

Meet the Endangered 'Bunyip Bird'

When disturbed, the Australasian Bittern often stands motionless with its neck and bill pointing upwards, making it difficult to spot in the vegetation



Species description

The Australasian Bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) is a large (66-67 cm), stocky, thick-necked heron with mottled buff-and-brown plumage. It mostly occurs singly or in pairs, usually within beds of reeds, rushes or sedges in freshwater wetlands. With its cryptic plumage, it is heard more often than it is seen.

During the breeding season (September-January), males utter a distinctive, resonant booming call, repeated several times in succession, calling most frequently at dusk and before dawn. The eerie booming call of the Australasian Bittern is said to have been the origin of the Aboriginal and colonialist myth of the Bunyip, a mythical creature said to live in creeks, swamps, billabongs, riverbeds and waterholes.

You can listen to the call by going to the Australasian Bittern profile on our website

birdlife.org.au/bird-profile/australasian-bittern

Habitat and Status

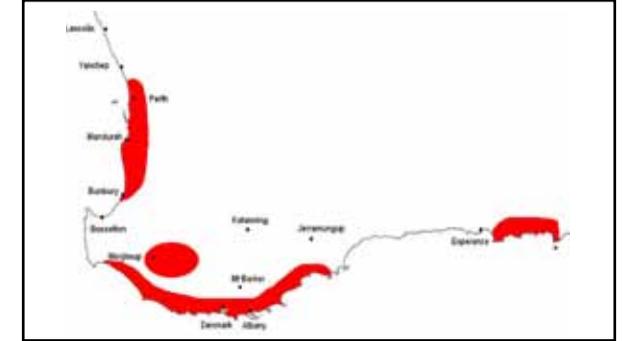
Australasian Bitterns need large, relatively undisturbed freshwater wetlands with large areas of cover such as rushes and sedges that are inundated by water. They feed on a variety of small animals including frogs, mice, fish and gilgies.

There has been a rapid loss of suitable natural habitat in WA for the Australasian Bittern over the past 30 years. Groundwater use, changes in drainage, salinisation and wetland acidification have all contributed to wetland habitat degradation. It is estimated that the species has declined by 24% to 51% in WA since the 1980s. In 2009, the WA population was estimated to be only between 38-154 adults.

With declines in the population in other parts of Australia and a global population of less than 2500 mature birds, the species is listed as Endangered under the EPBC Act (1999) in Australia and globally in the IUCN Red List.

Distribution

Australasian Bitterns are found in south-west Western Australia, south-eastern Australia and New Zealand. In WA, they are confined to the southwest in four main areas: the Swan Coastal Plain, Manjimup wetlands, the south coast from Augusta to Bremer Bay and from Esperance to Cape Arid.



The key areas above are those with sufficient rainfall and large freshwater wetlands that are suitable for breeding. Good quality habitat is essential for successful breeding.

During non-breeding periods, the species uses wetlands outside these areas that provide food and shelter. They pass through inland areas, such as Katanning, and have been found in Busselton.



Identification guide

Australasian Bitterns can be confused with juvenile Nankeen Night-Herons, which are slightly smaller, more lightly built and have white spots on the back and wings. Nankeen Night-Herons also have a more hunched posture and are more likely to perch in trees compared to Australasian Bitterns.



Above: Juvenile Nankeen Night-Heron perched in a tree (left) and in the typical hunched posture (right).



Above: Australasian Bitterns rise awkwardly on large, broad wings with rounded tips, and with their legs dangling (left). They have a less hunched posture (bottom right) compared to Nankeen Night-Herons (top right).

How you can help

- Volunteer in surveys conducted largely in spring, but also summer and autumn
- If you are lucky enough to see or hear an Australasian Bittern please note the date, time and the location (with a GPS if possible) and report it to WA's Australasian Bittern project coordinator

Contact us

Please contact **Robyn Pickering**, Birdlife WA's Australasian Bittern Coordinator, with sightings or to volunteer for the Bittern Project.

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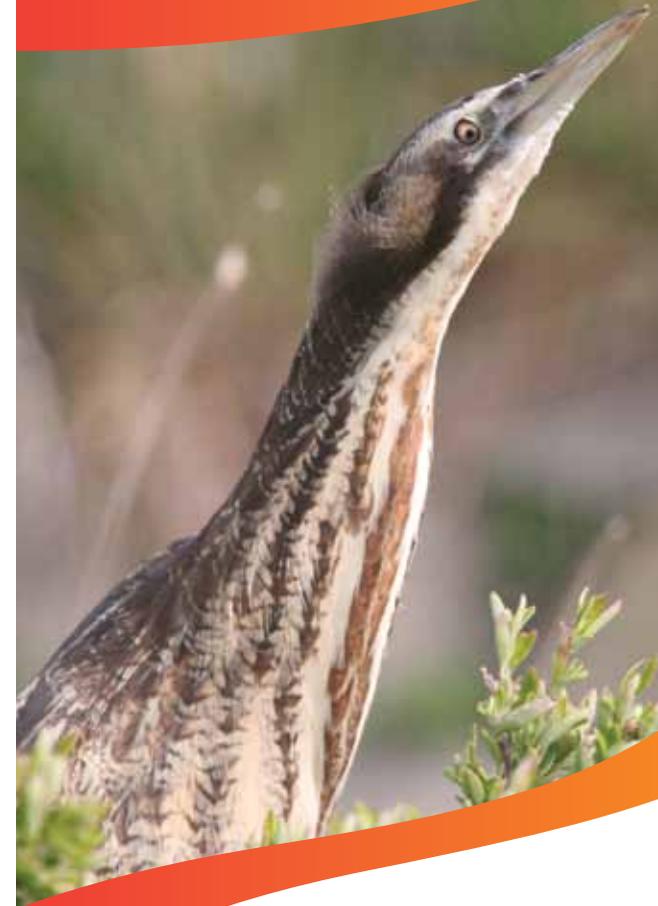
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Australasian Bittern

The Big Brown Boomer of Western Australia



birds are in our nature

