

Least Bittern - Denison of the Marsh



Big Portage Marsh (above) in the northern section of the Waterloo Recreation Area includes over 2,300 of the nearly 5,000 acres of wetlands within the park boundaries. It is home to a variety of plants and animals, including the secretive least bittern (below). Wetlands produce more biomass (quantities of plants and animals) per acre than any other ecosystem, including tropical rain forests. Riethmiller Road near the German Lutheran Church is a good place to observe the marsh.

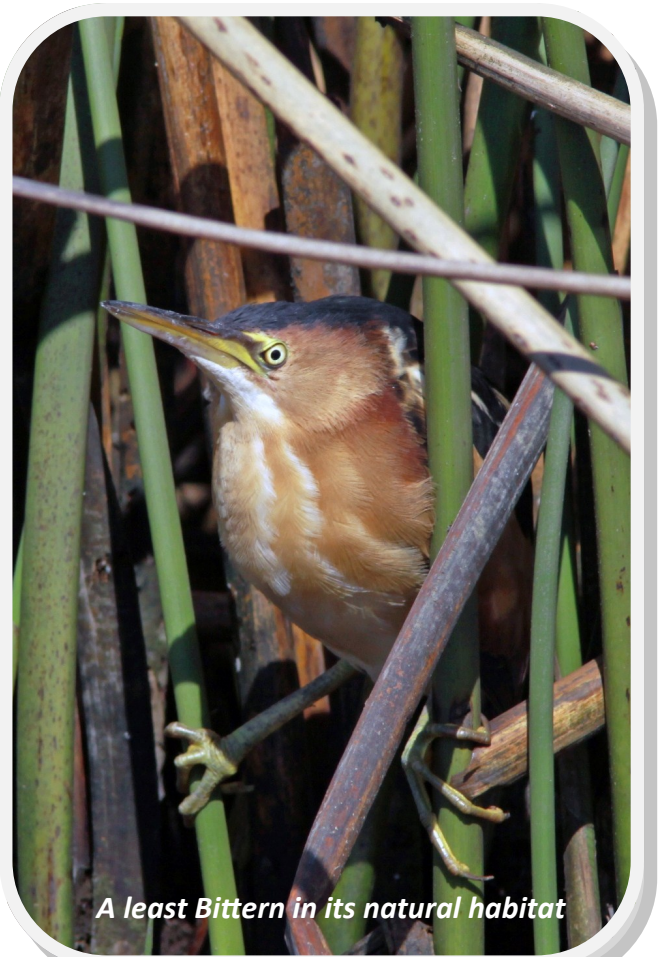
The Least Bittern is the smallest member of the heron family. It measures only about 12 inches from head to tail. It is also one of the most secretive, spending much of its time in dense stands of cattails, sedges and bulrushes that make up its preferred habitat.

It's laterally flattened body allows it to easily slip between densely packed stems of emergent vegetation. It often hunts over deeper areas of marsh by clinging to plant stems. Prey consists primarily of small fish, large insects, tadpoles, other amphibians, crayfish, and occasionally small mammals and birds. Least bitterns often construct feeding platforms of bent vegetation at productive feeding sites.

Least bitterns arrive in Michigan in late April or early May. They build nesting platforms a foot or two above the water by bending down live and dead stalks and adding short stems and sticks. They usually lay clutches of four to five eggs.

Because of their secretive nature, seeing these birds can be a challenge. They are often heard before they are seen. During the breeding season in May and June, the males emit a rapid series of dove or cuckoo like calls consisting of three to five "coo" notes. Since neither doves nor cuckoos are found in marshes, such sounds indicate the presence of a least bittern.

The rest involves patience. Those who remain quiet and observant will be rewarded when the bird comes to the edge of open water to feed. Thanks to the many acres of wetlands protected in the Waterloo Recreation Area and other natural areas throughout the state, least bittern populations remain fairly stable.



A least Bittern in its natural habitat