

Bird Note

Breeding record of the Australian Little Bittern, *Ixobrychus dubius*, on the River Murray

K. TRELOAR AND G. CARPENTER

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Little Bittern, *Ixobrychus dubius*, is a spring-summer visitor to South Australia (Parker *et al.* 1979; Jaensch 1989, Carpenter and de Jong 2001). Most records are from the South East at Bool Lagoon, its only known breeding site in the State (Parker *et al.* 1979; Jaensch 1989). Its habitat in South Australia is primarily dense emergent vegetation in freshwater swamps, especially beds of tall reeds (Cumbungi, *Typha* spp, and Common Reed, *Phragmites australis*). The nest comprises a flat platform of reeds, typically 30-50 cm over water within the densest part of the reed bed (Jaensch 1989).

The stronghold of *I. dubius* appears to be the Murray - Darling Basin (Blakers *et al.* 1984; Marchant and Higgins 1990), although Carpenter and de Jong (2001) noted that it had not been recorded along the River Murray in South Australia since the 1950s (Schodde and Glover 1955; Parker *et al.* 1979). Based on two spring records at pastoral dams north of the River, Carpenter and de Jong (2001) concluded that *I. dubius* had been probably overlooked as a spring visitor to *Typha* swamps along the River Murray in South Australia, presumably to breed.

Since 2001 there have been several widely spaced reports of *I. dubius* along the River Murray in South Australia, including Lakes Alexandrina and Albert. Peter Koch and associates (in Rogers 2008a and b, 2009, 2010; Carpenter 2015) had several reports from December 2004 onwards at Paiwalla Swamp, about 15 km N of Murray Bridge, including several in January 2006. They also heard one in *Phragmites* at Tolderol Game Reserve on 6 January 2006 (in Rogers 2008b). GC (in Rogers 2008a) heard one in a reed bed about 2 km N of Paringa on 19 October 2005. O'Connor, Rogers and Pisanu (2013) heard *I. dubius* at three sites around Lakes Alexandrina and Albert (Finniss River, Clayton Bay and Narrung) during a systematic survey of cryptic birds in reed beds in September – December 2012.

This note details recent evidence of *I. dubius* breeding along the River Murray near Renmark, South Australia.

BREEDING REPORT

While canoeing along the mainstream of the River Murray about 10 km N of Renmark on 29 March 2009, KT's attention was drawn to an Australian Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus australis*, in an emergent *Typha* reed bed on the edge of the river. Another larger brown bird was noticed moving near the Reed Warbler, and they both appeared at the edge of the reed bed. KT took several photos (Figure 1a, b) from his canoe as the bird walked through the reeds about 15 cm above the water, easily grasping the reed stems with its long green toes and occasionally slowing to peck at insects on the reeds. KT approached within a few metres while the bird continued without concern, finally after about five minutes disappearing into the reeds.



Figure 1a, b. Juvenile Australian Little Bittern photographed near Renmark

Images K. Treloar

The bird was recognised as a young *Ixobrychus* bittern based on its streaked underparts and mottled wing coverts. The dark malar stripe, shorter and stouter bill and long, dark streaks on the breast identify it as *I. dubius* rather than the similar Yellow Bittern, *I. sinensis* (Marchant and Higgins 1990). The bird also had a patch of long pale wispy down on its crown, indicating that it was recently fledged.

KT camped nearby but did not note any bitterns calling, although was unfamiliar with the call of *I. dubius* at that time.

DISCUSSION

The observation of a young *I. dubius* near Renmark indicates that the species had nested nearby, thus is the first report of breeding along the River Murray and only the second nesting site known in South Australia.

Because *I. dubius* is very secretive and spends most of its time concealed within dense reed beds, it is likely that most nesting is overlooked. Locating nests within dense reeds growing in deep water is also challenging (Jaensch 1989). Given the timing of records along the river (spring-summer) it is considered likely that *I. dubius* breeds widely adjacent the River Murray and Lakes Alexandrina and Albert wherever extensive dense, emergent reed beds occur.

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- K. Treloar**
P.O. Box 266
Minlaton SA 5575
- G. Carpenter**
24 Dryden Rd
Black Forest SA 5035