

BLAST from the PAST

American Bittern, Kilmacoll, Renfrewshire, 4th November 1981

by David Clugston

During the evening of 10th December 1981 I received a telephone call from Iain Gibson, the Clyde Bird Recorder, informing me that a possible American Bittern had been seen by a Mr. A. J. Cumming at Glen Moss, Kilmacoll. This novice birdwatcher had first seen the mystery bird as long ago as the 4th November, and again early on the 10th while walking his dog, but due to fleeting views and his admitted lack of experience, was unable to be sure of its identity.

Early the following morning I visited the site and found the whole area well and truly frozen over after a night of very severe frost down to -13°C . Searching the moss I eventually flushed the bird on several occasions obtaining reasonably good flight views. I noted its small size, plain blackish flight feathers and the much lighter grey-brown, finely flecked (with black) upper-wing coverts. It was indeed an American Bittern - a species I had been very fortunate to see nearly twenty years earlier on Bardsey Island, Gwynedd in September 1962, which was only the third British record since the end of World War Two.

Putting the news out that day resulted in at least 12 experienced birders searching the moss over the next few days, but to no avail. I returned to Glen Moss on 17th December and literally the first bird I saw was the American Bittern, in flight, circling low down over the ice-covered ground. It dropped down into sparse willow scrub and tall sedges where it quickly assumed a typical bittern posture with its head and bill pointing skyward.

The following Sunday, 27th December, accompanied by Iain Gibson, Angus Hogg and Mike Scott we re-found the bird and all had good but brief flight views on more than one occasion. Again the whole of the moss was frozen over with several inches of lying snow.

My final visit was on 9th January 1982 after yet another night of very severe frost down to -17°C . I searched the site for just over an hour before the bittern appeared. It suddenly flew by and dropped down at the far end of the moss in a tiny ice-free area. Approching very cautiously, I was able to view it crouched down on its legs standing on the ice next to some running water from the main moss outflow burn. I was able to study it for about two minutes before it took flight and disappeared into a large private garden adjacent to the site.



Plate 135. American Bittern, Magor, Gwent, 29th October 1981 – 3rd January 1982 (David M. Coltridge)

The pattern of observations suggested that the bird was able to survive during the long spell of unusually cold weather in an extensive area of boggy marsh and willow scrub close to the main lake, visiting three or more tiny ice-free areas and the outflow burn at frequent intervals. Once thawed out, the whole moss became waterlogged and very difficult to search.

This record coincided with a much more obliging bird at Magor, Gwent from 29th October 1981 to at least 3rd January 1982. That bird was enjoyed by over 2,000 observers during its lengthy stay and constituted the biggest twitch ever at the time. The previous Scottish record was of a male, obtained (shot!), on Benbecula, Outer Hebrides on 27th December 1932. There are seven 19th Century Scottish records (1844 to 1888) all of which were shot, so the ninth bird was the first to escape the gun!

Renfrewshire is not known as a county where rare birds appear very often, but the 1998 Scops Owl (see *Birding Scotland* 1(3): 111) was found on the road less than two miles from Glen Moss. It just goes to show that rare birds can and do appear almost anywhere. Keep working your local patch - persistence can occasionally bring great rewards.

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