

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

AMERICAN BITTERN

Botaurus lentiginosus

Family: ARDEIDAE
B049

Order: PELECANIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The American bittern is distributed widely in winter in fresh emergent wetlands, primarily west of the Sierra Nevada. In the Central Valley, fairly common October to April, uncommon to rare rest of year; although breeds there. Less common on coastal slope, and no longer breeds regularly south of Monterey Co. (Garrett and Dunn 1981). In Imperial Valley and along Colorado River, fairly common October to April, rare through summer, and may breed at northern end of Salton Sea. In northeast plateau and east of Sierra Nevada crest south to Lake Tahoe, rare May to August; breeds locally. Rare August to May in saline emergent wetlands along coast. Elsewhere in lowlands, a rare transient and local winter resident (Cogswell 1977, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Eats mainly insects, amphibians, fish, crayfish, and small mammals; also snakes, miscellaneous invertebrates, and birds. Feeds in tall, fresh or saline, emergent wetlands; less often in adjacent shallow water of lakes, backwaters of rivers, or estuaries; and occasionally along adjacent shores. Feeds most actively at dusk or at night (Terres 1980), but also apparently at any time of day. Stands motionless and waits for prey, or stalks very slowly; grasps prey in bill with a quick strike (Kushlan 1976b).

Cover: Usually hides, rests, and roosts solitarily amidst tall, dense, emergent vegetation, on ground, or near ground on log, stump, or on emergent plants. Does not normally perch in trees.

Reproduction: Nest is a platform of matted, emergent aquatics, other herbaceous stems, sticks and/or leaves, usually in shallow water, but sometimes floating, or on ground. It is concealed in tall, dense, fresh emergent vegetation.

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: No additional data found.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, circadian feeder, but most activity is crepuscular and nocturnal.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: The small breeding population in lowlands may be nonmigratory; augmented during October to April by migrants, probably from north of California and from the northeastern plateau, which is deserted in winter by this species.

Home Range: No information found. In a slough in Saskatchewan, less than 16 ha (40

ac) in extent, there were 5 nests (Bent 1926). Distances between nests have been as little as 18 m (57 ft) in Michigan (Middleton 1949), 37 m (120 ft) in Iowa (Provost 1947), and 46 m (150 ft) in Minnesota (Vesall 1940).

Territory: Probably used mainly for courtship, copulation, and nesting; size unknown (Palmer 1962).

Reproduction: Timing of courtship and nest-building unknown; eggs or young reported April to July (Cogswell 1977). Possibly polygamous, based on minimal evidence. Basically a solitary nester, but often in vicinity of other pairs. Clutch size usually 3-5, range 2-6. Apparently single-brooded. Incubation about 24 days. Semi-altricial, downy hatchlings apparently tended solely by female, and remain in nest about 2 wk. Ages at first flight, independence, and first breeding are unknown (Palmer 1962).

Niche: Population has declined from draining of marshes, human disturbance, and pesticides (Arbib 1979); overgrazing of emergent vegetation also is detrimental.

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