

Least Bittern

Ixobrychus exilis

The Least Bittern is the smallest and most secretive heron to breed in Vermont. Although often regular in its preferred habitat—extensive cattail and sedge marshes—it is rarely seen even by the most determined or fortunate observers, and then often is only drawn to the open by tape recordings of its call. A weak flier, the Least Bittern seldom flushes, preferring instead to slip stealthily away, or, if alarmed, to freeze with head and neck upright in the characteristic hiding position of the larger American Bittern. It migrates long distances, wintering from southern Florida and Texas south to Colombia. Migration dates are poorly defined because of the species' retiring nature, but it apparently arrives in Vermont nesting areas in mid May and departs in late August.

Although the Least Bittern's breeding range includes much of central North America and extends south through subtropical South America, it is locally distributed; it is most common in regions with extensive marshes, and may be rare or absent from large blocks of the overall range. This pattern is maintained in Vermont, with nearly all records coming from the marshes of the Champlain Lowlands and the West Rutland Marsh. Whether Least Bitterns are as restricted in distribution in eastern Vermont as the single Atlas Project record indicates remains to be seen. Certainly the Lake Memphremagog and the Connecticut River marshes seem to offer suitable habitat, and the species is regularly recorded farther south in the Connecticut River valley.

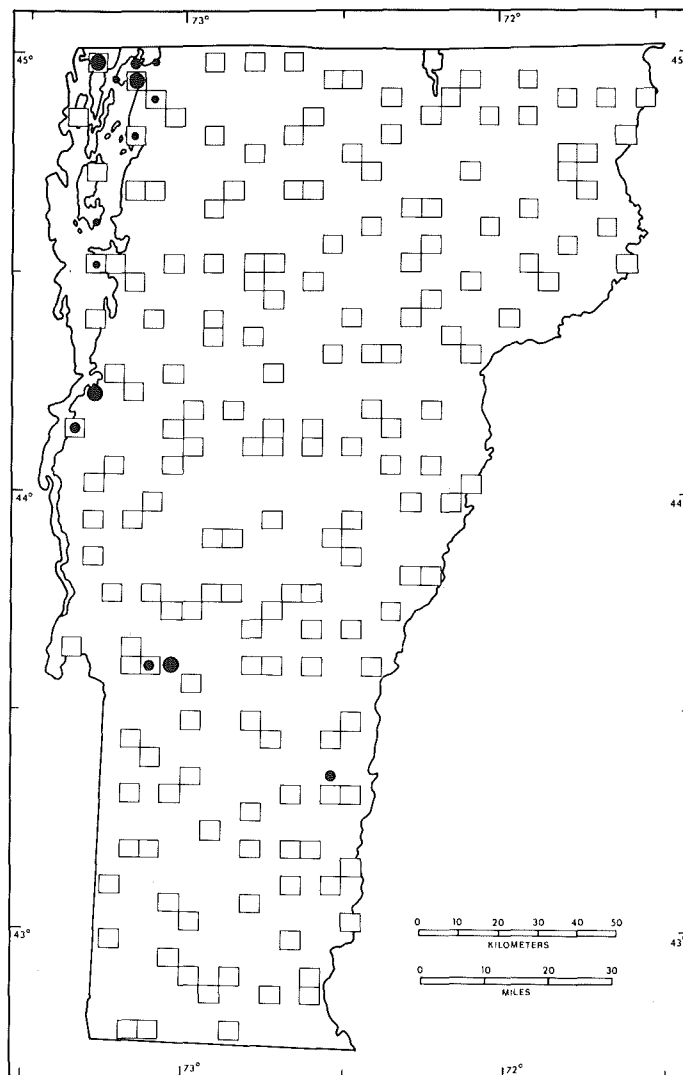
Least Bitterns prefer to nest in emergent vegetation, usually near the open-water side of a marsh (Weller 1961). Although technically waders, Least Bitterns are adept at climbing about on emergent vegetation and therefore frequently nest and forage over water considerably deeper than would be accessible through wading. The nest is little more than a platform of coarse sticks and



stems gathered from the immediate vicinity and placed on a clump of the previous year's vegetation. Overhanging vegetation is pulled down and incorporated into the nest, with the more resilient stems forming a canopy. The male performs most of the nest building, but both sexes continue to add to the structure throughout incubation. Courtship and territoriality have been inadequately studied; copulation occurs at least occasionally at the nest. The sexes are dimorphic, the male exhibiting a much darker mantle, but the significance of this dimorphism is unknown. A rare dark color morph known as Cory's Least Bittern was sighted in Vermont in July 1975 at the West Rutland Marsh (W. J. Norse, pers. comm.).

Four to 6 pale blue to pale green eggs are typically laid, with incubation commencing early in the nesting cycle. Incubation extends 17 to 18 days from the laying of the last egg, with hatching occurring over a 3-day period. Although the female performs a greater portion of the actual incubation (Weller 1961), parental ties to the nest are strong in both sexes; there are numerous references to incubating birds being lifted from the nest by researchers. This attentiveness limits the chance of locating a nest by flushing the adult.

Perkins and Howe (1901) indicated that the Least Bittern was rare in Vermont by 1900, although it had once been more



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 7 (4%)

Possible breeding: 3 (43% of total)

Probable breeding: 2 (28.5% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 2 (28.5% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	6	19	86
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	1	6	14
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

common. Data are insufficient to indicate whether there has been a real change in the species' status in the past century. The species is considered fairly common in the Champlain marshes by state waterfowl biologists (J. Stewart, pers. comm.), but is rarely found by most observers. The Least Bittern is proposed for Species of Special Concern status in Vermont, and the Nature Conservancy reports a decline in its population throughout the Northeast. Because of its restrictive habitat requirements the species is vulnerable to any alteration in the state's marshland; other factors that may influence its statewide distribution are unknown. The

Least Bittern has been regularly reported in the West Rutland Marsh since the early 1900s (L. H. Potter, pers. comm.); 3 birds at once were seen there in the air during a Vermont Bird Conference field trip on June 17, 1973.

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