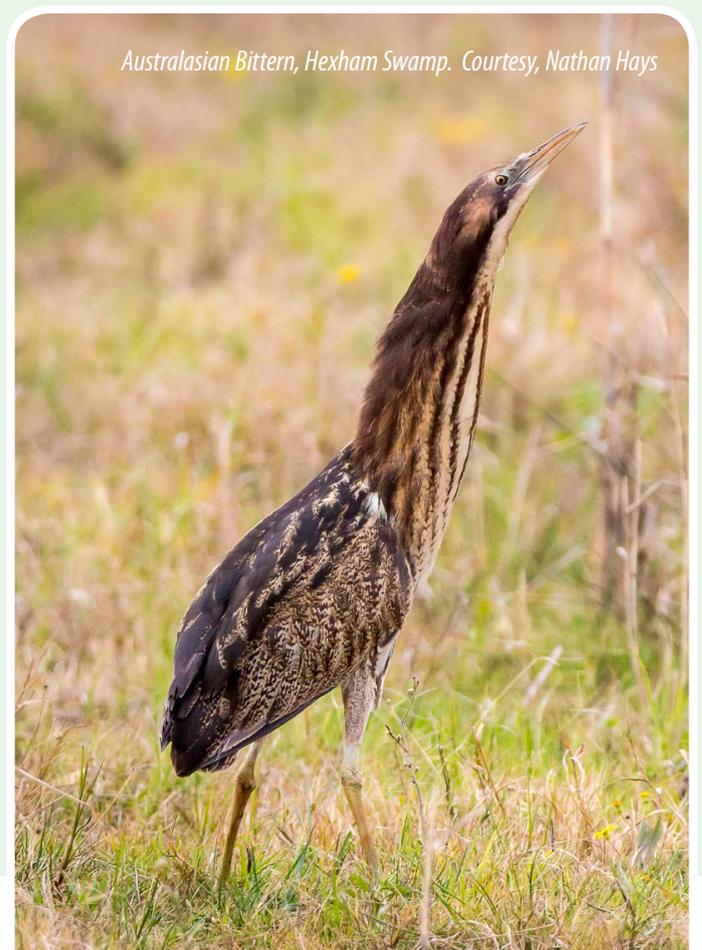
There is much we do not know about this secretive species. A significant project in the Riverina region ("Bitterns in Rice") has been monitoring the Australasian Bittern since 2012 across local rice fields with the assistance of local farmers. This project has been steadily uncovering the well-guarded secrets of the Australasian Bittern, including breeding and feeding habits, the range and behaviour of these secretive birds, and raising awareness of its plight. However more information is still needed.

The Australasian Bittern is endangered under both NSW and Commonwealth legislation.

Habitat and Biology

Australasian Bitterns prefer freshwater wetland habitat with dense sedges, rushes and reeds and occupy large territories of between 40 – 50 ha. The species usually feeds at night along the edges of wetlands for fish, crayfish, frogs, insects and reptiles. It remains well camouflaged and hidden in dense wetland vegetation which makes it difficult to observe, although at night the male's deep 'booming' mating call can be heard during spring and summer.

Within the Hunter and Mid Coast regions, the species has been recorded in a variety of fresh and brackish habitats. The majority of records are from the Hunter Estuary Wetlands, however it is probable that isolated populations occur in freshwater wetlands on private properties and in other estuary systems. It breeds in summer within dense wetland vegetation, building a platform of reeds and grasses 10 – 30cm above the water.



Australasian Bittern, Hexham Swamp. Courtesy, Nathan Hays

Threats

Significant environmental degradation and loss of habitat has resulted in severe population declines of many waterbird species across NSW. Aerial surveys over 15 years to 2007, found that total waterbird abundance across NSW had declined by around 75%. Total numbers of Australasian Bitterns are estimated at somewhere between 1000 – 2500 individuals across Australia, of which the majority are thought to occur in NSW. These declines, coupled with the already low population count highlighted above, means this species is at risk of extinction in the near future. Threats to this species include:

- Livestock impacts to wetland habitat by grazing vegetation, increasing sediment, introducing pollutants into the water and trample nesting sites
- Foxes and cats are thought to prey upon eggs in the nest
- Deliberate drainage of wetlands, and herbicide poisoning
- Excess sedimentation from poor agricultural management practices or salt incursion from rising sea levels
- Introduction of fire into wetland areas
- Changes in hydrological regimes in the upper reaches of estuarine areas



Foxes are a threat to Australasian Bitterns survival. Courtesy, Pixabay

Identification

Australasian Bitterns are well camouflaged with its brownish-yellow bill, mottled brown on the upper surface and striped dark brown on the underside. It has a thickly set body and pale neck, with yellow eyes and pale green legs. Although at night, the male's deep booming mating call can be heard during spring and summer. It reaches 75cm in length and can weight up to 2kg. Males are about twice as large as females. Feeding at twilight and night, this species has been recorded using pieces of grass to lure fish to catch.



Australasian Bittern, Hexham Swamp Courtesy, Nathan Hays

You can help the Australasian Bittern.



1. **Fence off** or restrict livestock from sensitive wetland areas to promote natural regeneration of these areas.



2. **Undertake coordinated control of feral animals** and report sightings of foxes and feral cats through the Feral Scan web site, to increase this species breeding success.



3. **Maintain adequate groundcover** to reduce the amount of sedimentation entering important Australasian Bittern habitat.



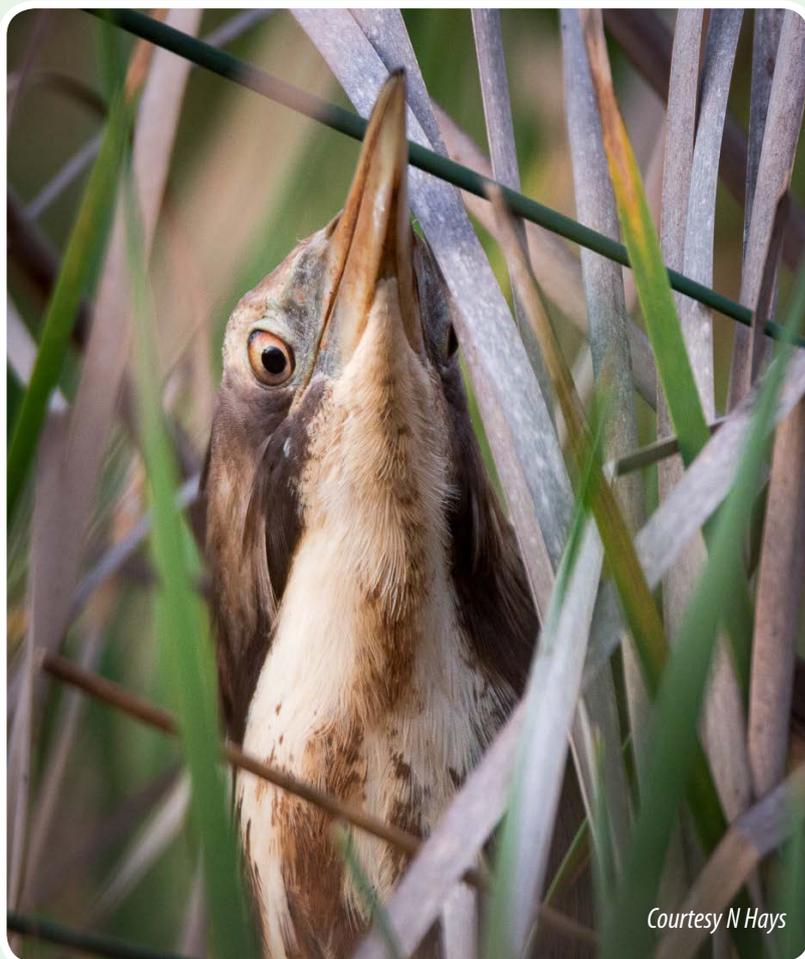
4. **Support local efforts** including bird monitoring and surveys to identify and improve effective species management.



5. **Maintain wetlands in their natural state** by limiting herbicide usage, reducing pollution and excluding fires, and encouraging tall wetland rushes (such as bullrushes and spikerushes).



6. **Report any potential sightings** Hunter Local Land Services, BirdLife Australia or Hunter Bird Observers Club.



Courtesy N Hays

Birding routes in the Hunter Region can be found at
<https://www.hboc.org.au/resources/birding-routes/>

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