American bittern

Botaurus lentiginosus

Kingdom:	Animalia
Division/Phylum:	Chordata - vertebrates
Class:	Aves
Order:	Ciconiformes
Family:	Ardeidae

Features

An adult American bittern is about 23 inches long. Both sexes are similar in appearance. This brown heron has a black stripe on its neck and the underside of the outer wing is black. It has green legs. Like the other herons, its neck is held in an “S” formation during flight with its legs trailing straight out behind its body.

Natural History

The American bittern lives around marshes, wet prairies, wet woodlands, and lakes. It eats mainly frogs. It stands with its bill pointed upward when alarmed. This is a secretive bird that hides in vegetation and is active mostly at night. The call of the American bittern is a strange, pump-like “oong-ka-choonk, oong-ka-choonk;” it often is called the slough pump. Migration occurs at night. Breeding occurs in wet prairies, sloughs, and marshes. The nest is placed on the ground or on a platform of vegetation in areas with dense plant growth. Two to six brown or olive eggs are laid during the nesting period of May through June. It is an uncommon migrant and rare nester in Iowa.

Habitats

natural lakes and prairie marshes; wet prairies and fens

Iowa Status

uncommon; native

Iowa Range

summer: northern half of Iowa and scattered locations in suitable habits in southern Iowa; migrant: statewide

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.