

Biodiversity

Australasian Bittern/Matuku-hūrepo (*Botaurus poiciloptilus*)



DESCRIPTION

The Australasian bittern (or matuku-hūrepo) is a heron-like wading bird found in wetlands around New Zealand. Streaky brown frontal plumage and mottled brown feathers on their back provide excellent camouflage. They are large with long necks and legs, reaching more than 70cm tall when outstretched. Males are larger than females.

These birds are rarely seen, but from dusk a distinctive booming call can sometimes be heard from males announcing their territory. Scan the QR code to hear this unique call.



DISTRIBUTION, BREEDING AND FEEDING

Matuku-hūrepo are active during the day but are also partly nocturnal and prefer to inhabit shallow, densely vegetated wetlands where they can stand still and blend in. During egg-laying season from August to December, male matuku-hūrepo produce a distinctive "boom" call in the evenings to attract females and to guard their territory from other males. Once mated, the male defends the territory while the female incubates the eggs and then feeds the hatchlings.

Matuku-hūrepo are visual hunters and take a variety of prey, including fish, frogs, eels, freshwater crustaceans, invertebrates, mice and young birds.

Once common throughout the country, matuku-hūrepo are now more often found in wetland areas north of Waikato and the on west coast of the South Island. They are native to New Zealand, Australia and New Caledonia

MATUKU-HŪREPO IN TARANAKI

The extensive loss of wetland habitat in Taranaki has greatly reduced matuku-hūrepo numbers, with estimates of less than 20-30 birds remaining. These are scattered throughout the region with the highest numbers occurring around the extensive coastal dune lakes of South Taranaki.



CONSERVATION

The matuku-hūrepo is a globally endangered species and is listed as 'Nationally Critical' in New Zealand. Recent estimates suggest there are 250 to 1,000 matuku-hūrepo remaining in Aotearoa, and the population is likely still declining. Fewer than 1,000 birds are thought to remain in Australia and there are fears the critically low population in New Caledonia may now be gone.

IMAGE CREDIT (above and top right): Jenny Kerrisk



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP

- Report sightings to Taranaki Regional Council, or on the iNaturalist and eBird apps.
- Report sick/injured birds to the DOC emergency helpline 0800 362 468.
- Participate in The Great Matuku Muster, run each spring.
- Drive slowly near known matuku-hūrepo habitat, such as SH3 through Mōhakatino.

THREATS

The primary cause of decline of matuku-hūrepo in New Zealand is wetland drainage and degradation. Predation of young birds by introduced predators poses a significant threat.

QUICK FACTS

- Matuku-hūrepo are highly mobile and can travel between wetlands more than 100km apart.
- When threatened, matuku-hūrepo will stand straight, tall and still to camouflage themselves.
- Matuku-hūrepo are protected by the Wildlife Act (1953), which is administered by the Department of Conservation.
- A large group of matuku-hūrepo is known as a sedge, a reference to plants which grow in their wetland habitats.



TARANAKI REGIONAL COUNCIL

Biodiversity Section

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