

## AUSTRALASIAN BITTERN (Botaurus poiciloptilus)

The Australasian Bittern is a shy species of waterbird which inhabits dense rushbeds of freshwater lakes and swamps.

It used to be quite common in the south west of WA in the early part of this century. However, clearing of land for agriculture caused many of its favourite haunts to become saline. The rising salt levels killed the rushbeds and the lakes became totally unsuitable for bitterns.

The species is now confined (in WA) to the few remaining freshwater, rushy swamps of the coast.

Because of its secretive nature its status is uncertain. It does appear to be rare, however, and its habitat is certainly threatened. There are only a few recent records of nesting and none within conservation reserves. The total south west population is perhaps no more than a few hundred birds.

The bittern's diet consists of aquatic insects, small fish, frogs, jilgies, snails and even small birds. They are solitary birds and feed mainly at night.

By bending rushes over to form a dense mat, they build feeding and nesting platforms among the rushbeds. Feeding platforms can be recognised by the presence of remains of various prey items, particularly the carapaces of jilgies.

The nest usually contains six eggs, and breeding occurs in spring and early summer, while water levels are high (at least in good years) and food is abundant.

The bird is rarely seen during the day. At night its presence is betrayed by its low, booming call, sounding much like the bellowing of a bull. Hence the bird's generic name, Botaurus, which comes from two Latin words for bull - bos and taurus. This eery sound, emanating from the marshes during the darkness of night, was thought by early European settlers to be the call of the mythical Bunyip!

Bitterns are expert at camouflage. When disturbed they stand motionless - or even swaying with the breeze! - with bill and head pointed skywards. This behaviour, combined with their brown and yellow streaked plumage, makes them very difficult to see.

J. Lane  
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