

ARDETTA MINUTA.

Little Bittern.

Ardea minuta, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 240.

—— *danubialis*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 637.

Botaurus minutus, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 559.

—— *pusillus*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., p. 598.

Ardeola minuta, Bonap. Geog. and Comp. List of Birds of Eur. and N. Amer., p. 48.

Cancrophagus minutus, Kaup, Natürl. Syst., p. 42.

Butor minutus, Swains. Class. of Birds, vol. ii. p. 354.

THE Little Bittern, being a very shy and recluse bird, it is probable that many more examples may have come to England than have been detected; however this may be, it has been killed in sufficient numbers, both in this country and in Ireland, to show that it is not one of the rarest of our British birds. Most of these have been obtained in the spring, just prior to the breeding-season, a period of the year when birds become restless and are prompted to wander, and probably have been individuals which, during the passage from south to north, have been driven out of their course in a westerly direction, when, as a natural consequence, they would strike the British shores, and gladly seek rest by alighting thereon. If under these circumstances two or more of opposite sexes were to meet, there is no reason why they should not breed and spend the summer among our marshes and fluviatile districts, as the Great Bittern used to do; as yet, however, I believe neither eggs nor very young birds have been procured. That at least some of the specimens which have been obtained were birds which had been driven out of their intended course is evident from the following notes, communicated to me by Mr. Gatcombe:—"Early in May 1865, a pair of Little Bitterns were seen in the neighbourhood of Plymouth, one of which was caught by some boys, who said it was entangled in a bramble bush by the side of a stream. It was a male in fine plumage; its companion flew away." In another note Mr. Gatcombe says, "it may interest you to know that a Little Bittern was obtained at the fishing-village of Beer, near Seaton, on the coast of Devon, on the 20th of April, 1869. It was seen by some fishermen to alight in a boat lying on the beach, and was taken out of it in a most exhausted state; and I know of several other examples which have been picked up in the same state on our coast."

Besides the above, instances are on record of the occurrence of the Little Bittern in Somersetshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, South Wales, Dorsetshire, Hampshire, Middlesex, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Yorkshire, Northumberland, and, lastly, in Cornwall, as detailed in the following notes from my friend E. H. Rodd, Esq., of Penzance:—"June 14, 1866. I saw yesterday a very beautiful specimen of a male Little Bittern in the highest development of plumage. It was killed at the large pool at Trescoe, one of the Scilly Islands; its weight was exactly three ounces, and its ruff quite as large in proportion to the bird as that of the Bittern." "April 12, 1867. An adult male Little Bittern, in fine plumage, like the one from Mr. Smith's grounds in Scilly, was brought to me yesterday. It was killed not far from St. Michael's Mount; like the former it weighed three ounces."

Mr. T. White, Taxidermist, of Bath Road, Cheltenham, wrote November 20, 1867:—"I have a Little Bittern, killed last winter within a mile of this town, at a pond full of dead rushes &c. There were three more, but I could not succeed in killing either of them; they go off in the daytime, but come back at dusk."

Apart from the British Islands the Little Bittern ranges in summer over all the central and southern parts of Europe, and in winter is probably as extensively spread over Africa. Its occurrence in India is very doubtful; for although Dr. Leith Adams includes it in his list of the birds of that country, Mr. Jerdon thinks it likely that he has mistaken the *Ardetta sinensis* for our species.

Speaking of the bird in Norfolk, Mr. Stevenson says:—"No doubt, from time immemorial, the Little Bittern has occasionally sought shelter in the luxuriant herbage of the "Broad"-district, nor is it at all improbable that it may even have remained with us at times and bred, having been found in pairs during the summer months, and, in one instance, a perfect egg was taken from a female killed near Lowestoft. Its skulking habits, however, and the almost impenetrable nature of the swamps it frequents, render its detection, except by the merest accident, extremely improbable."

The situations described by Mr. Stevenson are precisely those which the bird frequents in every country in which it is found. During the spring it frequently perches on trees; and Selby says that its usual