

ARTICLE FOR "DAILY NE 5" ENDANGERED SPECIES COLUMN

THE BLACK BITTERN

The Black Bittern is a small, secretive, largely-nocturnal member of the heron family.

It is one of three species of bitterns which inhabit south-western Australia and can be distinguished from the other species (the Little and Australasian Bitterns) by its sooty black to brown plumage, the yellow plumes on its neck, and its intermediate size.

With its long neck and pointed beak it is well equipped for seizing live prey; while its medium-length legs are suited for both wading in shallows and climbing through branches of overhanging trees.

Black Bitterns are solitary birds, most active during twilight and at night. They live near the water's edge, in mangroves, and in other trees and shrubs which fringe coastal swamps and rivers.

For much of the day they perch in trees or among rushes. When startled they may fly upwards to the safety of a tall tree - or stand slightly swaying, with their long neck and beak pointed towards the sky in typical bittern fashion. In this pose they can be very difficult to detect.

Black Bitterns make their nests on low branches of trees, usually over water. Nests are loosely-built platforms of twigs and sticks, with a shallow depression on top. The birds breed in Spring and usually lay three eggs, sometimes four or even five. These are pale blue-green, and oval in shape.

Black Bitterns feed on small fish, frogs, aquatic insects, crustaceans, and occasionally on lizards.

Black Bitterns occur in south-east Asia, New Guinea and Australia. Their appear to be three separate populations of the Australian subspecies gouldi - two isolated populations in south-western Australia and the Pilbara, and one continuous population in northern and eastern Australia.

The Black Bittern has not been reported breeding in the south-west of the State for at least forty years, and has declined in numbers during that period. In the south-west it was apparently most common along the wooded banks of rivers, and could often be seen in the flooded gums which fringed the upper reaches of the Swan and Canning. It used to nest at Herdsman Lake prior to its drainage in 1925.

In recent years a few have been seen along the Blackwood and upper Murray rivers, and in the paperbark trees surrounding a privately-owned swamp near Pinjarra. None have been found on conservation reserves.

The cause or causes of this species' decline in the south-west are unknown. Loss of riverine vegetation and freshwater swamps due to over-grazing, salinization and drainage may have contributed. The effect of increased recreational use of rivers and riverbanks is unknown.

No research into the biology of the species in Australia has been undertaken.

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