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## Least Bittern Nesting on Mangrove Keys in Florida Bay

Reed Bowman

G. Thomas Bancroft

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The low number of released hogs makes any definitive conclusions impossible. That a panther did kill one of the hogs suggests that very large scale releases may increase the panther prey base. However, the biological consequences and economic costs of large releases of hogs in this area makes this a debatable management alternative. It is possible that environmental stresses may have compromised the health of collared hogs and made them more vulnerable to predators such as bears, bobcats, and alligators. The patterns of mortality revealed by this study demonstrate that predators other than panthers may be a considerable mortality factor when hogs are available in the study area.

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#### Least Bittern Nesting on Mangrove Keys in Florida Bay

REED BOWMAN AND G. THOMAS BANCROFT  
National Audubon Society, Ornithological Research Unit,  
115 Indian Mound Trail, Tavernier, Florida 33070

The Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) is found throughout much of the western hemisphere (AOU 1983). It is usually associated with a variety of freshwater habitats and to a lesser extent, salt marshes (Palmer 1962). In southern Florida the Least Bittern is a common resident of the Everglades freshwater marshes, nesting primarily in sawgrass (*Mariscus jamaicensis*) and the cattail (*Typha* spp.) (Kushlan 1973). As an exception, Howell (1932) reported a Least Bittern nest in a mangrove at Indian Rocks, Pinellas County, in Florida. Most sightings of the Least Bittern in the Florida Keys have been during the fall or winter months (Bowman 1978), suggesting migrating or wintering birds. Summer sightings in the Keys were presumed to be non-breeders or the result of environmentally-induced dispersion (Robertson 1962). Robertson (1971) reported a Least Bittern on Big Crane Key in Florida Bay on 19 August 1971 and referred to an "elusive population that inhabits mangrove islands of Florida Bay." Here we report the first observations of Least Bittern nesting on mangrove keys in Florida Bay.

During the summers of 1985 and 1986 we observed Least Bitterns on Middle Butternut Key, in the northeast corner of Florida Bay (25° 4' 70" N, 80° 32' 02" W). On 29 May 1987 we flushed an adult Least Bittern from a small red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) clump

on the edge of the central lagoon. A nest was in the center of the clump, 0.3 m above the water, containing three pale-blue eggs. The clump was 1.2 m tall and 1.5 m in diameter and at least 10 m from the nearest mangroves. The nest was made of coarse, woody twigs. We remained in the vicinity of the nest for 15 minutes. On 5 June the nest was revisited. The adult Least Bittern was perched near the nest and flushed when we were 15 m distant. The three eggs were intact, but felt cold. By 10 June, the nest was empty and the adult was not seen nearby.



**Figure 1.** Adult female Least Bittern brooding young in nest located in black mangroves on Bottle Key, Florida Bay.

On 12 June 1987 a second Least Bittern nest containing three eggs was found on Bottle Key about 4 km southwest of Middle Butternut Key. The nest was located 0.5 m above dry ground in a dense clump of saltwort (*Batis* spp.) growing in a dense stand of black mangroves (*Avicennia germinans*). The nest was made of small woody twigs and measured 27 cm in diameter and 9 cm deep. The eggs were similar in size with mean dimensions of 30.2 mm x 23.0 mm. These dimensions are comparable to those reported by Hancock and Kushlan (1984). On 22 June the nest contained two young and one egg. On 1 July two young were seen in the mangroves above the nest. The last egg did not hatch. On 15 July we flushed a juvenile Least Bittern about 15 m from the nest.

On 15 June 1988 a third nest was found on Bottle Key (Fig. 1). This nest was located in a tall black mangrove in the central lagoon. The nest was only 0.3 m above water 0.4 m in depth. This nest was built of larger sticks than previous nests and was much larger in overall size, especially depth (31 cm in diameter and 45 cm deep). The lower portions of the nest were under water. The contents were three eggs similar in size to the 1987 eggs. On 24 June the nest contained two young and one egg. By 5 July the water depth below the nest had risen to 0.57 m. Both young were able to fly short distances near the nest, but the unhatched egg was still in the now partially submerged nest. We saw adult Least Bitterns throughout the summer of 1988, but never resighted a juvenile.

Saline environments are not normally considered appropriate breeding habitat for the *exilis* subspecies of Least Bittern, although they may be used extensively during the winter. Mangrove swamps, however, are commonly used for nesting by a Mexican subspecies (*L. e. pullus*) and to a lesser extent by *L. e. erythromelas* populations of Trinidad (Hancock and Kushlan 1984). Beatty (1943) reported Least Bittern nesting in mangroves on St. Croix in the Caribbean. Least Bitterns have been observed nesting in *Avicennia* on offshore islands along the south Texas coast (R. T. Paul, pers. comm.). The regular, but infrequent, sightings of Least Bitterns during the summer in the Florida Keys suggest that breeding has occurred here for some time. Most keys in Florida Bay are within Everglades National Park and closed to the general public. Considering the inconspicuousness of the Least Bittern, it is not surprising that this breeding population had gone undetected.

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## PERIODICAL LITERATURE

Florida Field Naturalist 17(2): 46-48, 1989.

### Florida Birds in the Periodical Literature

FRED E. LOHRER

Archbold Biological Station, P.O. Box 2057, Lake Placid, Florida 33852

This list contains 47 citations to recent (1987-1988) articles about Florida birds except those published in *Florida Field Naturalist* and the seasonal reports in *American Birds*. Authors are encouraged to send reprints of their articles to the compiler for inclusion in this annual feature.

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