



Nest and eggs of Bittern hatching. The Bittern starts to incubate her eggs as soon as the first egg is laid so the eggs do not all hatch together.



Norfolk's Broadland

by Alan Savory

ONCE UPON A TIME, when the Norfolk Broads were really and truly wild and the inhabitants were few and far between, the bittern was reasonably plentiful and the long spring nights were tremulous with their 'booming', which is the noise a bittern makes in the mating season. They appear to make it while walking about their nesting territory; and from the only cine photograph that has ever been taken of a bittern 'booming' it looks as if the bird puffs himself up and then thrusts his head downwards and let out an enormous belch.

The sound carries for miles over water and sounds like the bellowing of a bull with a sort of gasp at the end of it. It was a frightening sound to the superstitious natives. They were ruled by ghostly beings. They had 'shuck dogs' and will-o-the-wisps' and the evil smelling marsh mists of autumn that brought on fevers known as the 'shakes'. Life was short and terrifying in the old fenland; and the booming of the bitterns in the quiet of the evenings did nothing to help their simple minds.

Then drainage of the vast fens and reed cutting, and a certain amount of what the natives called 'edication', began to curtail the habitat of the marsh birds and bitterns in particular.

The frightful urge to shoot, collect and stuff finally made the bitterns extinct as a Norfolk breeding bird sometime in the 19th century; and it was not until the First World War that they returned to breed. One pair near Upton Broad, so a keeper told me.

From then onwards they seem to have done well and, on a shoot I had at the top of Breydon Water, which was a fantastic place of reed beds and lagoons, there were always bitterns. I used to sit on the inner river wall for flighting duck and, sometimes, a bittern would stalk out on to the mud of a lagoon like a half size brown heron and dab about for shrimps in the brackish water. If the bittern saw us it would stand up straight as a ramrod in the reeds. But usually we ignored each other.

Once I shot a duck that fell splash into the mud and water within 30 yards of a feeding bittern, which walked off the mud into the reeds with unhurried steps and stood like a sentry, while my old dog paddled warily out to retrieve the duck, instinctively knowing what damage a bittern's beak can do and determined to have nothing to do with it.

By this time the bitterns were back in Norfolk and had re-established themselves as a breeding bird

in the vast reed beds of the Hickling area. This is the sort of place they really like. Vast reed beds and great skies reaching from reed rimmed horizon to the tawny sandhills of the coast. Once a reed bed starts to get overgrown with sallow bushes and alder trees it ceases to be bittern breeding habitat and they go elsewhere. Here, near my home in the Yare valley, there are bitterns on migration, and a few years ago a pair nested, but there are too many carrion crows and too many bushes on the marshes for the bitterns to nest now, although they wander in the reeds along the dykes and turn up in the most surprising places.

Some years ago one got itself arrested by the local police. The way of it was thus. I was rung up by the police to say that a nasty looking bird with a long sharp beak was knocking hell out of the chickens in a cottage garden near by. The owner's cat had been jabbed in the face and had bolted into the cottage and no one dare go near the chicken run because there was a 'funny looking pheasant' in it. I went off to the police station and the policeman and I set off for the scene of the crime. I thought I was going to find a golden eagle or a vulture.

When we got to the cottage, the tear-streaked face of an old woman peeped round the door and there was a cat in her arms with a bloody nose. She pointed to the chicken run in the garden and shut the door in our faces. In the run there were feathers all over the place and a very belligerent looking bittern crouching with his beak pointing like a sword at the sky.

The chickens and the old cock that was bleeding from a very badly pierced comb had gone up to perch in the laying shed but were peeping anxiously out and clucking. There was blood everywhere—but no real damage.

Bitterns and herons and all birds of that ilk are eye stabbers when cornered and highly dangerous. The only way to handle them is by the neck and feet. This bittern knew about this and puffed himself up and stabbed at us through the wire netting. Eventually we pushed a sack over him with a stick and grabbed him through the sack. When we knocked on the cottage door to say what we had done the cat peeped through the window and left a blood smear on the glass; but the woman shouted 'Take it away—take it away' and refused to open the door at all.

We took the bittern in the sack down to the Yare valley and rather gingerly released it beside a dyke running through a reed bed. At first it crouched with all its feathers erect and its beak drawn back like a snake ready to strike; then as we backed away it stood up and walked off into the reeds. To be completely truthful, we were both glad to see the last of it and conceded victory on every point.

This last year I had the privilege of photographing a bittern's nest on an estate where the crows and other enemies of ground nesting birds are dealt with by two most efficient keepers who take great interest in the natural world around them. The nest was about a foot off the ground in a short reed bed close by a large sheet of water. It was just a slightly dished platform of rushes and held five eggs, one of which was rotten and instead of being cream colour was dark and mottled.

The other four eggs were chipping; and while I

was in the hide taking photos they proceeded to hatch. I left very quickly and came back next day to find one chick dry and lively and the other three eggs chipping violently. I had hoped the mother bird would come back but she spent her time wandering about in the reeds about 25 yards away. Quite suddenly the top came off one of the eggs and the young bittern heaved himself out and then the top came off the other one and I thought it time to leave.

The last time they were seen they all were growing feathers and doing well and only coming back to the nest at dusk. They are very secretive birds and great skulkers in the reed beds; but every now and then you see them flying like a great egger moth over the reeds of the Norfolk Broads in full daylight or, in the dusk of a spring evening, you may hear a distinct booming like a muffled fog horn and you will know that there are still bitterns in Broadland. Probably many more than one thinks.

photographs by the Author.



The fighting Bittern in the hands of the Law.