

# Tree Top Bittern

Jean Iron



American Bittern, 24 metres up in a Sugar Maple. Photo taken through telescope by Jean Iron.

On an overcast 6 May 2003, when the ground and vegetation were wet from the previous night's rain, I was doing the warbler survey for the Toronto Ornithological Club in Brookbanks Ravine, Toronto. At 8:15 a.m., I noticed a large dark object near the top of a tall mature Sugar Maple. Through binoculars it looked more like a ball of feathers than a squirrel's nest, but to be sure it was a bird, I returned home to get my telescope. Through the scope it was an American Bittern, crouching and balancing precariously on thin branches near the top of the maple.

I had never seen an American Bittern in a tree before. During the morning I watched the bird for several hours. At first it looked tired, alternately closing and opening its eyes. A little later it became more alert, moved its head, looked about, turned around and preened, stretching its neck and a wing. When a Blue Jay flew over calling loudly, the bittern quickly stretched up its neck and head into the camouflage pose that you often see in early spring when bitterns think they are hiding among the emergent cattails in a marsh. A Ring-billed Gull flew

over and the bittern assumed the same camouflage pose. Neither the Blue Jay nor the gull swooped at the bittern.

The same day at 4:30 p.m., I returned. The bird was still there, swaying and perilously hanging onto thin branches near the tree top as it was blown about by increasingly strong winds. About half an hour later the bird moved down about a metre to a sturdier branch as in the photo.

Why was the American Bittern at the top of a tree in Brookbanks Ravine, in a residential Toronto neighbourhood, far from suitable marsh habitat? During the night of 5-6 May, thunder and lightning storms and very heavy rain started at 10:30 p.m. and continued throughout the night. The bittern was probably migrating at night and was brought down by the storms, landing in the maple. We measured the bittern to be perched 24 metres above the ground.

The next day, I checked for the bittern but it had gone, hopefully arriving safely at a marshy destination.

Many thanks to Ron Pittaway for assistance with this note and for measuring the height of the bittern in the Sugar Maple.

## Nature Sounds of Ontario CD by Monty Brigham

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