

Bird Note

The observation and photographic documentation of an Australasian Bittern catching and consuming a small mammal

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Tolderol Game Reserve, a 428 hectare wetland conservation area 75 km SE of Adelaide, provides habitat for a range of wetland birds from shallow ponds where water levels are manipulated to encourage migratory waders to reed beds fringing Lake Alexandrina. Over a two year

period, 2015-2017, an adult and a juvenile Australasian Bittern, *Botaurus poiciloptilus*, were seen by Regina Durbridge (pers. comm.) walking along a track surrounded by very high Common Reeds, *Phragmites australis*, near Bay 11 (Figure 1).

The Australasian Bittern is mostly nocturnal, cryptic and elusive, but Colin Rogers reports that Australasian Bitterns expose themselves and walk around in the open during winter (C. Rogers pers. comm.). It is known to feed on small fish, frogs, invertebrates and small snakes, and thought to prey on small mammals (Menkhorst and Silcocks 2012).

On 12 June 2017 at approximately 1500 h I was driving slowly along a track through very high Common Reed searching for the juvenile Australasian Bittern when I saw an adult sitting

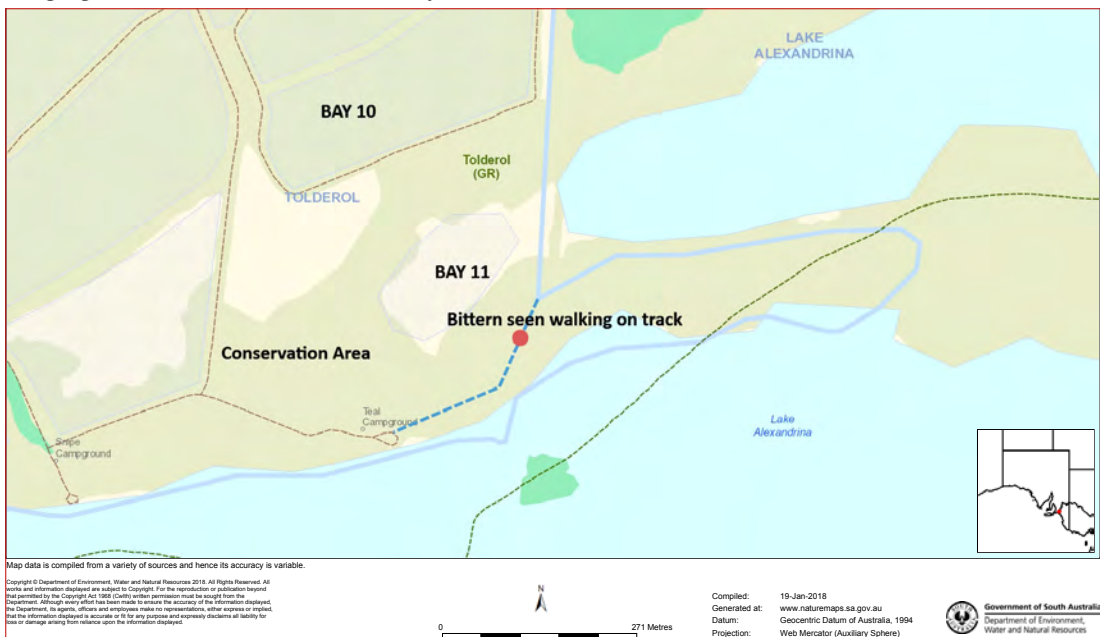


Figure 1. Map of portion of Tolderol Game Reserve

in the middle of the track in a typical pose with its head held upwards, but in full view and not in the reeds (Figure 2). I stopped the car and took several photos of the bird slowly walking along the edge of the track (Figure 3).

The bird was not bothered by my presence, even when I got out of the car and lowered myself to the ground to get a better angle for photography. Suddenly, the bittern thrust its head towards the ground next to the reeds and came up with a House Mouse, *Mus musculus*, in its bill (Figure 4).

I observed and photographed the Australasian Bittern struggling with the House Mouse (Figures 5, 6 and 7). The bird did not shake or batter the House Mouse, but manipulated the struggling animal into position before, after many seconds, swallowing it head first. The



Figure 2. The Australasian Bittern as first seen on the track near Bay 11, in typical pose. Just after this shot was taken the bird started to walk away down the track very slowly as seen in Figures 3 - 9. All images were taken with a Nikon D700 DSLR camera with a Nikon 200-500 mm zoom lens set on 500 mm.

Image John Gitsham



Figure 3. The Australasian Bittern skulking along the track prior to catching the mouse
Image John Gitsham

House Mouse could be seen as a lump in the bittern's crop area (Figure 8) and then the bird raised its head a couple of times and swallowed the animal. It stretched its head up a couple more times and then resumed walking slowly along the track. As I continued to photograph the bird for another 2-3 minutes, following for it for about 20 m, it took flight and disappeared over the reeds and was not seen again for the rest of the day.

Some publications list small mammals as part of the diet of the Australasian Bittern; for example, the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* records food items as:

Fish, especially eels, amphibians, crustaceans, snails, insects and other arthropods, reptiles, small mammals and even birds.

(Del Hoyo, Elliott and Sargatal 1992, p. 428).

The *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* lists:

Medium-sized aquatic animals, including eels, frogs and freshwater crayfish ... Recorded taking ... rats and mice.

(Marchant and Higgins 1990, p. 1058-9).

The new *Australian Bird Guide*, on the Australasian Bittern, states:

Found in swamps with tall dense vegetation, especially reeds, rushes and sedges ... where they forage, slowly stalking medium-sized



Figure 4. Soon after capturing the mouse



Figure 5. Manipulating the mouse in the bill



Figure 6. The mouse is struggling and the bittern continues to squeeze it into position



Figure 7. The mouse has stopped struggling and is flipped around head-first and swallowed



Figure 8. The mouse is seen as a bulge in the crop area of the bittern's throat



Figure 9. The bittern stretched its neck up twice before fully swallowing the mouse

All images John Gitsham

aquatic animals (e.g. frogs, eels, crayfish) or standing and lunging.
(Menkhorst *et al.* 2017, p. 192).

In July 2003 Peter Menkhorst and Andrew Silcocks observed on two occasions an Australasian Bittern catching and consuming a House Mouse at Werribee Treatment Works, Werribee, Victoria, though no photographs were taken of the events (Menkhorst and Silcocks 2004).

The paucity of records of the Australasian Bittern including mammals in their diet suggests that it is a rare event, but as a large cryptic wetland bird, they need to be opportunistic when foraging and probably eat whatever comes their way.

The mouse plague in parts of South Australia following high rainfall in 2016-17 would offer mice as a readily available food source to Australasian Bitterns.

The action of the Australasian Bittern walking casually in the open and unperturbed by my presence surprised me. They are a reasonably large bird standing at about 400-500 mm (Del Hoyo, Elliott and Sargatal 1992), so would be difficult for a raptor to take, but the Australasian Bittern is exposing itself to land predators like foxes, *Vulpes vulpes*, and domestic cats, *Felis catus*, that frequent the wetlands, when it is stalking for food in the open.

In summary this sighting of an Australasian Bittern capturing and consuming a House Mouse

is rare and is the first to offer photographic evidence of the event. Little has been published on the prey items of the Australasian Bittern (Menkhorst and Silcocks 2004), making this record worthy of publication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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