Short paper

A double century for Bitterns

The year 2011 has been a double-century year for the Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* (hereafter Bittern): not only did the number of booming males in England top 100 (*Brit. Birds* 104: 633), but it is exactly 100 years since the species was rediscovered breeding after a long absence from the country.

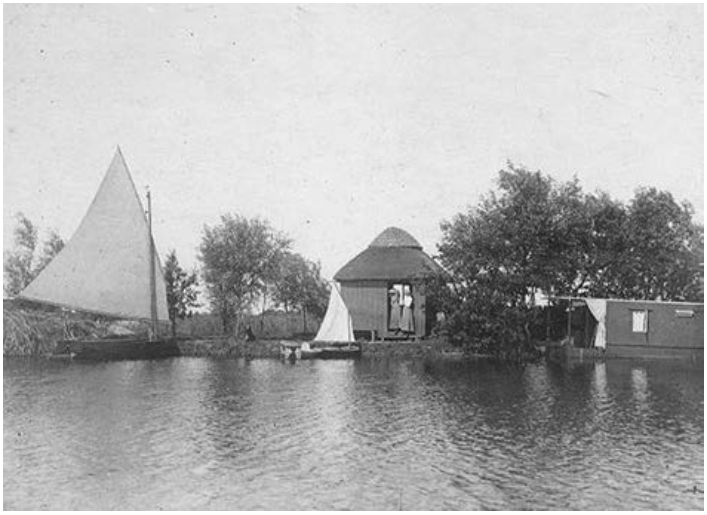
Bitterns were once widespread across Britain (Hutchinson 1989; Lovegrove *et al.* 1994; Brown & Grice 2005; Forrester *et al.* 2007), sufficiently so that they featured not only in feasts of the rich (Cocker & Mabey 2005) but also in the Sunday dinners of at least some of those who lived among their marshland haunts (Taylor *et al.* 1999). Centuries of drainage reduced the distribution of the species but the males' far-carrying calls stayed familiar to everyone in the areas where extensive reedbeds remained well into the nineteenth century. But the rapid improvement of firearms spelt its doom and by 1843, even in its main stronghold of Norfolk, its numbers had declined substantially from those a few years before when 'a party of fen shooters would kill 20 to 30 Bitterns in one morning (Richard Lubbock, in Taylor *et al.* 1999). There was evidence of sporadic breeding in Norfolk until 1868 but then a gap for over 40 years, apart from a young bird handed in to a Norwich taxidermist in 1886. In 1903, the experienced Norfolk ornithologist Rev. M. C. H. Bird wrote: 'Probably the Black Tern [*Chlidonias niger*] and Bittern will never again rear their young in Broadland' (in Dutt 1903). Eight years later he was to be proved wrong.

Maurice Bird played a part in disproving his own opinion but the chief actors were Miss E. L. Turner and James Vincent. Meeting Richard Kearton in 1900, Emma Turner was inspired to follow his lead and take up bird photography. For the next quarter of a century she spent parts, at least, of most springs and summers (and two winters) living on her houseboat on the Norfolk Broads, developing her photographs in a tiny hut on an adjacent swampy island. A prolific author and lecturer, she wrote up her observations on Bitterns in insightful and lyrical accounts in *BB* and in *Broadland Birds* (Turner 1911, 1924). Jim Vincent, keeper of the White Slea Lodge estate from 1909 until 1944, was renowned for his protection of rare birds alongside shooting management, his diaries (1980) providing a briefer account of the discovery. Both received Gold Medals – Turner from the Royal Photographic Society, Vincent from the RSPB.

That Bitterns were present again in their former Norfolk breeding haunts became apparent during the spring and early summer of 1911. Both Turner and Vincent recorded how they had received reports of Bitterns being seen and heard booming on land owned by Robert Gurney at Sutton Broad.

photographer unknown

437. Emma Turner, photographed around 1911, the year that she, Jim Vincent and Maurice Bird found Eurasian Bitterns *Botaurus stellaris* breeding again in Norfolk, at Hickling.



photographer unknown

438. Emma Turner's accommodation on the Broads. The houseboat on the right (*The Water-Rail*) was her main living accommodation when working in the Broads. The island provided a safe anchorage on Hickling Broad and a place for a small hut, in which she had a darkroom and sleeping accommodation for visitors (of which she had many). To get about, she used sailing boats, punts and canoes; among her birdwatching friends she was widely known as 'Skipper'.

(In her accounts, Turner was coy about the precise locality and, indeed, the identity of the landowner, but she revealed it in 1934 and it is confirmed in the diaries of Bird (unpublished) and Vincent (1980)).

Stuart Smith/Norfolk Wildlife Trust

439. Jim Vincent, pictured here in June 1943 at Hickling, Norfolk, holding two young Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* chicks. The Marsh Harrier was one of the species that he cared for especially; it had been absent as a breeding species from England since the late 1800s prior to breeding again at Horsey in 1915, after an unsuccessful attempt in 1911.

The exact date of the proof of breeding is unclear: Turner referred to it as 'The never-to-be-forgotten 8th of July', while Vincent recorded it as the 7th. The confusion may have arisen because the discovery was spread over two days, as described below, and Bird's (unpublished) diary has the date of first discovery clearly recorded as the 7th. Sadly, Turner's diaries for that particular month do not seem to have survived.

Despite the apparent inconsistency of dates, Turner's and Vincent's accounts of the actual discovery itself correspond well. Turner described how, during the afternoon of the first day, she and Vincent watched an adult Bittern fly between two discrete areas of reedbed three times between 2.00 and 4.30 pm. Having selected the most likely of the two locations for the breeding site, they moved closer and Vincent searched, initially unsuccessfully, for the nest. After adjourning for tea and watching in vain for any further Bittern activity, they tried again, wading into the reedbed in water that was above knee level. They soon flushed the adult Bittern, and Vincent then suggested that Turner stood still while he worked in circles through the reeds around her. This approach worked, and Turner recalled how, 'At last came a joyful shout, "I've got one youngster; come, quick"'.

Both Vincent and Turner described how, upon being disturbed, the young Bittern – 'two-thirds grown' according to Vincent – had its head pointed skywards, in the classic posture of the species. It was by now 8.30 pm and too dark for photography. What happened next seems rather unorthodox by modern standards. 'I insisted on some third person seeing our captive, lest the unbelieving world should scoff,' Turner wrote, 'so I carried the wild, beautiful thing to dry land…. After stowing the bird safely away for the night, … we returned home.' She does not indicate exactly where the hapless youngster was stowed, nor to whom it was revealed as proof of their discovery, although Bird described in his diary how 'They shut it up in

the stable at the Sutton Laboratory.' (Robert Gurney, a renowned freshwater biologist, had set up the laboratory on his property as a parallel to the marine laboratory at Plymouth, this being in the days before the establishment of the Freshwater Biological Laboratory; Rice 1989).

photographer unknown

440. Rev. Maurice Bird, 1857–1924, shown here in his punt on Hickling Broad (date unknown).

Turner goes on to recount how the next morning, at 3.00 am, she and Vincent set off again, collecting the Bittern en route and then releasing it so that it could be photographed in situ, presumably at the place where it was found the previous day. The resulting images stand as testimony to what must have been a remarkable few hours, with Turner describing how the flightless bird, assessed by her as being four to five weeks' old, 'stalked off in a solemn, and what was intended to be a very dignified, manner'.

Interestingly, Vincent's rather lean account of the sequence of events says nothing about the Bittern being taken from the reedbed on the previous evening and its overnight incarceration. His entry for 8th July simply stated: 'Went with Miss Turner at 3 am, found young Bittern and he was photographed in various attitudes.' The photographic session, and an abortive attempt to feed the bird, was followed by a renewed effort to find the

Emma Turner

Emma Turner

441 & 442. Two of Emma Turner's photographs of the young Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* she and Jim Vincent found at Sutton Broad. Both images were reproduced in her 1911 *BB* article and again in *Broadland Birds*. They were taken the morning after the original discovery, with the bird placed back in the reedbed after its night in captivity.

actual nest, again without success.

That the nest was close by was in no doubt, and there was the obvious likelihood that other young birds were present in the vicinity. On 18th July (or 17th, according to Turner's account), a party comprising Vincent, Turner, Bird, Robert Gurney and Gurney's gamekeeper searched the reedbed – the exact site being described by Bird as 'towards Lousy Bay'. It was Bird himself who actually found the abandoned nest, composed largely of broken reedstalks and located 10 m or so from where the young Bittern had been discovered by Vincent and Turner ten days earlier.

There was no sign of any Bitterns in the immediate area at the time, although that evening one adult was seen in flight nearby and, several days later, two young birds were flushed from the same reedbed. It is reasonable to speculate that these comprised the original bird and a sibling. They were the first Bitterns known to have been reared in Britain for a quarter of a century.

There appears to have been a substantial increase in Bittern numbers in the years immediately following, with 9 known nests in the Broads by 1918. Turner (1919) believed that 'the war has been a godsend to the birds of Britain, because it kept the majority of gunners and collectors busy elsewhere', although 15 Bitterns were shot in Norfolk alone between midsummer 1917 and midsummer 1918 (Turner 1919, 1924; Taylor *et al.* 1999). For the next few years, Turner's visits to the Broads were less intensive because of photographic work elsewhere and war work. In 1918 and 1919 she was, however, able to work hard on Bitterns, producing fine photographs and a wealth of published observations (Turner 1924). Not only did she spend hours at nests, she lived for months at a time (later including winters) on her boat in the middle of the birds' habitat. Vincent was also a keen observer and broadcast on the radio on 'The Romance of the Bittern' (Vincent 1980). He did not publish much but, in the course of a successful bet, he passed on to Lord William Percy (another great Bittern enthusiast; Percy 1951) the observation that males appear to be polygamous, something that establishment ornithology doubted until many years afterwards (*BWP*). Unfortunately, the sort of protection that Vincent and his colleagues provided for their Bitterns proved insufficient when the habitat began to change in the second half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, without his efforts in the first half of that century, we might have had no Bitterns on which research could be carried out to determine their exact habitat requirements.

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