

WETLAND SPECIALTIES IN BERKSHIRE COUNTY

By David St. James

American Bittern

The American Bittern is an extremely secretive heron, the presence of which is usually detected by its less than musical, resonant, gulping "song," which it gives while on its breeding grounds. It is usually silent out of the breeding season, making the overall status of the bird difficult to determine. Largely motionless, cryptically colored, bitterns blend almost perfectly into the cattails and other marsh vegetation, making visual sightings difficult. The bird arrives in the Berkshires in mid-April and stays until the first week of October.

Although never common here, prior to 1960 the bittern was found throughout the state in suitable habitat. From that date, the population has undergone a significant range constriction, most probably due to habitat destruction and disturbance on the breeding grounds. Habitat degradation may also play a major role for wetland bird species, with *Phragmites* and purple loosestrife replacing native vegetation and producing a subsequent shift in associated animal life.

Currently, American Bitterns breed regularly in Massachusetts only in northern Essex County and Berkshire County, although smaller, spotty breeding populations exist in the Sudbury River Valley and in interior Plymouth County. Between 1976 and 1980, only seventeen nests were confirmed during the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas, and since that time very few new sites have been discovered. Massachusetts has, because of this precipitous decline, designated the American Bittern a Species of Special Concern, a status which allows for increased protection.

Though represented by several breeding populations in Berkshire County, the bittern is not common anywhere. In 1979 only eight nests could be confirmed in the county, although since that time additional sites have been located.

The bittern is most consistently recorded in marshes and cattail swamps along the Housatonic and Hoosic River valleys, though it is not restricted to these areas. Perhaps the most reliable spot to locate this species is Brielman's Swamp, part of the Housatonic Valley Wildlife Management Area in Pittsfield. The first swamp one encounters when entering the area has hosted at least one pair a year for at least the last fifty years (it is probable that they have existed here for much longer). Cattail marshes along the Housatonic River to the south of this point also harbor this species. American Bitterns can often be heard in spring by the river on New Lenox Road in Lenox, within the same wildlife management area. A canoe trip from this point downstream to Woods Pond, also

in Lenox, may well produce other sightings (or hearings?). At Tierney Swamp in west Pittsfield, bitterns are regularly recorded along with a rich array of other distinctly wetland birds (moorhen, Sora, King Rail, Pied-billed Grebe). In the Tyringham Valley, Hop Brook flows through wet meadows and cattail marshes that traditionally serve as an oasis for breeding pairs of American Bitterns. In the uplands, one can often hear pumping bitterns at Muddy Pond in Washington, part of the Hinsdale Flats Wildlife Management Area. Higher yet in elevation (1900 feet) are the wet meadows of the Moran Wildlife Management Area in Windsor, where this species has been recorded in recent years. This species is extremely fond of larger cattail marshes, especially when they are adjacent to wet meadows, and should be looked for in this association.

Common Snipe

The winnowing of the Common Snipe is perhaps one of the most eerie and unusual of the courtship rituals of our native birds. As the bird swoops down in large circles, air passing through the tail feathers creates a weird and ethereal sound unlike that of any other of our bird species. In the Berkshires, migrating snipe arrive in early April through May. Winnowing will occur through this period and occasionally into early summer. Fall migrants arrive back in the county in September and commonly remain until early November. There are several winter records, including a bird that returned to the same site along the Housatonic River in Lenox for several years in the early 1980s.

The Common Snipe has within the last twenty years become increasingly common in wet meadows and along river flood-plains in Berkshire County, although historically it has never been recorded in large numbers in the Berkshires either in migration or as a breeding bird. The species was greatly decimated in the last century and early parts of this century by both market and unregulated sport hunting. E.H. Forbush recounted several instances that illustrate the magnitude of this slaughter. In one example, in a twenty-year period (1867-1887), one Louisiana hunter killed 69,087 snipe with an additional 2772 listed as incidental losses, a figure which did not reflect those birds killed by his companions. Through the first portion of the twentieth century, Massachusetts did not limit bag limits on snipe, nor were there seasonal restrictions, and hunting was extensive. Spring hunts probably discouraged any extensive breeding. By 1941, because of overhunting, severe droughts in the bird's breeding range, and unusually cold periods in the snipe's wintering areas, the hunting season for this bird was closed until 1953, when it was resumed but with increased regulations on the harvest.

Massachusetts lies within the southern fringe of the Common Snipe's breeding range, although records exist of nesting in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. There are several records of breeding in the eastern portion of Massachusetts, but most records date from the nineteenth century. In the

Berkshires, the snipe was not discovered as a breeding species until May 9, 1976, when Gordon Dennis discovered a nest with four eggs at Brielman's Swamp in Pittsfield. This nest was destroyed by high water on May 15. Another nest with four eggs was discovered by Robert Goodrich on May 20, 1976, near this spot, but it was believed that a different pair of birds was responsible. Between 1976 and 1979, another six locations were confirmed as nesting spots in the towns of Stockbridge, Windsor, and Lenox.

Locating this species is easiest in the spring, when migrants mingle with breeding birds. The Housatonic River Valley is the most productive area to find these birds, and observing snipe is easiest at Brielman's Swamp in the Housatonic Valley Wildlife Management Area in Pittsfield, and at the river wetlands on New Lenox Road in the Lenox portion of the wildlife management area. Bartholomew's Cobble in Ashley Falls has recently recorded sizable numbers of breeding birds that are viewable from the area's parking lot. The Housatonic basin is not the only area that hosts this species. Breeding birds have also been recorded along the meadows of Hop Brook in Lee and Tyringham and at Moran Wildlife Management Area and adjacent meadows in the town of Windsor, situated on the Berkshire Plateau, 1000 feet higher in elevation than the river valleys. Currently, one should suspect the presence of snipe in any suitable habitat in the county.

Common Moorhen

The Common Moorhen was known previously as the Florida or Common Gallinule. This species is distinctly southern, with New England being its northernmost breeding outpost. Currently the species is undergoing a regional population contraction and is absent from many areas long frequented. Many researchers have attributed this to habitat loss through the filling of wetlands; however, many areas where the bird was recorded in the past but is no longer found seem to have little changed over the years, suggesting that loss of breeding habitat may be only a partial explanation. Massachusetts has assigned Species of Special Concern status on the bird hoping that this increased protective designation will halt further population decline.

This species commonly arrives on breeding territory by late March or early April and departs by late October, although some November records exist. Migrants are rarely detected. Though never considered common, the moorhen seemed to slowly increase its successful breeding areas in the Berkshires through much of the twentieth century. At the turn of the nineteenth century, only one site was noted (Pontoosuc Lake inlet in Lanesboro), but as time progressed additional sites were discovered in Pittsfield, Lenox, Stockbridge, Cheshire, Great Barrington, and Egremont. The cattail marshes adjacent to the Housatonic River furnished many of these records. Currently, moorhens have retreated from most of the central portion of the county, although as recently as

1978, thirty-seven birds were seen; in 1986 this same Pittsfield marsh produced nineteen individuals. This level of productivity is no longer in evidence. Southern Berkshire wetlands still harbor remnant populations, but numbers are far below those noted as recently as the early 1990s.

In 1999 only one site was felt to have nesting moorhens, although that may well reflect birder coverage rather than actual status of the species. Smilley Mill Pond (Egremont Pond), located in South Egremont at the intersection of Routes 41 and 23, has been the wetland where these birds may be located most consistently. By the early 1990s, five breeding pairs were recorded here, but these numbers have declined since then. In Great Barrington, Fountain Pond, located at the foot of Monument Mountain on Route 7, has had nesting moorhens as recently as 1998, although locating these birds was always difficult. Tierney Swamp, a Pittsfield Conservation Commission property located on Jason Street, has until recently hosted a healthy population of these birds (as noted above). Beavers have raised the water level and may have had a negative effect on the vegetation and cover required by moorhens. Brielman's Swamp on the Housatonic Valley Wildlife Management Area in Pittsfield has historically been a productive area for this species, although moorhens have not been in evidence there for a number of years. There have been several unconfirmed reports of moorhens along the Housatonic River in Lenox south of the Decker Canoe Boat Access site on New Lenox Road.

While habitat loss is probably the most direct reason for this species' decline, habitat degradation may play an equally important role. The moorhen has always been associated with cattail marshes, and these same marshes are being overrun by exotic plant species such as purple loosestrife and phragmites. In suitable habitat, this bird should always be looked for.

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