

Australasian bittern: Seasonal movements

The Australasian bittern (matuku, *Botaurus poiciloptilus*), a species only found in New Zealand, Australia and New Caledonia, is the rarest bittern species in the world. Populations are declining and the species is classified as Endangered by the IUCN and Nationally Endangered in New Zealand due to drastic reductions in their range. In New Zealand, population guesses vary but it is thought that <1000 birds remain. Little information is available regarding the causes of population decline for this species, although reductions in habitat area (~90%) since human settlement, invasive predators, lack of food and fluctuating water levels, water quality and/or turbidity are all considered potential threats to bittern populations.

The Australasian bittern project is a collaboration between Massey University, the Department of Conservations and Lake Whatumā Wetland Care Group. As part of this project Massey University and the Department of Conservation have been developing methods that determine status, distribution and threats to bittern populations, as well as identify key sites that are of importance to bittern populations. So far this work has involved the attachment of nine radio tags to Australasian bitterns although it is hoped that this number will increase by the end of the current breeding season. Alongside this work, the Lake Whatumā Wetland Care Group is looking at ways to restore bittern breeding habitats in Central Hawkes Bay, and aims to provide information about how bittern populations are responding to certain management practices. To complement this work, funds from the Birds NZ Research Fund (BNZRF) will be used in 2015/2016 by the Australasian bittern research project to cover the transport costs associated with following bitterns carrying radio-tags outside of the breeding season to see where they go.

The idea behind these funds is to collect data on seasonal bittern movements to identify habitats that are important for bittern conservation. However, at the same time we wish to create a platform that allows Birds Hawkes Bay members to share knowledge and skills with local non-members (especially the younger generation). Opportunities for young budding ornithologists and older experienced Birds Hawkes Bay members to work together, are possible on this project because of the work the bittern research team is already doing with local communities and schools. The funding provided by BNZRF will be used to cover the costs of Birds NZ members, and younger non-members, allowing them to work together to locate bitterns across a 12 month period.

For more information about the project, or if you would like to get involved, please contact Emma Williams (bittern.wills@yahoo.com)

