

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

An American Bittern Hunting Dragonflies: On 1 September 1982, I noticed an American Bittern standing in a small, marshy pond near the Saranac Lake High School. The bird seemed to be stalking some sort of prey, as it moved slowly and deliberately through the pickerel weed, arrowhead and cattails. The bittern froze for a second, then extended its neck to its full length. It rotated its head slowly, following the flight of a large dragonfly. Suddenly the bittern lunged forward, and snapped at the dragonfly with its bill. The attack was unsuccessful and the insect escaped unharmed. Undeterred, the bittern continued its hunt and in a few minutes located another large dragonfly which was skimming low over the marsh. Again the bittern stood very still, and slowly extended its neck straight up. It followed the flight of its prey with its eyes and by slowly rotating its head. The dragonfly ignored what must have seemed to be a large stalk of some plant sticking up out of the water, and continued on its flight path—straight toward the bittern. With a lightning-quick movement, the bittern snapped the dragonfly in its bill as it flew by. The insect was trapped crossways in the bill of the bittern, which quickly devoured the unwary prey. I continued to watch the bittern for another half hour, while he stalked his airborne prey, but it was unsuccessful in three subsequent attempts at mid-air capture.

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