

## Genus BOTAURUS, *Selby*.

GEN. CHAR. *Bill* strong, rather longer than the head; both mandibles of equal length; the upper sulcated for two thirds of its length and very gently curving from the base to the tip; tomia of both mandibles very sharp and finely serrated near the tip; lores and orbits naked. *Nostrils* basal, linear, longitudinal, placed in the furrow of the maxilla, and partly covered by a naked membrane. *Legs* of mean length. *Toes* long and slender, all unequal; middle toe of the same length as the tarsus; hind toe long, articulated with the interior toe on the same plane; claws long, subfalcate, that of the middle toe pectinated; front of the tarsus scutellated; back part reticulated. *Wings* long, rounded; the first three quills nearly equal and the longest.

## COMMON BITTERN.

*Botaurus stellaris*, *Steph.*

Le Heron Grand Butor.

FORMERLY, when large portions of the British Islands were uncultivated, and extensive marshes and waste land afforded the Bittern abundance of retreats congenial to its habits, it was plentifully distributed over the country; but as cultivation has extended and the marshes been drained, its numbers have gradually decreased, and although not absolutely a rare bird its presence is not always to be reckoned upon, for in one year it may be tolerably common, and then for several succeeding seasons scarcely to be procured at all.

We have received specimens of the Common Bittern from Asia and Africa, but we are of opinion that Europe alone is its native habitat. At the present time it finds sufficient shelter and retreat among the marshes of Holland and other low countries, where it may fulfill the task of incubation in comparative security.

The Bittern is a solitary and shy bird, hiding itself in dense masses of reeds during the day, and seldom appearing abroad until the evening, when it resorts to ditches and the more open parts of the marshes in search of small mammalia, frogs, lizards, fishes, and various aquatic insects, retiring again to its retreat when its wants are satisfied.

No two birds can better show the necessity of subdivisions than the Bittern and the Heron, which have been until lately classed under one generic title (*Ardea*). They are equally shy and wary, yet each evinces its timidity in a strikingly opposite manner, the Heron always choosing as a place of rest, after feeding, the topmost branches of high trees, or some elevation where it can perceive the approach of danger; while the Bittern depends for security upon the covert afforded it by the thick reed-beds and other dense masses of vegetation, from whence it is not roused without considerable difficulty, and then seldom flies to any great distance. "When wounded or surprised," says Mr. Selby, "and unable to escape, it defends itself with vigour, and as it always aims at the eyes of its enemy with its strong and sharp-pointed bill, a considerable degree of caution must be used in capturing it. When attacked by a dog, it throws itself upon its back and strikes with its claws as well as with its bill; and in this manner it will keep the most resolute dog at bay, as the infliction of a stroke or two of the latter spear-pointed weapon is commonly sufficient to keep him afterwards at a respectful distance. The Bittern used to afford excellent sport in falconry; for when flown at, it immediately begins to soar, rising in spiral circles, and endeavouring to keep above its enemy. Should this manœuvre fail, it then prepares for the descent of the Hawk by setting its sharp bill perpendicularly upwards, upon which its impetuous antagonist frequently transfixes itself, or is so severely wounded as to be obliged to give up a second attack. The bellowing or booming noise of the Bittern is confined to the pairing-season, which commences in February or the beginning of March. At this time, on the approach of twilight, it rises in a spiral direction to a very great height, uttering at intervals the peculiar cry, formerly heard with superstitious dread."

In earlier times the flesh of the Bittern was esteemed a great luxury, and even now fetches a good price; it is dark coloured but not coarse, and partakes of the flavour of the hare and that of wild fowl.

The nest is composed of sticks, reeds, &c., and is generally placed near the water's edge among the thickest herbage: the eggs are four or five in number, of an uniform pale brown colour. The young are produced in about twenty-five days; they are fed by the parents until fully fledged and do not quit the nest till they are able to provide for themselves.

The sexes are alike in plumage.

Crown of the head black, glossed with bronzy green; feathers of the occiput margined with pale buff, rayed with black; from the gape a broad streak of blackish brown; all the upper surface pale buff irregularly marked with black and reddish brown, the former predominating; sides of the neck barred transversely with dark brown, the front with large longitudinal streaks of reddish brown intermingled with blackish brown; feathers of the breast blackish brown deeply margined with buff; under surface buff with narrow longitudinal streaks of brownish black; quills blackish brown, barred with reddish brown; tail reddish brown, with irregular markings of black; orbits and angles of the mouth yellow; bill yellowish green, darkest on the culmen; legs and feet pale grass green; claws pale horn colour; irides yellow.

The Plate represents a male about two thirds of the natural size.