

Bittern

Grootrietreier

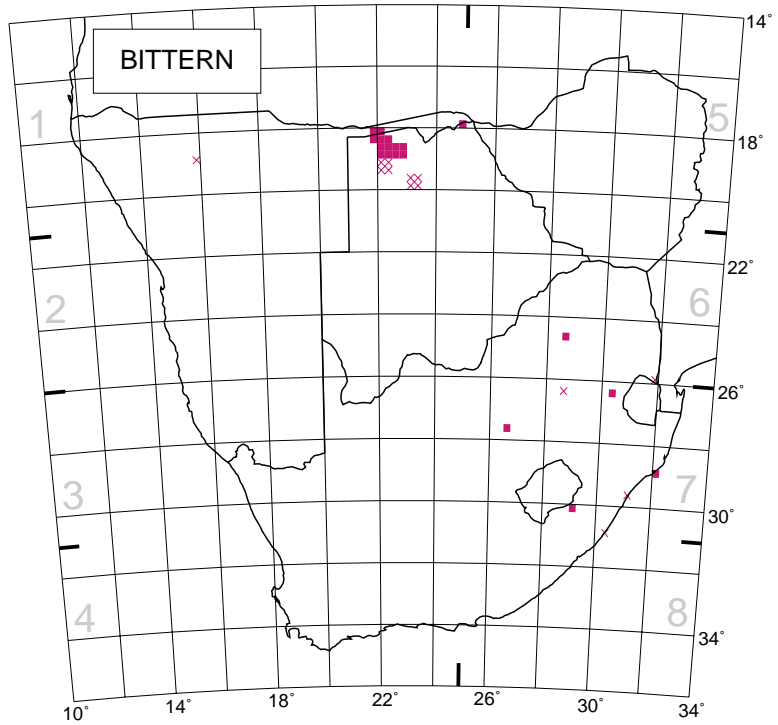
Botaurus stellaris

The nominate subspecies of the Bittern occurs in the Palearctic and Oriental regions, some migrating into Africa as far south as the equator (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). The race *B. s. capensis* is geographically isolated in southern and central Africa, and occurs outside the atlas region in Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Angola (Brooke 1984b; Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992).

Atlas records were widely scattered. In the Transvaal it was reported from four sites: the seasonally inundated floodplain at Nylsvley (2428DA), two permanent wetlands, namely Blesbokspruit (2628BC) and Mdzadi Vlei (2531DD), and a recently flooded dam near Lothair (2630AD). Three of the four KwaZulu-Natal localities are on the coast: Richards Bay (2832CC), north of Durban (2931CC), and south of Port Shepstone (3030CD). In the Free State the only record was from a reedbed below a dam (2726DA) during a period of high rainfall. It was reported in the wetlands of northern Botswana and the Caprivi Strip, where it is unaccountably rare (e.g. Penry 1994). There was one record close to Etosha Pan and there are three historical records from northern Namibia (Winterbottom 1971d).

It is highly inconspicuous, often revealed only by its 'booming' vocalizations during the breeding season. It is frequently confused with juvenile Black-crowned Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* (Brooke 1984b), but the atlas records were carefully vetted.

It inhabits tall, dense emergent vegetation, e.g. *Phragmites* reedbeds and tall beds of sedge, at large wetlands, apparently preferring seasonal over permanent marshes (Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), and is rarely seen out in the open. Its preference for seasonal wetlands suggests that it must be highly mobile, but details of its movements are unknown. The single atlas breeding record (a nest with eggs) came from Nylsvley during March 1991. Records of booming males and active nests in South Africa suggest an extended summer breeding season September–May (Clancey 1964b; Dean 1971; Tarboton *et al.* 1987b), and booming males have been heard in the Okavango April–June, the period of peak flooding (Brewster 1991; M. Herremans pers. comm.).



Recorded in 32 grid cells, 0.7%
 Total number of records: 39
 Mean reporting rate for range: 1.6%

A catastrophic decline in South Africa during the 20th century is attributed to wetland degradation (Brooke 1984b). It previously occurred as far west as Cape Town (3318CD) in the southwestern Cape Province, where it is now extinct (Brooke 1984b). It has disappeared from Lesotho and most of the Free State (Brooke 1984b). In the Transvaal (cf. Tarboton *et al.* 1987b) and KwaZulu-Natal, it no longer occurs at several historical localities. The only place in South Africa where it is now recorded with any regularity is Nylsvley. The Bittern is listed as 'vulnerable' in South Africa (Brooke 1984b) and, although it is not regarded as globally threatened (Collar *et al.* 1994), the southern African population merits the highest level of conservation concern.

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