Bitten by the Bittern bug down-under

Title
Rice growers in Australia are being urged to keep their eyes and ears peeled for Endangered Australasian Bittern. The Rice Growers Association, BirdLife Australia (BirdLife Partner) and other organisations have teamed up to learn more about this secretive bird that is thought to have given rise to the bunyip legends.

Wildlife ecologist Matt Herring, who is working with interested rice farmers this season, said "we've known for years that rice is important for this species, but we're keen to find out just how important it is and how we can manage rice farms to benefit these birds."

In 2011 the Australasian Bittern was added to the EPBC Act as Endangered, however virtually nothing is known about how the birds utilise rice crops. The core of the Australasian Bitterns range lies in the Riverina region, and although bitterns are frequently heard calling from the rice crop, we do not know if the industry is beneficial to this species, as it is in other parts of the world (for a similar bittern species).

The project is aiming to initiate a research program to address this question. The project will involve community awareness, engagement and education within the region, as well as data collection and monitoring. The end goal will be to work with the rice industry to better conserve the Australasian Bittern and other threatened fauna within the Riverina. "We'd like to get a good idea of the actual number of birds using rice, how they use it and how they're distributed through the Murrumbidgee, Colyeambally and Murray irrigation areas", added Matt.

"The more people we have out there looking, the more we're likely to learn about them and the more we'll be able to do to help build their numbers back up." The bunyip is a large mythical creature from Aboriginal mythology, said to lurk in swamps, billabongs, creeks, riverbeds, and waterholes ? Australasian Bittern habitat. During the bittern breeding season, the male call is a "low pitched boom"; hence, it is occasionally called the "bunyip bird".

For more information or to report a record of the Australasian Bittern click here.