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The American Bittern: an historic first for Essex

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A remarkable detective story began when Nick Green, a member of the Essex Avifauna Committee, joined a group of ornithologists researching specimens of mounted birds kept at museums in Essex. Looking into the original identification and the specimen history was part of a fact-checking process for the new, forthcoming *Birds of Essex* book, and the group included its senior editor, Simon Wood. They came to Saffron Walden Museum to research bird specimens, and were assisted by Sarah Kenyon, Natural Sciences Curatorial Officer.

When they came to looking at the Bittern specimens, the first one presented was definitely the Common Bittern, *Botaurus stellaris*, but the second gave them a shock, since it was immediately identified as a very rare American Bittern *B. lentiginosus*, shot at Wenden in 1826. There were many questions: Who donated it to the museum? When was it identified and by whom? Had information about this specimen been published? Nick had unwittingly taken on a major research project which would entail a further six visits to the Museum, close liaison with its staff, research on the Internet and with Saffron Walden local experts, visiting Essex Record Office and libraries in Chelmsford, Colchester and Saffron Walden, liaising with the Essex Field Club and with a genealogist specialising in the Travis family, among others.

Nick's subsequent research revealed that the American Bittern, a first-winter bird killed in the spring, appears to have been mounted by William Travis/Travers, a local taxidermist in charge of the menagerie at Audley End. It then found its way to the Saffron Walden Museum, established by Jabez Gibson and his friends, a group known as 'The Philosophers'. The American Bittern is a rare bird in Essex, and when Saffron Walden Museum opened in 1835, the specimen, presented by Jabez Gibson, was believed to be *B. stellaris*. Its true identity was not suspected until almost 50 years later in 1883 when the naturalist Robert Miller Christy suspected

the identification was incorrect. In his 1890 Essex avifauna, a valuable early record of birds in this area, Christy described three Bitterns, including the Wenden Ambo 1826 specimen (Christy, 1890, pp.186-7). Christy's list was based on notes made in 1845 by Joseph Clarke, FSA (1802-95), a naturalist and archaeologist, closely associated with the Museum from its inception in 1834, when he was listed as a Trustee (Christy 1890, Fitch 1895). He also authored an abridged catalogue of the museum's contents (Clarke, 1845). According to Joseph Clarke's obituary (Fitch, 1895), 'he was the sole means of keeping together the collections during the long period in which the museum was almost wholly neglected, prior to its resuscitation by the late Mr Geo Stacey Gibson in 1882'.

Clarke's 1845 notes about birds in the Saffron Walden area proved invaluable (Clarke c.1845). One bird described here, a common Bittern shot in 1849, is still on display in the bird collection at Audley End House, proving such specimens can survive in good condition for 150 years. It was enthralling to have Christy's early record to hand relating to this extremely rare bird, the more so as he tantalisingly stated: 'It is by no means improbable that some of the following specimens would, on careful examination, prove to belong to a distinct species, the American Bittern (*B. lentiginosus*), which, though a rare straggler in Britain, has occurred at least a score of times'. This indicated perhaps that he had viewed the 1826 Wenden specimen, but did not include it in his book, presumably due to lack of documentary evidence. Christy was also trying to stimulate the county's ornithologists into action, but his comments seemingly took over a century to have the desired effect! Yarrell (1843, p.483) also stated under Bittern, 'when we recollect how few records are published of the occurrence of rare visitors, I think it not improbable that this species may have been taken elsewhere, and remained unnoticed, or perhaps undistinguished from our Common Bittern'. How right they both were!

The 1845 museum catalogue gives only brief details, recording whether a male or female example was present, but the actual number was not given. However it did list donors, and Jabez Gibson was listed as one of the donors. It also indicated that all Bitterns in the Museum had been collected in the British Isles, and at least one locally. A hand-written 1883 museum catalogue of birds and mammals, compiled by Robert Miller Christy, was more helpful. After giving details of other Bitterns, the American Bittern is listed with accompanying text: 'This bird according to the judgement of Mr H Seebone is the American Bittern' (a misspelling of Seeborn who visited the Museum circa 1891 in response to Christy's book, to confirm the identification). But the origins of the specimen were still unknown.

Nick is nothing if not painstaking, but his methodical search through the microfiched copy of the Museum's accession register 1832-80/81 drew a

blank, suggesting that the specimen could have been donated before 1832, or between 1832 and May 1835 when the Museum opened, or simply that a later donation had not been entered in the register. The long-time lapse may be part of the problem, for this accession register was not compiled by G.N. Maynard until 1897, 62 years after the Museum's opening, and contains a note that it was largely based on various labels and other documents of Joseph Clarke's, since the original register, if it ever existed, had been lost. A hand-written register of specimens donated up to April 1835 provided references to the local taxidermist, Travers receiving payments for preparing Bittern skins, although his charge of £1 seems rather excessive compared to other Bitterns costing only 3s 6d or 6s. Another entry intriguingly noted that the Museum desired to procure an American Bittern, but ironically was completely unaware that it already had one! This strongly suggests there was no fraud, rather a simple misidentification.

Nick's investigations uncovered much of interest about the local history of ornithology in Saffron Walden. Joseph Clarke made a particularly strong contribution to the local ornithological record, with invaluable notes of observations on rare birds occurring around Saffron Walden 1820-45. This document is held at the museum. There is reference to the Stone Curlew, said to occasionally breed in the Walden district, and an itemised taxidermy bill from Travers (very likely 1826), listing birds he had mounted, including Teal, red Mallard, Gold cocks (Goldcrests), Crossbill (Crossbill), Nightjar, Nuthatch, Redwing and including exotic gold and silver Pheasants from the menagerie/aviary at Audley End, where Travis worked. Here was a critical line mentioning for the first time a Bittern, explaining why the price of £1 seemed so excessive: the Bittern had been part of a batch consisting of at least seven birds. In 1835-6 there had been a Crossbill invasion, and 8-10 years earlier in March, a pair had made a nest at Audley End aviary, in which the female deposited five eggs, but although undisturbed, deserted them without attempting incubation. About the same time a pair also built their nest in one of the town gardens on an apple-tree, but they were shot before they completed it.' Omit apostrophe Joseph Clarke's comment on the Crossbill was: 'An uncertain visitant. One killed about 1825'.

Sarah Kenyon contributed substantially to Nick's findings by discovering a book of collected newspaper articles from August 1891 by the Curator G.N. Maynard, in response to a local man asking what was in the Museum. These had been published in the *Saffron Walden Gazette*, in a series entitled 'A Ramble through Saffron Walden Museum', describing the natural history specimens on display. An article dated April 7, 1892 mentions 'No 208... American Bittern... a specimen of that rare British bird, the American bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*), which was taken at Wenden, Essex, in 1826. This specimen was originally placed with the common bitterns in the collection, but now turns out to be the rarer one

alluded to above. It is a native of North America down to Guatemala, being in the country but as rare visitor'. A description then follows on how it can be distinguished from a Common Bittern. Thus the newspaper record publicly confirmed the history of the American Bittern but unfortunately, with limited circulation, did not reach more official ornithological circles for acknowledgement. Finally, among Audley End papers at the Essex Record Office, Nick found further reference to William Travers or Travis. Here it clearly showed that William Travis was a full time, weekly-paid employee of Lord Braybrooke in the care of the Menagerie from at least January 1820 to February 1871. This suggests that Jabez Gibson had negotiated privately with William Travers to mount the 1826 Bittern specimen for his own personal collection, before donating it to the Museum.

In conclusion, this carefully researched identification has still to be ratified by the Rarities Committee of the British Ornithologists Union but it seems very probable that they will confirm that Saffron Walden Museum contains the earliest record of an American Bittern in Essex.

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NOTES

ERO: 1820-1834 Monthly General Accounts D/DBY/A230; 1835-1850 Monthly General Accounts D/DBY/A231; 1851-1866 Monthly General Accounts D/DBY/A232; 1867-1890 Monthly General Accounts D/DBY/A233; various monthly chits for the year of 1826 D/DbY/A84/1-12.

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