Critter Class
Least Bittern

Juvenile Least Bittern by: Maureen Leong Kee

September 8, 2011

**Comment:**
MVK--if you are lurking out there--I am putting in my request for an evening 'claas' on Least Bittern in the near future. It is WCV's new patient, and I have never heard of them before....http://www.wildlifecenter.org/wp/2011/09/floyd-county-least-bittern/

**MVK:**
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FALn_mUGSvI&feature=related

**Comment:**
Absolutely amazing that you go out to get natural habitat for these animals to keep them as relaxed as possible while they are recovering, you guys are truly wildlife champions!

**Comment:**
Least Bittern is a beautiful little bird. I think we have them here along with a bunch of other herons.

**MVK:**
OK - we can learn about the Least Bittern if you want!

**MVK:**
A tiny heron, furtive and surpassingly well camouflaged, the Least Bittern is one of the most difficult North American marsh birds to spot. Despite its inconspicuousness, however, the species can be rather common within appropriate habitat in its breeding range.

**Comment:**
Good evening MVK, are the Least Bittern from the heron family?

**MVK:**
Yes it is

Photo by: Kevin T. Karlson
Comment:
Least Bittern, Yay!!

Comment:
How big is the Least Bittern?

MVK:
It weighs 1.8 to 3.6 ounces length is 11 to 14.2 inches wingspan 16.1 to 18.1 inches

Comment:
Wow they are tiny.

Comment:
Are they plentiful or endangered?

MVK:
Difficult to survey, so few data available. Loss of wetland habitat and the encroachment of exotic species of marsh vegetation may pose a threat.
Not endangered.

Comment:
Do the males and females have the same color patterns?

MVK:
Per Wikipedia This bird's underparts and throat are white with light brown streaks. Their face and the sides of the neck are light brown; they have yellow eyes and a yellow bill. The adult male is glossy greenish black on the back and crown; the adult female is glossy brown on these parts. They show light brown parts on the wings in flight.

Photo by: Kevin T. Karlson
Comment:
Is there an explanation as to what the "Least" part of its name refers to?

MVK:
Since it forms a superspecies with the "Little" bittern and the "yellow" bittern - I have a feeling it is called "least" because it is the smallest.

MVK:
The Least Bittern is protected in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918

MVK:
The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (MBTA), codified at 16 U.S.C. §§ 703–712 (although §709 is omitted), is a United States federal law, at first enacted in 1916 in order implement the convention for the protection of migratory birds between the United States and Great Britain (acting on behalf of Canada[1]). The statute makes it unlawful to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill or sell birds listed therein ("migratory birds"). The statute does not discriminate between live or dead birds and also grants full protection to any bird parts including feathers, eggs and nests. Over 800 species are currently on the list.

Comment:
MVK, good evening. So happy to be with you. Question: do they lay many eggs and how many times per year?

MVK:
The least bitterns are monogamous. The males build the nests usually in dead or emergent vegetation and over water. The nests are generally 6-30 inches above the water. Egg laying usually takes place a few days after the nest if finished. A clutch is generally 4-5 eggs. The female will incubate the eggs for 17-20 days and then they will hatch 2-4 days apart. Fledge can be roughly 29 days.

Comment:
Oh thank you MVK---you are quick on the draw! Thanks for the video! Why does WCV refer to the Lease Bittern as a rare visitor? Are thy not often found in VA?

Comment:
The nesting is 4 to 5 small bluish eggs on a flimsy platform of dead cattails or reeds, usually over water. I did a little homework :)

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Photo by: William L. Newton / CLO
Comment:
Evening En & MVK of course (Teacher) Is there a difference in color for male & female? How many babies do they have in a season? Thanks

MVK:
The female is paler compared to the male. I posted pictures of both just a little bit back. The juveniles look like the females only paler in color. They lay 4-5 eggs.

Comment:
I just love your classes MVK...my husband is downstairs right now looking up the "Least Bittern" in our bird book. Thanks so much for being a great moderator!!

Comment:
Hi MVK & Sophie. Good report Abby. MVK, I looked up the least bittern in Canada and they are an endangered species, mainly because they are losing their habitat. It is being turned into farmland and housing.

Comment:
Do they mate for life?

MVK:
Yes - they are monogamous

Comment:
Cute! When their necks are stretched, it's appears almost longer than it's body. (neck/body view at about 1min 18secs into the video): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUIBFbFAGY&feature=related

MVK:
They also build foraging platforms of reeds at productive feeding sites during late-incubation and brood rearing patterns. They eat small fish, minnows, eels, tadpoles, salamanders, leeches, slugs, crayfish, small snakes, aquatic insects, an occasional shrew or mouse. This information is per yoloconservationplan.org

Comment:
The video of the least bittern is amazing MVK. Their sense of balance is something to behold. Can you imagine stretching your head/neck out that far and not plopping in the water? LOL

MVK:
They are very secretive birds so it is often hard to do accurate counts.

Comment:
Oh cool, Frances S. posted this message in a discussion on WCV FB (thanks Frances!): "article from Cornell Lab of Ornithology says they can compress their body to be very very narrow to get thru places (like between two books placed 1 1/2" apart,) and sometimes if a predator is spotted will sway with the reeds to blend in."
MVK:
Yes that was noted by John James Audubon

Comment:
Evenin’ MVK. Another beautiful bird!! I have heard of them but never seen one. Wonder if there are many along the SC, NC, VA beaches?

Comment:
We have marshlands near. Do you know what is their range?

All About Birds

Comment:
Ah! HI MVK and all. We have bitterns in UK -but on red endangered list - only 75 breeding males counted here. The males make a loud booming noise apparently. (typical men!!)♥♥

MVK:
Per Cornell Laboratory of Orinthology When alarmed, the Least Bittern freezes in place with its bill pointing up, turns its front and both eyes toward the source of alarm, and sometimes sways to resemble wind-blown marsh vegetation.

Comment:
When the babies are born do both parents take care of them?

MVK:
Yes - both parents incubate and provide food for the young.
Comment:
Here's what they sound like (kind-a weird):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUIBFbFAGY&feature=related

Comment:
Good evening MVK, I just read the story of the least Bittern, It melted my heart to know the lengths that WCV goes to for wildlife, but then again, why wouldn't they? Just look how they have brought so many people together in this discussion room. If the world could come together as we all have what a wonderful thing it would be. Giving hope and prayers to all those in Texas and on the East coast.

Comment:
The male is a handsome bird. Looks larger too.

MVK:
Yes he does but still a very small heron.

Comment:
I watched the video you posted MVK, plus another one that next to it for the "American Bittern". It was demonstrating "pumping" action. Do all Bitterns "Pump" and why do they do that?

MVK:
4-5 usually

Comment:
How many eggs do they lay?

Comment:
American Bittern: Breeds from southeastern Alaska, Manitoba, and Newfoundland south to California, New Mexico, Arkansas, and the Carolinas. Spends winters from coastal British Columbia, Illinois, and along the Atlantic coast to Long Island, and south to Costa Rica (rarely) and Greater Antilles. Preferred habitats include freshwater wetlands with tall emergent vegetation.

Comment:
The American Bittern it is actually native to a number of countries in North America as well as Central America and even in many other locales around the world. For example, it has also been reported in a number of European countries. The range of this bird is estimated to be more than 8 million square kilometers. With a global population of around 3 million individual birds, the American Bittern is not believed to be in any immediate danger of extinction. It is evaluated as Least Concern.

Comment:
The American Bittern has a remarkable, though rarely seen, courtship display. The male arches his back, shortens his neck, dips his breast forward, and "booms" at the female. Both birds engage in complicated aerial displays.
MVK:
I am amazed - you are all so good - I love it when you do research! LOL

Comment:
They prefer to freeze, not flush like other herons when approached. If an observer is nearby, they will often stretch their neck up, bill pointed towards the sky, and sway from side to side as if imitating waving reeds. They use resounding calls to communicate. These eerie calls have earned them many nicknames: stake-driver, thunder-pumper, and mire-drum.

Comment:
I wonder what effect the recent hurricanes had on these birds.

MVK:
They should have been through nesting - I sure hope so.

Comment:
Are they similar to the green heron?

MVK:
Much smaller. They weigh less than a pound.

Comment:
Another interesting fact from the Cornell Site, they make a canopy over the nest by pulling reeds over and crimping them. Sounds like a smart & pretty little bird!

Comment:
OOPS! Did some research and Wiki gave me this: They mainly eat fish and insects, which they capture with quick jabs of their bill while climbing through marsh plants. The numbers of these birds have declined in some areas due to loss of habitat. They are still fairly common, but more often heard than seen. They prefer to escape on foot and hide than to take flight. These birds make cooing and clucking sounds, usually in early morning or near dusk." Sorry if it's old info. These little herons are so CUTE, I just had to join in on tonight's class, if yas don't mind.

Comment:
They are skinny little guys

MVK:
Yes they are and like other herons - legs resemble sticks and reeds - so fish and other aquatic life - swim right around them not knowing what lurks right above.

Comment:
That is so neat to visualize that movement.
Comment:
I saw a Least Bittern in the Bahamas. IDed it using James Bond's bird book. Did you know Ian Fleming borrowed the name from the ornithologist who was an expert on Caribbean birds?

Comment:
That sound on the 8:52 video seems more like an insect noise...we have locust here that get VERY loud!

Comment:
According to the map you posted MVK, looks like the Least Bitterns are in VA only for summer breeding--Ed is going to have to take it to Florida Keys to release if it doesn't heal quickly.

Comment:
Exquisite little birds - I love their racing stripes. . . would love to see one, but the videos you post are almost as good!

Comment:
I used to see a bittern now and then on Ocracoke Island next to the marsh grasses along the highway. Had to be quick to see them, though. If they didn't move, they looked just like a clump of marsh grass.