

TAXON SUMMARY

Little Bittern (Australasian)

1	Family	Ardeidae
2	Scientific name	<i>Ixobrychus minutus dubius</i> (Mathews, 1912)
3	Common name	Little Bittern (Australasian)
4	Conservation status	Near Threatened: c

5 Reasons for listing

Although still widespread, the area of suitable habitat within the subspecies' range is possibly less than half its pre-European extent (Near Threatened: c). The population probably contains only 5,000 mature individuals, but is possibly divided between east and south-west with one sub-population of more than 1,000 individuals (so not Vulnerable: C2a), and there is no real evidence of a recent decline (so not C2b). Given that most of the population occurs within Australia, the subspecies' global status is probably the same, regardless of the high probability of genetic interchange.

Australian population	Estimate	Reliability
Extent of occurrence	1,400,000 km ²	high
trend	stable	high
Area of occupancy	1,500 km ²	low
trend	stable	high
No. of breeding birds	5,000	low
trend	stable	medium
No. of sub-populations	2	medium
Largest sub-population	5,000	low
Generation time	5 years	low
Global population share	70 %	low
Level of genetic exchange	medium	high

6 Intraspecific taxa

None of the other recognised subspecies, *I. m. minutus* (Europe, western Siberia, Mediterranean, Middle east to Kashmir), *I. m. payesii* (Africa) or *I. m. podiceps* (Madagascar), occurs in Australian territory. Global status of species is Least Concern.

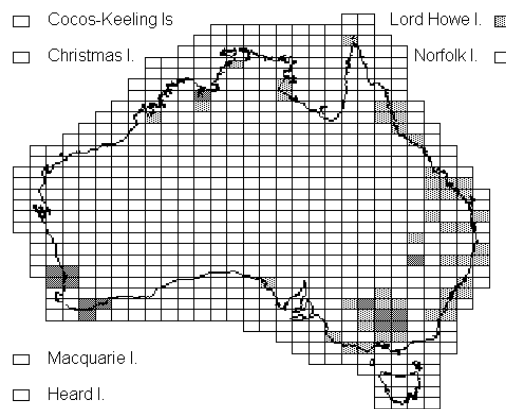
7 Past range and abundance

Coastal and subcoastal eastern and northern Australia, with greatest concentrations in Murray-Darling Basin, Kimberley and north-east Queensland. Also south-west Western Australia, notably south-west of Albany to Perth, where birds constitute a second sub-population (Jaensch, 1988, Marchant and Higgins, 1990). Extralimital population in New Guinea, where breeding residents are probably augmented in dry season by winter migrants from Australia (Draffan *et al.*, 1983, Blakers *et al.*, 1984, Jaensch, 1995). Australian population also vagrant to New Zealand, where a sibling species now extinct (Marchant and Higgins, 1990). Recorded breeding at Murray-Darling Basin, in

south-west Australia and at Kununurra, but possibly breeds throughout range (Blakers *et al.*, 1984, Marchant and Higgins, 1990, Johnstone and Storr, 1998).

8 Present range and abundance

As above.



9 Ecology

Little Bitterns frequent terrestrial freshwater wetlands that have dense emergent vegetation (Marchant and Higgins, 1990). They also use artificial wetlands, even in built-up areas. Little Bitterns eat small, aquatic invertebrates and tadpoles, and nest in dense vegetation over water (Jaensch, 1988, Marchant and Higgins, 1990). Ad hoc sightings indicate that some wetlands are used repeatedly.

10 Threats

salinisation, drainage and diversion of water for irrigation has destroyed many wetlands that were once used by Little Bittern in both the Murray-Darling basin and south-western Australia, and are continuing threats to the subspecies (Marchant and Higgins, 1990, Kingsford and Thomas, 1995, Kingsford and Johnson, 1998). Burning around wetlands also destroys the Little Bittern's nesting habitat which may take many years to recover (R. Jaensch). Extinction of a sibling species from New Zealand *I. novaezelandiae*, suggests the bittern could be susceptible to a variety of threatening processes.

11 Recommended actions

- 11.1 Develop methods for assessing population trends.
- 11.2 Identify principal breeding wetlands.

- 11.3 Protect and manage principal breeding wetlands.
- 11.4 Rehabilitate selected former breeding wetlands through Landcare.

12 Bibliography

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