

## Endangered Species and Spaces

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### 4.4 American Bittern: *Botaurus lentiginosus* (Rackett)

Order: *Ciconiiformes*  
Family: *Ardeidae*

#### Status

Global Rank: G4  
Provincial Rank: S3B, SZN  
COSEWIC: not addressed

Provincial Listing: [Blue list](#)



#### Distinguishing Features

Upper parts and back are yellowish brown with small spots, bars streaks and freckles of darker browns and buffs. Throat is whitish with brown stripe down its centre. Black streak down the sides of the neck, when seen, is diagnostic. Breast, sides, and abdomen are white, broadly streaked with brown. Bill yellow with blackish ridge. Legs and feet are greenish-yellow. Loud, croaking voice. (Godfrey, 1986).

#### Distribution

Columbia Basin: Locally distributed in wetlands throughout the Columbia Basin.

British Columbia: Breeding occurs in lowland marshes in lakes, ponds, and rivers in south and central interior British Columbia and in the lower Fraser Valley. Undiscovered breeding sites likely exist further north in lowland river valleys such as the Skeena, Nechako, and Peace River drainages (Cannings et al. In prep.).

Global: Breeds from c. British Columbia, s. Mackenzie, c. Saskatchewan, n. Manitoba, n. Ontario, ne. Quebec and Newfoundland south to California, Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Virginia and Maryland; locally in Texas, Louisiana and Florida. Winters from sw. British Columbia, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Delaware south to Panama and the Caribbean (Cannings et al. In prep.).

#### Habitat

American Bitterns usually breed in wet areas with dense growths of tall emergent vegetation or tall grasses adjacent to freshwater sloughs, marshes, swamps, and shallow, protected sections of lakes between sea level and 1300 m elevation. American Bitterns forage primarily in marshes, but also sloughs, lake edges, swamps, river banks, sewage ponds, and fields (Cannings et al. In prep.).

## Threats

Populations are in general decline across North America, and perhaps in British Columbia as well, although specific data for this province are lacking. Local declines are evident in the lower Fraser River valley, and are well documented in the Okanagan Valley. American Bitterns are moderately threatened by draining of their wetland habitats for urban and agricultural purposes. Long-term decline in available habitat is expected, particularly in the southern portions of the province with the highest human populations. Run-off from adjacent agricultural areas may indirectly affect breeding bitterns since prey species may be sensitive to agricultural pesticides (Cannings et al. In prep.).

## Biology

American Bitterns normally nest as solitary pairs. Dry fields and marshes are occasionally used for nesting. Major food items include insects, fishes, crustaceans, amphibians, snakes and small mammals. Although a few over-winter along the coast, most American Bitterns in British Columbia are migratory, returning in April and early May to nest in May and June. The average clutch is 4 or 5 eggs in British Columbia, which are incubated for 24 - 28 days by the female only. Nestling period is about two weeks, but the length of the fledging period is unknown. Autumn migration occurs primarily in late September and early October in southern British Columbia. (Godfrey 1986, Cannings et al. In prep.).



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