

LEAST BITTERN SUMMERING IN BARTOW COUNTY -- Least Bitterns (*Ixobrychus exilis*) are secretive and well-camouflaged summer inhabitants of Georgia that breed in fresh and brackish water marshes. The species is apparently most abundant along the immediate coast and in the southwestern corner of the state near Lake Seminole and Eufaula National Wildlife Refuge (Schneider, T.M., G. Beaton, T.S. Keyes, and N.A. Klaus. 2010. The breeding bird atlas of Georgia. University of Georgia Press). Elsewhere in Georgia, it is considered to be an uncommon, localized breeder, though in a few locations the species may be present in surprisingly high densities (Schneider et al. 2010). Least Bitterns have been known to nest as far north as Floyd County in the Ridge and Valley ecoregion, but sightings of the species in the northwest corner of the state are rare.

On 19 July 2009, 2 Least Bitterns were observed flying back and forth over a large freshwater wetland near Euharlee in Bartow County (Georgann Schmalz, pers. comm.). A substantial portion of this wetland consists of dense cattails (*Typha latifolia*), but in some areas there are thick patches of arrow-*arum* (*Peltandra virginica*) and open water. The wetland is surrounded by alders (*Alnus* spp.), cattails, rushes (*Juncus* spp.), and thick over-hanging branches from a surrounding bottomland forest. Dead stumps and snags protrude from the water.

On 12 June 2010, the author followed up on Schmalz' initial discovery while touring the area with a photographer (Dan Smith). Soon after arriving, an adult Least Bittern was observed flying over the cattails in the northwestern arm of the marsh. It quickly dropped out of sight. Over the next 30 min., at least 3 more bitterns were observed, one over the southwestern arm of the marsh, and 2 much closer to the observers' position at the eastern edge of the marsh where a road crossing and beaver dam help maintain its water level. One of these birds vocalized as it broke out of cover near the edge of open water, and flew into a patch of arrow-*arum* about 20 m from Smith, who was able to photograph it. It then emerged, flew again, and disappeared into the thick vegetation of the wetland. Soon after, a second bird with a visible bulge in its crop flew in from a different direction to the same spot in the arrow-*arum*. The observation of 2 adult Least Bitterns delivering food to the same location is a strong indicator of an active nest; however, confirmation was impossible because of the surrounding water.



Least Bittern delivering food item (bulge in crop), Bartow County, 12 June 2010, by Dan Smith.

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