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SHORT NOTES

First Record of the Australian

Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) in New Zealand

On 5 February 1987 an apparently exhausted and starving small bittern was caught by a council worker in Westport. The bittern was first seen walking past a supermarket several hundred metres from the saltmarshes of the lower Buller River. It was handed to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and one of its officers, Cindy Cairns, was given care of the bird. The bittern fed readily on tadpoles, bullies, freshwater invertebrates and a supplement of oxheart.

Local Wildlife Officers, Bob Simpson and Nigel Miller, were told about the bird a week later. They in turn asked us to assist with identification by describing, measuring and photographing the bird on 20 February. After rehabilitation the bittern was released into Birchfield swamp north of Westport.

The bird was identified as a Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) and the OSNZ Rare Birds Committee later confirmed the identification.

Description

Size: A tiny bittern standing c.200 mm high, usually in a crouched posture.

Head and body: Forehead and crown were dark chestnut with black flecks. A well-defined dark chestnut line ran down the midline of the neck and breast. Otherwise the plumage was pale yellow-buff strongly streaked with black and chestnut lines. The lower breast was plumed and was puffed out during threat displays. Back and mantle were chestnut-brown with large black flecks and pale buff feather edges. Belly and flanks were whitish buff with brown streaks.

Wings: Upper wing-coverts were brown with buff edges. Primaries were black with faint chestnut edges. The under wing-coverts were whitish, and primaries grey.

Tail: Black

Soft parts: Iris and eye ring yellow. Upper mandible brownish grey with yellow on the lower edge. Lower mandible yellow. Legs pale green with yellow footpads and claws grey.

Moult: No sign of moult or immature down.

Measurements: See Table 1.

TABLE 1 Measurements of New Zealand and Australian Little Bitterns

Origin age/date	Westport ? 1987	Australia imm. 1935	Australia male 1922	N.Z. ? ?	N.Z. ? ?	N.Z. ? ?
bill length	42	37	44	54	53	57
bill depth	11	10	11	11	11	12
bill width	8	8	9	10	11	11
tarsus	41	39	41	49	48	c.50
midtote & claw	44					
tail length	33	34	34	51	49	
wing length	128	117	130	144	151	150
total length		c.350	c.360	c.530	c.530	

Note: measurements taken from study skins held at the National Museum

Discussion

The photographs and measurements were compared with study skins of small bitterns held at the National Museum, Wellington. Skins examined included those of the New Zealand Little Bittern (*I. novaezelandiae*), Yellow Bittern (*I. sinensis*) from Hong Kong, Least Bittern (*I. cinnamomeus*) from Manilla, and Little Bitterns from Australia, Germany, Belgium, Asia Minor, and Russia.

The plumage pattern of the Westport bird was almost identical to that of a juvenile Little Bittern from Australia and the measurements were similar to those of an adult male, also from Australia (Table 1). Its appearance on the West Coast in a tired and very thin state suggests that the bird may have been windblown from Australia.

All measurements of the New Zealand Little Bitterns were considerably larger than those of the Australian straggler, particularly total length, with the former being about one-third longer than the latter (Table 1). The plumage of the New Zealand and Australian birds was also very different. Compared with the immature *I. minutus, novaezelandiae* is much darker overall, being a richer and more even chestnut brown; the underparts are only lightly flecked with buff and the upperparts far less streaked.

This is the first confirmed record of *I. minutus* in New Zealand. While overseas handbooks treat the New Zealand Little Bittern as a subspecies of *I. minutus*, on examination the New Zealand bird is clearly different from all other *Ixobrychus* species. The Little Bittern occurs widely in Australia, Europe, Africa and western Asia.

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