

DISTINGUISHED VISITOR

The Least Bittern, smallest member of the heron family, relies on cattail marshes and other wetland habitats for nesting. In the 1939 and 1944 editions of the bird checklist for the El Paso region, this species was listed as a fairly common permanent resident and nesting species. "Permanent resident" is unlikely – Least Bittern is a migratory species but it certainly nested at local river valley wetlands, including sites near La Mesa in New Mexico and Canutillo, Ascarate and Zaragoza in Texas. The Zaragoza site would have been near today's Rio Bosque Wetlands Park.

During the 1930s and early 1940s, the Rio Grande in the El Paso region was channelized. With the attendant loss of wetland habitat, Least Bitterns began a steep decline locally. The current edition of the local bird checklist considers



treated water from the plant had to go to the drain and Rio Bosque from Oct 14 through April 10. Our plan back in October was to divert enough water from the Drain pipeline into the Rio Bosque pipeline to meet the park's needs. The rest could go to the drain.

It wasn't possible. Well before significant volumes could be diverted, water started backing up to the Bustamante Plant. We had to revert to the original delivery method used before the Rio Bosque pipeline was built. Let the water go to the drain, then divert it from the drain into the old river channel in the park.

With this delivery method, the only way to flood the park's largest wetland cells is to raise the water level in the upstream half of the old river channel to the level at which water can spread into and throughout the wetland cell... and keep it at that high level.

The previous 5 years, we kept fall/winter flows low in the channel by delivering water directly to the wetland cells via the pipeline. This year