

A CONFIRMED BREEDING RECORD OF LEAST BITTERN ON LONG ISLAND

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The Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), the smallest North American heron, is a widespread yet local breeder in New York State due to its dependence on extensively vegetated wetlands. Denser breeding concentrations in New York are found in suitable freshwater marsh habitat in the Great Lakes Plain and Hudson River Valley regions, and specifically in the extensive wetlands of both the Montezuma and Iroquois National Wildlife Refuges. As detailed below, the Least Bittern has been historically reported as a local and uncommon breeder on Long Island with a long line of observations, spanning nearly 170 years.

J. P. Giraud, Jr. states in his 1844 classic *Birds of Long Island*: “It feeds chiefly at night, and is seldom seen flying during the day—and, like many other species that take shelter among the rank grass and rushes which grow on the wet, miry grounds, it is not as scarce with us as is by many supposed.” This comment reflects an often-made observation about the Least Bittern: its secretive nature, coupled with its use of dense, inaccessible wetland habitats makes it hard to detect and observe, probably resulting in an underreporting of the species.

Commenting on the species’ distribution on Long Island, Eaton (1907) had this to say: “The Least Bittern is locally common as a summer resident in the marshes of Long Island, the Hudson valley and the region of Lakes Erie, Ontario, and the central chain.” Griscom (1923) noted: “Formerly a very local summer resident, but locally common. All the breeding stations near New York City now destroyed. Probably breeds on Jones Beach. Casual elsewhere.” Additionally, Cruickshank (1942) reported at least six breeding stations on Long Island and reported “Until very recent years the bird bred in small colonies in Bronx, Kings, Queens, and Nassau Counties, and a few pair still hang on there. At present it is a rare local summer resident and transient in the New York City region.”

Regarding more recent accounts about the Least Bittern’s abundance and distribution on Long Island, Bull (1974) states: Least Bitterns may be found in many of the marshes in the southern and western parts of the state, especially where cattails occur, and are also noted in grassy marshes inland and in the brackish meadows along the coast of Long Island. At least six breeding pairs were present at the Jamaica Bay Refuge in 1960.” Nearly 25 years later, in *Bull’s Birds of New York State*, Stoner (1998) states: “Consistent with historical record, its stronghold is still the lower Hudson Valley, the Coastal Lowlands, and the Great Lakes Plain.”

These generalized accounts about the Least Bittern's distribution and status in New York State and on Long Island lack specificity, an issue addressed by the first New York State Breeding Bird Atlas, covering the period from 1980-1985. In this Atlas two breeding blocks were reported in which Least Bittern was confirmed as a breeding bird on Long Island—Jamaica Bay and the Lattingtown area of northern Nassau County.

In contrast, the second New York State Breeding Bird Atlas, which covered the period from 2000-2005, had no census blocks with confirmed breeding of Least Bitterns on Long Island. Least Bitterns were detected in a total of 129 blocks and it was confirmed as a breeder in fourteen of them, notably in the regions mentioned above. Three blocks on Long Island reported bitterns: one block with possible breeding and two others with probable breeding.

On July 17, 2011 I observed a male Least Bittern flying north over a small pond in the Massapequa Preserve. Several minutes later the same bird flew south, landing along the edge of a stand of *Phragmites* close to where it had first departed from. Posting this sighting to the NYS Birding List Serve led many other birders to visit the site, and on July 20th David Speiser and Henry Maas observed a recently fledged bittern being fed by a parent. Based on the lack of any reported observations confirming breeding activities since the first NYS Breeding Bird Atlas, this sighting was the first confirmed breeding record on Long Island for this species in at least 26 years. I visited the site on July 24th with Dave Klauber and we each simultaneously observed four juvenile bitterns. The male was reported on numerous occasions (having been seen by the author on five different visits) but the female has never been reported. A photo of one of the juveniles is reproduced on page 334.

The breeding habitat used by the bitterns is a small, two-acre, oval pond in the preserve located approximately 3,000 feet north of Clark Boulevard (see photo, page 334). The pond, connected to the Massapequa Creek which flows along its western edge, is ringed with wetland vegetation dominated by Common Reed (*Phragmites communis*) with a small patch of Broad-leaved Cattail (*Typha latifolia*) in the southwestern section. The *Phragmites* is more extensive on the western side of the pond. A number of wetland wildflower species are interspersed among this vegetation including swamp rose mallow (*Hibiscus palustris*) and Jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*). Woody plants such as Willow (*Salix* spp.) and Red Maple ring sections of the outer edges of the pond.

Surrounded by medium- to high-density residential development, the Massapequa Preserve is a 412 acre Nassau County-owned preserve situated in the southeastern corner of Nassau County. Massapequa Creek, one of the longer streams found along Nassau County's south shore, runs through the preserve which incorporates a fraction of the creek's watershed. The vegetation within the preserve varies, ranging from patches of pitch pine-oak forests in the higher elevations with Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) and Black Tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*) swamps in the lower lying areas. In more open areas, such as along the edges of numerous waterbodies and the margins of a recreational bike path, numerous grass and wildflower species occur.

The characteristics and landscape setting of the Preserve, i.e., its narrowness and the built-up nature of its surrounding environment, along with the small size of the pond, indicates the Least Bittern will use relatively small, fragmented wetlands situated in suburban settings for breeding/nesting. This may bode well for the continued existence of the species in New York if, in addition to breeding in larger more extensive wetlands, it also uses smaller, less contiguous habitats, as these landscape conditions are likely to become more prevalent as natural habitats continue to be converted to other land uses such as residential and commercial development.

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