

Independently of the European localities above mentioned, the Bittern booms forth its hollow sound in all the countries of the Old World north of the equator, wherever suitable situations occur; in India it is as common as it is with us; it has also been received from China and Japan; and that it enjoys a still wider range is proved by examples from other parts of Asia and from Africa. But it has not yet been discovered in America, its place in that country being occupied by an allied species, the *Botaurus lentiginosus*.

"The habits of the Bittern," says Mr. Selby, "are solitary, and, being a night-feeding bird, it remains quiet during the day, concealed in the reeds and long herbage of its marshy haunts. In this state it generally sits closely squatted, with the neck bent so that the head rests between the shoulders; and when thus dosing and digesting the meal of the previous night, it will frequently allow itself to be nearly trodden upon before it will take wing or endeavour to escape; and even when roused, it seldom flies to any considerable distance. When wounded or surprised 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, like the Owls and other raptorial birds, 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-like 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 leaves its place of resort during the day, and, rising in a spiral direction, soars to a very great height, uttering at intervals the peculiar cry that in former days was heard with superstitious dread. It also makes the bellowing noise when on the ground, to assist in the production of which extraordinary note it was supposed to thrust its bill into the hollow of a reed—an idea not at all probable, and unsupported by any confirmatory evidence.

"The nest of the Bittern is generally placed very near the water, among the thickest reeds or long herbage, and is composed of a large mass of reeds, sticks, &c., containing four or five eggs of a pale asparagus-green colour, from which, in the course of twenty-five or twenty-six days, the young are produced. These, as may be supposed, are at first very shapeless, being naked, and the neck, head, and legs appearing quite out of proportion to the other parts of the body. They are fed by the parents till fully fledged, and do not quit the nest until nearly able to provide for themselves. The food of the Bittern consists of water-insects, reptiles, fish, and small mammalia, particularly moles, mice, and shrews. Young birds are also frequently devoured; and Sir William Jardine informs me that he once took a whole *Water-Rail* out of the stomach of a Bittern,—a fact, however, not extraordinary, when we consider that the gape of this bird is very wide, and will stretch to a great extent, the commissure of the bill reaching behind the line of the eyes, and the œsophagus being through its whole length capable of much distention. The Bittern, in earlier times, was greatly esteemed as a luxury for the table, and even now it brings a good price when exposed for sale. The flesh is dark-coloured, but not coarse in texture, and the flavour partakes of that of the Hare, combined with the peculiar taste of what are usually termed 'Wild Fowl.'"

Dr. Latham states that the booming noise is supposed to arise from a loose membrane, which can be inflated with air and exploded at pleasure; but Mr. Selby states that the internal anatomy of the bird exhibits no peculiarity. That it is produced by the inflation of the throat I am certain; for we may many times in the course of the year witness the action, and the utterance of the peculiar sounds, in an allied species of Bittern now in the Gardens of the Zoological Society of London.

The Plate represents an adult and four young ones, of the size of life. For the opportunity of figuring the latter, I am indebted to the kindness of A. W. Crichton, Esq.