

Plumage Notes on the Little Bittern

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Two species of the small bitterns *Ixobrychus* have been recorded from Australia, the Little Bittern *I. minutus* and the Yellow Bittern *I. sinensis*. Although considered by Condon (1975) to be rare in Australia, the Little Bittern is the species that can be expected to be encountered in most instances. The Yellow Bittern, found through India, China, and Southeast Asia, has only been recorded in Australia once, from Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, in 1968. It has, however, been recently reported from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (Hansen, 1976). Problems occasionally arise in the identification of specimens of the small bitterns and, if based solely on plumage, misidentification, even of birds in the hand, can occur.

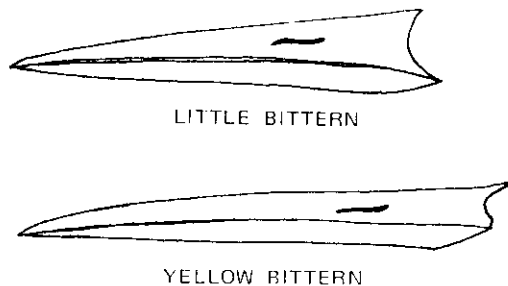
The sexes of the Little Bittern are incorrectly listed as similar in Slater (1970) and Reader's Digest (1976), as this widespread Old World species is one of the few herons to demonstrate sexual dichromatism. The adult male, with its diagnostic black back, cannot be confused with any of the plumages of the Yellow Bittern. This plumage is illustrated in Slater (plate 15, figure 6) and MacDonald (1973, plate 2). It is with the female that difficulties may arise. This plumage is not illustrated in any readily available reference book and bears a close similarity in colouration of the back to that of the adult Yellow Bittern (Fig. 1). Female Little Bitterns bear less resemblance to Slater's illustrated male than they do to the pictured Yellow Bittern (plate 15, figure 8) and consequently, on the basis of these illustrations, yellowish-brown backed individuals may be incorrectly identified.



● Figure 1. Back colouration of dorsal surfaces of small bitterns (left to right) Little Bittern (male, female); Yellow Bittern.

Photo: G. Millen

The most distinctive character separating these two species is the length of the bill (Fig. 2). Slater gives the lengths as 1.7 inches (43 mm) in the Little Bittern and 2 inches (52 mm) in the Yellow Bittern. Although individual variation in bill length occurs, this character is diagnostic.



● Figure 2. Bills of small bitterns (life size).

In light of the recent Papua New Guinea reports, the possibility of the Yellow Bittern re-occurring in Australia is greatly increased, and some may have already passed undetected. It is doubtful whether the brownish backed forms can be separated in the field unless the bird can be inspected in the hand and the bill measured. It is at present best to assume that all small bitterns encountered in Australia are Little Bitterns.

References

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