

RECENT RECORDS OF THE LITTLE BITTERN *Ixobrychus minutus* NORTH OF THE RIVER MURRAY. The Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* is a rarely reported but probable spring-summer visitor to South Australia. Most recent records are from Bool Lagoon in the South East, its only known breeding site in the State (Sutton 1934; Glover 1976; Parker *et al.* 1979; Jaensch 1989). In Australia the species' stronghold appears to be the Murray-Darling Basin (Blakers, Davies and Reilly 1984; Marchant and Higgins 1990), although it has not been recorded along the River Murray in South Australia since several reports in the 1950s (Schodde and Glover 1955; Parker *et al.* 1979). Its habitat is primarily dense emergent vegetation in freshwater swamps, especially beds of tall reeds and sedges, although various other densely vegetated habitats (e.g. crops) are occasionally used (Marchant and Higgins 1990). This note details two recent specimen records in atypical habitat north of the River Murray, South Australia.

Record 1: On 26 October 1992, while participating in a biological survey of the South Olyary Plains for the then South Australian Department of Environment and Natural Resources (Forward and Robinson 1996), C.

Materne, H. Owens and GC mistnetted a bittern at Pine Valley Homestead (33°19'S, 140°11'E; 90 km N of the River Murray). The bird was captured by its bill in a mistnet set to catch bats over water at a small dam. The mistnet had been furlled at 2300 h and the bird was discovered dead in the net the following morning. The record preceded several days of unsettled weather and widespread rains in the region.

Description: Crown black, face and sides of neck buff-brown, hindneck brown. Throat white with brown central stripe, streaked with black on neck. Back and tail black. Flight feathers black. Wing coverts buff. Bill yellow with black-brown culmen. Black-brown line from eye to nostril. Eye and eye-ring yellow. Legs grey-green (drying darker in specimen). The bird was lodged with the South Australian Museum where it has been prepared as a mounted skin and its torso preserved in alcohol (SAM B46881).

Record 2: On 28 October 1997 a small bittern was observed by the authors at Old Gluepot Homestead Dam (33°46'S, 140°00'E; about 50 km S of Record 1 and 40 km N of the river). The bird was standing hunched in shallow

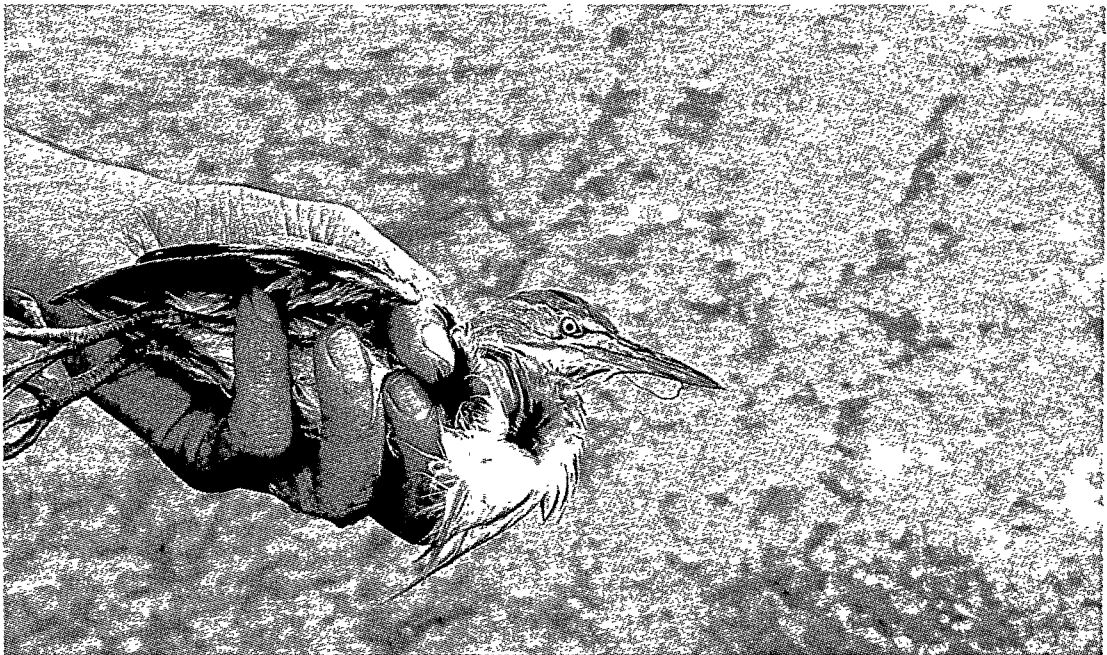


Figure 1. Adult female Little Bittern picked up at Old Gluepot Homestead Dam (Record 2) (Photographer M. de Jong).

muddy water at the edge of the dam. It appeared to be in very poor health and on our approach did not flush. The bird was picked up (see Figure 1), offering little resistance other than raising its head and giving single 'croak' calls. In the hand it had difficulty remaining upright and felt extremely thin. The bird died during transit to Adelaide. Several millimetres of rain had fallen at the site during the night after a long dry spell, followed by heavier widespread rains in the region two days later.

Description: Crown black-brown with brown margin (including forehead), face and sides of neck pale buff-brown. Hindneck brown. Throat white with centre heavily streaked brown. Breast white, heavily streaked black-brown. Back black-brown. Flight feathers brown with buff outer margin. Wing coverts buff-brown. Bill pale brown-buff with yellow base (including lores), culmen black-brown, brown line from eye to nostril. Eye and eye-ring yellow. Legs grey-green, yellow around joints, soles yellow-green. This bird also was lodged with the South Australian Museum (B49288).

The above two descriptions fit with those of Marchant and Higgins (1990) for adult male and adult female Little Bitterns respectively. Both records were in extensive open pastoral land dominated by mallee *Eucalyptus* spp. and black oak *Casuarina pauper* and where the limited surface water is confined to dams and temporary swamps. The immediate locality of both records was bare of vegetation other than scattered nitre-bush *Nitraria billardierei* on the dam walls; quite atypical habitat for bitterns.

The records suggest that some Little Bitterns migrate through the northern Murray Mallee region during spring, occasionally resting at dams and wetlands overnight (especially during unsettled weather). Possibly birds are moving south-westwards to the River Murray from the wetlands of the Darling River system. Interestingly, most reports from the River Murray are also during spring (Parker *et al.* 1979). To the north-east, there is also an atypical inland report of a dead bird found by Mr Jack Paull at Broken Hill on 20 March 1944 (SAOA 1944) and to the

west Glover (1976) observed a bird at the water's edge at Spring Creek, near Wilmington, on 24 September 1975.

The above records and the extent of permanent wetlands with extensive reedbeds along the River Murray in South Australia (e.g. Reedy Creek–Pellaring Flat, Woods Point–Sunnyside Swamp and Cobdogla Evaporation Basin; Thompson 1986) and Murray Lakes indicate that more intensive surveys for Little Bitterns there are warranted (see Jaensch 1989).

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Maya Penck of the South Australian Museum kindly provided information and access to specimens of Little Bitterns held in the collection.

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