

THE LITTLE BITTERN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

BRIAN GLOVER

Accepted February, 1976

Notwithstanding its choice of habitat and unobtrusive habits, the paucity of records indicate that the Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* is a very rare bird in South Australia. From material published in the *South Australian Ornithologist* the earliest known record of this species for the State was of the remains of a bird found on the Moorook bowling green by S. Sanders Jr. c.1915 and subsequently identified by Captain S. A. White (21:67, 1955). Then in January, 1930, J. B. Hood saw two birds at Bool Lagoon, although he was not certain of the species' identity until March, 1932, when his dog captured one of five birds flushed. The first nest found, containing four heavily incubated eggs, was on 8 January, 1931. Hood had many sightings, mostly of single birds, in the early 1930s and found several nests. He considered the species 'rare' (*ibid*, 12:186-7, 1934.) His last report, although probably not his last recording, was of an immature bird obtained on 4 January, 1935 (*ibid*, 13:109, 1935). D. W. Brummit also recorded the species at Bool Lagoon, in November, 1933 (*ibid*, 12: 173, 1934) and found three nests containing eggs on 30 December, 1936 (*ibid*, 14:45, 1937). To conclude the published data on this area, A. R. Attiwill in his paper 'Birds breeding in Naracoorte District, 1941-1971' stated of the Little Bittern, "December only month when eggs recorded. Very rare." (*ibid*, 26:60, 1972).

J. Sutton and others saw a Little Bittern at the artificial lake at 'Buckland Park' near Port Gawler on 18 September 1932 (*ibid*, 12:184,

1934). R. Schodde and the writer recorded one bird at Morgan on 9 October, 1954, and reported several other State records: Paradise (specimen in S.A. Museum), Punyelroo, near Swan Reach (H. T. Condon, *South Australian Naturalist*, 24:16, 1947) and the Moorook record quoted above (*South Australian Ornithologist*, 21:67, 1955). John Eckert reported an injured bird found at Streaky Bay on 25 September, 1969 (*ibid*, 26:139, 1974).

Just across the eastern border there are records of the Little Bittern from Broken Hill, a specimen found by J. Paul, 20 March, 1944 (*ibid*, 17:44, 1944) and from the lower reaches of the Glenelg River in Victoria, Claude Austin reporting a bird that had been caught in a trap in 1949 (*ibid*, 20:14, 1951).

Specimens from South Australia in the South Australian Museum are from:—

Bool Lagoon		4-1-1935	J. B. Hood
Paradise	male	19-10-1938	Miss Short
Punyelroo	male	22-9-1940	C. Blewitt
Narrung	male	12-5-1950	J. Addison
Narrung	female	11-10-1954	W. Ayres
Cowell	female	29-8-1961	R. Sims

The writer's second recording of the Little Bittern in South Australia was on 24 September, 1975, when a male bird was observed on Spring Creek in the lower Flinders Ranges, several kilometres upstream from where the creek crosses the main road 8 km south of Wilmington. The first view was of a small heron-like bird with large buff or pinkish wing patches that flushed from a narrow but dense band of sedges

at most 1 m high. It settled on the bank of a dammed-up section, flew again and perched on top of a shrub just below the dam. After five minutes or so the bird dropped to the ground and disappeared into other dense shrubs. Shortly afterwards it flew back to the dam where it remained in the open for at least 30 minutes, being observed through 10 x 50 binoculars from as close as 10 m. Most of the time it merely stood at the water's edge, but occasionally jabbed at something in the water.

The above records are from all months except February (although the Bool Lagoon records suggest that the species was present during this month), April, June and July. H. T. Condon in his *Handlist of the Birds of South Australia* (3rd Edn., 1969), considered the Little Bittern "Probably migratory." That there are no

records between 12 May and 29 August indicates that it is a migrant, although the total number of records is too few to be positive on this point. The species was recorded c.1915, 1930-36, 1938, 1940, 1944, 1949, 1950, 1954, 1961, 1969 and 1975. From this it is difficult to suggest whether the Little Bittern might be a regular or irregular migrant to South Australia, for it is obvious that many birds must go unrecorded. Apart from Bool Lagoon and the River Murray system where the species may possibly occur regularly, all other records are scattered over a wide area of the State, so that Little Bitterns could possibly 'turn up' anywhere that dense emergent freshwater vegetation occurs.

14 Kauri Rd., Hawthorndene, S.A. 5051.