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The First Recorded Cory's Bittern (Ixobrychus "neoxenus") from South America

DANTE MARTINS TEIXEIRA1 AND HERCULANO M. F. ALVARENGA2

1Museu Nacional, Rio de Janeiro (RJ), CEP 20942, Brazil, and
2Rua Colômbia 99, Taubaté (SP), CEP 12100, Brazil

Described by Cory (1886), Ixobrychus "neoxenus" is considered a variant morph of the Least Bittern (Ixobrychus e. exilis), characterized by contrasting dark chestnut underparts and blackish upperparts. About 30 specimens are known, mostly from southern Florida and Ontario, but there are also records from Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin (Bent 1926, Hancock and Elliot 1978). Thus, it was quite a surprise for us to obtain a specimen of the South American Ixobrychus exilis erythromelas in this rather uncommon plumage. Apparently, this is the first time this morph has been reported outside North America.

The bird was collected on 13 May 1967 in the rice fields of the Paraiba do Sul drainage, county of Taubaté, São Paulo (approx. 23°01' S, 45°33' W), southeastern Brazil. In this area, "normal" colored I. exilis erythromelas are common, as are other herons such as I. involucris, Botaurus pinnatus, Butorides striatus, Casmerodius albus, and Egretta thula. Another species, Bubulcus ibis, has been recorded as a recent invader of the surrounding dry pastures. The specimen collected was a young male, with nonossified skull and very small gonads. Its stomach contained a small, 50-mm long characid (Tetragonopterinae) and unidentified seeds of a monocotyledon.

Like normal-colored I. exilis erythromelas, this specimen in the neoxenus plumage showed a light yellow iris and yellowish bare lores, but its bill was blackish brown and the tarsus brownish, without yellow tinges. The plumage agreed more or less with the description of Sharpe (1898), but some conspicuous differences were observed: the specimen did not show any greenish or bronze gloss in the blackish parts of the plumage, and its secondaries were plain black without rufous. The ashy black feathers of nape, hindneck, back, and rump were fringed with ochraceous, and all previously described I. "neoxenus" have been adults.

Bent (1926) considered I. "neoxenus" to be an example of melanism and erythrosis, and a comparison of our specimen with typically colored I. exilis erythromelas seems to point to hyperpigmentation. Indeed, a superproduction of eumelanins and phaeomelanins perhaps could explain the deep blackish tinges of the upperparts and the rufous chestnut color of the foreneck, breast, etc. observed in this unusual plumage (Vevers 1964).

As mentioned above, I. "neoxenus" is considered a rare morph, and our observations in southeastern Brazil seem to reinforce this supposition. Although I. exilis erythromelas is common in the rice fields of Taubaté, only one specimen in the "neoxenus" plumage has been recorded after almost 20 yr of observation. In addition, our field research in coastal Rio de Janeiro and in Alagoas has never revealed any other specimen in this peculiar coloration. Thus, it is impossible to evaluate if the "neoxenus" morph has, in Brazil, a local occurrence or not, as was observed in the North American Least Bittern.

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LITERATURE CITED


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