

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

FIRST AUSTRALIAN RECORD OF THE CHINESE LITTLE BITTERN

On 23 January 1967 Mr. B. Landers found a small bittern in a weak condition at Kalgoorlie, Western Australia. I identified it as the Chinese Little Bittern *Ixobrychus sinensis*, as later confirmed by J. D. Macdonald of the British Museum. The specimen, a male in fresh plumage with no sign of moult, an incompletely pneumatized skull, and small testes, is now in the Western Australian Museum (Reg. No. A9672). It has streaks on the crown, neck, breast, and upper wing-coverts and, therefore, had not attained full adult plumage.

The bird was probably transported to Kalgoorlie from northern Australia by tropical cyclone Elsie, which was first detected off the north Kimberley coast on 15 January as a weak circulation slowly moving south-west. The cyclone followed a normal path parallel to the north-western coast well out to sea until 18 January when it started curving south-east. Accompanied by hurricane force winds and torrential rain, it crossed the coast about 80 km south of North West Cape on 20 January and moved slowly south-east through the West Gascoyne district, the centre losing its identity by 23 January. The first strong winds and rain struck Kalgoorlie on 22 January.

None of the previous records of the Chinese Little Bittern in Australia is valid. Specimens from Australia in the British Museum identified as *sinensis* by Sharpe (1898, *Cat. Birds of British Museum*, 26) have been re-identified by J. D. Macdonald as the Australian Little Bittern, *I. minutus dubius*.

I. sinensis is a winter migrant to the Malayo-Melanesian Archipelago, and could visit northern Australia more often than this single record suggests. However, its unobtrusiveness and similarity to *dubius* will make it difficult to assess its status.

The yellowish-brown to reddish-brown back and grey rump of *sinensis* may distinguish it in the field from *dubius* which has a black back and rump. However the line of dark feathers on the fore-neck between the chin and breast in *dubius*, and not in adult male *sinensis*, is probably the best field character because North (1913, *Nests and Eggs of Birds . . . in Australia and Tasmania*, 4) says that the adult female *dubius* has a reddish-brown back. The specimens of *sinensis* in the Western Australian Museum have longer bills than those of *dubius* (see Table I). The alternative vernacular name of *sinensis*, Little Yellow Bittern, suggests that it is more yellowish than *dubius* though this is not very evident in the museum specimens. Streaked juveniles cannot yet be distinguished because the immature plumages have not been critically compared.

I. sinensis has been divided into several subspecies but, because the validity of these is questionable (Peters 1931, *Checklist of Birds of the World*, 1; Vaurie 1965, *Birds of the Palaearctic Fauna*, 2), no attempt has been made to identify subspecifically the Kalgoorlie specimen. Possibly *sinensis* is a subspecies of *minutus*; they are very closely related and there may be no overlap in their breeding ranges. A proportion of the northern population of *sinensis* migrates into the range of *minutus* in India and Pakistan, but *sinensis* normally does not occur in Kashmir, the breeding stronghold of *minutus* in India (S. Ali, *in litt.*). There are some records of both *sinensis* and *minutus* breeding together in Sind, West Pakistan (Ticehurst 1923, *Ibis* 11 (5): 273), but these need confirmation (S. Ali, *in litt.*). No overlap of range is known in the Palaearctic region (Vaurie, *op. cit.*).

TABLE I

Measurements (mm) of adult specimens in the Western
Australian Museum

Locality	Sex	Wing	Culmen	Tarsus	Tail
<i>I. sinensis</i>					
Kalgoorlie	♂	131	50.5	46	45
Japan	♂	140	50.5	44.5	47
Japan	♂	139	52.5	46.5	47
Japan	♂	141	53	45.5	47
Guam	♂	132	52.5	47.5	47.5
Guam	♀	131	53.5	47.5	46
<i>I. m. dubius</i>					
Midland Junction	♂	129.5	45.5	43.5	43
Cottesloe	♂	137	46.5	44	45.5
South Belmont	♂	132	43	40.5	46
Belmont	♂	128.5	44	—	45.5

Fleming (1953, *Checklist of New Zealand Birds*) suggests that the Australian Little Bittern should bear the subspecific name *novaezelandiae* because New Zealand examples of *I. minutus* are apparently stragglers from Australia, and *novaezelandiae* is an older name than *dubius*. Falla *et. al.* (1966, *Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand*) reject this because the few specimens collected in New Zealand are so markedly distinct that it is not easy to dismiss them simply as wind-blown strays of *minutus* from Australia. New Zealand birds (Oliver 1955, *New Zealand Birds*) are larger than Australian birds and have a culmen of about the same length as that of *sinensis*. They also have a brown back and a more or less spotted appearance over most of the body instead of a continuously black back and uniformly buff wing-coverts. Amadon and Woolfenden (1952, *Am. Mus. Novit.* (1564)) correctly, therefore, list the south-western and eastern Australian populations as *dubius*.

The Perth Weather Bureau permitted me to examine its file on the movement of cyclone Elsie. Messrs J. Disney and J. D.

Macdonald checked the identification of Little Bitterns in their collections. Dr Salim Ali gave information in the status of *I. minutus* and *I. sinensis* in India.

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29 June 1968, revised 1 August 1969.

RECENT PAPUAN BREEDING RECORDS

MEGAPODIUS FREYCINET Common Scrub Hen

On 3-4 January 1968 I found two active nest mounds off Port Moresby, on Vaugo Island a coral cay, 5 km long, about 1,000 m wide and 3 km from Napa Napa Peninsula which has the lowest rainfall in New Guinea (c. 70 mm), mainly from January to May. The rainfall on Vaugo Island is probably less. The island has no surface water and is covered with Kangaroo Grass *Themeda australis* where there is enough soil. Some coconuts and *Pisonia* trees grow on an old village site and some scraggy *Pandanus* elsewhere, but otherwise the only bushes and trees are some mangroves in the south-western corner in a brackish depression surrounded by 2 m high scrubby growth covering about 50,000 m². The Scrub Hens nested here. The mounds contained no decaying vegetable matter and presumably the sand was heated only by the sun. The species has probably adapted itself to a wide range of habitat by using several different methods of incubation (solar and volcanic heat, and decaying vegetable matter). The owners of the nests were probably recent colonists because I failed to notice the species on previous visits to the island and because fishermen regularly visit the area for firewood and could be expected to interfere with the mounds so that continued successful breeding would be unlikely. The species is well able to cross water or unsuitable terrain for long distances because not only is it found on many islands, but it reappears in isolated patches of scrub or monsoon forest near and in Port Moresby after it has been exterminated there.

BUTORIDES STRIATUS Mangrove Heron

The nest had not been found in New Guinea before 1965; this was not realized when nests were found at Port Moresby (Mackay 1968, *New Guinea Bird Soc. Newsletter* 30). On 8 April 1965 a nest was found on the ocean side of Taurama Head. It was 2.5 m above the water in an upright fork in the centre of an isolated *Rhizophora* tree, 5 m tall standing in water. It was a flat platform (Hindwood 1933, *Emu* 33: 27) and had one pale green egg. On 19 April there were three eggs and more sticks had been added to the nest. On 16 May both nest and eggs had disappeared, perhaps destroyed by fishermen. On 19 May another nest was found in a similar *Rhizophora* 50 m from the first nesting tree and