

Bittern

The Bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*) is confined almost entirely to wetlands dominated by reeds, where it feeds on fish, amphibians and other small water animals. Bitterns are more often heard than seen, being instantly recognisable by its deep booming call.



This BAP should be considered together with the Reedbed BAP as the two are intrinsically linked.

Current status

The bittern re-colonised the UK after extinction last century but has declined steadily as a breeding species in the last 30 years. This has mainly been due to direct habitat loss and degradation through lack of appropriate management and accumulation of nutrients and associated sediments in the water.

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of Bitterns over-wintering in the UK and within the north west of England. Recent national initiatives to increase and improve existing reedbeds have resulted in a significant increase in bittern numbers, although they remain concentrated at a small number of sites. Breeding bitterns are confined almost entirely to lowland marshes in Norfolk, Suffolk, Lancashire and the newly colonised Humber basin. The only site in the North West where bitterns breed is Leighton Moss.

Bitterns do not currently breed in Wigan Borough. Winter visitors are, however, recorded annually in the Wigan Flashes and at Pennington Flash. At present numbers are uncertain due to the secretive nature of the bird. The bittern is considered to be a rare but increasing non-breeding visitor to Greater Manchester.

Legal protection

The bittern is a Species of European Conservation Concern, Category 3. This designation covers species whose global populations are not threatened, but which have an unfavourable conservation status in Europe. The Bittern is listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive and Appendix III of the Bern Convention. It is protected in the UK under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) as amended.

Current Issues

- Loss of suitable breeding areas in fens and reedbeds through natural succession and lack of appropriate management (particularly cutting and water management).
- Degradation of habitat through eutrophication and pollution.
- Food availability, especially eels, affected by inappropriate management and pollution.
- Salt water intrusion into coastal reedbeds by rising sea levels.
- Vulnerability to severe winter weather.
- Small size population reduces the potential of the species expanding to other potentially suitable habitat

Species needs/management requirements

For successful breeding at least 20 hectares of wet reedbed is needed. For each hectare of reed ideally there should be 250m of open water/reedbed fringe available. Pool margins provide more opportunities for feeding than ditches, although bitterns will use reeded ditches if they support a good fish population. Water depths should be between 20 - 30cms within the reedbed for nesting and feeding. Water quality is important to maintain an adequate and visible food supply which includes fish and a range of other aquatic fauna.

Current Action

A UK Biodiversity Action Plan for Bittern was produced in 1995 setting out the main objectives for this species until 2020.

The EU Life Bittern Project is a £4m project, which will see ideal habitat for bitterns developed at 19 sites throughout England. New reedbed areas are being created and existing reedbeds restored. The Wigan Flashes are part of this project.

A working group will oversee the development and implementation of the BAP. This partnership is formed by English Nature, Greater Manchester Ecology Unit, Lancashire Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Wigan Council and Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust.

Related Action Plans

UKBAPs:

Reedbed
Bittern

GMBAPs:

Bittern

Wigan BAPs:

Reedbed
Wet Woodland

Objectives, actions and targets

Primary Objective: Establish breeding Bittern in Wigan by 2010		
Strategic Objective: Protect, encourage and monitor bittern in Wigan		
Operational objective	Action Required	Timescale
1. Determine the current distribution and numbers of Bitterns in Wigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect and collate records of Bittern and produce distribution map to establish accurate baseline 	2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a database accessible by all relevant partners. Develop system for updating records of bittern 	2006
2. Protect bittern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognise and protect bittern and their habitats through policies in plans and strategies e.g. UDP, SPG, Nature Conservation Strategy 	Ongoing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess all relevant planning applications for their impact on bittern habitat 	Continuous process
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage appropriate water abstraction policies 	Continuous process
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safeguard all bittern habitat through designation as SBI, LNR, SSSI or SPA 	2007
3. Investigate opportunities for enhancement of bittern habitat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify areas for potential expansion of bittern habitat 	2007
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess quality of existing bittern habitat and seek opportunities for enhancement 	2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify sources of funding for habitat enhancement works 	Ongoing
4. Monitor and record bittern in Wigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and implement annual monitoring system 	2006
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop links with universities and encourage research on bittern and associated habitats 	Annual review

Management Objective: Increase the population of bittern in Wigan		
Management Objective	Action Required	Timescale
1. Manage existing bittern habitat	• Identify funding opportunities for habitat management and development	Ongoing
	• Produce site specific management plans	1 per year
	• Implement management prescriptions	Ongoing
2. Develop new bittern habitat	• Investigate opportunities for bittern habitat creation initiatives	2008
	• Seek funding for bittern habitat creation	Ongoing
3. Monitor and record bittern population	• Develop and implement recording system	2006
	• Develop and implement ecosystem monitoring programme	2006
	• Establish database accessible by all relevant partners	2007
4. Promote conservation value of bittern	• Continue to raise the profile of bittern and improve community awareness of its importance	Ongoing
	• Engage with local communities in bittern conservation	Ongoing