

8 July 1911

Covered in mud and drenched from the waist down, a middle-aged woman in a tweed skirt emerges from one of the dense reedbeds around Hickling Broad. Tightly held under her arm is a bird, looking indignant and confused – a young bittern, which had been about to fledge from its nest. The woman, Miss Emma Turner, is a bird photographer and a familiar sight locally. She had set off that morning with local gamekeeper Jim Vincent, “armed with a large slice of bread and cheese and a bottle of lemonade by way of lunch”, in search of evidence that one of Norfolk’s most iconic birds, the bittern, was once again nesting in the county.

There had been no confirmed records of bitterns breeding anywhere in Britain since 1886, but in the spring of 1911 a booming male had been heard regularly at Hickling and a female bird seen repeatedly flying in and out of a particularly dense section of the reedbed. A nest seemed highly likely. With Vincent’s help, Turner was determined to obtain photographic evidence of the bittern’s long-awaited return.

They had discovered the young bittern at sunset, when failing light had made photography impossible. Turner records how she “insisted on some third person seeing our captive lest the unbelieving world should scoff”, which explains the unorthodox practice of removing the bird from its reedbed! This was, after all, a time when most bird records rested on a dead specimen in the hand as evidence. After a night spent on Turner’s houseboat *The Water Rail*, the juvenile bittern was returned safely to its nest, seemingly none the worse for the experience. Turner then took a series of *in situ* photographs which remain among the most elegant and evocative ever taken of this species.

Emma Turner had been visiting the Broads regularly since 1902 and photographed many of its celebrated marshland birds, from bearded tits and reed warblers to common snipe and ruffs. Most had never been photographed in the wild before, and they provide the subject of Turner’s most celebrated book, *Broadland Birds*, first published in 1924.

She worked in the most uncomfortable of conditions, often concealing herself for hours under a camouflage mound of rotting marsh vegetation, her lens poking out, so that she could photograph birds at the closest of quarters. She describes in her books how redshanks would alight on her head, so accepting of her did they become.

Living for much of the time out in the middle of Hickling Broad,

Nature writer James Parry goes in search of the legend of Emma Turner in the centenary of her iconic bittern photograph

Broadland’s bittern pioneer



JAMES PARRY



Emma Turner’s iconic 1911 image demonstrated bitterns had returned to Norfolk after an absence of 25 years.

either on her houseboat or in a hut she had built on the island that still bears her name today, Turner must have seemed an eccentric figure. A few years later she was to become the first ever seasonal “tern watcher” on Scolt Head, protecting the breeding seabird colonies there and described in the contemporary press as “the loneliest woman in England”. In fact, she was far from being alone. Her five dogs were there too, supplies were taken out to her regularly by boat, and she used to hoist a flag daily above her hut to let everyone know she was fine.

Turner’s photographic record of the rediscovery of the bittern earned her the Royal Photographic Society’s Gold Medal and secured her place in Norfolk’s ornithological history. Yet she was not just a pioneer in the art of bird photography. Her books are full of insightful and sparkling prose, and she was a meticulous observer of bird behaviour, contributing regularly to journals such as *British Birds* and *The Ibis*. She was also one of the first women to be elected a Fellow of the Linnaean Society and among the first honorary women members of the British Ornithologists’ Union.

In later life Turner moved to

Cambridge and was a stalwart of the Cambridge Bird Club, serving as its vice-president. Tragically, she progressively lost her sight, a bitter blow for someone who derived such enjoyment from watching birds. She continued to maintain a keen interest in birding, eagerly anticipating the arrival of the publications to which she had once been such a well-regarded contributor. Undergraduate members of the club – who called her “Skipper” – would visit her home and read out the articles to her. She died in 1940 at the age of 74, but Turner Island at Hickling can still be seen today, and the successor generations of the bitterns that Emma Turner helped rediscover 100 years ago this summer continue to boom on the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve.

■ James Parry is working on a biography of Emma Turner and is interested to hear from anyone who has information about her life and work. Please contact him on james.parry@sizzel.net

■ Turner Island can be seen from one of NWT’s guided wildlife boat trips which run daily at NWT Hickling Broad until the end of September, and on a more limited basis in October. For more details and to book please phone 01692 598276.



Emma Turner uses a stereoscope with her erstwhile companion, Alfred Nudd.