

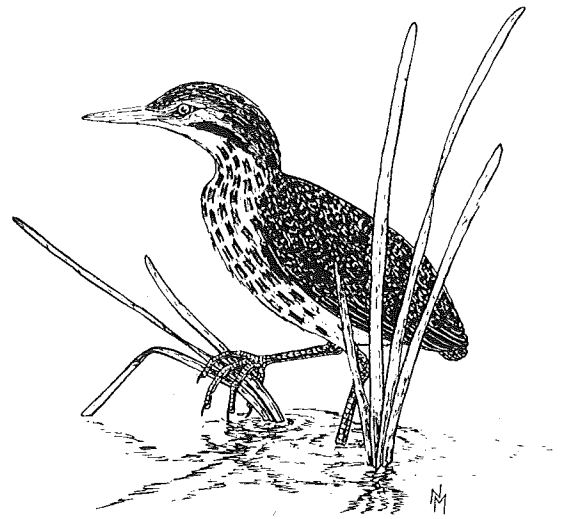
American Bittern

Botaurus lentiginosus

Although rarely seen, the American Bittern is one of the best known North American marshbirds. The species is widely known for its habit of trying to elude detection by freezing in position with its head and neck pointed skyward; observers have even seen birds swaying from side to side to match the movement of the windswept marsh grass. Its "pump-handle" territorial song characterizes marshes throughout its range, which extends from coast to coast across the middle states and north to Hudson Bay. Although freshwater marshes are its preferred haunts, the species is flexible in its choice of nest sites and will even accept dense, grassy upland fields provided water is nearby. Spear (1976) mentioned that wet fields were used for feeding by American Bitterns in Vermont. American Bitterns return early to Vermont's marshes, frequently appearing the third week of April. By early May, the "pile-driver" call of the males can be heard at dusk near many of the state's wetlands. The males appear to be territorial throughout the breeding season, and some evidence suggests that they may be polygynous (Palmer 1962).

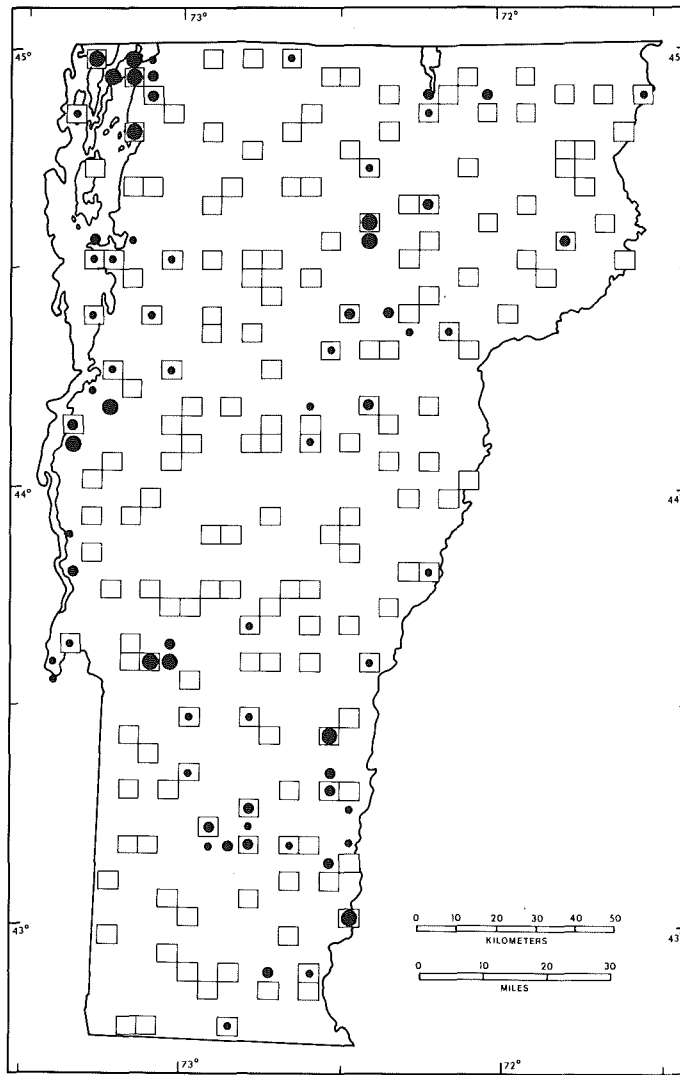
Males may also "pump" while on spring migration; caution is advised before concluding that a bird heard early in the breeding season is on territory. While intraspecific aggression has not been documented, males frequently call in response to Yellow and Virginia Rail and Sora calls. Courtship behavior, though not well known, includes aerial and ground chases and a slow stalk by the male, who moves forward in a "retching" position while holding the white nuptial plumes on his shoulders erect (Johnsgard 1980).

Nesting invariably occurs on the ground, although a myriad of sites may be accepted. Cattail stands, islands, and even dry fields may be used. The nest, apparently constructed by the female, is a haphazard structure, sometimes little more than a scrape, always in dense vegetation. A series of paths



frequently connects the nest site with platforms constructed by the birds. Although their function has not been documented, it is interesting to note that similar structures are built by other, unrelated marsh nesters (e.g., Pied-billed Grebes, Black Terns, and Common Moorhens), who use them for resting and brooding of the young. The female lays 3 to 5 olive-buff eggs, commencing incubation with the initiation of the clutch. Consequently, the length of the incubation period is dependent on the number of eggs in the clutch, each egg requiring 24 days to hatch. Vermont egg dates range from May 21 to June 18 (three records). Although the male remains in the vicinity, he apparently does not assist in either incubating or caring for the young. He may continue to call throughout the breeding season, presumably seeking to lure new females to his territory. The young are fed by regurgitation at the nest for about 2 weeks, and remain dependent on the parent for an undetermined period of time thereafter. Age at first flight is also unknown. Reports of fledged young in Vermont range from June 30 to July 25 (three reports).

American Bitterns feed by waiting for or slowly stalking their prey through the marsh. Virtually any form of animal life small enough to be swallowed is taken. Dietary staples include fish, crustaceans, insects, rodents, amphibians, and reptiles, all



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 42 (23%)
 Possible breeding: 25 (59% of total)
 Probable breeding: 10 (24% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 7 (17% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	14	45	33
Green Mountains	9	17	21
North Central	5	26	12
Northeast Highlands	2	12	5
East Central	3	16	7
Taconic Mountains	2	12	5
Eastern Foothills	7	29	17

of which are usually swallowed on the spot and brought to the nest to be regurgitated to the young partly digested. Although more active at low light intensities, birds may forage throughout the day and night.

The American Bittern was considered a fairly common summer resident in Vermont's marshlands by Perkins and Howe (1901), who wrote that it nested in "meadow and swampy land." Fortner et al. (1933) noted that American Bitterns were "uncommon to rare summer residents." While the majority of sightings during the Atlas Project came from the Champlain Lowlands, where most of the large marshes are located, a scattering of sightings from throughout

the state affirm this species' ability to occupy small wetlands. The Taconic Mountains, North and East Central regions, and Northeast Highlands had the fewest sightings, because of a paucity of wetlands. Extra effort is required to locate this marsh denizen, which is extremely difficult to confirm because of its stealth and its practice of swallowing food before taking it to the young, and because nests are hidden in inhospitable cover.

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