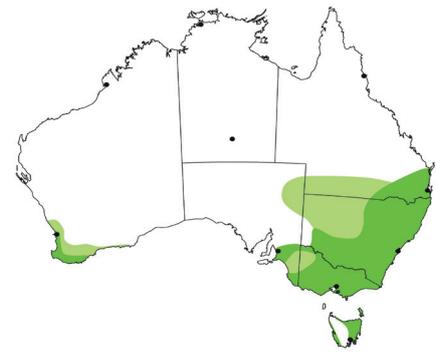


# The Australasian Bittern — 'the Bunyip bird'



The Australasian Bittern (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*) is a large (66-76 cm) stocky, thick-necked heron with mottled buff-and-brown plumage. These shy and unobtrusive birds prefer vegetated freshwater wetlands with reeds, sedges and rushes. Their highly cryptic plumage and retiring habits make them difficult to detect — often it is only their calls which advertise their presence.

During the breeding season (September to February) the males utter a distinctive, resonant booming call, repeated several times in succession, most frequently around dusk and dawn. The eerie booming call of the Australasian Bittern can carry for over a kilometre and was probably the origin of the Aboriginal and colonist myth of the Bunyip, a mythical creature said to live in creeks, swamps, billabongs and waterholes.



Distribution map of the Australasian Bittern in Australia

## Population status

Due to the loss and degradation of natural wetlands across the country, Australasian Bitterns have become increasingly uncommon. Groundwater use, changes in drainage, salinisation and wetland acidification have all contributed to wetland habitat degradation.

Low rainfall in recent years has resulted in many wetlands being too dry for Australasian Bitterns, highlighting the importance of those that maintain good water levels in dry years.

With declines in the population in Australia and a global population estimated of fewer than 2500 mature birds, the species is listed as Endangered under the EPBC Act (1999) in Australia and globally on the IUCN Red List.



## Distribution and habitat

Australasian Bitterns occur in southern Australia, and also New Zealand.

They mainly occur in areas where reliable rainfall sustains large freshwater wetlands (see map above right). Good quality habitat is essential for successful breeding. Australasian Bitterns prefer large, relatively undisturbed freshwater wetlands with large areas of suitable cover, such as rushes and sedges that are established in standing water.

During non-breeding periods, the species uses wetlands outside these areas where they can find suitable food and shelter. By monitoring a bird fitted with a tracking device, we know that bitterns pass through inland areas when travelling towards the coast.

Ongoing research is showing that rice farms play an important role in the survival of the Australasian Bittern in south-eastern Australia. With the reduction in natural swamps, these surrogate wetlands create suitable habitat for bitterns which have been shown to breed successfully in the crops.



## Conserve wetlands — healthy wetlands are the key

Australasian Bitterns can be considered to be the frogs of the bird world, highly susceptible to environmental changes and a strong indicator of wetland health. They are a top-order predator, eating a variety of wetland animals, such as frogs, fish, insects, mice, and yabbies.



An Australasian Bittern eating a Growling Grass Frog

You can help Australasian Bitterns by conserving freshwater wetlands on your property. Here are some ways to help you preserve or improve wetlands on your farm for Bitterns and other waterbirds.

- Manage stock access to water by fencing to reduce erosion, sedimentation and vegetation loss from grazing
- Minimise water drawdown near a wetland so that the water level is retained for longer.
- Maintain a buffer of native vegetation around the wetland to filter out nutrients, prevent erosion and to reduce sediments entering the wetlands.

## Mistaken identity

Australasian Bitterns can easily be confused with juvenile Nankeen Night-Herons, which are slightly smaller, more lightly built and have distinct white spots on the back and wings. Nankeen Night-Herons also have a more 'hunched' appearance and often perch in trees during the day, unlike Australasian Bitterns. In flight, Australasian Bitterns rise awkwardly on large, broad wings with rounded tips, and with dangling legs. In contrast, Nankeen Night Herons have a much more compact appearance while flying.



Juvenile Nankeen Night-Herons (left) often perch in trees and have a more hunched posture compared to Australasian Bitterns (right).

## Report sightings

Visit your local wetlands and keep a look out and listen for Australasian Bitterns. If you are lucky enough to see or hear an Australasian Bittern, please note the date, time and the location (with gps coordinates if possible) and report it to the Australasian Bittern project. For more information on Australasian Bitterns, go to our website [birdlife.org.au/bird-profile/Australasian-bittern](http://birdlife.org.au/bird-profile/Australasian-bittern)

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