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## The Biology Curator

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Title: First Record of an American Bittern in Essex

Author(s): Not Listed

Source: Not Listed (2002). First Record of an American Bittern in Essex. *The Biology Curator, Issue 22*, 3.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/355>

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## First Record of an American Bittern in Essex

Eighteen months of research at Saffron Walden Museum by Nick Green and other members of the Essex Birdwatching Society investigating manuscript documents and bird specimens, have now been rewarded. After 175 years of obscurity, a rare American Bittern in the museum's historic collections has been recognised by the British Ornithologists' Union Rarities Committee (BOURC) as the first record of this bird to be found in Essex. The American Bittern is a rare visitor to Britain, and the museum's specimen, dating from 1826, is only the second on record. Since it was first seen in Dorset in 1804, there have been only 63 British sightings. By coincidence bitterns were in the news recently when three Common Bitterns were spotted at Barnes Wetland Centre in London during January 2002.

When the bird was shot in 1826 at Wendens Ambo in Essex, it was thought to be a Common Bittern. Local taxidermist William Travis mounted the specimen for Jabez Gibson, who was a member of

the Saffron Walden Natural History Society. This society's collections formed the basis of the Saffron Walden Museum, which opened in 1835. The mounted specimen was correctly identified as an American Bittern in the museum's 1883 catalogue of birds and mammals. However, its historic significance was not discovered until 1999, when members of the Essex Birdwatching Society (EBS) visited Essex museums while researching for a new edition of 'Birds of Essex' (editor Simon Wood). **(Please refer to The Biology Curator March 2000, issue 17, page 5, Birds of Essex – A Request for Information).** Nick Green, chairman of the EBS, and Sarah Kenyon, Saffron Walden Museum's natural sciences curator, traced the history of the specimen using the museum's extensive 19<sup>th</sup> century archives. Due to the rarity of the bird, and the importance of this historic record, the BOURC has validated the research.

On Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2002 museum visitors and birdwatchers were able to meet the American Bittern and discuss the discovery with Nick Green and Sarah Kenyon at Saffron Walden Museum. The American Bittern is now on display in a recreated Victorian naturalist's study at Saffron Walden Museum.

