



THE BABBLER

Newsletter of BirdLife Zimbabwe

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Hi everyone,

Well, the rains appear all but 'done' and have been disappointing in Harare and catastrophic in Chimanimani! Not too many waterbird counts have been submitted and the fuel and cash shortages have no doubt had an effect. *If you haven't sent yours in yet, please do so as soon as you can.*

Nonetheless, we keep on birding wherever possible as a release from these stresses and the Harare bunch has been quite active and also joined Marondera members at Rifa – read about their experiences in this issue.

Branch activities are good fun and see also the notice for the eBird count in May. Try to take part this year, even if it is just in your local area. Happy birding everyone!

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The BirdLife Zimbabwe Annual General Meeting will take place on 15 June 2019 at Mukuvisi Woodlands, Harare. Further information in the next newsletter and presumably via email.

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Branch News

Mashonaland

Walk at BALLANTYNE PARK, Saturday 9th February 2019

Porzana porzana, the rarely seen Spotted Crake, appeared for all to see in the main dam at Ballantyne Park Conservation Area, when our unusually large group turned up for the regular second Saturday outing. This secretive, skulking species, a nonbreeding migrant from Europe, about the size of a bantam with green legs and yellow beak, occurs very infrequently in southern Africa. In 2016, one showed up near

Photo: © Roger MacDonald



Johannesburg and 600 birders flocked to see it. Ever-improving photos of 'our bird' had been appearing all week on Birding Zimbabwe Facebook and WhatsApp Special Species group. And what is more, it was seen in the company of a Lesser Moorhen, itself an uncommon species, during the week but not on Saturday.

Everything else was anticlimactic but the day started with a third rarity, the Dwarf Bittern, which was flushed from the reeds and flew up into a tree beside the smallest dam. From this exciting start the day continued on a high note and 72 different species were recorded, including a pair of Gabar Goshawk, an African Goshawk and a Little Sparrowhawk. Also new for Blair Dam was a pair of Cuckoo Finch sitting exposed on the bulrushes. Even better was the first European Roller of the summer atop a tree near Staley. A Great Reed-warbler was grating in the reeds but didn't pop out for us.

I must add that many of these wonderful sightings would not have been listed had we not had Harare's top ornithologists in our group. The poor birds had only to make the slightest peep or shake a feather and they were immediately identified. An unforgettable walk in so many respects. Thanks to the Ballantyne Park Conservancy Trust and all their workers for recreating this lovely venue.

Ken Dixon

MONA VALE VLEI WALKS

Sunday 20th January, 2019

After what must have been one of Harare's quietest weeks ever, and despite the fuel famine, Sunday's turnout was most encouraging. Gumboots were not de rigueur, thanks to the lack of rain and Harare having at last repaired the damaged pipes, but they helped. Jimmy was on top form and very pleased with himself having found his first Streaky-breasted Flufftail's nest during the week.

When I arrived the advance party was viewing a Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, a local rarity and the first of many excellent sightings on a warm, sunny morning. Others worth mentioning were Yellow-throated Longclaw,

Cape Longclaw and Rosy-throated Longclaw, Black Coucal, Purple Heron and Cuckoo Finch. A Marsh Owl rose from the thick grass near the confluence and all the vlei birds were in breeding plumage and very active chasing one another around.

In addition to the birds, we found a Reed frog, a small but elongated frog (see overleaf). We were also shown clumps of *Commelina*, a pretty blue flower with ephemeral petals. There was also evidence of Bush Pig. How privileged we are to have among our birders so many general naturalists from whom we learn so much.



What was *Hyperolius nasutus* has been split! This is now *H. inyangae*, but how the taxonomists are going to treat the rest of the 'nasutus' group around Zimbabwe isn't yet resolved.

Sunday 17th February 2019

A dozen members and friends met on this overcast, cool morning for the monthly walk. The vlei was fairly wet partly due to natural causes and partly to burst underground pipes, the grasses and reeds thick and lush, affording ideal nesting conditions for local birds. In fact, this summer, Jimmy Muropa, with advice from Alex Masterson, has found the nests of Streaky-breasted Flufftail and even African Quailfinch, which few of us have even seen there. Occasional pools of open water were beautifully decorated with waterlilies and Cosmos was everywhere; it may be invasive but it is extremely pretty.

The birds were very busy, erupting in flocks and skimming over the long grass. The usual vlei birds like Southern Red Bishop and Yellow Bishop, Red-collared Widowbird and Yellow-mantled Widowbird and Orange-breasted Waxbill were abundant. A welcome visitor, in addition to the resident Yellow-throated Longclaw, was a Rosy-throated Longclaw. A European Roller on one of the golf course gums was a first for the year. Such a pity the light was poor for the photographers. Birds of prey noted were Black-chested Snake-eagle, Wahlberg's Eagle, Black-shouldered Kite, Gabar Goshawk and African Goshawk. Both Senegal Coucal and Black Coucal were heard and seen and the latter appeared to be delivering breakfast to its young but failed to lead us to the nest. From the reeds and bulrushes we logged the calls of Great Reed-warbler, Little Rush-warbler and Lesser Swamp-warbler and 5 members of the cisticola family were listed. One unexpected sighting was a Spotted Flycatcher in an acacia.

In all 64 species were recorded, almost all from the vlei. Thanks once again to COSMO for allowing us to visit and to be made aware what a valuable asset to our town a well-preserved wetland can be. Let's fight for their survival and protection from development.

Paddle on Sunday 17th March 2019

Not the most pleasant morning of the year but COSMO's sterling work to preserve the vlei in the courts deserved recognition, so I donned, and later filled, my gumboots in the lush vlei grass and pools. We were 6 and saw many birds of 33 different species. Some Southern Red Bishops are losing their finery but the Yellow Bishops still flaunt their rumps and Red-collared Widowbirds are everywhere. Only one Black Coucal was seen, 3 heard as were Red-chested Cuckoo and Diderick's Cuckoo. European Bee-eaters called from the overcast sky and, lower down, lots of Barn Swallows and Common House-martins hunted over the soaking grass, along with African Palm-swift and possibly White-rumped Swift. The only raptors were Black-shouldered Kite and an Amur Falcon. Two Red-billed Teals overflowed as we trudged round the pool which seemed to have only Common Moorhen and Black Crake.

I have to admit that the post-walk hot shower was the best bit of the morning plus the satisfaction of demonstrating loyalty to the *Defenders of the Vlei*. Hope our clothes will have dried in time for next week's outing to Goromonzi.

Ken Dixon

But before all this...

The rainy season has been a rather disappointing one, what with the virtual drought in Harare. I visited the vlei on the 23rd December 2018, cutting through the northern sector, which had dried up quite a bit due to the recent repair of the burst water pipes. Not expecting anything surprising, I was surprised to flush a Striped Crake from the edge of the southwest 'rice bowls'... and then just a little further one, two more! One of these obligingly hung around for photos, though the best opportunity, when it stood in full view on top of a grass clump, was before I had the camera ready. But who's complaining - these crakes are hard to see at the best of times! Heading on through the rest of this flooded area, I later

flushed a fourth bird! Not bad and you never know what you will see when you go out birding.

I don't know if any Striped Crakes were found in January-February but this shows they snuck in early, found this lovely wet patch, thanks to the burst pipes, and left as conditions got drier and drier (possibly didn't breed?) – and then came the edge effects of the cyclone that brought disappointingly little rain to Harare but caused such devastation in eastern Zimbabwe and Mozambique!

Ian Riddell



Visit to HIDEAWAY, LAKE MANYAME, for the African Waterbird Count Sunday 27th January 2019

A dozen of us in three vehicles made the 80km journey via Nyabira and through the fields of ripe tobacco to this attractive fishing camp, where we split up into two groups, one to cover the shore and 3 of us in Jourdan's smart bass boat. As the water was relatively high the birds were not as abundant as usual, on either the lake or shoreline, but that did little to dampen our enthusiasm on a lovely warm morning.

I was in the boat with two experienced anglers who knew the lake really well so we launched and headed off for known hot birding spots. We hadn't gone far before we picked up our first of many nets set out by the numerous poachers, one of whom was instrumental in removing the net cord from our propeller.

We decided to head away from the netted area and passed three large rafts of some 30 Red-knobbed Coots on our way to a more remote spot with fewer nets, where we settled down to count the birds around us. Common Moorhens were numerous, as were Squacco Herons and African Jacanas, but the stars were two Lesser Jacanas paddling about on the fringe of the reeds. The discovery of this lifer sent our Captain into paroxysms of joy. African Purple Swamphen popped in and out of the reeds but

egrets were few and far between. Both Red-billed Teal and Hottentot Teal appeared in small numbers but only one Comb Duck was seen. White-faced Duck were ever present but once again not prolific. On the waterlilies and hyacinth, Black Heron mantled and fed, we presumed. Eight of them in all. Everywhere we paused we could see Barn Swallows swooping low over the water but only one Grey-headed Gull was noted.

At our second stop, we saw a single Goliath Heron in full breeding plumage land on a reed island to be photographed and a Purple Heron was nearby to provide a size comparison. We pulled in near to the cementation to look for Barn Owl in the holes but none was evident so we resumed our return.

Back at the camp we joined the rest of the group who were finding interesting birds in the acacias. These included a Spotted Flycatcher, Willow Warbler, weavers, an African Paradise-flycatcher and a Cardinal Woodpecker.

The cumulative total was at first 96 but that was still being added to when I left and I'm sure the century was reached. Thanks to Kelly Foster for welcoming us once again to this lovely camp.

Ken Dixon

BLZ joint Marondera and Harare visit to RIFA, Thursday 21st to Monday 25th February 2019

What a very mixed group we were; 17 birders of various nationalities, sizes and ages, 4 guns, our hosts, Elspeth and Dave and Stefan the kitchen superintendent plus Tapera, grounds-

man and general hand. But we all, the birding group I mean, had a wonderful time as always.

Rifa is unfortunately under drought conditions, having received only a third of hoped for rain but it looks stunning and all the

roads are drivable. However, you can't drive to as many different locations as in the past as the rest of the Rifa Triangle has been 'privatised', as have many of the areas near the main road into Chirundu. The same, I am told, is happening in Mana. 'CAMP RESIDENTS ONLY' notices are springing up like poplars at Greystone Park.

That said, we had 3-4 days of successful, varied birding along the Zambezi and listed about 190 species. This list was compiled each evening after supper and includes birds seen by 3 or 4 different groups who had visited different sites in rotation.

On arrival on Thursday we had lunch, were given a security and housekeeping briefing by Elspeth and Dave, and met the hunters who would be accompanying us everywhere. The first sortie was to the river, by truck or foot, exploring different riverine environments and meeting up later for the first of many sundowners at aptly named Sunset Point. Lots of hippos and a selection of waterbirds like Squacco Heron, egrets, Malachite Kingfisher and Pied Kingfisher, Wood Sandpiper, Reed Cormorant and African Jacana. I seem to remember we had 62 species but, having carelessly dropped my beloved notebook, I can't be sure.

There was a Hyena, an Impala and 2 Woolly-necked Storks on the floodplain when we came along for breakfast on Friday morning. A bit later, I joined a Harare group bound for Long Pan, among other stops. Our first port of call was the Chipandaure cliff, home to so many White-fronted Bee-eaters and Southern Carmine Bee-eaters in the breeding season but quiet now. In fact, we saw only 2 or 3 Carmines during our stay. Mosque Swallow was a new species for some and the sharp-eared heard an Eastern Nicator. Long Pan showed only patches of water among the vegetation but was host to lots of Comb Duck and White-faced Duck, Spur-winged Goose and many egret and heron, including Rufous-bellied Heron. What a super spot to sit and watch. A pair of African Hawk-eagles flew over and waders, mainly Wood Sandpiper, were constantly on the move low over the surface. There was nothing but another Rufous-bellied Heron and a Great Egret on the small pan nearby so we drove on to the limit of Rifa territory before returning to the cliff top in search of spinetails, which failed to appear.

After brunch and a snooze, we walked to Mopane Pan hoping to find the Thick-billed Cuckoo and Dwarf Bittern, but they also failed to show, although the cuckoo's host, Retz's Helmet-shrike, was present. There was probably too little water for the bittern.

Saturday was our turn for the Bream Pools and the adjoining floodplain. On our way there a large group of Grey-headed Parrots flew noisily across our path and settled in a tree near the river to be counted and photographed. From there they visited other trees on the plain, giving us clear views for more than half an hour. What good fortune. In the marshy area were Yellow-billed Stork, African Spoonbill, egrets and a few Wood Sandpipers. We scoured the short grass for pipit or lark but found none. The pools were also quiet, except for Grey Heron and African Jacana, so we moved on to the Chirundu sewage ponds near Tiger Safaris. Although these didn't appear to be operative our tour produced lots of Common Sandpipers, a few Wood Sandpipers and maybe Green Sandpiper or Marsh Sandpiper plus Southern Red Bishop, Black-winged Stilt, Great Reed-warbler, a Southern Carmine Bee-eater, another Long-tailed Paradise-whydah and the ubiquitous Southern Grey-headed Sparrows. Our hunter/guide then took us up to the top of Chirundu Heights, to what was in his police days the best bar with the best view of Chirundu, now a ruin but maintaining the stunning view down on the river, the bridges and border posts and lots of undiscovered Zambia. Thanks Chris.

In the late afternoon we all drove to Arunatius Pan, so called because it was discovered when a joint group from Arundel and St Ignatius were there together. It is a roughly circular algae-covered pan past Long Pan, not over populated with birds, but we did spot Rufous-bellied Heron, Malachite Kingfisher, Hamerkop, Village Weaver and a few more 'Woodies'. From there one group left to do some sundowning at Long Pan while the real birders headed for the cathedral mopane in search of Arnot's Chat. Best birds here were a pair of Three-banded Coursers and Red-billed Hornbill but not the target species. Some birds can't always be found in prime habitat.

Sunday morning saw one car set off on the return to Harare. Those left headed for

Chirundu town and then Jecha Point Fishing Camp, run by Iona and Nick Coetzee. This is a gem in every way, very popular with the fishing fraternity and a super birding destination. *En route* we saw Broad-billed Roller, Long-tailed Paradise-whydah and Steel-blue Widowfinch. Jecha's top attractions are African Mourning Dove and riverside bushes full of Lesser Masked-weaver nests, some taken over by Blue Waxbill, but birds were everywhere. Freedom spotted 3 African Skimmers on the island but unfortunately the sand bar on which they used to breed is no more. Lots of Wire-tailed Swallow, Jacobin Cuckoo, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Rufous-bellied Heron, African Paradise-flycatcher, White-browed Coucal, Glossy Ibis, African Goshawk, Trumpeter Hornbill and many others. Eventually we dragged ourselves away and made a brief visit to the sewage works, which held the same birds as the previous day apart from a juvenile Martial Eagle overhead. To

everyone's chagrin, Chirundu's first Common Myna was photographed as we passed through town.

Though many of the members were birded-out, the mention of Sunset Point for the late afternoon sortie was unanimously received with enthusiasm. Eight Hippos, with just as many Red-billed Oxpeckers, were already grazing on the island when we arrived so we took out our cooler boxes, which needed emptying, and our folding chairs and formed a riverside gallery to studiously record the gorgeous sunset one last time. It was seven o'clock before we could drag ourselves away for our supper and the final count.

Our sincere thanks are due to Elspeth and Dave for hosting us, Chris, Dave and Andy for guarding us, Stefan for washing up after us, Tapera for general duties and to Penny for suggesting and organising the holiday.

Ken Dixon

BLZ Trip to RIFA CAMP, CHIRUNDU, from 21 to 24 February 2019

(Report by Abigail Karimanzira)



Finally, the long weekend for a visit to Rifa Camp in Chirundu arrived, after I had enthusiastically waited for it. Over a period of 21 to 24 February, four BirdLife Zimbabwe

Youth members (Abigail Karimanzira, Ronnie Chirimuta, Benhildah Antonio and Karen Chiro) and 2 senior members, Julia and Carla Pierini, took the journey to Chirundu to join other BirdLife members to birdwatch in the low-lying Zambezi Valley. Almost everyone anticipated many lifers, since it was our first visit to the area. Our hopes were raised when we started seeing several raptors soaring over the Zambezi escarpment on our way in. Unfortunately, we were not able to identify most of them except for a female Bateleur that flew low past us.

On arrival at RIFA Education Camp, Dave Winhall and Elspeth Baillie gave us a warm welcome. We had no time to waste and quickly unloaded our stuff, got into our bush gear, filled our water bottles for the walk and took off birding. Dave introduced us to Nkululeko Hlongwane (mostly known as Freedom) and Andy Smith, who guided us through the riparian woodland to the river. We stopped in the channel adjacent to the camp and we saw a Natal Spurfowl, Crested Francolin, Southern Red Bishops and Rattling Cisticolas, and later heard and saw many birds, including White-browed Coucals, Meves's Starlings, White-browed Sparrow-weavers, Emerald-spotted

Wood-doves and Cape Turtle-doves. Freedom and Andy spoke to us about many interesting aspects of the wilderness including insects, grasses and trees.

A Crowned Hornbill flew past us and we also saw Red-billed Hornbills and African Grey Hornbills. We learnt about different bird habitats and food preferences, for example that 'jungle rice' is favoured by many seedeaters! Further up the channel, a Red-billed Oxpecker flew past us. We also saw Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Grey-backed Camaroptera, 12 Violet-backed Starlings and a Steel-blue Widowfinch. Just before the Zambezi River, we saw a herd of over 50 foraging elephants.

We enjoyed the scenic view of the river and watched the sun setting. We saw a lot of hippos and a few wetland birds, including the African Openbill, before heading back to camp. We had our supper and went to sleep in the dormitories. I couldn't sleep well due to a Cape Turtle-dove that kept calling all night!

The following morning we woke up very early to join in the 6.30 a.m. walk to Bream Pools. Julia saw what she thought was a Black-winged Bishop but unfortunately, it flew away before proper identification. We identified European Bee-eaters, Yellow-billed Stork, White-fronted Bee-eaters, Terrestrial Brownbul, Green-backed Heron, Rufous-bellied Heron, Goliath Heron, Yellow-breasted Apalis and Allen's Gallinule. Freedom saw something grey in the reeds and we thought it was maybe a Rufous-bellied Heron, but no, it was flushed and we identified a Dwarf Bittern. What a lovely sight of a special bird - a lifer for us. Many raptors were seen flying including African Fish-eagle, Black Sparrowhawk, Bateleur, Black-chested Snake-eagle, Long-crested Eagle [*status unconfirmed in the Rifa area, needs confirmation-Ed.*] and an African Harrier-hawk. This was the first time I'd seen so many raptors flying around at the same place, including circling White-backed Vultures. A Grey-headed Kingfisher was perched in a tree and an Eastern Nicator was heard in the distance. Freedom took us further down the river to the Hot Springs area. We enjoyed lovely sights of Woolly-necked Storks feeding in the muddy waters of the pools.

It was 10 a.m. by the time we headed back to camp and met up with the other group to share our morning sightings. Penny had prepared a

quiz and everyone participated. It was quite fun and I have to say almost everyone learnt new information. After that we had breakfast and rested before the late afternoon walk. It was then that I realized there was a Lesser Honeyguide calling repeatedly... 'Vic..Vic..Vic' behind our dormitory.

At around 16:00 hrs we gathered up for a drive through the mopane riparian woodlands to Long Pan. The road was a bit rough but who cared, everyone was focused on identifying more birds! The pan had Comb Duck, Egyptian Goose, Spur-winged Goose, Wood Sandpiper and Purple-crested Turaco, plus many Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters flying around. Ronnie identified a juvenile Martial Eagle circling in the sky. This was amazing! A Scarlet-chested Sunbird was perched in a mopane tree, our first sunbird sighting, and later added Variable Sunbird and White-bellied Sunbird [*the Variable Sunbird is interesting and needs confirmation. Whilst not unknown from Rifa its status is uncertain due to paucity of records and possible confusion with Collared Sunbird-Ed.*]. Everyone had brought a chair so we all enjoyed sundowners at the pan. On our way back to camp, a Bronze-winged Courser was seen in the grass by the side of the road. The day had been a fruitful one for everyone and we rested with the anticipation of seeing more the next day.

The following morning gave us interesting sightings. As we drove along the Zambezi to the beach area, we spotted three Southern Ground-hornbills foraging under the trees. From the beach, we walked to the river and added Bohm's Spinetail, Eurasian Hobby, African Hobby [a rarity needing confirmation], Golden-breasted Bunting and African Golden Oriole.

At around 12:00, our little group visited Chirundu Safari Lodge, where Julia had received an invitation to come birding. Upon arrival, we were welcomed by Carl van der Reit and his wife, Debbie. They introduced us to Lionel Muzenda who was to be our guide. Sitting in the shade of the lodge, we recorded a list of about 33 species, including Southern Carmine Bee-eater, African Mourning Dove, Cut-throat Finch, Diderick Cuckoo and African Hoopoe in less than 20 minutes.

After birding around the lodge, we were driven to the woodland by Lionel. It was very hot that afternoon but amazingly enough we

recorded a list of 104 species in about 3 to 4 hours. We passed through many pools and added Glossy Ibis, African Sacred Ibis and Black Crake. We drove to the Chirundu Estate campsite, sited along the bank of the Zambezi River. What a nice place to camp, enjoying the great Zambezi and birds around the area. Collared Palm-thrush, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Long-billed Crombec, Terrestrial Brownbul and Speckled Mousebirds were recorded at the campsite. A flock of about 30 White Storks was seen flying above us. From the campsite, we drove along the Zambezi and we saw Long-toed Lapwing and this gave us something to brag about later to the group we had left behind at Rifa. We also recorded Broad-billed Roller, Steppe Buzzard, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike and Black Heron.



Crested Francolins and Swainson's Spurfowl seemed to be at every corner of the woodland. We arrived at Tamarind camp (within the Chirundu Estates) which was situated on a very scenic bend of the Zambezi.

Many Southern Carmine Bee-eaters swarmed the area where the vultures were perched, while Mosque Swallows swooped on insects. Crowned Lapwings, Meyer's Parrot and a juvenile European Honey-buzzard were recorded on our way back. (Many thanks to Carl and Debbie for their hospitality and to Lionel for his knowledge and guidance).

Back at Rifa that night, we all sat down to compile our birding list and we came up with a total of 169 species for all the areas that were visited. The following day we visited Jecha Camp for a last birding stroll before leaving for Harare and added Grey-headed Parrots, Northern Grey-headed Sparrow, African Skimmers, Green-winged Pytilia and Trumpeter Hornbill to the list. Passing through the sewage ponds we only saw a few Wood Sandpipers and a Common Sandpiper.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Penny Raynor, who booked Rifa Camp for us, and Dave and Elspeth who made our stay very comfortable. I also would like to extend our gratitude to Freedom and Andy for their knowledge and guidance. Many thanks to Julia Pierini who made the trip possible for the young BLZ Youth birders. Indeed, this trip was a memorable one and I am looking forward to visiting the area again, probably for Birding Big Day, and I am very sure that this time, my team, the Mhandambiri Creepers, will come first!

BLZ Mashonaland Branch Annual General Meeting – Thursday 14th February 2019

This year was unusual as, due to the unstable situation in January as well as the fuel shortage, the committee decided it would be prudent to postpone the AGM until the February meeting. However, they were thwarted again as the date of the February meeting (21st February) was declared a public holiday, and so settled for the 14th February instead.

The AGM was a most lively evening with 32 members attending. First on the agenda was the Chairman's report. Tony Alegria gave an informative roundup of the year's activities and

away outings, as well as the monthly talks. With reference to the out of town outings, Tony pointed out that the support for these has diminished significantly due to the economic and fuel woes. However, a successful overnight trip was organised to the van Leenhof's home in the Norton area, where everyone had a chance to see the elusive African Grass-owl. Tony also appealed to members to pass on any ideas for subjects and speakers for the monthly meetings as it is always difficult to organise suitable talks.

The next item was the Treasurer's Report presented by Debbie Wiggins, which gave a summary of the finances for the year where there were no surprises! The situation is that there is a sufficient annual surplus for BLZ Mashonaland to be able to make small donations towards venues that are more frequently visited.

Reports were then presented by Dave Dalziel, Richard Dennison & Dorothy Wakeling regarding the main birding areas that have been covered by regular BLZ outings.

Dave gave an interesting account of the species recorded at Mukuvisi over the year where the number of different species seen appear to continue to decline, e.g. Spotted Creeper & Stierling's Wren-warbler. On the positive side though, following on from the arrival in late 2017 of a single male Miombo Rock-thrush, is the subsequent record of a female, perhaps indicating that the pair had bred, and then a second male.

Richard gave a résumé of the species seen at Chivero over the year but was disappointed that the number of members taking part in the outings to this venue is low, with only 4 members attending the last visit.

Dorothy summarised rainfall and sightings at Monavale Vlei over the year, the highlight being a Cape Longclaw. She explained how a burst council water pipe has kept the vlei artificially wet during the dry season, which affected the variety of species seen in those months. Jimmy Muropa continues as vlei scout but was seconded to do some training and so was not around for all the year. Dorothy reported that she had attended an international wetlands conference in Dubai last year, which provided a valuable opportunity to raise awareness of the plight of wetlands in Zimbabwe. She also spoke about the ongoing court case against development on wetlands in Harare that was initiated by the Harare Wetlands Trust, which has received generous and invaluable input from the Lawyers for Human Rights.

The last item on the agenda concerned any changes in the committee.

The most significant of these was that Tony Alegria announced that he had decided to step down as Chairman of the committee, a position that he held for 10 years! Tony was an exceptional chairman and enthusiastically executed his duties. He was dedicated to promoting the joy of birding and during his office was there to lead the majority of walks and gladly welcomed any newcomers on these outings, showing them the ropes and sharing his favourite jokes with them, which never fail to break the ice! Over the years when he was chairman he organised some memorable away outings, making the bookings, researching the venue and birding opportunities along the way. These were always a great success. Every month, he lugged the screen and projector for the meetings as well as his laptop back and forth and even willingly filled in the gaps when we couldn't find a speaker for that month! Tony always provided the venue for the bi-monthly committee meetings, with his wife Pam laying on drinks and tasty snacks. We will miss Tony's capable leadership but hope that he won't abandon us completely in favour of trees and stars!

Meanwhile Innes Louw volunteered to join the committee as Chairman, so a new chapter has begun. The committee welcomed him and I'm sure he will be a great asset. In addition, the committee welcomed two other new members, Geoff Lowe who has a vast knowledge and experience in the field of birding, and Patrick Shadwell who is already a respected birder and will of course significantly lower the average age of the committee! Thanks go to both for volunteering their time to stand on the committee.

To round off the evening, James Ball gave a fascinating talk about a pair of African Cuckoo Hawks that set up house in a tall gum tree on his property. At a height of about 30 metres, it was quite a challenge taking photos of his subjects but he nonetheless managed to get some excellent photos to illustrate his account from the nest building to fledging of the first of the two chicks.

Debbie Wiggins

Matabeleland

January waterfowl count at a few MATOPOS NATIONAL PARK dams, January 2018

It was already hot and humid by the time we arrived at the Sandyspruit – the first of eight small dams within the Matopos National Park that we were to monitor for the January waterfowl count. First on the list was an African Wattled Lapwing sauntering along the road in front of us and later it teamed up with another. Sandyspruit is a very pretty dam with a mass of waterlilies, reeds and bulrushes. Without a telescope, we would not have managed to pick up all the White-backed Ducks lying low in the water amongst the lily pads, some of them obviously youngsters. We were delighted to add nine African Pygmy-goose and four Lesser Moorhens to the list. In amongst a couple of African Jacana, we tried to identify a rallid, with a crake-like bill, that was out, trotting busily about, inspecting the underside of the lily pads for morsels, tail up and flicking. Unfortunately, it skulked in the long grass so photographing it was not possible and it had no obvious markings. Common Moorhens and Little Grebes joined the list as Wire-tailed Swallow, Barn Swallow and Red-breasted Swallows dived down to drink on the wing.

Maleme Dam was exceptionally quiet with only one Blacksmith Lapwing and two Pied Kingfishers making the list. However, while waiting to see if anything else popped up, a lone White-backed Vulture flew high overhead and three Yellow-billed Kites seemingly had an altercation just above our heads. The resident pair of Verreaux's Eagles were perched on a high point above the dam but unfortunately we didn't get to see their fledgling from last year. (During our Matobo visits, data on raptor sightings are also taken into account.) Next came Madingazulu, which is now only a puddle, where we found eleven Red-billed Teal standing on the muddy bank, resting with heads tucked in. Nswatugi Dam was completely dry and sadly, there was a crowd of noisy fishermen at Mesilume, who, for some reason, hadn't frightened off a African Comb Duck and two White-faced Duck. Two African Jacanas completed a sad list there. Whitewaters Dam, as

well, was just a muddy puddle rendering a nil return.

Within the Whovi Game Park, we count at two dams – Chitamba and Mpopoma. Chitamba is now extremely low and quiet of bird noise with the resident pod of hippo having a hard time trying to submerge themselves in what little water remains. Here we only picked up two Blacksmith Lapwing and four Egyptian Goose. On our way through to Mpopoma we had a large raptor flying through the canopy of trees in front of us, which we eventually identified as an African Harrier-hawk, adding a Brown Snake-eagle and two more Verreaux's Eagles to our raptor list as we descended to the first picnic spot beside the dam. There an African Darter and two White-breasted Cormorants started off the list. Counting is done at several different spots along the Mpopoma shoreline and we were delighted to see that the dam had caught some water since our last visit in late December. Once again, we didn't have a large number to count and most of the birds that made the list were found down at the bottom end of the dam where it is quiet and away from the fishermen. As we arrived, three Squacco Herons and a Giant Kingfisher greeted us while a Great Egret stalked the shallows and a couple of large crocs cruised slowly through the lily pads, upsetting a few African Jacanas. While walking through to another counting spot, we saw a reedbuck and her youngster grazing in a grassy vlei. It is always a delight to see some game during our Matobo visits. There was a noticeable lack of Little Grebes, which normally abound at Mpopoma.

Driving out of Whovi towards the entrance gate, we came across a very friendly Grey-headed Kingfisher flitting along the road in front of the vehicle. It was also a delight to watch a large flock – 200+ birds – of (mostly) Amur Falcons pouring over a granite dwala, heading towards an approaching storm, which was thankfully cooling off the heat of the day.

John and Jenny Brebner

Some birding in HWANGE - late December 2018

Text and photos by **John and Jenny Brebner**

Usually, birding in Hwange in late December/early January is fantastic as many of the migrants are around, particularly those big brown jobs flooding in for the termite alate flights along with some of our other annual visitors. Although the park had had some rain and outwardly everything seemed lush and green, it was evident that there hadn't been that much - yet. Some of the natural pans were beginning to fill up and most of the solar pumped pans we visited sported some waterbirds.



Hottentot Teal (above) & Abdim's Stork

Nyamandhlovu vlei was particularly alive with birds. Loads of Woolly-necked Storks and Abdim's Storks were about, as several groups of Grey Crowned Cranes stalked, pecking through the grass. A few of the Abdim's had their wings out to sun bathe. A couple of Spur-winged Goose, a lone White-backed Vulture, an African Sacred Ibis and some African Comb Duck occupied a small natural pan along with three African Spoonbills busily spooning about. As a juvenile Bateleur soared above the platform, several Yellow-billed Kites swirled overhead, playfully diving down now and again, upsetting the huge crowd of Blacksmith Lapwings that

took wing while noisily complaining. A few waders - Wood Sandpipers, Kittlitz's Plovers, a Common Greenshank and some Ruffs - fossicked along the edges of the pan and a group of Red-billed Teal rested on a sandbank quite unconcernedly next to one of the large crows.



Grey Crowned Cranes (above) & African Spoonbills

As it was a hot and humid day, more Woolly-necked Storks dozed by the water at Dom, along with a Grey Heron, standing motionlessly on one leg with neck tucked in while two spoonbills appeared to be fast asleep on the edge taking no notice as Red-billed Teal busily ducked and dived and Black-winged Stilts stalked through the shallows. Plenty of Southern Carmine Bee-eaters flew about, resting every now and then on stumps or termite mounds as their European Bee-eater cousins flew higher up, calling as they hawked, with a few Amur Falcons in the mix as well. Woolly-necked Storks were also plentiful at Dopu, cloaking the old logs near the one pan in

company with several wildebeest and their newborn calves resting on the edge of the pan. At both Dopu pans there were several Hottentot



Amur Falcon

Teal as well as Red-billed Teal, Black-winged Stilts and Egyptian Goose. We watched a Three-banded Plover industriously smoothing out a muddy hollow right next to the pan and wondered if it was preparing to nest. Lilac-breasted Roller, European Roller and Purple

Rollers were out in full force too, with some lovely sightings of Broad-billed Rollers in prime plumage. After spotting the Racquet-tailed Rollers in the *erioloba* forest, we came out into the Kennedy vlei to find a lone White Stork and a Secretarybird, while down at Ngweshla we finally found not one but three Kori Bustards. Several times during our trips around Balla Balla to Nyamandhlovu, we came across five Saddle-billed Storks – two of them adults and the other three juveniles; once a single Black Stork accompanied them and another time an African Openbill. Helmeted Guineafowl had mostly paired off although we did have a small flock at one stage trilling along the road in front of the vehicle, reluctant to go off into the wet grass. Southern Ground-hornbills appear to be doing well in the park as we saw several groups during our travels.

We only managed to log 132 birds and felt a little disappointed at the lack of raptors and waterbirds, which usually abound at this time of the year.

Birding around the block

After the days of searing heat, how welcome was a life-giving shower of rain, cheering absolutely everything and everyone up, not least the birds! Rising to a freshly washed morning, the lawn was alive with feathered friends, mostly Dark-capped Bulbuls, interspersed with African Hoopoes poking about with their scimitar-like bills, all the while being harassed by two Fork-tailed Drongos intent on stealing their morsels. Kurrichane Thrushes dashed hither and yon, while above African Palm-swifts, Barn Swallows and vocal European Bee-eaters swooped about feeding on the wing. A couple of White-browed Robin-chats dueted in the oleander and an Orange-breasted Bush-shrike added its voice to the mix. Heading out on a morning walk, the bird song was phenomenal with much bustle in amongst the tall grasses along the side of the road as Bronze Mannikins, Yellow-fronted Canary and Black-throated Canary, as well as Common Waxbills, balanced precariously on the long stalks, chirping away. A Levillant's Cuckoo flew across the road, the call of its cousin, the Red-chested Cuckoo, "Piet my vrou-ed" me on my way and a bit later, a Diderick Cuckoo added its

call to the cacophony. A querulous bunch of Grey Go-away-birds quarrelled in the top of a *Peltophorum* and a Yellow-bellied Greenbul grumbled in the undergrowth. A Common Scimitarbill could be heard somewhere, as well as a Black-crowned Tchagra and several Rattling Cisticolas cha-cha-cha-ed cheerfully in the thorn scrub along my route. Near the municipal reservoir, a trio of female Yellow Bishops clustered round a male, his bright yellow back puffed like a pompom, startling against the jet black of the rest of his plumage. Five Black-collared Barbets chortled and bobbed at the very top of a gum tree while a Crested Barbet, on a lower branch, chirred vocally. Several potholes revealed little avian bodies having a marvellous morning bath; a cavernous one accommodated a pair of Cut-throat Finches and three Blue Waxbills joyously splashing while seemingly discussing something of importance. In the branches of a thorn tree above their heads, a small crowd of chatty African Yellow White-eyes and other Blue Waxbills fussed about as they awaited their turn. A Steel-blue Widowfinch balanced on the phone line while a cheeky male Pin-tailed Whydah struggled with

its long tail in the strong breeze, attempting to chase the widowfinch off. And getting back to the gate, a handful of Red-faced Mousebirds took off from the fig tree where they'd been investigating the last of the fruit.

It's always a delight getting out for a walk and despite not having any binos with me, I get to see and hear an amazing array of birds "around the block" (the block being approx. 3.7km).

Jenny Brebner

Mashonaland West – Kadoma report

On 13th January at 6.30 p.m., and after continuous rain for a week, 2000+ Amur Falcons settling for the night on the stretch of ZESA lines near the old CSC feedlot area at 18° 22.148'S, 29° 53.823'E

On 15th January the pair of Common Mynas in my garden, feeding chicks high up in a palm tree and hard to locate, have since disappeared but will probably return next season for nesting!

There has been much nesting around. At Cherrybank farm, a family of Green Woodhoopoes precariously fed chicks on top of a wide-mouth metal pole outside the verandah and were so noisy as all members helped with the feeding. This family is resident in the ceiling of a house, entering through the apex of the roof. A pair of Scarlet-chested Sunbirds raised young on the flimsy branch of a flamboyant tree outside the dining area. Red-headed Weaver nests adorn telephone wires outside the dining area. Red-eyed Doves sat on a nest near the house area and a pair of Senegal Coucals nested in a thick hedge. I suppose the birds feel safe and secure near the house and gardens with food and water also available.

On the way to a waterbird count, we stopped along the roadside to watch early morning activity. A pair of Green-winged Pytilias was nesting in a wild-grape vine hanging from a thorn tree, the mother, with her red beak, was peering through the small entrance while the male was perched nearby. A rare sight we thought!

A trip to Hove farm 18°164.04'S, 29° 571.10'E on Saturday 23rd February was a highlight, the weather warm with bright sunshine. Our outing was to see the migratory White Storks. 31 were counted and they were avidly feeding and following the tractor while the hay was being cut and what lovely, sweet-smelling hay as we stood and breathed it in. Visible on one stork was a yellow tracking devise! The storks appeared relaxed and happy, feeding, then flying between the various grass fields and the dairy area where 40+ Cattle Egrets and 15+ Abdim's Storks all mingled together with the cows. At the farm homestead, a big colony of Village Weavers are resident and have continuously stripped the leaves off the palm trees for nest building, so the palms look quite gaunt!

Other birds of special interest that day, as we traversed between grass fields and woodland, were 3+ Yellow-throated Longclaws, Zitting Cisticola and Croaking Cisticola, plentiful Cape Turtle-doves, Laughing Doves and Emerald-spotted Wood-doves, Flappet Lark, 3 Lilac-breasted Rollers, male and female White-winged Widowbirds plentiful in the grass, Red-backed Shrike, White-crested Helmet-shrike, Black-backed Puffback and Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, a pair of Bearded Woodpeckers, and Red-faced Mousebirds. A total of 46 species recorded that full morning in the bush.

Truly, we have wonderful areas to visit so we try to make the best of situation and explore our great countryside.

Margaret Parrock



From Alex Masterson,

please reply to him via Shirley Geisel shirley@cwg.co.zw

“I see that Imbgwa Farm has been acquired by the State from a Mrs. Marjorie Vivien Cooper. This is where the Chitungwiza Sewerage Ponds is situated. It is (when the works are not going straight into the Hunyani or Nyatsime) very good for birds.

If anyone knows how I can contact Mrs. Cooper please let me know.”

The last time I went to Imbwa was some years ago; it was no longer very good for birds as it was not operating and most of the ponds were dry. The main works, which have been counted on the waterbird survey, is 6km to the east – Ed.

For Sale

Mark Shaw has a beautifully bound set of *Ostrich* covering the period 1959 to 1980. Please contact him with offers.

Mark Shaw SAS Security P/L, mobile 0772343485

eBird



Last year's Global Big Day featured more than 30,000 people across 171 countries, collectively reporting 7,026 species of birds—about two-thirds of the world's bird species in a single day! This May, you can be a part of the fun. All you have to do is spend a few minutes birding, and eBird what you find.

Use eBird Mobile. eBird's free data-entry app takes the time out of data entry, with tools like [Quick Entry](#) that mean you have less time with your face in a notebook and more time birding. Try [eBird Mobile](#), or if you are going the paper route, send your list to Julia at the office.

Useful Contacts:

CEO/Ringing Programme: Julia Pierini JuliaPierini@birdlifezimbabwe.org 0772-894562
Rarities Committee: Ian Riddell gemsaf@mango.zw 0772-117054
BLZ Library: piumosso@zol.co.zw 2304298; 2481496
Special Species: Peta Ditchburn specialspecies@blz.co.zw 0775-940714, 029-2230075
Mashonaland South: Margaret Parrock 068-22005 or her daughter Coralee 0772-739370
Eastern Districts: Sue Fenwick 0779-408557 ingram.sue@gmail.com
Mashonaland East Natural History Society: Chairman Peter Hadingham 024-2497035
Secretary: Colin de Beer 0279-23931 jcdb1936@gmail.com
Honeyguide production: vacant

BLZ MEMBERSHIP

BirdLife Zimbabwe's membership year is from April to March, but you can join any time.

Even if you don't attend meetings and outings, your membership is really important and supports our goal to protect biodiversity and conserve birds and their habitats through education, lobbying decision-makers and interaction with international organisations.

In addition, your involvement with data collection through atlassing and submission of records is invaluable. As a member you get the newsletter, *The Babbler*, every two months and two issues of *Honeyguide*, our internationally acclaimed journal, every membership year. All for a very reasonable annual fee.

Especially in these difficult economic times, donations towards any of our projects are always much appreciated and you may consider mentioning BLZ in your will!

Individual/Family members (incl. children under 17)	US\$ 25.00
Pensioners (65 & over), Students	15.00
Youth Club	5.00
Schools (high density)	25.00
Schools (private), Educational Institutions	50.00
Rest of Africa	40.00
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* If you would like recognition on our public forums, choose the \$200 Corporate Plan. To learn more about corporate sponsorship and BLZ projects, write to JuliaPierini@birdlifezimbabwe.org

Payment details. Please deposit into BirdLife Zimbabwe account at **NMB Bank, (Borrowdale Branch) Account No: 260092014** or BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Branch, CABS (Chisipite Branch) Account No: 1002399955 or **Ecocash** – Merchant Code No. **22084**. You can **also** pay your subscription online with **Paynow**. Look on the BLZ website on the membership page www.birdlifezimbabwe.org/joinus, and click on the Paynow tab at the bottom of the page. This is especially important for our members outside Zimbabwe. You could **also** come to our office at 35, Clyde Road, Eastlea in Harare.

Some members are not informing us when they pay their subscription and when members deposit into the banks, the name shown on the statement is often only the first name and therefore we may not know who you are.

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And look on our Facebook page for great pictures and interesting birding news -

www.facebook.com/BirdLifeZimbabwe. You can find out about us and projects you as a member can get involved with, on our informative website www.birdlifezimbabwe.org

Branch Activities

Friends of the Vumba is a community initiative that employs 3 trained scouts to protect the wildlife – tracking for snares and arresting poachers of game, birds and wood. We also support an education outreach into the schools in the area, mostly focussed on birding but more recently extending into wider environmental issues such as WESSA's Water program, rubbish health awareness, alien tree harvesting and indigenous tree planting.

Directions to regular venues (Google Earth co-ordinates):

CABS Northridge Park -17.777494, 31.090782. From town drive along Borrowdale Road, turn right into Whitwell, next right into Ridgeway North, next right into Northend Road and first right into Northridge Close. Drive to the end of the road and go through a security boom into Northridge Park.

Marlborough Vlei -17.742715, 30.990416. Meet at the bottom of Princess Margaret Road, off Harare Drive and follow the road round to the left. Park on the short road midway along the bottom of Princess Margaret.

Mukuvisi Woodlands -17.851935, 31.092010. Turn off the Chiremba Road into Ford Road (opposite Queensdale shops) cross over Longford Avenue and bear left down to the T-junction on Blatherwick Road. Turn right and the gate is about 150 metres on the left. Bring a tip for the car guard. Don't forget refreshments for after the walk when we record the number of species. The **public car park** is off Hillside Road, -17.835393, 31.089111.

Prince Edward School car park -17.818721, 31.036462. Josiah Tongogara Ave.

Monavale Vlei -17.806770, 31.010579. From Quendon Road turn into Lyndhurst Road, at bottom follow right hand bend, take first left and second right to BS Leon roundabout. Second exit is Fenella Drive. Meet on Fenella Drive.

Haka Park -17.843391, 31.143369. From the traffic circle at the Mutare Road/Harare Drive intersection, continue 500m and turn left, follow the road (770m) to the Haka sign and boom on the left. If entering through the boom on Harare Drive (-17.828473, 31.140253; 1.9 km north of the circle) make your way to the meeting point. \$5 entrance fee for BLZ members, \$10 others.

Avondale Sports Club -17.785100, 31.041972. Brighton Road, Harare between Sam Nujoma Street Extension and Upper East Road. There is a cash bar and a security guard. A minimum charge of \$2 per person at the door please.

Mashonaland Branch

BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Calendar of Events: APRIL 2019

Saturday 6th	Marlborough Vlei walk	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
Sunday 7th	Mukuvisi Woodlands walk	Meet at 06.30 a.m.
Saturday 13th	Ngomakurira Meet at CABS, Northridge Close.	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
Sunday 21st	Monavale Vlei walk	Meet at 06.30 a.m.
Thursday 25th	Harare Garden Bird Survey Presentation by Debbie Wiggins, Avondale Sports Club.	Meet 5.30 for 6.00 p.m.
Sunday 28th	Christon Bank (Graham and Debbie Bowker) Meet at CABS, Northridge Close.	Meet at 06.30 a.m.

BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Calendar of Events: MAY 2019 - Note change to Winter times

Saturday 4th	Marlborough Vlei walk	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
Sunday 5th	Mukuvisi Woodlands walk	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
Saturday 11th	Crowborough Ponds Meet at Prince Edward School car park.	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
Thursday 16th	Rifa Presentation by Leslee Maasdorp, Avondale Sports Club.	Meet 5.30 for 6.00 p.m.
Sunday 19th	Monavale Vlei walk	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
Sunday 26th	Ruwa (McDonald Timbers) Meet at Mukuvisi Woodlands car park.	Meet at 07.00 a.m.

For further information, please contact Innes Louw, innes.louw@ames.co.zw, 0776 190295

Other Areas

Mashonaland West – Margaret Parrock 068-22005 or 0773-263673

Eastern Districts – Second Saturday of every month **The Vumba Walk**. These vary from the Upper to Lower Vumba areas and occasionally may extend into Penhalonga, Burma Valley, and even Chimanimani. Many birding enthusiasts join us although it is not officially a birding walk. They are usually hosted by either a Vumba resident or a commercial venue such as Tony's Coffee Shop, Forest Hills Lodge, White Horse Inn or the Botanical Gardens and the walks will often traverse private properties not always accessible by the public. Contact Sue Fenwick 0779-408557 ingram.sue@gmail.com for more details.

Lowveld – contact Clive Stockil 0772-219204 or clive@chilogorge.com

*Please send contributions for The Babbler 148
June-July 2019 any time before the 15th May.*