

EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#21 NEW ZEALAND LITTLE BITTERN

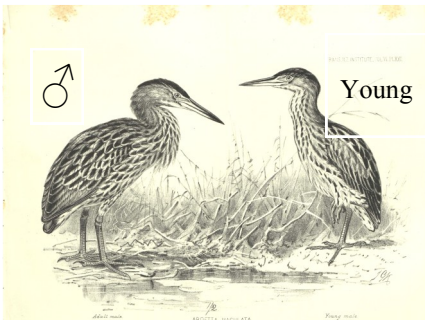


Illustration: John Gerrard Keulemans
(1842-1912)

From: A History of the Birds of New Zealand
By: Walter Lawry Buller

The New Zealand Little Bittern, *Ixobrychus novaezelandiae*, is an extinct species of heron in the Ardeidae family. It was endemic to New Zealand and was last recorded alive in the 1890s. Common names for the species include New Zealand Bittern, Black-backed Bittern, Spotted Heron, and *Kaoriki* (Maori). It has been suggested the species was a subspecies of the Australian Little Bittern, *Ixobrychus minutes dubius*.



LITTLE BITTERN

I. m. dubius

Photo: Julian Robinson

Although small, the species was larger (at about 38cm (14.75") than the Little Bittern (25-36cm). The sex of some of the few remaining specimens is in doubt, making published descriptions unreliable.

In recent times the bird is only known with certainty to have inhabited the South Island of New Zealand, with most records from Westland. The first scientific specimen was reportedly obtained at Tauranga in the North Island in 1836, but is now untraceable. The holotype* specimen in the Museum of New Zealand was taken from the head of Lake Wakatipu in Otago. Recorded habitat for the species includes the wooded margins of saline lagoons and creeks.

Walter Buller quotes a Mr. Docherty, who was familiar with the bird, as saying:

"They are to be found on the salt-water lagoons on the seashore, always hugging the timbered side of the same. I have seen them in two positions, viz.:— standing on the bank of the lagoon, with their heads bent forward, studiously watching the water; at other times I have seen them standing straight up, almost perpendicular; I should say this is the proper position for the bird to be placed in when stuffed. When speaking of lagoons as the places where they are to be found, I may mention that I caught one about two miles in the bush, on the bank of a creek; but the creek led to a lagoon. They live on small fishes or the roots of reeds; I should say the latter, because at the very place where I caught one I observed the reeds turned up and the roots gone. They are very solitary, and always found alone, and they stand for hours in one place. I heard a person say that he had opened one and found a large egg in it. They breed on the ground in very obscure places; I never heard their cry."

The bittern is recorded as eating mudfish and worms in captivity, when given in water. Two calls were recorded by Buller, a "peculiar snapping cry" as an alarm call, and a "cry not unlike that of a kingfisher, though not so loud"

Reasons for the species extinction are not known, but introduced predators and hunting caused the demise of most of New Zealand's extinct species.

*A holotype is a single physical example (or illustration) of an organism, known to have been used when the species was first formally described.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia