

## Least Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis*

An uncommon to rare and localized resident of marshes of cattail and tule, the Least Bittern is one of the more difficult species for the San Diego County birder to see. It is somewhat more numerous—or maybe just more conspicuous—in summer. Nevertheless, atlas observers found it to be regular in winter, a status it did not have—or was unknown—25 years earlier. Another perspective on the Least Bittern in San Diego County comes from wildlife rehabilitators. Each year, in late summer and fall, they receive several dispersing juvenile Least Bitterns that met a mishap in urban areas unsuitable for them.

**Breeding distribution:** Habitat for the Least Bittern lies largely in the coastal lowland, at brackish lagoons and lakes, ponds, and streams inland. Our most frequent sites for the species during the atlas period were O'Neill Lake, Camp Pendleton (E6; up to four on 21 and 29 July 1998, P. A. Ginsburg), the San Diego River between Santee and



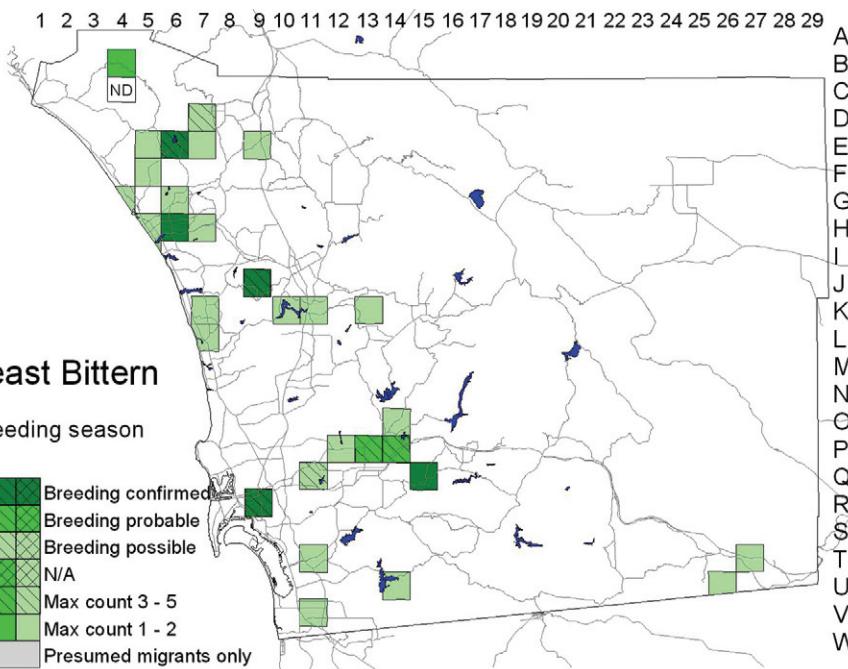
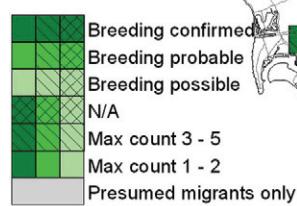
Photo by Dave Furseth

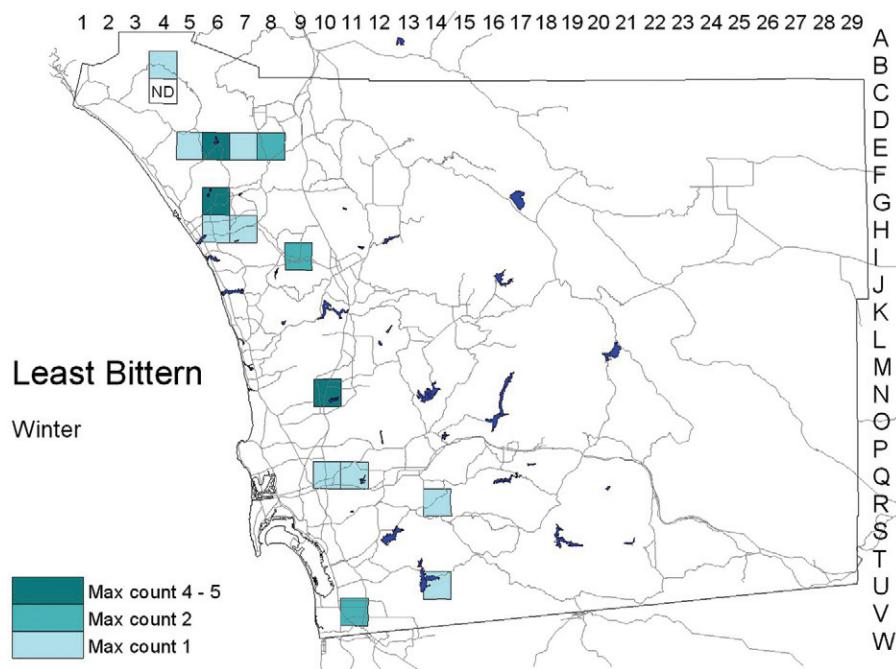
Lakeside (P13; up to three on 26 April 1997, D. C. Seals), and Lake Murray (Q11; up to three on 22 August 1998, S. R. Helm). All sites where we recorded the species in spring and summer represent likely breeding sites, but the only locations where we actually confirmed breeding 1997–2001 were O'Neill Lake (fledgling 21 July 1998, P.

A. Ginsburg), the east basin of Buena Vista Lagoon (H6; adult feeding young 18 July 1999, L. E. Taylor), Discovery Lake, San Marcos (J9; fledgling 17 May 1998, J. O. Zimmer), the borrow pit in the Sweetwater River at Dehesa (Q15; fledgling 14 June 2001, H. L. Young), and the San Diego River in Mission Valley near Mission Center Road (R9; four fledglings with adult 3 May 1997, J. K. Wilson). Least Bitterns are known to nest also at San Elijo Lagoon (King et al. 1987). It is likely that only the species' secretive habits accounted for our missing it at some sites where it had been seen repeatedly before the atlas period, especially Guajome Lake (G7) and the upper end of Batiquitos Lagoon (J7).

## Least Bittern

### Breeding season





The Least Bittern also occurs rarely on the Campo Plateau. Sams and Stott (1959) reported it at Campo Lake (U22). We found it twice at Lake Domingo (U26; one on 24 June 1999 and 21 April 2000) and three times at Tule Lake (T27), the best habitat for it in this region (one on 20 April and 3 July 2000; two, including an independent juvenile, 6 June 2001, J. K. Wilson, F. L. Unmack).

**Nesting:** The Least Bittern hides its nest effectively, screening it with a canopy of surrounding vegetation as well as building within the marsh itself. It is no surprise that atlas observers found no nests. Dates of eight egg sets collected 1901–37 range from 20 May to 8 July, but our earliest date of fledglings during the atlas period, 3 May, implies egg laying as early as about 1 April. A family of three fledglings with adults along the San Diego River in Mission Valley 16 August 1990 must have hatched

from eggs laid in early July (P. Unitt).

**Migration:** With the increase in winter records of the Least Bittern, the species no longer follows a clearly defined seasonal schedule. Nevertheless, juveniles found away from marshes in developed areas demonstrate at least short-distance dispersal. Their dates range from 25 June (1991, near Chollas Reservoir, R11, SDNHM 47680) to 30 September (1998, Paradise Hills, T11, SDNHM 50223).

**Winter:** We noted the Least Bittern in winter on 44 occasions at about 16 sites from 1997 to 2002. Our largest winter numbers were five at O'Neill Lake 4 December 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg), four at Windmill

Lake (G6) 26 December 1998 (P. Unitt), and four at Miramar Lake (N10) 29 January 1998 (M. B. Stowe). Most of the winter records are from sites where the species was regular during the breeding season. All are in the coastal lowland, and most are in northwestern San Diego County where freshwater marshes are more frequent.

**Conservation:** Numbers of the Least Bittern are generally thought to have declined in parallel with the elimination of freshwater marshes. The species is so difficult to monitor, however, that real evidence for a decline is lacking at least in San Diego County. Its history in Mission Valley shows it retains the ability to recolonize regenerated habitat. In 1988, all vegetation along the San Diego River between Highway 163 and Stadium Way was removed, and the river banks were recontoured, as part of the “First San Diego River Improvement Project.” The bitterns recolonized and nested successfully in 1990, the first year in which stands of cattails had regrown to full size.

Before 1981, there were only eight San Diego County records for December and January (Unitt 1984). It is unclear whether the apparent increase in winter is real or whether it is an artifact of birders covering the wintering sites more consistently and being more aware of the species’ calls.

**Taxonomy:** All Least Bitterns in North America are nominate *I. e. exilis* (Gmelin, 1789); the supposed western subspecies *I. e. hesperis* Dickey and van Rossem, 1924, is invalid (Dickerman 1973).

