



NTSIKENI NATURE RESERVE

An overlooked IBA

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The Eurasian or Great Bittern is often a frustrating bird to actually see. In early summer, its deep, booming calls can be heard emanating from some of the larger wetlands in southern Africa, but the bird seldom emerges into view. In South Africa, the species is considered to be Critically Endangered, with fewer than 150 pairs surviving. The main threat to its continued survival is the loss of its wetland habitat, especially in the grassland biome,

where it favours shallow marshes and vleis. In recent years, many such wetlands have been drained for agriculture or other developments. The subspecies *Botaurus stellaris capensis* occurs from southern Tanzania south to South Africa, where its range has contracted markedly in the last century. It may still be locally common in some areas in the north of its range, but its poor conservation status in South Africa gives cause for concern as human pressures on wetlands increase throughout the region.

The discovery of a largely overlooked population in a protected area in South Africa is good news indeed. In early October 2005, Greg Davies flushed a Bittern from the edge of the main vlei in Ntsikeni Nature Reserve, and Malcolm Gemmell reports hearing up to four males booming at this site over the last 10 years. Ntsikeni has been a provincial nature reserve since 1978, but it received relatively little attention until the late 1990s, when Div de Villiers from Eastern Cape Nature Conservation started working to improve its conservation status with support from the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa and the Rennies Wetland Trust. Conserved

largely by its inaccessibility, the vlei lies on a high plateau between Franklin and Creighton in East Griqualand, in the isolated enclave of the Eastern Cape marooned in southern KwaZulu-Natal. Until recently, access was limited to four-wheel-drive vehicles, but the road has just been upgraded. A small lodge with four four-bed suites has been built overlooking the vlei in an attempt to encourage tourists to visit this poorly-known reserve.

In November 2005, while *en route* from Cape Town to Durban, John and Greta Graham, Rob Leslie and Peter Ryan made a quick overnight stop at Ntsikeni to look for the elusive Bittern. We arrived during the afternoon in dense mist and cloud. The main vlei lies at 1 750 metres, often above the cloud level, and our initial attempts to explore the area were frustrated by the poor visibility. After a largely futile walk, we retired to bed early as the rain set in. Fortunately, the weather cleared during the night, and more than an hour before dawn we awoke to clear skies – and the unmistakable booming of distant Bitterns. At least four males were calling from the main vlei. Thanks to a three-quarter moon, we were able



to walk towards the bird calling most consistently, and thus be in position to hopefully see it once the sun rose.

The main vlei at Ntsikeni occupies approximately 1 100 hectares, and is enclosed within a basin ringed by hills and small mountains, all of which lie within the reserve. Counter-intuitively, the vlei drains to the north, away from the sea, with its outflow joining the Gungununu River, and eventually the Mzimkulu River. As dawn broke, we were able to appreciate for the first time the breathtaking beauty of this area. The grasslands were alive with calling Common Quails and Wing-snapping Cisticolas, while the vlei was ringing with the trills of African Rails and the hoots of Red-chested and Striped flufftails. Some flufftail calls were

over the vlei, seemingly moving from its roost in the denser sedges to forage among more open vegetation along the edge. As we moved in for a closer look, we flushed first an African Grass Owl from its day roost, then another Bittern, which flew off to land several hundred metres away. The first bird was located near where it landed, and allowed close approach before also flushing to another foraging area.

Ntsikeni is home to several species of global conservation concern, including three pairs of Wattled Cranes, a small colony of Cape Vultures and good numbers of Yellow-breasted Pipits. The reserve also has a breeding pair of Bearded Vultures, Southern Bald Ibis occur, and we saw a Black Harrier flying over. Rudd's Lark has not been recorded, but the habitat looks ideal and the species occurs nearby at Matatiele. Given the large number of threatened species, this reserve should be recognised as an Important Bird Area (IBA), both at a national and global level.

Birders also will enjoy the Broad-tailed Warblers that occur in the vlei, as well as its many Crowned Cranes, African Marsh-Harriers and Pale-crowned Cisticolas. The surrounding grasslands are home to Denham's Bustards, with Buff-streaked Chats and Eastern Long-billed Larks on the rocky ridges. Olive Woodpeckers and Red-throated Wrynecks occur in the small patches of trees around the lodge, while a Barratt's Warbler was singing from wattles near the entrance gate.

Further Reading

Anon. 1999. 'RWP works to save Ntsikeni Wetland.' *African Wildlife* 53(2): 38–39.
De Villiers, D. 2000. 'A recipe for success.' *African Wildlife* 54(6): 17–20.

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A number of cisticola species occur, among them Pale-crowned.

unfamiliar to us, and may have been from the endangered White-winged Flufftail – certainly the habitat looks to be ideal for this species.

But our attention was fixed firmly on the Bitterns. At close range, the male's boom is extremely impressive, resonating in our chests as much as registering as a sound. The low-frequency call easily carries several kilometres; the bird we tracked was calling more than two kilometres from our camp. Shortly after sunrise we saw a Bittern fly leisurely

Anyone trying to see Bitterns and other wetland birds must be extremely careful to limit disturbance to the wetland habitat and to the birds themselves. The marsh and adjacent grasslands already suffer considerable trampling pressure from cattle grazing in the reserve, so there is a temptation to walk into the marsh. However, Bitterns are susceptible to human disturbance, so birders should be prepared to wait for the birds to fly, which they often do at dawn and dusk, or search for them in the more open areas around the edge of the vlei.



A good population of Crowned Crane exists at Ntsikeni.