

# Bittern

*Botaurus stellaris*



## Description

The Bittern is smaller than the closely related Heron and much more secretive. They are heavily camouflaged in shades of brown and buff with a variety of mottled markings.

Although rarely seen, the male's unmistakable booming call in spring is a good indication of potential breeding. The Bittern is dependent on large areas of reed for breeding. Bitterns have dramatically declined in recent years, due to habitat loss through drainage and decline of food supply such as fish and amphibians.

Bittern are still declining in many parts of the UK and it is now a rare breeding species, but progress is being made in some habitats as part of the RSPB national initiative.

Creating extensive 'phragmites' reed-beds in a fresh water habitat with abundant fish and amphibians as a source of food appears to be the key to success.

## National Status

The Bittern is a declining, localised and rare breeding species. It is confined almost entirely to lowland marshes in Norfolk, Suffolk and Lancashire, dominated by the common reed *Phragmites australis*. It feeds principally on fish and amphibians. The UK population had declined to 15 or 16 'booming' males in 1994 from a peak of 70 pairs in the late 1960s, when they bred in eight counties. Numbers are boosted in winter by continental migrants (usually less than 100).

## Local Status

Within Barnsley this species is recorded as a passage migrant or occasional winter visitor, but reedbed habitat creation has been carried out to encourage colonisation. There has been a major initiative to plant new reedbeds in the Lower Dearne Valley by the RSPB with the aim of attracting breeding birds.

## Legal Status

The Bittern is listed on Annex I of the EC Birds Directive and Appendix III of the Bern Convention. It is protected in the UK under Schedule I of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981.

## Links with other Action Plans

HAPI4 Reedbeds

### **Current Factors Causing Loss or Decline**

- Loss of suitable large reedbeds through succession, inappropriate management (particularly drainage and water abstraction).
- Degradation of habitat through water pollution, pesticide and heavy metal pollution.
- Food availability, especially of Eels, affected by inappropriate habitat management and pollution.
- Problems due to small isolated population size.

### **Current Local Action**

- Large reedbeds have been created at the RSPB's Old Moor site. These have been deliberately designed to attract Bittern.
- Reedbed management has been undertaken at Worsbrough Reservoir and this will hopefully attract wintering or even breeding Bittern.

### **Proposed Local Action**

- In partnership with Environment Agency (EA), RSPB and other landowners, look at improvements along the Dearne to benefit Bittern.
- Create additional hectares of new reedbed at Bolton Ings (RSPB) to support Bittern.
- Assess reedbed creation project at Worsbrough Reservoir and identify any further action required at this site.
- Identify and survey other sites in the borough for reedbed management, enhancement or creation.

### **BMBC Land Ownership and Management Actions**

- Seek to reduce tree encroachment on Barnsley MBC Carlton Marsh Local Nature Reserve (LNR) main lake.
- Consider dredging works to maintain suitable wetland habitat at Barnsley MBC Carlton Marsh LNR.