

Threatened Fauna of the Central West



Australasian Bittern

{Botaurus poiciloptilus}

The Australasian Bittern is widespread but uncommon in freshwater wetland habitats in south-eastern Australia with significant reed beds.

It 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.

It usually forages in shallow water (up to 30cm deep) in dense wetland vegetation made up of sedges, rushes, cumbungi and/or reeds.

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.**

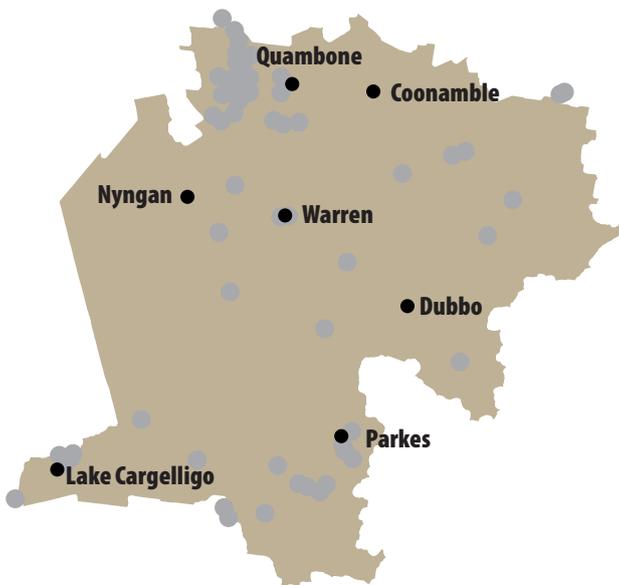


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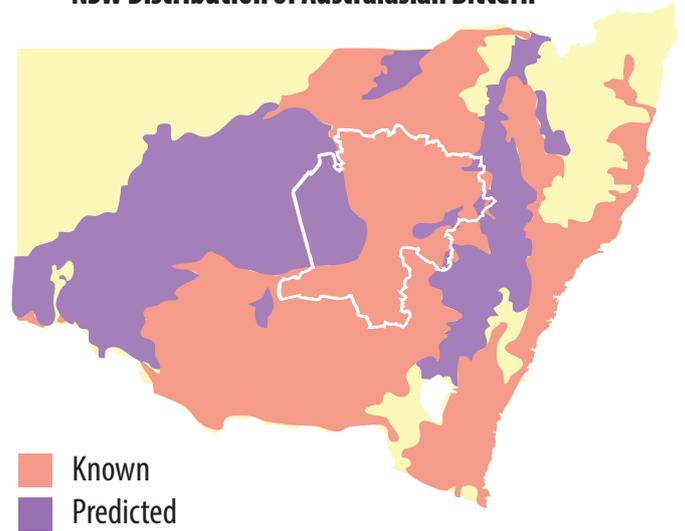
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Bittern sightings in Central West region



● Bittern sightings (source: Atlas of Living Australia).

NSW Distribution of Australasian Bittern



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. Map derived from OEH 2018.

Are Australasian Bitterns found near you?

Australasian Bitterns are found on mainland Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand and New Caledonia. Locally, the Macquarie Marshes and Lake Cargelligo are known locations for the species, but are also recorded at other smaller wetlands with reedbeds.

It is possible that populations of Australasian Bitterns occur in parts of the Central West region and have not been identified or recorded. More searches and monitoring of the species is required across our region.

A secretive species

There is much we do not know about the secretive Australasian Bittern. A significant project in the Riverina region (Bitterns in Rice) is about farming and wildlife conservation working together and has been monitoring the Australasian Bittern since 2012. The project is a collaboration between rice growers, Birdlife Australia and other key state agencies and bird groups (see www.bitternsinrice.com.au).

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.

Recent monitoring in the Macquarie Marshes by the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment's Biodiversity and Conservation Division has confirmed Australasian Bittern were present in reedbeds (primarily *Phragmites australis*) following inundation of areas from natural flows and managed water for the environment.

The Australasian Bittern is listed as 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 – 50ha. The species usually feeds at night along the edges of wetlands for fish, crayfish, frogs, insects and reptiles. They disperse seeds of wetland plants to other locations as they move around.

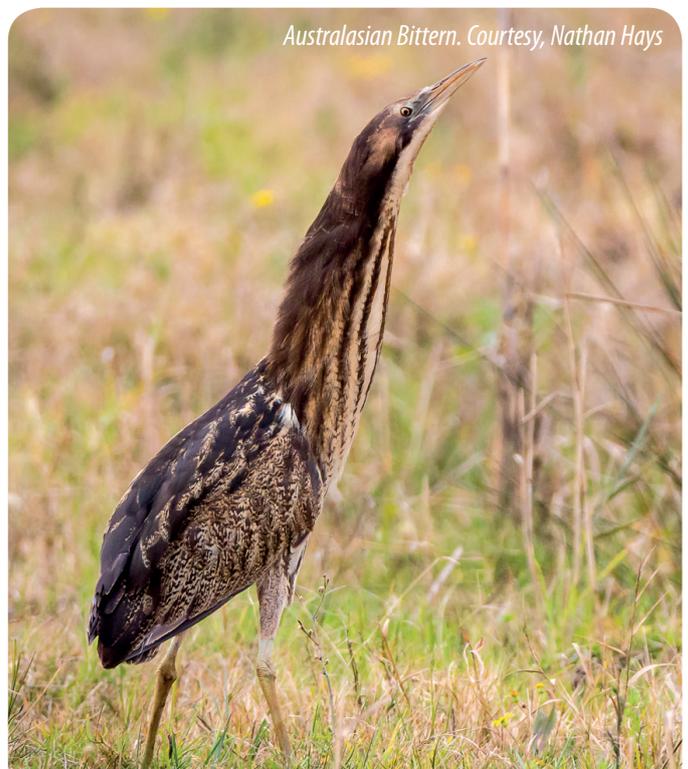
The Australasian Bittern remains well camouflaged and hidden in reedbeds, which makes it difficult to observe, although the male's deep booming mating call can be easily heard at night or during the day.

It breeds in summer within dense wetland vegetation, building a platform of reeds and grasses 10 – 30cm above the water and laying a clutch of three to four eggs.

The bunyip bird

Did you know the Australasian Bittern is also known as the bunyip bird? The male mating call is an eerie booming sound, and thought to have been the origin of the mythical bunyip that lived in creeks, swamps and waterholes.

If you hear this booming call during breeding season (September to January), you can rest assured it belongs to a much more earthly creature!



Australasian Bittern. Courtesy, Nathan Hays

Threats

Significant loss of habitat and breeding grounds have resulted in severe declines of Australasian Bittern populations. The 2018 Eastern Australian Waterbird Survey showed overall waterbird abundance decreased considerably from the previous year and remains well below average.

Total numbers of Australasian Bitterns are estimated at less than 1,000 individuals across Australia, of which the majority are thought to occur in NSW. These declines, coupled with the already low population count, mean this species is at risk of extinction in the near future. Threats to this species include:

- reduced extent of vegetated wetlands and lack of water
- deliberate drainage of wetlands and herbicide poisoning of reeds
- pigs and livestock impact on wetland habitat by grazing vegetation, increasing sediment, introducing pollutants into the water and trampling nesting sites
- pigs, foxes and cats are thought to prey upon eggs and chicks in the nest
- excess sedimentation from poor agricultural management practices or salt incursion
- reedbed burning in wetland areas.

Identification

Australasian Bitterns are well camouflaged with their 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.

It reaches 75cm in length and can weight up to 2kg. Males are about twice as large as females.

Feeding at twilight and at night, this species has been recorded using pieces of grass to lure fish to catch.

Many recordings are thought to be misidentified Nankeen Night Herons (*Nycticorax caledonicus*). The two species have a similar shape and are both patterned under the body.

The easy way to distinguish the two species is that Nankeen Night Herons will perch in trees. The Nankeen Night Heron also is generally smaller and has no dark streaks on the side of the neck.



Foxes and cats are a threat to the Australasian Bittern's survival, as well as a range of other native fauna.



Below: An immature Nankeen Night Heron (left) compared to the Australasian Bittern. Photos courtesy of Rebecca Van Dyke and Nathan Hays respectively.



You can help the Australasian Bittern



1. **Fence off** or restrict livestock from sensitive wetland areas to promote natural regeneration of these areas, particularly during the breeding season.



2. **Undertake coordinated control of feral animals**, including foxes, cats and pigs to increase the breeding success of the species.



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



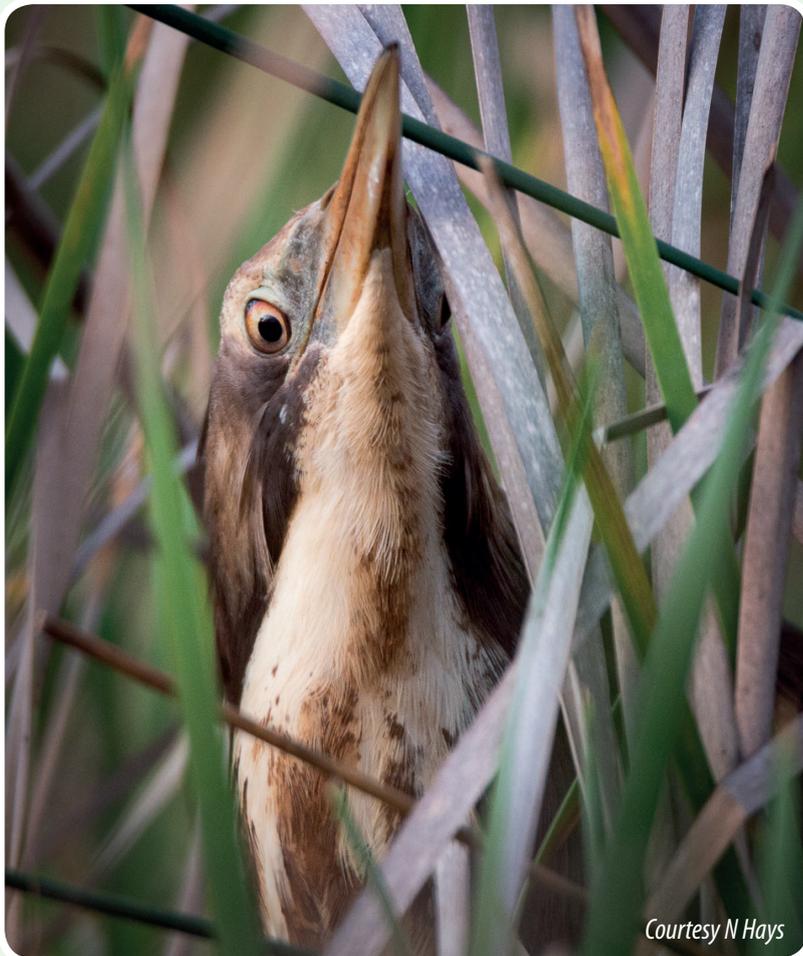
4. **Support local efforts**, including bird monitoring and surveys to identify and improve effective species management or join a local birdwatching or landcare group.



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



6. **Report any potential sightings** via the Birdlife Australia Birdata app or direct to Central West Local Land Services, Dubbo Field Naturalists and Conservation Society or the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (Biodiversity and Conservation Division).



Courtesy N Hays

Birding routes in our region and others can be found at
<http://birdlife.org.au/locations/birdlife-northern-nsw/bird-routes-nn>

For more information contact

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Lachlan Valley Birds and Lake Cargelligo Bird Routes

W: www.birdsofnsw.com

Lake Cargelligo Birds Facebook Page

W: www.facebook.com/lakecargelligobirds



National
Landcare
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