

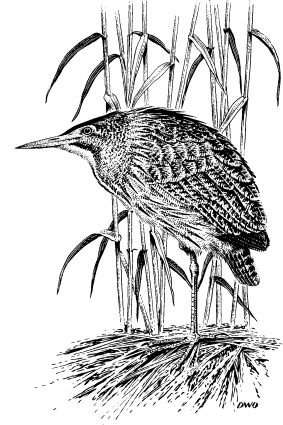


BITTERN

Botaurus stellaris

1. INTRODUCTION

The bittern is a rare and secretive golden-brown relative of the grey heron that inhabits swamps and well-vegetated wetlands, especially reedbeds. Food is mainly taken within the cover of vegetation and birds spend much of their time standing motionless between reed stems, watching for fish and amphibians. These form the major part of their diet, though aquatic invertebrates and occasionally small mammals and birds are also taken. Within Europe, the northern and eastern populations are migratory and some of these birds winter in the UK, especially in hard weather. Although a rare bird in the sub-region, up to four have regularly wintered at a site in the north of the county in recent times.



© Natural England

2. OUR OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

	Target
A. To maintain and increase the size of the regularly wintering population to at least five birds.	2010
B. To increase the range by having wintering bitterns regularly present on at least two sites.	2010
C. To maintain the extent and maintain / improve the condition of existing reedbeds, with priority given to those holding UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species and Red Data Book species.	by 2005
D. To have breeding bitterns in Warwickshire.	by 2014

ASSOCIATED HABITAT PLANS

- Reedbeds

ASSOCIATED SPECIES PLANS

3. NATIONAL BAP OBJECTIVES & TARGETS

- *Arrest the decline of the bittern, maintaining at least 20 booming birds*
- *Start to increase the population before the year 2000*
- *Arrest the decline of the bittern, maintaining its present range*
- *Start to increase the range before the year 2000*
- *Increase the population to 50 booming males by 2010*
- *Achieve a population of not less than 100 booming males by 2020*
- *Increase the number of sites containing booming males to 22 by 2010*

(Revised as of 2003, which differ from those originally published on the UK Biodiversity website)

4. CURRENT STATUS

The bittern has an unfavourable conservation status in Europe, where it is said to be vulnerable, with breeding numbers having recently declined in most countries. In the UK it is on the Red Alert list, though numbers have improved, with 2001 being the best year for a decade (Gilbert et al. 2001). Even so, the average breeding population during 1997-2001 was just 19 pairs (Gregory et al. 2002) and these were largely confined to a few sites in Lancashire, Norfolk and Suffolk. However, winter numbers are swollen up to 100 through immigration from the continent.

So far as is known, bitterns have never bred in the sub-region, but up to three birds (on one occasion possibly four) have been regularly recorded at Ladywalk (North Warwickshire) in every winter since 1993/4 (except for 1994/5). This is now one of the most regular wintering sites in the UK and it is known that one bird, carrying an expired RSPB radio transmitter, originated from either Leighton Moss (Lancashire) or Minsmere (Suffolk). Two birds also wintered at Brandon Marsh SSSI in 2003/4.

4.1 Legal and Policy Status

The bittern is listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive and Appendix III of the Berne Convention. It is also protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

4.2 Current Factors Affecting The Species

The main threats to the future of bitterns in Warwickshire are:

- **Lack of large areas of reedbeds**
- **Population size:** such a small, migratory population is extremely vulnerable.
- **Disturbance:** from incompatible activities on adjoining land, e.g. water-ski-ing at Dosthill pool.

5. CURRENT LOCAL ACTION

- The WMBC obtains advice from the RSPB about how to manage the Ladywalk reserve for the benefit of bitterns. It is hoped to increase the size of the reedbed in an attempt to create suitable conditions for the birds to breed.
- New reedbeds have been planted at Brandon Marsh, Kingsbury Water Park and Middleton Quarry, which straddles the county boundary between Staffordshire and Warwickshire. These will all increase the extent of the habitat available to bitterns. The Brandon Marsh work has already proved successful in attracting wintering bitterns.

6. PROPOSED LOCAL ACTIONS (some dates amended - Core Steering Group - Feb 2008)

ACTION	Lead	Partners	By	Meets objective
Policy & Legislation				
PL1. Include in Development Plans appropriate policies for the after-use of mineral workings and other land which would favour reedbed development.	NWBC	WM WWT RBC	review 2007	B, C, D
PL2. Ensure that all known bittern sites are considered for designation as SSSIs or SINCs.	WBRC	WSP WM NE WWT	2010	A, B, D
Site / Species Safeguard & Management				
SM1. Enhance any sites which are important for bitterns, including wintering birds.	WWT	RSPB NE WMBC	2010	A, B, C
SM2. Continue with the development of the new reedbeds at Brandon Marsh.	WWT	BMVG	review by 2010	C
SM3. Promote and support the creation of new reedbeds on suitable sites, such as surplus agricultural land, mineral extraction sites, etc.	WWT	WBRC NE RBC EA NWBC	2010	B, C
Advisory				
A1. Advise reedbed owners and managers of bittern requirements in order to promote appropriate management regimes.	RSPB	WM WWT	review 2005	A, B, C

Research & Monitoring				
RM1. Annually monitor the bittern population in Warwickshire.	WMBC	WWT	2004-2015 review annually	A, B, C
Communication & Publicity				
CP1. Use the bittern to promote the importance of reedbeds and their conservation.	RSPB	WM WMBC WWT	2004-2015 review 2005	A, B, C

Abbreviations: BMVG – Brandon Marsh Volunteer Group, Dev – Developer, EA – Environment Agency, NE – Natural England,, LA , NWBC – North Warwickshire Borough Council, RBC – Rugby Borough Council, RSPB – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, WBRC – Warwickshire Biological Record Centre, WM – Warwickshire Museum, WMBC – West Midland Bird Club, WSP – Wildlife Sites Project, WWT – Warwickshire Wildlife Trust.

7. REFERENCES

Gilbert,G. and Smith, K. (2001) . *'Bitterns in 2001'* in Birds Vol 18: 41-43, RSPB Sandy.

Gregory,R.D., Wilkinson,N.I., Noble,D.G., Robinson,J.A., Brown,F., Hughes,J., Proctor,D., Gibbons,D.W., and Galbraith,C. (2002). *'The Population Status of Birds in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and Isle of Man: an analysis of conservation concern 2002- 2007'* in British Birds 95: 410-448.

8. FURTHER INFORMATION (see separate **Links** web page for links to web sites)

UK Biodiversity Action Plan no.159
Natural England
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
EU LIFE Project Manager -Sarah Alsbury: email sarah.alsbury@rspb.org.uk

9. CONTACT

Graham Harrison, 'Bryher', Hatton Green, Hatton, Warwick CV35 7LA.