

Occurrences of Least Bittern
(Ixobrychus exilis)

Recommended Listing Status: ENDANGERED

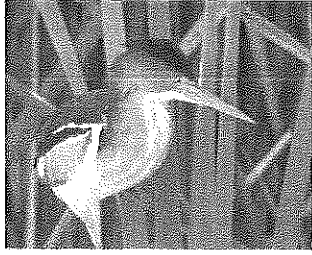
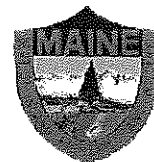
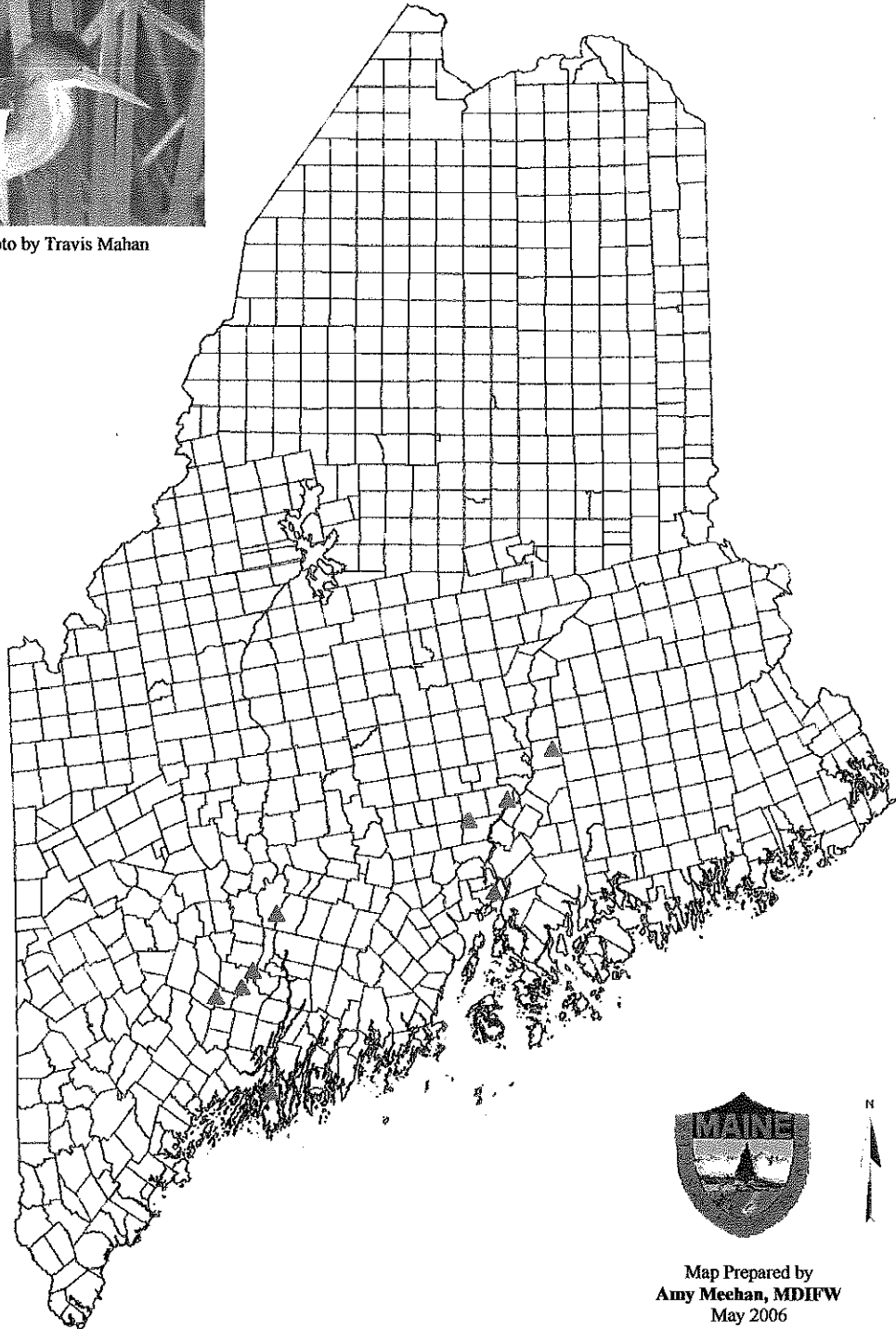


Photo by Travis Mahan



Map Prepared by
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Scientific Name: *Ixobrychus exilis*

Common Name: Least Bittern

Taxonomic Group: Bird

Range in Maine: Coastal third of Maine from Southern Oxford county NE through Central Maine (southern Somerset County).

Habitat: Emergent freshwater marshes, chiefly those characterized by cattail (*Typha*). Occasionally occurs in coastal saltmarshes.

Seasonal Residency: Summer resident

Recommended Listing Status: ENDANGERED

Basis for Listing Recommendation: The Least Bittern is recommended for Endangered status based on its small population size, few breeding sites, and an apparent decline in both the number of occupied wetlands and the abundance of birds at the remaining occupied sites. This species has occurred in Maine for well over 100 years, having been mentioned in some of the earliest ornithological writings. Furthermore, several breeding records date to the late 1800s.

Data in support of this listing recommendation result from nearly two decades of field surveys as well as observations by experienced birders. Beginning in 1989, Gibbs and Melvin (1989, 1990) initiated an effort to catalog marsh bird diversity at over 50 wetlands in Maine. These efforts resumed in the late 1990s, thus expanding the original work to over 200 total sites by 2005. The University of Maine, together with the Maine Dept. of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, surveyed 85 sites during 2005 and 2006 (including 29 of 32 sites where this species has been observed in the past) to further document rare marsh bird occurrence and begin to assess population trends. Consequently, some sites have been surveyed during two or more breeding seasons over the past 17 years. Based on these three survey efforts, it appears the best habitat for this species has been surveyed.

As early as the mid 1900s, Palmer (1949) wrote of an apparent decline of this species in Maine citing several pairs at Scarborough (presumably Scarborough Marsh) in 1863, but knew of none by the mid 20th century. Similarly, among the 18 occupied sites documented by Gibbs and Melvin in 1989/90, 5 of these had 2 or more territorial males (presumably paired). However, formal surveys since 1998 (i.e. IFW's Ecoregional Surveys plus Univ. of Maine surveys) have yielded no sites with more than 1 territorial male.

This species occurs primarily in the Midwestern U.S., along the Gulf of Mexico, and along the eastern seaboard as far north as Nova Scotia. Erskine (1992) suggests that the species may not breed every year in the Maritime Provinces and describes their status as "precarious". This species occurs at the edge of its range in Maine and limiting factors are not clear. This species is listed as Endangered in PA and MA, Threatened in CT and NY, and of Concern in Maryland.

Selected References:

- Erskine, A. J. 1992. Atlas of breeding birds of the Maritime Provinces. Nova Scotia Museum, Province of Nova Scotia. 270 pp.
- Gibbs, J. P. and S. M. Melvin. 1989. An assessment of wading birds and other wetlands avifauna and their habitats in Maine. Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Bangor, Maine. 114 pp.
- Gibbs, J. P. and S. M. Melvin. 1990. An assessment of wading birds and other wetlands avifauna and their habitats in Maine. Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Bangor, Maine. 61 pp.
- Gibbs, J. P., F. A. Reid, and S. M. Melvin. 1992. Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*). In A. Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, eds. The Birds of North America, No. 17. The Birds of North America Inc., Philadelphia, PA.
- Palmer, R. S. 1949. Maine Birds. Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Volume 102, Harvard College, Cambridge, Mass. 656 pp.