

“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)”.

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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.

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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).

The recent records of Little Bittern in the Middle Fly wetlands were from four habitats: reed/pit-pit, lotus beds, wild rice and floating grass mats. All four such habitats are extensive in these wetlands and collectively would offer year-round refuge except in severe drought years.

Little Bitterns have now been recorded in the Middle Fly wetlands in each of four austral seasons. Thus it is unlikely that the species occurs only as a winter migrant from Australia. Confirmation of occurrence of migrants would require marking and recapture of individuals, or systematic sampling of genetic material.

Although nests or nestlings have not been observed in the Middle Fly, Rand's specimen and the calling birds in June 1994 imply that breeding probably occurs there. Vigorous calling (the "advertising call") is done by males and is closely associated with the breeding process (pers. obs.; Hancock and Elliott 1978).

Breeding of this species occurs primarily in spring-summer in Australia. However, breeding seasons of the same species may differ between equatorial and temperate regions. In equatorial Malaysia, *Ixobrychus* species bred throughout the year (Medway and Wells 1976). Food supply for nestlings may be the main determinant of timing of breeding, and food (e. g. tadpoles: pers.

obs.) is more likely to be abundant once floodplain water-levels start to fall. In the seasonal Middle Fly wetlands, that scenario would begin in about May-June and continue for perhaps six months, which is consistent with the June and September data suggestive of breeding.

It is now apparent that the vast reed beds and other floodplain vegetation of the Middle Fly region, and possibly other parts of southern New Guinea, could indeed support the entire Australian population of Little Bittern if that population is truly migratory. However, for the present we can only conclude that there is a resident breeding population of this species in New Guinea, which may be seasonally augmented by southern migrants.

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#### NOTES ON THE BLACK MANNIKIN (*Lonchura stygia*) AND OTHER MANNIKINS (*Lonchura* spp.) AT LAKE OWA MIDDLE FLY RIVER

by Phil Gregory

During the course of a survey of the Middle Fly wetland habitats in April 1995, Roger Jaensch and I observed the rarely encountered Black Mannikin (*Lonchura stygia*) at just a single site, Lake Owa near Lake Ambuve. These are interconnected valley floor lakes joined to the Fly River via a narrow tie-channel some 192.5 river miles (ARM) from the coast. We did not find the species at either Lake Daviumbu, nor Lake Pangua despite extensive similar looking habitat. During December 1994 we failed to find it at all three of these sites, which suggests the species must be locally nomadic as grass seed abundance and water levels dictate. The Black Mannikin is endemic to the western Trans-Fly, where it is known from the Kurik and Mandum area (near the lower Digul river, Irian Jaya) east to Lake Daviumbu which was the only Papua New Guinea locality previously known (Coates 1990). Few ornithologists have had the chance to observe the species.

We initially saw the Black Mannikin in flight, two birds over the floating grass as we neared Owa village, Lake Owa. Then we saw a few individuals and groups of two in this general area, and small parties of 4 or 5 as we punted back to the main lake system. The total for the day was about 30+ birds. Most, with a maximum flock of 6, were with Grey-crowned Mannikin (*L. nevermanni*) at the floodplain end of the tie-channel. These birds exhibited a variety of plumages:

Adult: All black, with a yellowish rump and tail, the outer third of the tail with darker central feather streaks on a yellowy-orange background. The legs were blue-grey, the eye dark, and the massive bill bright blue-grey in colour. The birds resembled a melanistic Grand Mannikin *L. grandis* in shape. Some birds had a brownish tint to the colour of the upperparts.

An immature or moult plumage was highly variable:

1. Generally blackish in colour but extensively blotched with light brown and rump not yellowy, with a dark tail, dark facial area and paler nape.
2. Mainly blackish but with some pale blotches on the belly and with a pale greyish-brown nape collar.
3. A mystery Mannikin had a blackish face and whitish underparts with black blotches on the belly. Brown upperparts with black blotches on the wing coverts. This may have been a hybrid Black Mannikin x *Lonchura* sp.

Another mannikin was entirely rich tawny-orange, presumably an imm. Grey-crowned as it was always with flocks of that species and had a similar shape. Other curious *L. nevermanni* had no black throats and heads streaked with white, but with orangey rump and tails, perhaps hybrids with the White-spotted Mannikin *L. leucosticta*.

The Black Mannikins were invariably in floating or emergent grass, especially *Oryza* and *Echinochloa* spp. in full seed head, and were clearly feeding on the heads of *Echinochloa* sp. (probably *praestens*) like their congener the Grey-crowned Mannikin.

The Grey-crowned Mannikin was quite common at Lake Owa and Ambuve (max. 50 in a flock) and rather less common at the Lake Pangua (max. 10) site, as well as being occasionally seen from the boat along the river banks. We noted a distinct difference in the calls of Grey-crowned and White-spotted Mannikins, the former having a musical "tink tink" whilst the latter had a thin, plaintive "see". *L. leucosticta* was scarce, we found just a single party of 10 birds feeding on the