

HERONS AND BITTERNS — FAMILY ARDEIDAE

American Bittern *Botaurus lentiginosus*

A secretive bird of marshes, the American Bittern has long been considered primarily a winter visitor to San Diego County. In this role it is now rare and decreasing. In the breeding season the American Bittern is also rare, with the first suggestion of actual nesting only in 1983. Yet from 1997 to 2001 we found possibly breeding bitterns at eight sites, almost as many as where we found the species wintering—an unexpected twist. A family at the mouth of Las Flores Creek in 1998 provided us with the first evidence of successful fledging of American Bitterns in San Diego County, the southern tip of the species' breeding range along the Pacific coast.

Breeding distribution: In the marsh at the mouth of Las Flores Creek (E3), American Bitterns were regular in 1998 and 1999, with two calling males 15 May 1999 and one calling male, an apparent adult female, and a fledgling 6 June 1998 (R. and S. L. Breisch). The other sites where

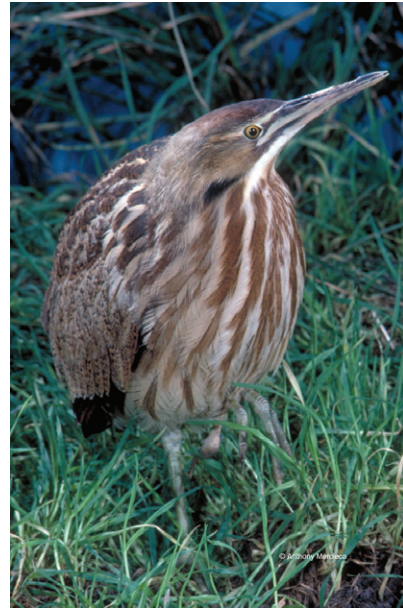
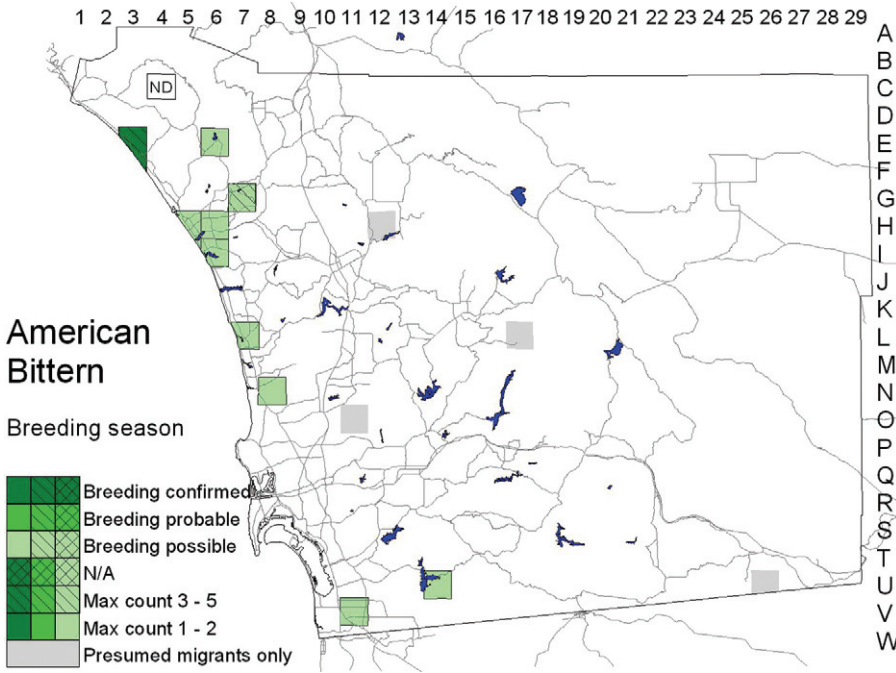
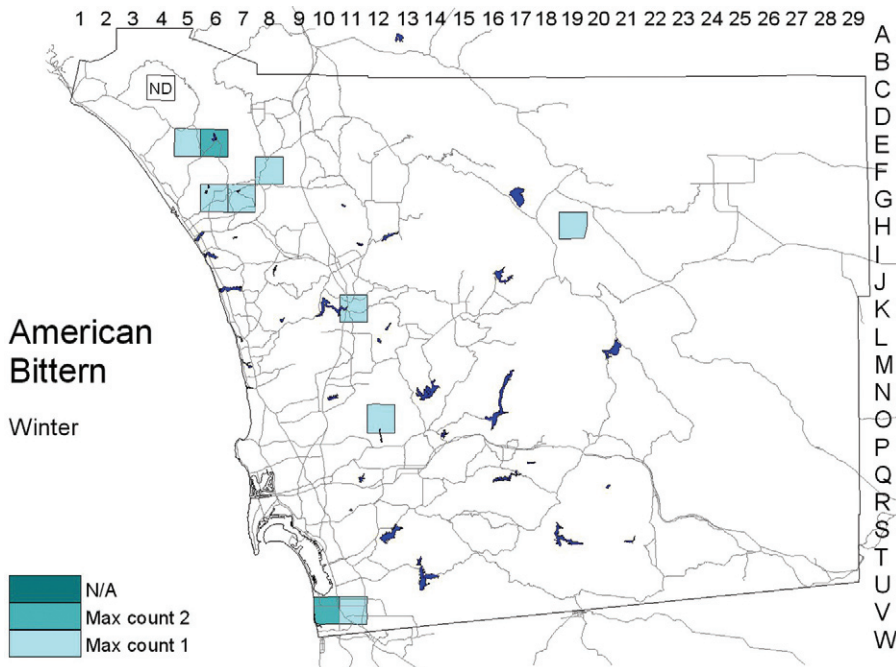


Photo by Anthony Mercieca



the species possibly bred during the atlas period were Guajome Lake (G7; up to five on 8 May 2001, C. Andregg), Buena Vista Lagoon (one west of Interstate 5, H5, 18 July 1998, K. Messer, and 29 May 2001, R. Gransbury; two east of the freeway, H6, 11 August 1998, J. Ginger), the mouth of Agua Hedionda Creek (I6; one on 22 April 1998, W. E. Haas), San Elijo Lagoon (L7; four records of single birds, one as late as 1 June 1998, A. Mauro), lower Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8; one on 7 May 2000, P. A. Ginsburg), and the Dairy Mart pond, Tijuana River valley (V11; up to two on 28 May 2001, G. McCaskie). The species had summered at least irregularly at Guajome Lake, San Elijo Lagoon, and the Tijuana River valley since the 1980s.



One at O'Neill Lake (E6) 19 April 1999 was in suitable habitat but not relocated in spite of thorough coverage so was most likely a late migrant (P. A. Ginsburg). Unexpected were two American Bitterns away from extensive marshes in midsummer: one in Woods Valley (H12) 19 June 1998 (W. E. Haas) and one along the San Diego River near Boulder Creek (L17) 28 June 1997 (R. C. Sanger).

Nesting: American Bittern nests are usually built over water within dense marshes, making them difficult to find. The only nesting confirmation in San Diego County before that at Las Flores Creek was a sighting of one carrying nest material at Border Field State

Park (W10) 26 June 1983 (J. Oldenettel).

Migration: At O'Neill Lake, which P. A. Ginsburg covered intensively year round, he found the American Bittern in the spring as late as 19 April (1999) and in fall as early as 27 August (1997 and 1998). Outside the coastal lowland, records of spring migrants are of one at Jacumba (U28) 10 April 1976 (G. McCaskie), two at Lake Domingo (U26) 17 April 1998 (F. L. Unmack), one at Lower Willows, Coyote Creek (D23), 25 April 1981 (A. G. Morley), and one in the unsuitable habitat of Tamarisk Grove Campground (I24) 25 April 1982 (D. K. Adams). Records of fall migrants are of one found dead along Henderson

Canyon Road, Borrego Valley (E24) 29 September 2002 (P. D. Jorgensen, SDNHM 50681) and one at Little Pass, between Earthquake and Blair valleys (K24), 3 October 1975 (ABDSP database).

Winter: During the atlas period we noted the American Bittern in winter 22 times at 11 sites, all but one in the coastal lowland and most in the valleys of the lower Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers. Our only sightings of more than a single individual were of two at O'Neill Lake 13 December 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg) and two in the Tijuana River estuary (V10) 24 January 1998 (B. C. Moore). The salt marsh in the Tijuana estuary was our only winter site

for the species that was not freshwater marsh.

The American Bittern has been noted twice on Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts, apparently the only winter records for the species at higher elevations in San Diego County: one at Lake Henshaw (G17) 19 December 1983 (D. K. Adams et al.) and one in Matagual Valley (H19) 18 December 2000 (G. Morse).

Conservation: Both atlas results and Christmas bird counts reveal a downward trend in the number of American Bitterns wintering in San Diego County. In the 1970s, counts at the Santa Margarita River mouth, Batiquitos Lagoon, and San Elijo Lagoon ranged up to

four or five per day (Unitt 1984, King et al. 1987), but these numbers could not be equaled from 1997 to 2002 despite greater effort. The annual average on San Diego Christmas bird counts from 1975 to 1984 was 1.6 but dropped to 0.7 from 1992 to 2001. On the Oceanside count, the annual average over the same periods dropped from 3.1 to 0.9. Presumably the change in San Diego County reflects the decline across the species' range, due to the elimination and degradation of wetlands (Gibbs et al. 1992). Stephens (1919a) called the American Bittern "rather common"; Sams and Stott (1959) wrote that it was easily found at Mission Bay before most of the marsh there was destroyed in the 1950s.