

NATURE AT RISK

A glimpse of an original snow-bird

Brodhead Watershed Association

An hour into the pontoon river cruise, the naturalist had pointed out several manatees, countless alligators, two osprey, a bald eagle, egrets, purple gallinules, even an owl. But the bird he slowed to a crawl for was virtually invisible: an American bittern, hiding in plain sight.

In its concealment pose, the bittern points its narrow bill to the sky, lengthens its body, and sways with the breeze, looking for all the world like the cattails and reeds of the wetlands and shorelines it prefers. Streaked with brushstrokes of buff and brown, this elegant, secretive heron is a master of disguise. Only its brilliant gold eye gives it away.

The American bittern is large, up to almost three feet tall, with a 50-inch wingspan. It flies with hunched neck and rather ungainly wingbeats, its solid black flight feathers on display. On the hunt, the bittern stalks deliberately along the water's edge, or stands rock-still ready to snap up small fish, frogs, snakes, insects, and even small mammals, and swallow them whole.

Like many of the passengers on the pontoon boat, the bittern is a "snow-bird," which flies south to winter in Florida, the Gulf Coast, the Caribbean and Central America. In spring, they migrate back north where they mate, nest, and raise young. From the far reaches of Canada's Northwest Territories across the northern U.S., their peculiar, booming "plump-a-lunk" mating call is unmistakable.

But here in Pennsylvania, the American bittern is endangered. According to the PA Game Commission, they have become "uncommon to rare" migrants in most places. The culprit: habitat degraded and disrupted by humans.

Marshes and wetlands where breeding bitterns once nested by the thousands have been filled in, shrunk, choked with sediment, or contaminated with chemicals and runoff. This harms both nesting areas and the birds' food supply.

That's bad for the birds — and can also be bad for people. Wetlands help keep drinking water clean and plentiful, slow down stormwater, prevent flash floods and stream bank erosion, and reduce flooding on downstream properties.

What you can do:

- Tell your local officials that protecting wetlands from development, road runoff, and overloads of nutrients is important to you.



The American bittern can swivel its eyes downward to focus on prey at its feet, without otherwise moving a muscle.

- If you're lucky enough to have wetlands on your property, leave them alone — don't mow, fertilize, or apply pesticides anywhere near them.
- Support local land conservation that protects wetlands.

The naturalist on that river cruise didn't need to ask the passengers how many were seeing an American bittern for the first time — the oohs and aahs told the story. Today, American bitterns are a rare sight in the Brodhead watershed. With healthier wetlands, maybe we can invite them back.

For information about protecting clean, abundant water go to brodheadwatershed.org

For local land conservation information go to phlt.org

Find more about the American bittern on the PA Game Commission website: www.pgc.pa.gov/Wildlife/EndangeredandThreatened/Pages/AmericanBittern.aspx



Can you find the American Bittern hiding here? Look just to the right of center and then up — its narrow head and beak stand out from the greenery.

Nature at Risk is a series published by Brodhead Watershed Association. See brodheadwatershed.org.

