

“ECLIPSE: a post-nuptial plumage stage occurring in some species. It is characterized by being of much shorter duration than the winter (or non-breeding) plumage in most species that show marked seasonal change, as well as by being dull in comparison with a conspicuous breeding dress. Notably, the males of many of the Anatidae are in full breeding plumage for the greater part of the year but have a dull plumage during the latter part of the summer (while a simultaneous moult of the remiges may render them temporarily flightless)”.

References

Campbell Bruce and Elizabeth Lack, editors. 1985. **A Dictionary of Birds**. The British Ornithologists Union, T & A. D. Poyser, Calton, England.
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AN UNDESCRIBED PLUMAGE MORPH OF THE GREY-HEADED GOSHAWK (*Accipiter poliocephalus*)

by Phil Gregory

Whilst birding along the Ok Ma road near Tabubil, Western Province on 28th July 1992 with a tour group from Field Guides Incorporated, we had two separate sightings of what appears to be an undescribed plumage form of the Grey-headed Goshawk. Both individuals were perched in trees by the roadside, and allowed good views, one at km 7 and the other near km 5. They were medium size accipiters with entirely blackish-slate plumage and the characteristic orangey red cere and legs of this species. The second bird had some dark bars on the outer tail feathers and some dark barring on the underwing flight feathers. Melanistic morph Variable Goshawk (*A. novaehollandiae*), which is the common medium sized accipiter here, would show a yellow cere and legs, as would the larger Meyer's Goshawk *A. meyerianus*.

I have had no subsequent sightings of this morph, and no records of any other melanistic phase accipiter locally either. Clearly the form is rare, whilst normal plumage Grey-headed Goshawks remain uncommon residents in the area. Reference is made in del Hoyo et al (1994) to reports of a possible melanistic morph in this species, probably referring to these sightings which are now duly documented.

References

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del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Sargatal, J. eds. (1994). **Handbook of the Birds of the World**. Vol. 2. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona

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LITTLE BITTERNS (*Ixobrychus minutus*) IN THE MIDDLE FLY WETLANDS

by Roger Jaensch

Background The Australasian subspecies *dubius* of the Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* primarily occurs in Australia and New Guinea (Marchant & Higgins 1990). Its known breeding strongholds are in south-western and south-eastern Australia, while in tropical Australia breeding is known from only one site, in the north-west (Jaensch 1988). It is probably migratory: most birds apparently leave southern Australia in autumn-winter and there is some evidence of movement across Torres Strait (Marchant & Higgins 1990), but the principal wintering grounds have not been identified.

Little Bitterns occur regularly near Port Moresby (Moitaka) from November to April and are possibly resident there but are seldom seen at other times of the year (Coates 1985). There is one published record from Western Province, one bird, ready to lay, collected in September in 1936 at Lake Daviumbu via Rand (Coates 1985, Archbold and Rand 1940). The similar Yellow Bittern (*I. sinensis*) occurs regularly in the northern watershed of New Guinea and in the islands to the east (Coates 1985).

Recent sightings: On 12th June 1994 I heard 4 Little Bitterns, presumably adult males, calling at 0700 h and several again at 0900 h in flooded vegetation at the channel of Lake Pangua, Middle Fly region, Western Province. A pair were flushed, one bird being a black-backed male, the other (with brown back and dark grey primaries) probably an adult female. Habitat was clumps of reed *Phragmites karka* and pit-pit *Saccharum robustum* with surrounding floating mats of the wetland grasses *Leersia* sp. and *Echinochloa* sp. The wetland was fully inundated.

During December 2-4 1994, single Little Bitterns were seen by Phil Gregory and myself at three locations in the Middle Fly wetlands, though none were heard calling. A single brown phase female or immature bird was glimpsed when flushed from tall lotus *Nelumbo nucifera* in Lake Daviumbu on December 2 (RJ). A brown phase bird was seen flying along the bank of the Fly River opposite Obo station at 0630 h on 3 December (PG); it disappeared in swampy tall reed and pit-pit behind the bank. An immature, streaked below and with grey-brown primaries and mottled back, was flushed from floating grass (? *Leersia* sp.) in remnant water in a tie-channel joined to lake Ambuve around mid-day on 4 December. In December 1994 most of the floodplain was dry and extensively burnt, or holding remnant shallow water, whereas lakes and ox-bows were still deeply flooded.

The Middle Fly lake, ox-bow and floodplain sites surveyed in December 1994 were revisited by Phil Gregory, Paulus Kulmoi and myself in April 1995. An adult male Little Bittern was flushed from pit-pit and reed fringing a tie-channel (joining the Fly River channel) of Lake Ambuve in the morning of 25 April and was seen by all observers. An adult female was seen briefly (PG, RJ) as it rose from a field of dense tall wild rice *Oryza* sp. on nearby floodplain later that morning. The wetlands were fully inundated in April 1995.

Conclusions: All birds seen in 1994-95 were identified as Little Bitterns on the basis of either black backs or (if brown-backed) grey-brown primaries that did not contrast strongly with upperwing coverts. Yellow Bittern does not show a black back in any phase and all phases display black primaries that contrast markedly with pale upperwing coverts (RJ pers. obs. in field and from museum skins).