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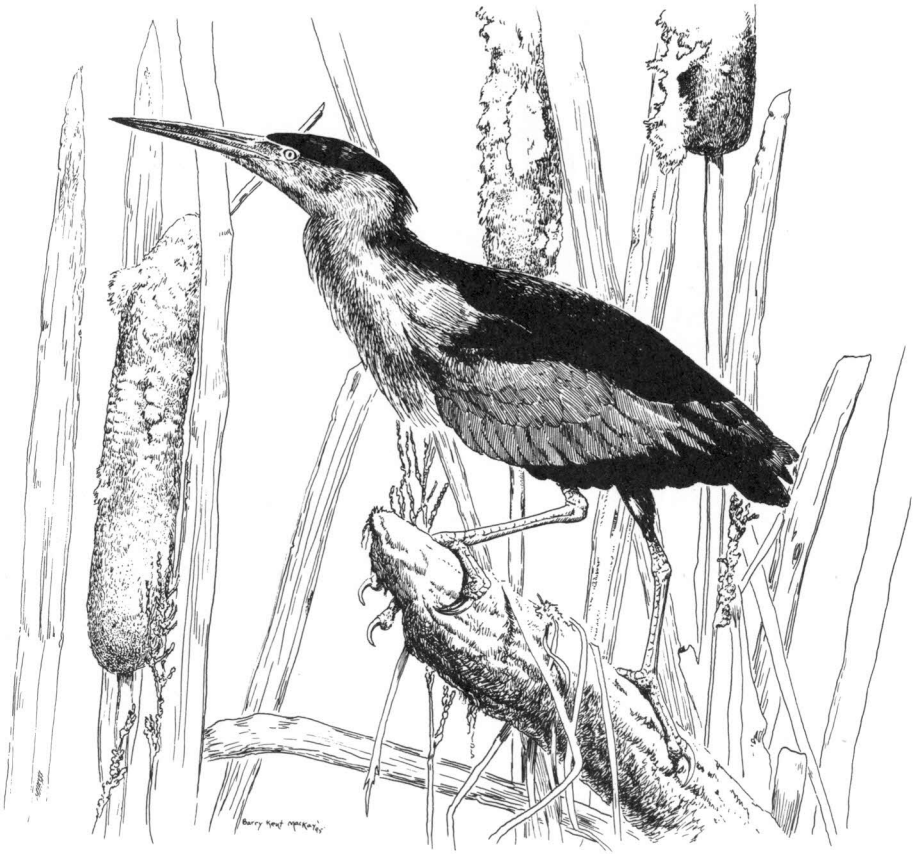

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Recognizable Forms

Cory's Least Bittern

by

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Introduction

The secretive Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*) is the smallest heron in the world, barely bigger than a meadowlark! In southern Ontario, it is a "rare to locally common summer resident" from early May to mid-September (James 1991), mainly south of the Canadian Shield. Least Bitterns in Ontario prefer extensive cattail (*Typha*) marshes with scattered areas of open water. They are most numerous where the ratio of emergent vegetation cover to open water is one to one, known as the 50:50 or "hemi-marsh" stage (Gibbs et al. 1992). Peak activity periods are dawn and dusk. The male's song (often heard at night) is a series of five or six low cuckoo-like notes *coo-coo-coo-coo-coo* repeated at regular intervals. A cackling *ca-ca-ca-ca* is heard at all times of the year. This latter call could be confused with a King Rail (*Rallus elegans*) (Jon Dunn, pers. comm.).

A very rare colour morph, known as the Cory's Least Bittern, was formerly thought to be a distinct species. In Cory's, the buffs and whites of typical birds are a rich chestnut to chocolate. See the cover illustration by Barry Kent MacKay and Figures 1 to 3. Cory's Least Bitterns are also illustrated in Chapman (1896), Pough (1951) and Peterson (1980). Cory's Least Bittern is of great interest to Ontario birders because more than 50 per cent of the records are from Ontario, mainly Toronto. In this article, we review the taxonomy, morph genetics, plumages and molts, description, field identification, history and distribution of the Cory's Least Bittern in Ontario.

Taxonomy

The Least Bittern comprises five fairly similar subspecies (races) in North and South America. The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list (AOU 1957) and Palmer (1962) list two subspecies north of Mexico: nominate *I. e. exilis* in the East and *I. e. hesperis* in the West. Recent studies do not support the recognition of *hesperis* (Gibbs et al. 1992). We follow the latter here. The subspecies found in Ontario is nominate *exilis* (James 1991). Hancock and Kushlan (1984) give brief descriptions and ranges of the other four subspecies : *erythromelas, peruvianus, bogotensis* and *pullus.*

The type specimen of Cory's Least Bittern was taken in 1885 near Lake Okeechobee, Florida and was described as a new species, *Ardetta neoxena* (Cory 1886). Cory did not give it an English name. Unofficially, it was called Cory's

Bittern by Scott (1892), McIlwraith (1894) and a few later authors. The AOU Check-list (AOU 1895) accepted *Ardetta neoxena* as a full species and officially named it Cory's Least Bittern. The AOU named it after Charles Barney Cory (1857-1921), an American ornithologist best known for the shearwater whose name also commemorates him (Terres 1982, Choate 1985).

The scientific name changed several times from *Ardetta neoxena* to *Botaurus neoxenus*, back to *Ardetta neoxena*, then to *Ixobrychus neoxenus*, and finally to *Ixobrychus neoxena* (Cory 1886, AOU 1895, Chapman 1896, AOU 1931).

Chapman (1896) considered Cory's a distinct species based on 10 of the 14 known specimens at the time. Comparing typical Least and Cory's, Chapman said, "This comparison shows such a striking difference between these two birds, that to give further reasons for regarding them as specifically distinct seems much like proving an axiom." Also, O.E. Baynard reported that both nesting adults were always dark, evidence supporting Cory's as a distinct species (Bent 1926, Bent and Copeland 1927).

Not long after its discovery, Scott (1892) suggested that Cory's Bittern might prove to be a colour morph of the Least Bittern. Bent (1926) stated that "It now seems to be generally conceded that the dark form...is not a distinct species, but a case of melanism or erythrism." Cory's was removed as a species and placed on the Hypothetical List in the Eighteenth Supplement to the AOU Check-list in 1923 and in the fourth edition of the Check-list in 1931, because it was considered a colour morph of the Least Bittern (AOU 1923, 1931). Although Taverner (1934) still listed Cory's as a full species, interest in Cory's waned because it was a colour morph and it had all but disappeared by that time. Interestingly, there is no mention of Cory's in the last two AOU Check-lists (AOU 1957, 1983). Cory's Least Bittern has gone from a full species to a colour morph having no taxonomic standing!

Morph Genetics

There is no information in the literature on the genetics of the Cory's Least Bittern. Therefore, we can only speculate about the possible genetic basis of this morph and why it is so rare. Cory's Least Bitterns seen today probably result from a rare recessive allele in the population of typical birds. The recessive trait (Cory's) is masked when paired with the dominant trait (typical). It appears only when two of the recessive traits are paired by chance. Thus, Least Bitterns inheriting two copies (one from each parent) of the recessive allele (homozygous) would express the Cory's colour morph. In birds, many morphological traits are controlled by more than one gene and intermediates are common; for example, the colour morphs of some buteo hawks. The lack of intermediate morphs between typical and Cory's Least Bittern

suggests a single gene having two alleles for colour: dominant (typical) and recessive (Cory's).

Many Cory's specimens show traces of albinism and melanism, which suggest inbreeding. O.E. Baynard reported in Bent (1926) that Cory's always paired with Cory's and never with typical birds. This seems unlikely, but if true, suggests a strong positive assortative mating (like with like) within the morphs. A male and a female collected at Ashbridge's Bay, Toronto on 12 July 1900 is also suggestive of assortative mating (Table 1). Cory's Least Bittern may be an older form that is now at a selective disadvantage and has been replaced by the typical morph. The most likely explanation is that Ashbridge's Bay and Lake Okeechobee were the only places known where random processes allowed the Cory's morph to become temporarily established, because of chance colonization by a few individuals with the trait.

The almost complete disappearance of the Cory's Least Bittern and the destruction of Ashbridge's Bay marsh are important losses of genetic diversity and habitat to the Least Bittern.

Plumages, Molts, Ages and Sexes

Least Bitterns molt twice a year. Juvenals (juveniles) undergo a partial molt in fall to first basic (first winter) plumage. Male and female first basic plumages (not seen in Ontario) resemble the juvenal, but the back feathers have few or no buff tips. First basic and definitive basic (adult winter) birds molt much of their body plumage in late winter and early spring into alternate (breeding) plumage. First alternate and definitive alternate plumages are very similar. The crown and back have a distinct gloss. Breeding males in high alternate plumage have bright reddish-pink or carmine-pink at the base of the lower mandible (Jon Dunn, pers. comm.). Alternate birds have a complete molt from July to September to definitive basic plumage. Definitive basic differs from alternate in both sexes in not having a strong greenish gloss to the upperparts. Male, female and juvenile Least Bitterns are distinguishable in the field. See the illustrations of typical adult male and adult female Least Bitterns on Plate 8 in Godfrey (1986) and male, female and juvenile on page 49 in Scott (1987). For more information on the molts and plumages of the Least Bittern, see Bent (1926), Roberts (1955), Palmer (1962), Oberholser (1974), Cramp (1977) and Gibbs et al. (1992).

Description

See Figures 1 to 3. Cory's Least Bittern is a combination erythristic (reddish) and melanistic (blackish) morph (Bent 1926, Cramp 1977). In Cory's Least Bitterns, most of the buff and white areas of typical birds are a rich chestnut. Some pale areas on typical birds (outer scapulars, wing tips and undertail coverts) are replaced by black (not chestnut) in Cory's (Chapman 1896). A few birds show more melanism. Most individuals have

Figure 1: Male Cory's Least Bitterns (two left), male Least Bitterns (middle and top right), female Cory's Least Bittern (bottom right). Drawing by *Peter Burke.*

some (usually slight) albinistic plumage, especially on the abdomen and thighs (Chapman 1896, Taverner 1934). The plumage of some individuals is a combination of erythristic, melanistic and albinistic markings! See the discussion in Chapman (1896); he provides a detailed comparison of typical and Cory's Least Bitterns.

Bill Colour: In typical Least Bitterns the bill is mostly yellow with a dark ridge, but in Cory's, the bill is mostly blackish brown. Information on bill colour is based on specimen labels in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and the description of the recent specimen described in Teixeira and Alvarenga (1985).

Adults: Adult males are chestnut with contrasting black upperparts. The crown, hindneck, back and tail are black, with a greenish gloss in breeding plumage. The throat is a dark buff to chestnut, the foreneck is chestnut, the belly and flanks are chestnut or mixed with black, and the undertail coverts are black. The upper wing coverts are dark chestnut (not buff) and the wing linings are similar but paler. Adult females are similar to males but the crown is slightly duller and the back is a flat blackish brown. The undertail coverts are black in both sexes. Cory's also lacks the contrasting buffy wing patches (dark chestnut in Cory's) and the whitish lines (black in Cory's) on the outer scapulars of typical birds, giving it a more uniformly dark appearance to the upperparts at rest and in flight. There is less difference between the sexes in Cory's than in typical birds.

Juveniles: See Figure 2. Juvenile males and females show the pattern of the adults but they are paler and more uniform in coloration. They lack the contrasting black areas, and the back and scapular feathers have buffy tips. The undertail coverts are blackish brown in the juveniles.

Nestlings: See Figure 3. Based on the colour of the down still attached to juveniles in the ROM, the downy nestling plumage is a dark buff in Cory's as opposed to a creamy buff in typical birds. In a large quantity, this would make the downy young darker than normal (Ross James, *in litt.*). James also notes, "I would expect the downy plumage to be darker in Cory's. This is what happens in the colour morphs of the Reddish Egret and Snow Goose." The nestling Cory's in Figure 3 is based on the above information. The statement in Bent (1926) that the downies are "coal black" like young rails may be a slight exaggeration.

Eggs: Even the eggs of Cory's are apparently darker than those of typical birds (Palmer 1962). The one egg labelled a Cory's in the ROM, collected by George Pearce on 15 June 1898 at Ashbridge's Bay, is slightly but distinctly darker than most Least Bittern eggs (Fleming 1901). This is the only Cory's egg known. Given the darkness of the birds at all ages, it is reasonable to expect the eggs to be darker as the same pigments may be involved. Note that the Cory's

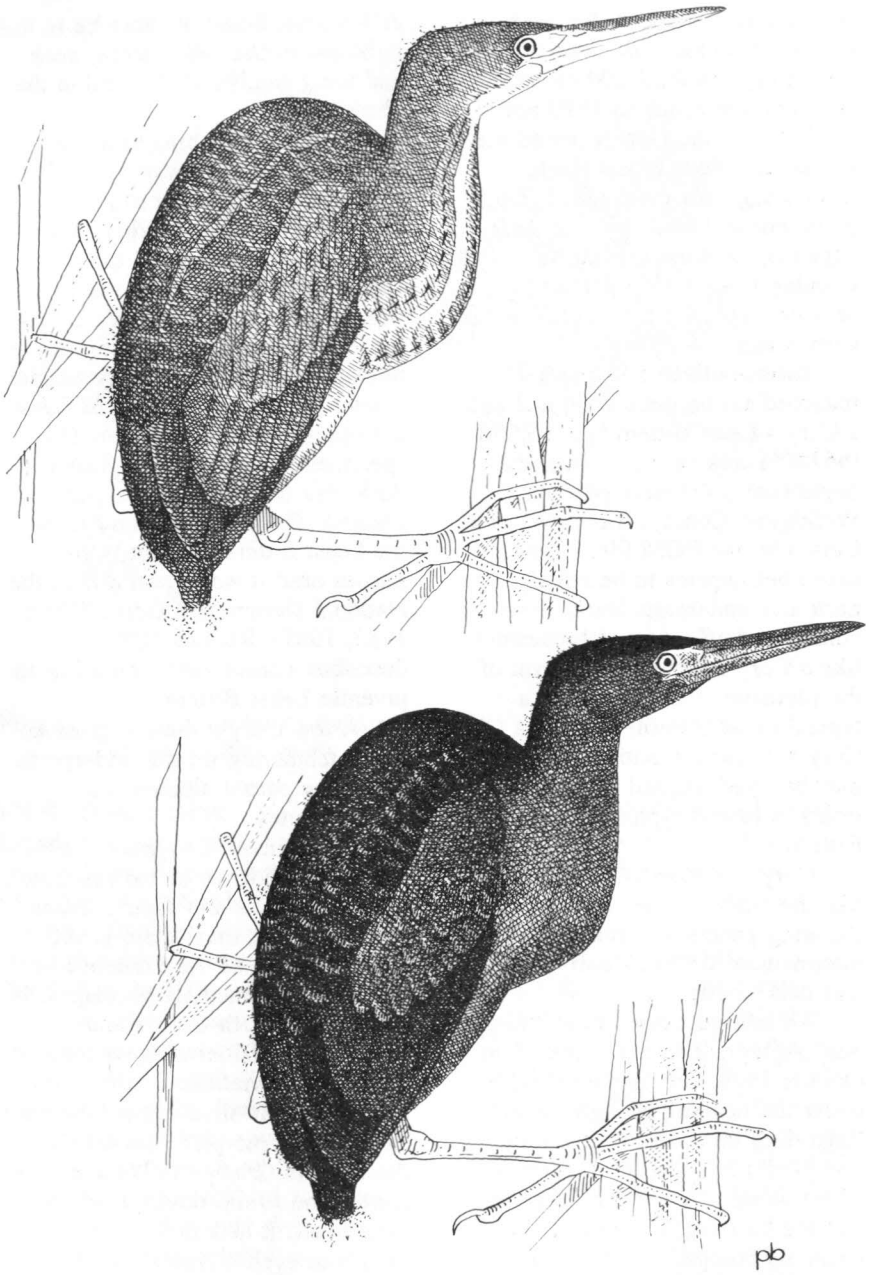

Figure 2: Juvenile Least Bittern (top), juvenile Cory's Least Bittern (bottom). Drawing by *Peter Burke*.

egg is only a shade darker than normal (noticeable in a series). Two sets of eggs in the ROM collected at Ashbridge's Bay in 1890 and 1891 during the Cory's period are similar in colour to the single Cory's egg. However, Ross James (pers. comm.) cautions that these eggs may be from typical birds and Fleming (1901) reported seeing a set from typical birds as dark as the Cory's egg.

Intermediates: A possible intermediate between a typical and a Cory's Least Bittern in the ROM (#67405) was collected in early September 1905 near Guelph, Wellington County. It is listed as a Cory's in one ROM file. It was not sexed but appears to be a male. The neck and underparts are a cinnamon buff, not a rich chestnut like a Cory's; however, the rest of the plumage closely matches a typical Least Bittern. It is not a Cory's in our estimation. This bird may be dyed, stained with iron, or a richly coloured typical Least Bittern.

Cory's number 20 in Table 1 is like the others in the ROM, except the wing panels are somewhat intermediate between buff (typical) and dark chestnut (Cory's).

An injured Cory's Least Bittern was photographed and released in Ohio in 1949. See number 9 below under the heading of sight records. Regarding this latter bird, Craig Campbell (*in litt.* to R.T. Peterson 1983) wrote "While I quite agree that the bird in question is a Cory's, I note by comparison with some paintings of adult males of this entity that there are a few slight differences. Some of these lie in the lightness of the bill, cheeks, neck and wing patches of the bird in the photograph."

A road-killed bird from the causeway at Long Point in 1981 was originally thought to be a Cory's Least Bittern. When Roger Tory Peterson examined the specimen in 1982, there was debate whether it was a Cory's or a richly marked typical Least Bittern. Some thought it might be an intermediate. It later proved to be a typical Least Bittern in juvenile plumage. The specimen is now missing (David Agro and Jon McCracken, pers. comm.). The juvenile plumage of the Least Bittern was not well-known until it was illustrated in the National Geographic Guide (Scott 1983, 1987). Roberts (1955) describes considerable variation in juvenile Least Bitterns.

A few Cory's show extensive white feathering on the underparts. These are partial albinos, not intermediates.

In summary, Chapman (1896) found no evidence of intermediates between Cory's and typical Least Bitterns. Since then, there is still little evidence of the existence of any truly intermediate plumages. It appears that both Cory's and typical Least Bitterns show some individual variation.

Note: The illustration labelled an "ad dark morph" (number 4 on Plate 30) in Cramp (1977) does not correspond to the description in the same book. It is definitely not a Cory's or even a typical Least Bittern.

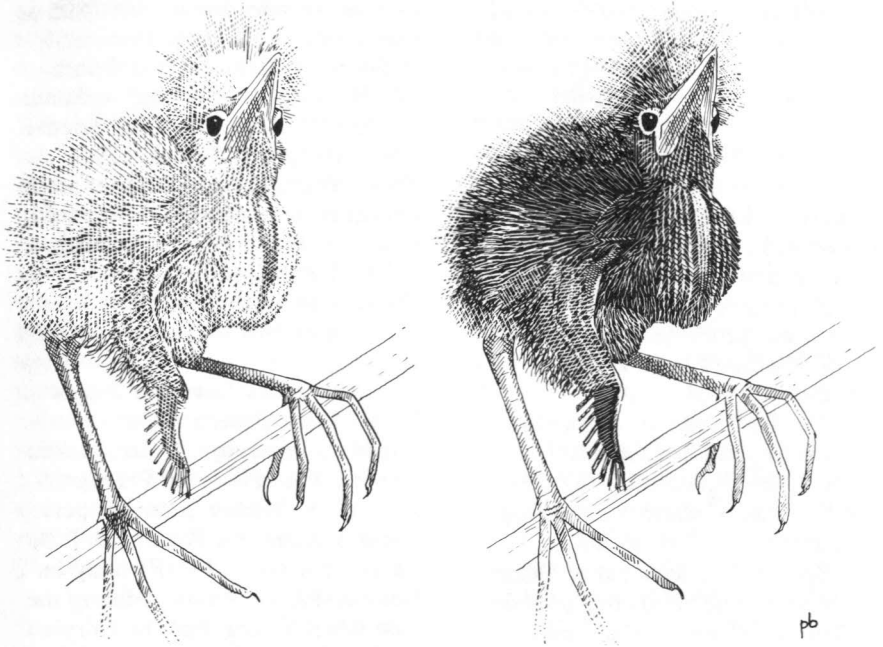

Figure 3: Nestling Least Bittern (left), nestling Cory's Least Bittern (right). Drawing by *Peter Burke*.

Field Identification

Cory's is much darker than a typical Least Bittern. See Figures 1 to 3. Adults are black (males) or blackish (females) above and a rich chestnut below. At rest and in flight, they lack the contrasting buff wing patches and whitish lines on the outer scapulars of typical birds. In flight, adult Cory's is almost uniformly blackish above and chestnut below, appearing very dark. A Cory's skulking in a marsh is almost like a blackbird at times. Juveniles are also very dark, but more uniform in coloration.

Caution: See Figure 1. Observers who are not familiar with the juvenile plumage of typical Least Bitterns might confuse it with a Cory's. Typical juveniles are drabber and more uniform than adults with less contrasting shoulder patches. See the photograph of a juvenile Least Bittern on page 5 in Wormington (1985). This photograph shows why it could be confused with a Cory's Least Bittern. However, Cory's is a much darker bird at all ages and the moment you see one there should be no doubt about its identity! Also, novices might confuse the dark juvenile Virginia Rail or even a Green Heron as a Cory's Least Bittern.

Distribution

Specimens: Palmer (1962) lists 31 specimens taken between 1885 and 1914 as follows: Ontario (16, *see additions below*), Florida (7), Michigan (2), Illinois (2), New York (1), Ohio (1), Massachusetts (1) and Wisconsin (1). There is a relatively recent specimen collected in Brazil on 13 May 1967. It is the first record of the Cory's morph in the range of the South American subspecies *I.e. erythromelas* (Teixeira and Alvarenga 1985).

The first nests were found in Florida in 1890 and Ontario in 1898. Lake Okeechobee, Florida and Toronto, Ontario are the only confirmed breeding locations.

See Table 1 for a list of Ontario specimens. The following provides additional information on many of the specimens listed in Table 1. Palmer (1962) cites 16 specimens from Ontario, but there are at least six others discussed below. McIlwraith (1894) mentions the discovery of the first Ontario specimen on 18 May 1890 at Ashbridge's Bay, Toronto. This specimen is now missing from the Royal Ontario Museum (Ross James, pers. comm.). Fleming (1902) reports 16 specimens from Toronto, perhaps the same 16 reported above by Palmer (1962). Currently in the Royal Ontario Museum, there are 13 specimens (another is missing) and one egg from Ontario. All the Toronto specimens listed in Table 1 and the egg are from the former Ashbridge's Bay marsh, Toronto.

The only specimen not from Toronto in the ROM was shot by Dayton Murphy about June 1895 at the east end of West Lake near Wellington (Hallowell) in Prince Edward County (Fleming, undated; Baillie 1935 letter in ROM; Snyder 1941; Sprague and Weir 1984). Two specimens from Toronto are in British museums and one was sold to a collector in Maine (Fleming 1902). Three specimens from Toronto are in the American Museum of Natural History (ROM files).

In addition, there is a female Cory's Least Bittern in the Canadian Museum of Nature taken by C.H. Young at Point Pelee on 5 June 1913 (Michel Gosselin, pers. comm.). About the Pelee bird, P.A. Taverner wrote to J.H. Fleming on 2 October 1935, "I was paddling the boat when Young shot the Cory's Bittern. It got up at ordinary range about as other Least Bitterns did and I told him to shoot quickly. One could not say that it was particularly wild or tame" (ROM files). The Point Pelee and Prince Edward County specimens taken in June suggest breeding at these locations.

A note in the manuscript files of the Canadian Museum of Nature from J.H. Fleming dated 27 November 1935 mentions a specimen from Toronto owned by the University of Toronto Schools (UTS). Jim Baillie repeatedly tried to get this specimen for the ROM, but was unsuccessful (Alex Cringan, pers. comm.). About the UTS specimen, John A. Livingston wrote, "This was a mounted Cory's - old and badly eroded - that

teetered in an ancient glass case in the high school I attended. This was a significant bird, and it deserved more appropriate quarters; in the course of time James Baillie, of the Royal Ontario Museum, persuaded my biology teacher to donate it to the R.O.M.'s distinguished collection. Regrettably, our headmaster learned of the arrangement and immediately vetoed it. After all these years, I have no idea where that rare specimen eventually came to rest; perhaps it has served to inspire subsequent generations of schoolboys'' (Landsdowne and Livingston 1968). This specimen was missing when we checked the mounted specimens at the UTS on 26 March 1996.

Possible additional specimens from Toronto not included in Table 1 are listed in ROM files: In 1925, George Pearce told Jim Baillie that he sent specimens of Cory's Least Bitterns to the South Kensington Museum in England; one to Walter Rothschild in New York City; one to William Brewster in Boston; one to Barnes in Tiffin, Ohio; one to William Owen (Toronto?), one he still owned at the time; and there was one in a case at 51 Jackman Ave., Toronto. The Barnes and Brewster specimens are possible additions to Table 1. A few more Cory's Least Bitterns may exist in private collections or museums.

There are parts of two wings in the ROM files from a bird claimed to be a Cory's that was found crushed and rotting on the causeway at Long Point on 4 September 1955. However, the buffy wing coverts and rest of the wings match a typical Least Bittern. Specimen number 67405 in the ROM is listed as a Cory's in one museum file, but is not one in our opinion. See the discussion above under the heading of intermediates.

Cory's Least Bitterns were prized by early collectors. A newspaper story in the Toronto *Telegram* of 31 July or 1 August 1913 tells the story of a boy who sold a Cory's Least Bittern to a Toronto taxidermist for 25 cents. After mounting it, the taxidermist sold the Cory's to merchant millionaire and bird collector Walter N. Rothschild of New York City for 100 dollars. This would be more than 2000 dollars today! George Pearce, who collected many Least Bitterns at Ashbridge's Bay, was said to have destroyed many normally coloured Least Bitterns to hide the fact that Cory's was a colour morph, thus helping to maintain an inflated price (Ross James, per ROM files). Jim Baillie told Gerry Bennett (pers. comm.) that George Pearce, known as the Hermit of the Humber, collected typical Least Bitterns, dyed them red, and sold some as Cory's to unsuspecting collectors. One of these dyed birds apparently surfaced in the 1950s. Earl Godfrey (pers. comm.), Curator Emeritus of birds at the Canadian Museum of Nature, was sent a specimen of a ''Cory's Least Bittern'' to examine. Godfrey determined that it was not a Cory's, but a typical Least Bittern dyed to look like one!

The total number of Cory's Least Bitterns collected in Ontario

is at least 22, of which 20 are from Toronto, plus one from Point Pelee and one from Prince Edward County. Adding the 15 specimens from the United States (Palmer 1962) and the one from Brazil (Teixeira and Alvarenga 1985), the total number from all locations is at least 38!

Sight Records: There are numerous sight records including recent ones for Ontario and elsewhere. **(1)** Paul Harrington saw one about 1921 in Toronto (ROM files). **(2)** A. C. Bent and M. Copeland saw a Cory's on 7 April 1925 in Pinellas County, Florida (Bent and Copeland 1927). **(3)** One was seen 1 August 1927 at Ashbridge's Bay, Toronto (ROM files). **(4)** One was seen by Peggy Mitchell on 6 July 1932 at Erindale (ROM files). **(5)** George Pearce told Jim Baillie of the ROM that he found Cory's breeding in 1923 at Port Rowan on Lake Erie, Norfolk County (ROM files). **(6)** One was seen by Alex Lucas on 2 August 1939 along the Otonabee River at Rice Lake, Peterborough County. It was described to Jim Baillie as "chocolate coloured all over" (ROM files). **(7)** James Savage observed a Cory's Least Bittern at Long Point, Norfolk County on 16 September 1928 (Snyder and Logier 1931). **(8)** George North and William Campbell saw a Cory's in Hamilton on 10 August 1941 (ROM files; Bob Curry *in litt.*). **(9)** Roger Tory Peterson (*in litt.* to Craig Campbell 1982, 1983) was given a colour photograph of a Cory's Least Bittern taken in Ohio in 1949. The date stamped on the photograph is 3 October 1949. This bird flew into a building at Youngstown in the autumn of 1949 and was photographed by Frank F. Ferris who apparently gave the photograph to Peterson. This Cory's was later released (Duane Ferris, pers. comm.). **(10)** W.C. Mansell saw a Cory's on 21 May 1950 at the third Humber River marsh, Toronto. **(11)** Gerry Bennett (pers. comm.) saw a Cory's near Hamilton in the 1950s. **(12)** Don Sutherland (pers. comm.) and Nick Godfrey flushed a Cory's Least Bittern in May 1973 at Hanlan's Point on the Toronto Islands, not far from the former stronghold at Ashbridge's Bay. **(13)** The most recent Ontario report is from Craig Campbell (pers. comm.) and Dave Perrin who attracted a Cory's to the taped call of a Least Bittern in Prince Edward County in July 1981. The behaviour noted in the last sighting is further evidence that Cory's is indeed a colour morph, rather than a distinct species. There are no doubt other sight records that we missed.

Ashbridge's Bay

Toronto's Ashbridge's Bay marsh was the world's centre of abundance of the Cory's Least Bittern. More specimens of Cory's were taken at Ashbridge's Bay (between 1890-1900) than anywhere else in the world, and it was recorded breeding there in 1898 (Ames 1901; Fleming 1901, 1906, undated). Ashbridge's Bay and the Lake Okeechobee region of Florida were the only confirmed breeding locations of Cory's Least

Table 1: Cory's Least Bittern - Ontario Specimens

	*Age\Sex	Date	Location	Collection
1.	adult male	18 May 1890	Toronto	ROM**
2.	adult female	20 May 1893	Toronto	BM
3.	adult male	26 May 1894	Toronto	ROM
4.	adult female	16 July 1894	Toronto	AMNH
5.	adult male	16 Aug. 1894	Toronto	ROM
6.	juvenile male	17 Aug. 1894	Toronto	ROM
7.	juvenile male	24 Aug. 1894	Toronto	ROM
8.	adult male	about 1895	Toronto	UTS**
9.	adult male	17 Aug. 1896	Toronto	AMNH
10.	adult male	14 May 1897	Toronto	AMNH
11.	adult female	30 June 1897	Toronto	ROM
12.	adult male	8 June 1898	Toronto	Private USA
13.	adult female	15 June 1898	Toronto	ROM
14.	juvenile male	3 Aug. 1898	Toronto	ROM
15.	adult male	7 Aug. 1899	Toronto	ROM
16.	juvenile male	14 Aug. 1899	Toronto	ROM
17.	adult male	8 Sept. 1899	Toronto	BM
18.	adult male	21 Sept. 1899	Toronto	ROM
19.	adult male	12 July 1900	Toronto	ROM
20.	adult female	12 July 1900	Toronto	ROM
21.	adult female	? June 1895	Prince Ed. Co.	ROM
22.	adult female	5 June 1913	Point Pelee	CMN

AMNH - American Museum of Natural History
BM - British Museum
CMN - Canadian Museum of Nature
ROM - Royal Ontario Museum
UTS - University of Toronto Schools
* - Some "adults" are likely in first alternate or definitive basic plumage
** - Specimen missing

Total Specimens: World 38 (Ontario 22, United States 15, Brazil 1)

Sources: ROM Collection, Ross James, pers. comm.;
CMN Collection, Michel Gosselin, pers. comm.;
Chapman (1896); Fleming (1902); Palmer (1962);
Teixeira and Alvaarenga (1985).

Bittern, but it undoubtedly bred elsewhere.

Early ornithologists regarded Ashbridge's Bay marsh as one of the finest marshes in Canada. The marsh covered some 560 hectares (1385 acres). We are indebted to George Fairfield (in prep.) for permission to quote from his upcoming book on Ashbridge's Bay, to be published by the Toronto Ornithological Club: "The marsh was formed at the delta of the Don River. It was enclosed on the south side and separated from Lake Ontario by a long peninsula of sand which continued on to form what is now Toronto Islands. The present Toronto shoreline in this area follows roughly the south edge of this peninsula. The peninsula was formed by the deposition of material eroded from the Scarborough Bluffs and carried westwards by lake currents."

Ashbridge's marsh was described by Hubert Brown in 1894 (Fleming 1894, Fleming undated). "The marshy location to which the birds resort, and where all the seven were taken, is only half a mile square, protected from the seas of Lake Ontario by a narrow sand-bar a few yards in width, and is situated immediately adjacent to the city of Toronto. A great deal of shooting is practiced there at all seasons, so that the bird, though of retiring habits, could scarcely have chosen a more frequented piece of marsh."

Ashbridge's Bay marsh is gone now, the result of early filling to develop a harbour and later a sewage treatment plant for Toronto. The marsh was mostly destroyed when Taverner published *Birds of Canada* in 1934. Remnants of the marsh existed into the 1960s. Regardless, the collecting pressure in one decade (1890-1900) virtually eliminated the Cory's Least Bittern from Ashbridge's Bay long before the marsh itself had disappeared.

Summary

The Cory's Least Bittern is a very rare colour morph of the Least Bittern. In Cory's, the buff and white areas of the typical form are replaced by chestnut to chocolate. Ashbridge's Bay marsh (now gone) in Toronto was the former stronghold of the Cory's Least Bittern in the world. Most of the known specimens from throughout its range date from 1885 to 1914, with a more recent specimen from Brazil in 1967. The total number of known specimens is 38 of which 22 are from Ontario. There were Ontario sightings in 1973 and 1981.

If our ideas about the genetics are correct (homozygous recessive), it is likely that Cory's Least Bitterns will turn up from time to time. Landsdowne and Livingston (1968) said, "The mysterious chestnut bird should still be watched for, wherever there are least bitterns. Some may remain at Lake Okeechobee, Florida, or in the Long Point marshes of Lake Erie." The Ontario Bird Records Committee is interested in recent reports of Cory's Least Bittern.

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