

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Least Bittern *Ixobrychus exilis*

In the United States the Least Bittern occurs in the eastern half of the country, with a disjunct population breeding locally from southern Oregon south through California into Mexico (AOU 1983). Birds from the United States winter from Florida, Texas, and California south to northern South America.

Habitat. Least Bitterns nest in fresh and salt marshes and, rarely, in mangroves (Bowman and Bancroft 1989). They usually build their nest in a dense stand of cattails or rushes, approximately 30.5 cm (1 ft) above the water. The nest is placed on a base of dried plants bent downward or, rarely, in an old nest of another species. Least Bitterns usually nest singly but are sometimes found in loose colonies in prime habitat (Kushlan 1973; Frederick et al. 1990). Both green and dry plants are used to construct the nest, which is built by both birds. A typical clutch consists of 4 or 5 eggs, but sometimes 6 are laid. The eggs are pale bluish or greenish, like the eggs of many herons. The female Least Bittern lays 1 egg per day, and both sexes incubate. An incubating bird will sit very tightly on the nest. Incubation takes 17 to 18 days (Palmer 1962). The young bitterns can leave the nest when about 5 days old; however, if undisturbed, they may stay in the nest up to 2 weeks. They fledge at about 25 days of age (Ehrlich et al. 1988). Least Bitterns breed from March to August and may raise 2 broods per year (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).



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Seasonal Occurrence. According to Stevenson and Anderson (1994), the Least Bittern is an occasional to fair common breeding summer resident but is quite rare in winter in north Florida. Locally, it is considered a fairly common breeder in south Florida. The species is migratory, although some individuals are found throughout the winter in south Florida.

Status. This smallest of North American herons often nests close to areas of human habitation. Almost any lake with a dense stand of cattails or shrubby marsh is potential breeding habitat. The presence of Least Bitterns is relatively easy for a skilled observer to detect; however, the nests are concealed in dense aquatic vegetation and are usually difficult to locate. Breeding is easiest to confirm by finding young birds recently out of the nest, as they climb about the cattails. The Least Bittern, a wetlands-dependent species, has been designated a Species of Special Concern by the Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals (Kale 1978e). It is currently not listed as such by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission].

The Atlas map shows the species to be widespread throughout the central and south peninsula and includes a breeding record as far south as Key West. The Everglades and the Polk County phosphate mines produced many confirmed records. The complete absence of birds in the Suwannee Valley and surrounding counties is a mystery. However, fewer lakes and marshes exist there, and that region received less intensive coverage by atlasers. In the Panhandle, more records along the coast suggest a preference for coastal marshes. This also may reflect the scarcity of suitable habitat and less intensive coverage in the western quadrangles.

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