

BABBLER

The Newsletter of



BirdLife Zimbabwe
The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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Office hours: Monday to Friday 8.30 – 4.30

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ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING - Please note change of venue.

The National AGM will be held at 10 a.m. on Saturday, 5 June 2010 at Inunqu Guest House in the Matobo National Park, Bulawayo.

Unfortunately the Maleme Camp has been booked for another group so Cecilia Hubbard has generously offered her property, Inungu Guest House, for the AGM and members' accommodation if required.

There are 4 bedrooms, each containing 2 beds, 1 possibly accommodating 2 more. In addition beds can be put on the veranda or tents erected in the garden. Camping will cost \$5 per person/night; beds \$10 per person/night. There is one kitchen and one bathroom but other 'bush' facilities for the campers. She will ensure there is adequate crockery and cutlery but visitors will have to supply food and drink, camp chairs, bedding, lighting etc. The meeting will be followed by a picnic/braai so please remember to bring chairs and your refreshments. Morning and evening walks will also be organised. If you wish to take advantage of this kind offer, please contact Cecilia directly at woodlands@netconnect.co.zw or 0912-433733.

You will find directions to Inungu on the AGM Agenda, which everyone should have received. It is approximately 50km from the centre of Bulawayo.

Entry to the National Park for people and vehicles will still have to be paid but BLZ members qualify for free entry provided they show their official receipt stamped 'Birdlife Zimbabwe'.

The President Dorothy Wakeling, Vice-president Neil Deacon, Honorary Treasurer Roger Castelin and Honorary Secretary, Ken Dixon are elected annually and have confirmed they are willing to stand again. Two ordinary Council members are also elected – David Rockingham-Gill is willing to stand again but Geoff Lowe has declined, so there is one member-elected Council place to be filled. Proxy forms can be obtained from Ken Dixon lynnken@mango.zw or 0912-324301

BABBLER EDITOR

This will be my last issue of *Babbler*, as regrettably I will be giving up the editorship – and just for fun, the cover page of the hard copy issue is in a 'shocking' colour!

I have been very much involved with BLZ for at least 5 years – as Council secretary, *Babbler* editor and latterly, honorary membership secretary. It has been an interesting, but time-consuming and often stressful period and I need to now concentrate on my personal life and health, which have been neglected! I will however continue to be the Membership Secretary and the liaison with members, many of whom I have had the pleasure of being in contact with.

Julia Pierini has thankfully agreed to take over, so please send her your contributions in future. juliapierini@yahoo.com cell: 0912-894562

Carolyn Dennison

SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL

Our membership year runs from April to March and **all** 2010/11 subscriptions were therefore due on 1 April.

We have had to increase the rate to cover costs of printing and distribution of our publications and any surplus will go towards helping to promote interest in birds. However, I am sure you will agree that they are still reasonable and BLZ is a worthwhile organisation to support. Donations are also very welcome!

Individual or Family members (including children under 17)	US\$ 20.00
Pensioners, Students and Juniors	US\$ 10.00
Schools (high density)	US\$ 20.00
Schools (private)	US\$ 50.00
Corporate members	US\$ 50.00
Rest of Africa	US\$ 30.00
Rest of World	US\$ 30.00

Please pay your subscriptions as soon as possible – to the office, a branch committee member at an outing or you can deposit it into the BLZ bank account – Barclays Bank NGO Centre, Branch no: 2157; Account no: 6465998. It is very important that with all direct deposits you include your name on the deposit, so that it appears on the bank statement and please also advise the office and myself, either by faxing the copy deposit slip or by e-mail.

FORTHCOMING ACTIVITIES

Please diarise these events now, as it is easy to forget later on.

Please contact a committee member if you need transport to any of the events. Beginners are welcome – don't worry if you do not have a pair of binos – there is usually an extra pair at most outings. **Remember to always bring chairs and refreshments.**

NATIONAL

July and January are the months when members throughout the country are requested to make a special effort to participate in the **African Waterfowl Census**. These sightings are sent to Wetlands International Africa in Dakar, Senegal where they are entered onto the international database and the results analysed, so threats and changes in bird populations can be monitored. Not only is this information important but collecting it enjoyable. Although the national office staff manages to count some water bodies, there are many that are not covered, so please help by going to more out of the way ones and spending a few hours counting water birds.

Please contact Fadzai Matsvimbo at the national office for the forms fadzai@blz.co.zw

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Evening Meetings are on the 3rd Thursday of each month at 5.30 for 6.00 p.m. The venue is the Avondale Sports Club on Brighton Road between Sam Nujoma Street Extension and Upper East Road. There is a cash bar and a security guard. Pies and meals like lasagne, spaghetti bolognese, cottage pie and chicken curry can also be ordered – either to eat there or take home and pop into the microwave. A list will go round at the beginning of the meeting

Thursday 17 June – Movements of Heavenly Bodies

Not human, but in the sky! Tony Alegria will guide us round some interesting astronomical phenomena. This will be followed by a presentation by Nick Hart, one of our young members and a keen amateur photographer, of some unusual pictures he took at Seldomseen.

Thursday 15 July – Ringing Programme

Dave Dalziel will talk about 'Interesting aspects of the 2010 BLZ Ringing Programme'. This will be followed by a session of 'Questions you always wanted to ask but never dared to' – so bring along some fun topics.

Saturday 19 June – 7 a.m.: Marlborough Vlei

Don't miss a chance to possibly see Marsh Owls. From Harare Drive take Princess Margaret Road – follow this, passing 5 roads on the left until it bends to the left near the sewage works. Continue until you see cars parked in a road on the right near a fenced wooden shed.

Saturday 17 July – 7 a.m.: Mukuvisi Woodland

Meet in the main car park. This is a chance to see a different aspect of the Woodlands.

Sunday 6 June and 4 July – 7.00 a.m.: Mukuvisi Woodland

Last month special sightings included Great Spotted Cuckoo, Wood Pipit and Purple Widowfinch – a species count of 94 was excellent. Winter is a good time to see some raptors such as the Long-crested and Black-chested Snake-eagle and Black Sparrowhawk. Spotted Creeper and Southern Hyliota can also be found. Turn off the Chiremba Road into Ford Road (opposite Queensdale shops) and continue down to Blatherwick Road (T- junction). Turn right and the gate is about 150 metres on the left. Bring a reasonable tip for the guard, taking into account the value of your vehicle! Don't forget refreshments for after the walk when we record the number of species.

Sunday 13 June and 11 July – 7.00 a.m.: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary

You might see Lesser Masked-weavers, African Cuckoo Hawk, Retz's Helmet-shrikes and Southern Hyliota, as well as the more common miombo woodland and water birds. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West.

Sunday 20 June and 18 July – 7:00 a.m.: Monavale Vlei

Meet on the BS Leon side of Fenella Drive to see a variety of birds – will the vlei have been burnt this year or been protected from wandering people? Depending on the status of the vlei the species vary, so brave the chill and see what's there.

Sunday 27 June – 7.00 a.m.: Haka Park, Msasa

Usually worth a visit – African Pygmy-goose and White-backed Ducks can be seen on the dam, and miombo woodland specials such as the Miombo Rock-thrush as well as all 3 species of longclaw. Meet at the entrance gate.

Sunday 25 July – 7.00 a.m.: Christon Bank Nature Reserve

This attractive venue borders on the Mazowe River and interesting birds that have been seen there include Grey Tit-flycatcher (Fan-tailed), Red-backed Mannikin, Striped Pipit, Mocking Cliff-chat and Brown Snake-eagle. Meet at the CABS head office, Northend Road.

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Weekend 19-20 June: Winter Birding Big Day

BLZ Matabeleland members have enjoyed the annual national Birding Big Day so much we have decided we want to do it twice a year. The emphasis is not on fund raising but on *having fun* – with a bit of friendly rivalry thrown in. Teams will record how many different species of birds they see within a specified period. We are offering 24-hour and 36-hour categories and a garden section. Contact Julia Duprée for entry forms and check lists or more information – phone 246269.

July: African Waterfowl Census

On Saturdays and/or Sundays throughout July we will be counting waterfowl as per the list submitted by Wetlands International – with a few extra water-related species (such as kingfishers, warblers and wagtails) added for our own interest. These outings are always enjoyable and worthwhile; every time we see something different and interesting. Most surveys are just half-day affairs, which culminate in morning tea and a pondering of what we saw. Areas to be covered include Aisleby, SAST (near Khami Dam) and Cowdray Park. For more information and details of which sites will be visited on which days, contact Julia Duprée, phone 246269.

Sunday 15 August: Joint Outing Matobo Conservation Society

BLZ will be joining up with members of the Matobo Conservation Society (MCS) for a day of birding in the Matopos. On arrival at our destination we will split into groups, mixing members of both societies, and do a walk through various habitat types to see what we find. This will not be an MCS epic hike but a relatively short walk allowing plenty of time to stop and peer into every bush and behind every rock. Meet at the Churchill Arms car park at 8:15 for 8:30 a.m. departure. For more information contact Adele Edwards, phone 882242 or 0712-366917.

COUNTRY DISTRICTS

Mashonaland South (Kadoma) – Contact Margaret Parrock on 068-22005 or her daughter, Coralee on 0912-739370.

Eastern Districts – Monthly outings are on the last Sunday of the month and depart at 7.30 a.m. from the Mutare Museum. Spare binoculars and field guides are available. Members with a vehicle are encouraged to attend and fuel can be provided. Contact Peter Gwidibira 0913-524844 or poggroupp.gwidibira38@gmail.com for details.

Other Areas – Those members in other areas – we are always interested to hear what is happening in your bit of the country. Please send in what you have seen. *Ed*

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RECENT REPORTS and SIGHTINGS

Director's Report

BirdLife Zimbabwe has completed a very challenging year. The RSPB continues to be our major supporter and are funding us in 2010/11 to the same level as the 2009/10 financial year.

Hazel Hatton resigned from BLZ at the end of April 2010. I thoroughly enjoyed working with her over the past three years and wish her the best in her future. Hazel was tough, frugal and strict with the finances and it is because of her dedicated work that we managed to go through the difficult years of hyperinflation. There were 217 applications for the post of Finance and

Administration Manager and following interviews by the Director, the President and the Vice-President, Ms Sylvia Muzavazi was appointed. I am confident Sylvia will fit into the big shoes left by Hazel.

The Membership Survey forms sent out to all members will be analysed and a report produced after the AGM. We can only improve our service to members if we know what they expect from us.

The BLZ website has been redone and has a new appearance. M-Web Zimbabwe kindly agreed to host the site as a donation and we are very grateful to them. Please send contributions for the website to the Director.

Dr. C. Chirara

A project funded by Conservation Leadership Programme titled 'Mitigating human/crane conflict in the Driefontein Grasslands' will begin in August, lead by Togarasei Fakarayi. He has been invited to a training course on conservation leadership in Edmonton, Canada in June.

To date, data from more than 1100 field cards has been captured by Innocent Magunje in the BLZ office and the process is ongoing.

Bird Walk in HWANGE National Park

I had the privilege to visit Hwange National Park from 4-7 May. Whilst the purpose of the visit was to facilitate a workshop, it was an opportunity to enjoy the peace and quiet offered by the Park and of course the excitement of seeing wild animals. It was therefore with great enthusiasm that I had arranged to meet Elias Banda at 5:45 a.m. I was particularly looking forward to this walk as had I had enjoyed walking in the parks (with an armed ranger) during my stay in Hwange National Park a few years ago. A drive in the park is always fun, but a walk has an element of excitement and adrenalin rush that cannot be matched by a game drive. It was still dark when I peeked outside the lodge and I was not about to turn myself into lion food! We did not see much in the first 15 minutes – not only was it chilly but the grass was wet with dew and it wasn't long before our shoes were wet and sandy and I was beginning to doubt the wisdom of my choice of the early morning walk. As it got warmer, we began to see more animals and birds. The first bird we saw was a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill followed by a group of Cape Glossy Starlings. We also had giraffe, kudu and impala and zebras ran off in frenzy at our approach. We saw a pair of Wood Sandpiper by a sewage pond and in a clump of acacia trees at the edge of the airstrip we came across a bird party that were beginning their morning feeding. We saw the Grey-backed Camaroptera, Long-billed Crombec, Black-chested Prinia, Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler, and Zitting Cisticola and heard the Scaly-feathered Finch. Our walk lasted for slightly more than two hours in which we saw 37 different species of birds – 11 species were ones I saw for the first time. Towards the end of our walk, the most fascinating sighting was that of a pair of Black-faced Waxbills. Hwange is one place that is guaranteed to please!

Fadzai Matsvimbo

Important Bird Areas (IBA) Monitoring Project Report

An experience exchange workshop was conducted at Hwange National Park in May. The Area Manager of Chizarira National Park officially opened the workshop on behalf of the Area Manager of Hwange National Park. Participants were drawn from four IBAs in the Matabeleland region namely Matobo Hills, Chizarira National Park, Batoka Gorge and Hwange National Park. The participation of attendants was very encouraging. Lessons were learnt during site monitors' presentations of IBA monitoring experiences in their respective areas. Most of the people were able to identify threats facing their respective IBAs. Site monitoring teams were also retrained on filling of the IBA monitoring form to allow new members to familiarize with them. The review of the 2008 IBA monitoring forms gave people the platform to understand the form better. Participants were also trained in bird identification and bird monitoring methods in different habitats. The intended output of the workshop was to produce effective site monitoring teams, knowledgeable in bird identification, bird monitoring methods and assessment of habitats. We anticipate getting improved quality data for the 2009/2010 monitoring period. Site monitors were encouraged to source monitoring data from a pool of stakeholders working in their areas and to use publications in order to increase site information and to improve data quality. The near future plan is to train Protected Areas authorities' representatives in data management.

The IBA monitoring forms submitted for the 2008/2009 monitoring period are being analysed to produce the 2009 National IBA Status and Trends Report.

Kanisios Mukwashi – National IBA Project Manager

BirdLife Zimbabwe organised the 2010 **World Migratory Birds Day** event on 7 May 2010. The theme was 'Save migratory birds in crisis – every species counts' and UNEP/AEWA secretariat in Germany sent posters and stickers about the theme. The venue was Kuimba Shiri Bird Sanctuary near Lake Mcllwaine IBA. Eight schools participated in the event which consisted of presentations from in-depth researches made by schools to flag the theme. The schools were: Budiro High, Kuwadzana 8 Primary, Warren Park 6 Primary, Hallingbury Primary, Kintyre Primary, Dudley Hall Primary, TwinLakes Primary, Norton 1 Primary and Pinper Private School. BirdLife Zimbabwe's presentation was on the migration of birds and their threats. The Blue Swallow, African Skimmer and Rock Pratincole were examples of migratory birds used in explaining bird migration. Schools pointed out some reasons for bird migration and how they are able to navigate and factors that affect them – climate change and human disturbance, pests and insect control by some of these migratory birds and some linked the conservation of migratory species and their habitats to the way forward in conserving biological diversity. All these schools showed that they had a lot of information on migration of birds and the importance of this phenomenon.

On the sidelines of the event, Gary Stafford, the owner of Kuimba Shiri Bird Sanctuary, made the event more interesting with his owl and Fish-eagle displays. He stressed the importance of owls in people's lives, explaining that owls are a biological way of eliminating rats attracted to homes because of rubbish, so there is no need to use rat poison. This presentation went along with BirdLife Zimbabwe's "Save the Owl campaign" that is ongoing in schools. Many thanks go to Gary Stafford and his staff for allowing us to use his premises, Innocent Magunje for presenting the migration of birds as well as all the schools for preparing for the presentations and taking part in the event.

Seventy schools countrywide are now members of the **Bird Awareness Programme** and BLZ assisted with the project of planting trees in school grounds to attract birds.

Rueben Njolomole – Education Officer

Crane Update

A snap crane survey was carried out in the DRIEFONTEIN Grasslands from 18-24 March 2010. The survey was conducted by a student on attachment (Wellensky Mavheneka) with the assistance of the Projects and Education Officers. Areas surveyed were Nyororo and Shashe streams. These are the two major streams in the Driefontein Grasslands that support a high concentration of pairs and floaters of cranes. A total of 17 Wattled Cranes and 26 Grey Crowned Cranes were recorded in this survey. Wattled Cranes counted comprised of 7 pairs, with 3 pairs having a juvenile each. During the survey, two nests were sighted; one nest along Nyororo stream and the other along Shashe River. The cranes in Driefontein are threatened by habitat loss due to cultivation in wetlands. Reports from local communities have highlighted incidences of electrification by power lines and this might be another worrying threat. However, this needs further investigation. Awareness of crane and habitat conservation was raised during this survey period. All the four Site Support Groups were visited, and in discussions with villagers, BLZ officers emphasized wetland habitat conservation to ensure long-term survival of cranes. Meanwhile, plans are in place to carry out a ground survey in June 2010 covering the whole Driefontein area.

Togarasei Fakarayi – Projects Officer

MASHONALAND

Bird Ringing around HARARE

Since the ringing course that was held at Lake Chivero from 5-10 January 2010, the Harare ringing group has had a further 19 ringing outings. Bird ringing has taken place at Mukuvisi Woodlands, Lake Chivero, Monavale Vlei, Christon Bank and Greystone Park Nature Preserve, gardens and Marondera. We usually have between 6 and 10 people on each trip and start very early in the morning (4.30 a.m.!) and end as it starts to get hot. During winter we are planning to do more afternoon outings and a lot less early mornings! We are getting pretty well

eye-ring and bright orange bill very diagnostic. The Kurrichane Thrush is always on the look out for insects – butterflies, bees, wasps, locusts, ants etc. – which is why we see it so often foraging for food on the ground, its body with white belly, orange flanks and plain, unmarked grey-brown upperparts, scuttling single-mindedly with bill pointed towards its prey. This thrush breeds widely in open woodland, including miombo and other broad-leaved woodlands, and also thornveld and gardens. It is monogamous – which means that the bird breeds with one partner – and usually lays three eggs in a nest built in tree canopy protected from predators by branches and dense green foliage (laying months September-November in Zimbabwe). But why is it that some birds – the White-browed Robin-chat is a good example – often display such an impressive repertoire of different songs? Rael and Helene Loon in their Sasol *Birds – The Inside Story* (Struik 2005) suggest some answers: ‘First, it is thought that males with larger song repertoires are able to acquire and defend territories of a higher quality than males with fewer songs, their singing ability being a strong vocal signal to other males of their superiority. Second, it has been shown that birds with larger song repertoires are able to impress and attract more females. For both these reasons, it is likely that musical versatility gives males a significant advantage in breeding’.

Bushman’s Rock Estate – 25 April 2010

There was an excellent turnout of 34 people for this outing and although the day started off much the same as the previous day – cool and overcast – the clouds began to break up by mid-morning and it was a good day for a walk in the hills at the scenic Bushman’s Rock Game Sanctuary, which is left off the Marondera road. BLZ had visited this place only once before, in May last year, and on that visit did not see as many birds in the miombo woodland as we had expected. The homestead, vineyards and lodges lie in a valley next to 2 dams and the valley is bordered by hills on both sides. The sanctuary is stocked with giraffe, sable, wildebeest, zebra, impala and the endangered Lichtenstein’s hartebeest. It covers an area of about 600ha and the views are impressive. Our host, Rick Passaportis, explained that the sanctuary and its comfortable lodges are a joint enterprise between himself and a neighbour and they have only recently started to accept bookings. We set out from the lodge area in 4 separate birding groups, each with a leader. My group was warned from the start that this was a relatively fast-walking group as I hoped to cover quite a lot of ground. In any case we needed to warm up in the cool weather and put some distance between us and the following group. There are roads, paths and firebreaks that can be used to walk around and the areas covered by the groups included the hills on the southern side of the main river and the lodge area, vineyards and forest on the northern side. My group went west up the southern side of the main river, around the last hill to the west, then east along the same side of the river, over the main dam wall and back along the northern side of the river to the gazebo, a distance of about 6km. The birding was patchy as it often is in typical miombo woodland, but we did see some unusual birds such as Brown-backed Honeybird, Grey Penduline-tit, Southern Hyliota, Lazy Cisticola and Western Violet-backed Sunbird. Sunbirds were plentiful with 7 species recorded and although there was a lot of spore of different mammals, the only one we caught a glimpse of was a putative Lichtenstein’s hartebeest. Back at our meeting point Tony Alegria set up his braai, which failed totally, but Rick had set up his, which worked perfectly! While we were seated a Meyer’s Parrot landed on a dead tree in the dam in front of us and a few more species, including Red-backed Mannikin, were added to our list. The final total was a pleasing 103 species. The 4 groups probably only averaged about 50 species each but the final total was boosted because we covered a lot of ground. The highlights included the birds reported above plus 2 Spotted Eagle-owls, Greater Honeyguide, Greater Striped Swallow, Boulder Chat, Copper Sunbird and Black-eared Seedeater.

Richard Dennison

ABERFOYLE – 1-2 May 2010

Aberfoyle is truly paradise on earth – both for the avid birder and the visitor looking simply for a place to rest and relax. The Lodge is nestled at the foot of Nyangani Mountain surrounded by tropical lowland forest, crystal clear rivers and breathtaking views. I had never been there before and I really feel obliged to thank Innes for single-mindedly overcoming all odds and getting our little party of friends there! The first bird I spotted as I strolled out of the main Lodge building into the gardens on the Saturday morning was an Olive Sunbird busily inspecting the flowers of a nearby bush and, to my immense joy as this was the bird I had come

to see, two Palm-nut Vultures gliding across the golf course into the string of palm trees that stand out against the fairway. After the long drive from Harare we were anxious to head out for a bird walk and set off across the golf course and up a winding road into the forest. We were well rewarded as we saw Chirinda Apalis and Yellow-breasted Apalis, Black-fronted Bush-shrike, Green Twinspot, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Sombre Greenbul, Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Stripe-cheeked Greenbul, Collared Sunbird and Yellow-throated Woodland-warbler. Eastern Saw-wings wheeled and danced in the clear blue sky and we were also awed to see an African Crowned Eagle circling above just before we entered the forest and below that, a White-necked Raven. Dark-backed Weavers lead the way up the road and Square-tailed Drongos called out at us from every second tree as we walked – necks craning to spot the next special bird! We were fortunate to have a couple of incredibly good sightings of the Green-backed Woodpecker and, in amongst the dense foliage we could hear the call of the Barratt's Warbler. After a quick lunch, two of our party dropped out for an afternoon snooze while the rest of us wasted no time and set out along a footpath towards the river just below the gardens of the Lodge. Here we sighted Grey Tit-flycatcher and Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher and on our return, Grey Cuckooshrike, White-eared Barbet and Mountain Wagtail on the edges of the old vegetable patch. Late that same afternoon, we drove through the tea estates to the marshy area to find the fabled Anchieta's Tchagra, but were only able to see it when we went back at dawn the next morning – not an entirely satisfactory sighting as the bird was stationary, low down in the grass and quite a distance from where we were gathered; which means that we will have to go back to Aberfoyle to look for it again! While we were looking for the tchagra, however, we also saw an African Goshawk soaring above us, heard the call of a Red-chested Flufftail, spotted a Burchell's Coucal diving for cover and for a long time watched a bevy of Red-backed Mannikins going about their early morning business. We were also hoping to see the Lesser Seedcracker and the Red-faced Crimsonwing and so once back at the Lodge, our guide, Wisdom led us through a tea plantation on the far side of the golf course and up a mountain path to look for them. Wisdom was able to hear the Crimsonwings but we were not successful in our quest – it was possibly too late in the morning and time was running short! Once out of the mountain/forest area, a couple of the group were fortunate to see the Yellow-bellied Waxbill! By this time, the rest of us were back in our rooms preparing to leave and just outside mine, Grey Waxbills were darting up and down from a fence catching insects. After a sumptuous breakfast, we said our goodbyes to the staff who had helped make our stay so marvellous and set off on the long drive back to Harare. A Long-crested Eagle saluted us from the skies, African Firefinches picked their way over the pebbles along the tea estate roads and everywhere Blue-spotted Wood-doves flitted through the trees and bushes lining our passage.

We counted 81 species on our two-day trip and will certainly be back for more.

Julia Pierini

EWANRIGG BOTANIC GARDENS – 23 May 2010

Ewanrigg showed signs of being prepared for our May visit. All sections of the gardens were in tiptop condition, many aloes flowering and the fluffy pink cherry trees attracting lots of sunbirds. As we were a month earlier than usual the majestic Kenya Coffee Shade tree was unfortunately not in flower but there was activity elsewhere after the overnight rainstorm and the group of 15 enjoyed a satisfactory morning's birding, compiling a cumulative list of 65 species.

Our first treat after the Black-shouldered Kite near the entrance, was 3 African Green-pigeons atop a dead tree. Nearby were Violet-backed Starling, the first of many Amethyst Sunbirds and White-bellied Sunbirds too. The Grey-headed Bush-shrike showed off its full range of calls; whistle, tap and growl as it moved through an *Erythrina*. We had both Black-headed Oriole and African Golden Oriole along with Red-eyed Dove and Cape Turtle-dove. Then the Emerald-spotted Wood-dove joined in. In the cherry blossom Variable Sunbirds and Miombo Double-collared Sunbirds flitted about and chased one another tirelessly. At this point we split into 2 groups, the first going off to find Violet-backed and Copper Sunbird in another cherry while my section moved off toward the aloes. These held mainly White-bellied Sunbirds but also Speckled Mousebird. High above we saw Black-collared Barbet and a male and many young Steel-blue Widowfinches, which parasitise the Red-billed Firefinch who happened to be just below on and around a dripping tap. An interesting flock of small birds contained Red-backed Mannikin and Bronze Mannikin and more widowfinches. The immature miombo woodland near the top of the hill was very quiet but we did see 2 Egyptian Goose and 8 White-faced Duck fly

over and even an African Fish-eagle called. Two trees did reveal some birds; the first held a Golden Weaver and a nearby thorn tree had a small group of Green-capped Eremomela and African Yellow White-eye, Chin-spot Batis and a Tropical Boubou. A Kurrichane Thrush called and Whyte's Barbet sat quietly nearby. Our search for the Western Violet-backed Sunbird was fruitless but we saw 2 Brown-backed Honeybirds, Fork-tailed Drongo and more Black Flycatchers. A pair of Pale Flycatcher delighted us from a bamboo but we didn't see any Magpie Mannikin, although Alex heard them flying overhead.

At \$2 per person and vehicle, Ewanrigg is definitely worth a visit, particularly at this time of the year and we certainly enjoyed our morning's walk.

Ken Dixon

MATABELELAND

Walk at Lakeside, BULAWAYO – 21 March 2010

A sunny Sunday morning was spent taking a leisurely stroll around Lakeside. The rains had filled the various dips and holes in the 'dam', and these had become a temporary home to some wonderful water birds. White-faced Duck hovered around the edge of the water, whilst Ruff and Wood Sandpipers trotted around busily picking at food that ran around their legs. A Grey Heron stood amongst the reeds, head held high, keeping a watchful eye. Whilst walking along the dam wall, Blue Waxbills, Southern Black Tits, Red-winged Starlings and Magpie Shrikes kept us company and entertained with their flight antics and distinctive calls. When a Black-chested Snake-eagle took its majestic flight, peering down, two Black-headed Herons flew nonchalantly by. An unusual call attracted us to inspect a smallish thorn tree – there perched in the sunlight, in full view, stood an immature Klaas's Cuckoo. The last sighting, as we were climbing into our cars, was of a pair of Lanner Falcons soaring overhead. A fitting end to what was a relaxing morning.

Cecelia Hubbard

Talk at HILLSIDE Dams Boma – 9 April 2010

Very little went according to plan for this event. Firstly the presenter, Cecelia Hubbard, was doing a run-through of the presentation on the night before the talk when a power surge struck – corrupting the file. There was no way of getting a second copy within 24 hours, so instead of seeing Tony Alegria's presentation on owls, Cecelia had to step into the breach and give us an update on the Verreaux's Eagle Survey. On the night of the talk ZESA once again struck – as a power cut left us with no electricity at The Boma. To add to the excitement, Hillside Dams Estate Manager, Rob Burrett, cautioned us that if we were wandering in the unlit car park and thought there was a particularly large dark shadow ahead we should take care, as the previous evening an elephant had passed through the Dams area! Despite these hazards and challenges the talk was interesting and informative for all present, including members of the general public, BLZ members and Verreaux's Eagle Survey team members, and stimulated lively debate.

In 2009 the Survey completed its 46th consecutive year of monitoring the Verreaux's Eagle population of the MATOPOS. The early years of the survey, up to 1984, were comprehensively reported on by Valerie Gargett in her book "The Black Eagle – A Study". There does not appear to have been any significant decrease in the number of birds occurring in the area since then; 37 territories were confirmed as occupied in 2009. However of concern is that the number of chicks fledged was significantly lower in 2009; in 2008, 23 pairs were observed to rebuild their nests, with 19 chicks fledging; in 2009, 22 pairs were observed to rebuild their nests, but only 13 chicks fledged. Two facts became apparent as a result of this talk – there is a wealth of information gathered over the years through this survey which needs to be analysed and written up; but there are also still hundreds of questions about Verreaux's Eagle behaviour in general and the Matopos population in particular, which still need to be answered.

Adele Edwards

Visit to the Natural History Museum – 24 April 2010

For those of you who felt the weather didn't justify going out for this event, you lost out on a very interesting and informative morning. When was the last time you set foot in the Museum? Remember that amazing building on the corner of Park and Leopold Takawira Streets? It is still

there and still functioning! We were greeted by Tongayi Mwedzi and Farai Musiyandaka of the Department of Ornithology and introduced to Francis Nyathi, the Curatorial Assistant.

Our first viewing was of the mounted collection in an upstairs gallery. The specimens remain intact, but were not shown off to their best due to a lack of lighting (anyone know where to get 8-foot fluorescent tubes?) and a few have unusual labels. What I found interesting was seeing the different birds together, giving an idea of size comparisons. We then went down to the Ornithological Department where the skins are kept along with eggs, mostly exotic, (anyone want to donate their local egg collection?) and skins, skeletons and various jars holding some very interesting items from whole birds to stomach contents. We were told that the museum housed the 24th largest collection of skins in the world, and it is still impressive – from the little finger-size humming birds to Martial Eagles. From there we had a look at their database where everything written in ledgers from the 80s is being entered into a database – a daunting job.

The highlight of the morning was watching Francis whilst he prepared a mist-netted Great Reed-warbler for a skin mount, from whole bird in the hand to stick-mounted stuffed bird ready for the storage drawer. The whole procedure is not as simple as it sounds. First, the weight, length, sex, species, date and place of collection and name of collector have to be recorded. From there a clean work surface with scalpel, tweezers, cotton wool, borax, scissors, thread (colour to match specimen) wash basin with soapy water, wash basin with clean water, paper towels (loo rolls in this case) and hair dryer (I kid you not!) should be ready. The next procedure (not for the faint-hearted, as we found with our newest member!) is the incision and careful removal of the skin from the bird. The muscle tissue also has to be scraped and cut away. What emerges is a small (in this case) red item housing the lungs, stomach, etc. Being such a small bird extreme care is taken or there would be a head in one hand and body in another – the neck at this stage looks like the bird is related to the ostrich! Even the tissue over the skull has to be scraped and the brain and eyes removed. When all this is done the whole skin with feathers is gently washed in soapy water, the result resembling what the local feline regurgitated. Normally after washing and rinsing, most of the water is squeezed off the skin and it is left to drip (time for tea but not in our case!) – so here's where the hairdryer comes in! Again care must be taken not to dry out the skin and after a time the feathers begin to fluff up. A stick with cotton wool is inserted from tail to head, and with attention to placement and shape, the stuffing finally takes the shape of the bird. The cavity is sewn up – with the consummate skill of a professional tailor – the legs are tied to the stick and the bird is then wrapped in a cocoon of cotton wool, an identification label attached and it is left to settle until the following day. Then the final adjustments are made to ensure the wings are even, feet facing the correct way, and the body shape is true before it is catalogued and put to rest in the drawer (RIP little *nyoni*). Wash hands, stretch back and start the next one – not a five minute job this and it would take many, many chickens before any of us was deft enough to tackle a large eagle let alone a humming bird!

The seven of us left with a greater understanding of bird physiology – which opened up another 100 questions. Thanks to Francis, Tongayi and Farai for their warm welcome and professional presentations which led to a most enjoyable Saturday morning outing, well worth the trip.

Judy Ross

COUNTRY DISTRICTS

KADOMA

We few supporters, **Margaret Parrock** writes, are still taking an interest and have some recent sightings in and around the town: African Cuckoo Hawk, 2-3 Black-chested Snake-eagles, 2 Yellow-billed Kite, numerous Black-shouldered Kites, Gabar Goshawk, sparrowhawk and African Harrier-hawk and the 3+ African Fish-eagles at Claw Dam are happily nesting and feeding there. There are plenty of Namaqua Doves at the cotton training farm about 5km west of Kadoma and flocks of Swainson's Spurfowl forage in the soya and sorghum fields. Groups of 30-40 White-fronted Bee-eaters have been soaring and enjoying the abundance of food with the recent rains. Violet-backed Sunbirds are seen in the miombo woodland and both sexes of the Scarlet-chested Sunbird, White-bellied Sunbird and Variable Sunbirds. Bearded Woodpecker, Cardinal Woodpecker and Golden-tailed Woodpeckers are heard and there are many African Yellow White-eyes in the bird baths and large groups of Pied Crows keep the town clean. A

¹ Corrected from 4th

lone Grey-headed Bush-shrike calls plaintively and a Black-headed Oriole has appeared as has a Groundscraper Thrush and Greater Blue-eared Starlings. It is wonderful to have our birds come and go with the different seasons and we never tire of acknowledging their ingenuity!

Letters to the Editor

The Editor
The Babblers

Dear Carolyn,

I recently borrowed Michael Irwin's copy of the *Birds of Zambia* and took it with me to Mazabuka/Lusaka, where we stayed a week. I used the book as a handbook, and was fascinated with everything I looked up. The upshot is this.

I refer to the book review "*The Birds of Zambia – an atlas and handbook*" *Honeyguide*, 55(1) pp75-90, in which the authors R.J. Dowsett, D.R. Aspinwall & F. Dowsett-Lemaire, have set a new standard of excellence, for a regional bird book, very hard to beat, but which we could try and copy. What we propose is that the bird society (BLZ) members write a new book on the Birds of Zimbabwe, on the same lines as the *Birds of Zambia*.

How: We propose a committee of interested people, like we had for the Red Data List, and see what interest we get. The committee will meet regularly until we finish the project. If our book is like Zambia's, we will have many areas, (especially border areas) not adequately covered and in the time frame, we will need to send explorers to those places, to try and bring up our species count per quarter degree square (QDS).

When: Let's say with a target of 5 years before we send to the publisher. Certainly we should try for speed, given the average age of our members.

Who: We should try a joint effort from many contributors, and obvious people come to mind – Peter Mundy on vultures, oxpeckers and queleas; Peter Steyn on eagles and owls; Neil Deacon on other raptors; Alex Masterson on nest records and LBJs; Tony Harris on shrikes; Tony Tree on waders etc. The point being that if we have a division of labour, there will be less for one man to do.

All a person has to do in the first instance is express an interest in the project, be they artist, author, computer boffin, explorer, photographer or finance/sponsor.

Where: Initially the project to cover the whole of Zimbabwe. The committee to start sitting in Harare and we see where we go from there – not forgetting that we have a good deal of expertise outside the country.

Priority should be given to organising the following data bases, as these are central to the whole:

- 1) Nest record cards
- 2) Field cards
- 3) Special species survey cards
- 4) Original atlas data
- 5) Museum material distribution maps
- 6) Ringing returns
- 7) Preparation of a comprehensive gazetteer of localities

Logistically this is a major exercise but absolutely essential to provide the necessary visual impact on a what, where basis.

If you are interested, please contact one of us or the BLZ Council.

David Rockingham-Gill rgill@zol.co.zw
or Michael Stuart Irwin hilarym@yoafrica.com
or Dorothy Wakeling piumosso@zol.co.zw

From the editor – I received this letter through the Matland branch from Prof. Ara Monadjem:-

Thank you very much for this interesting newsletter. I was particularly interested in the sighting of a tagged Marabou Stork (*at Hippo Valley – Babblers*, 93: April/May 2010). I've been tagging marabous in Swaziland since 2003 (almost 200 in total), and they are turning up all over

the place. *I've attached a short paper I wrote on this subject a couple of years ago that you and your readership might be interested in. I would be very grateful for any information on tagged marabous in Zimbabwe (or elsewhere). But reading the tag number is critical! My contact details are below.

Thank you once again, Ara

Prof.Ara Monadjem

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An extract from the paper states:-

“A total of 114 Marabou Stork chicks were ringed in the years 2003–2007 at the most southerly African breeding colony, Swaziland. Just one of 35 chicks fitted with colour rings was resighted by December 2007, while 17 of 79 chicks fitted with patagial tags were resighted. Juvenile Marabou Storks can disperse over 1500km within their first year after fledging, sufficient to cover the large distances between breeding colonies.”

Ara Monadjem, Andrew J. Bamford and Maria Rasmussen. 2008

“Dispersal of juvenile Marabou Storks *Leptoptilos crumeniferus* as determined by resightings.”
Ostrich, 79(2): 187–189

So, if you see a Marabou Stork anywhere, please keep a special lookout for any signs of rings or tags. Try to make a note of the number, colour and position on the bird of rings or tags, which are usually found on wings or legs, left or right, above or below the joint. Also critical is the location of your sighting and the date. Please send any information to Ara.

*If you would like a copy of the paper by e-mail (.pdf) please contact me. Ed

Aileen Robinson writes:-

I thought it might amuse you as to how God deals with a person who tries to bunk church and go birding! I decided that I would join the advertised bird walk in Monavale Vlei. It was such a lovely morning and I got up in good time and beat the power cut. But then I could not find my car keys and had to search for the spares! Now I was a bit late – then I got lost! It is only 10 minutes from home and I have been before, but I finally got there after 7 a.m. There were quite a lot of cars but not a soul in sight – not even a hat bobbing above the long grass – the group had just vanished into it, so I set off on my own. It was all very marshy. I had on an ankle brace, as I had broken my ankle 3 months before. The going was very uneven and inevitably I fell over – a very soft landing though. The grass, much taller than me, was bowed over, heavy with dew – a far cry from when I was there last, in July 2009, and it had just been burnt and was an ashy wasteland with a bush pig, harassed by crows, dodging across it. All I had seen so far were flocks of little brown seed eaters. They said that Little Bitterns had been seen! Next, I needed to spend a penny (too much tea too early) so I pushed my way into the wet grass and fell over again – backwards, flat on my back, bird book in one direction and hat in the other, all paws in the air, in a very soggy spot. If any one had come across me floundering about in long grass off the path they would have wondered what I was up to! You cannot use grass to hang on to, so it was quite difficult to get up and when I had fought my way out again onto the 'path' I had grass seeds in my knickers and down my bosom! Still no sign of the group so I abandoned the expedition and stomped home – very frustrated – and found the car keys on the desk in the spare room! It was just as well I did not get there in time to go with the group – it would have been an embarrassment all round. I now did have time to get to church, but was too exhausted!

I am not deterred – I will give God time to forget and try again.

Best regards

PS. I have remembered that I did see a Yellow-throated Longclaw, so that was a sop!

TAIL FEATHERS

On the 30/3/10 whilst on an early morning walk in Avondale, Harare, I noticed a different bird fly across my driveway and into a palm tree some distance away. I did not have binoculars but recognized it as probably being of the thrush or robin family.

The following morning I resumed my search and was surprised to find the bird in a small tree in my front garden, which I immediately recognized as a **Collared Palm-thrush**, having seen them in Victoria Falls and Lusaka. It was making an amazing cacophony of sounds including mimicking Dark-capped Bulbul, Grey-headed Sparrow and a whole host of different whistles, clicks and hissing sounds. Indeed I was able to mimic the bird's calls and get it to respond back as well as getting it to flair its tail and wings.

Since that date the bird can be seen or heard just about every day. The property is located next to the Florence Chisholm Park in Avondale which has numerous palms (no indigenous ones – I believe they are a selection of *Washingtonia* (tall), Chinese Fans, Queen and Date palms) and is ideal habitat for these birds. Some members of Birdlife Zimbabwe visited the park, saw the bird and were able photograph it and the species has been confirmed!

Ron Hyslop ronhy@realtime.co.zw

David Rockingham-Gill reports on migrating bird sightings:-

Last birds seen: Abdim's Stork – flying over Borrowdale race course	6/4/10
European Bee-eaters – 40 over Fernleigh Road, Borrowdale	8/4/10
3	10/4/10
Barn Swallows – 4 near Borrowdale School	8/4/10
First birds seen: African Hoopoe – at Mukuvisi Woodlands	3/4/10
Swallow-tailed Bee-eater “ “	10/4/10
	(last year 13/4/2009)

News affecting birds, the environment and conservation:

RSPB News www.rspb.org.uk

For the first time ever the UK is hosting a nesting pair of **Purple Herons**. However the site, at Dungeness in Kent, is under threat from an airport development at Lydd. The striking birds breed in southern Europe and visit the UK in small numbers each year. But the nesting pair which recently made its home on the Dungeness peninsula is set to be the first to lay eggs and raise young in the UK. The Purple Heron, closely related to the larger and widespread Grey Heron, can reach 90cm in height with a wingspan of up to a metre and a half. In continental Europe the Purple Heron usually breeds in colonies in reedbeds and feeds in wetland areas on insects, reptiles and amphibians as well as other small animals. A migratory bird, the European population of purple herons spend the winter in Africa. Although Purple Herons have struggled in Europe over the last few decades, experts say the numbers of breeding Purple Herons are expected to increase in the UK in the years to come.

The RSPB has set up a round-the-clock Species Protection Scheme to protect what could be the first successful breeding pair of Purple Herons ever recorded in the UK. Dr Mark Avery, the RSPB's conservation director, said: "The RSPB has a century-long heritage of protecting birds in Kent. Our protection scheme at the site provides immediate security for the birds, but the potential development of an airport on the peninsular casts a large shadow over the future of this magnificent site and its wildlife. Purple Herons are high up on the list of birds that we expect to see setting up home in southern Britain as the changing climate pushes them further north. This highlights the importance of wildlife havens like Dungeness in providing space for species displaced by global warming." Kent police are helping the RSPB to protect the nest and said: "We would remind any members of the public that any attempt to intentionally damage an occupied nest or remove eggs constitutes a criminal offence." Dr Avery added: "At the moment there is little for visitors to see as the birds are sitting tight on the nest. The area is a great place to visit and is teeming with spring wildlife – but please don't come hoping to see the herons as you are likely to be disappointed. If the eggs hatch successfully then we hope to set up a viewing station at a safe distance away from which the public will be able to catch a glimpse of this historic wildlife moment." Meanwhile the RSPB is calling on the government to call in the planning applications for proposed expansion at Lydd Airport. The local authority

Shepway District Council controversially consented to the applications in the face of a recommendation to refuse given on environmental grounds by the council's own planning officials. So far over 14,000 representations have been made to the Government Office of the South East to ensure this decision is scrutinised in a full public inquiry.

The following snippets are taken from *Africa Geographic newsroom*:

Durban's R8-billion King Shaka International Airport, named for the fearsome Zulu monarch who ruled the area in the early 19th century, welcomed its first arrivals at the beginning of May, just in time for the 2010 Fifa World Cup, and can accommodate the largest passenger aircraft in the world, the Airbus A380.

But besides taking care of its human passengers the airport is also giving the safety of birds high priority. During the planning of the airport it was found that a visiting flock of **Barn Swallows** (*Hirundo rustica*), also known as European Swallows, had built a nesting colony in the 35ha Lake Victoria wetland near the small village of Mount Moreland — right in the path of the approach to King Shaka's 3.7km runway. These migratory birds visit South Africa in the summer months to escape the cold of the northern hemisphere, where they breed in vast numbers. The tiny creatures, each weighing an average of 18 grams (unladen), cover the round trip between South Africa – some 12 000km – every year. The Mount Moreland colony is the largest in the country with between 3-5 million birds. The colony reaches its peak in November each year and the birds stay until mid-April, when they begin the long haul back north. During the 30 minutes or so before sunset the swallows gather in large numbers overhead, wheeling and swooping, before retiring to their nests [!] hidden in the reeds. This spectacular sight attracts bird enthusiasts from all over the world, who trudge through the ecologically important Lake Victoria wetland, chairs and refreshments in hand, to reach the massive roost. Many attend the ringing workshops that are held to catch and mark the tiny specimens, enabling them to be identified in other parts of the world.

Can birds and planes co-exist? The colony posed a serious conservation problem not only for the airport developers, because the safety of incoming craft could be jeopardised, but also for bird ecologists and enthusiasts. Bats are also at risk. At first the discussion focused on the possibility of destroying the reeds, but there was an outcry from organisations such as WWF South Africa and local and international chapters of BirdLife, who argued that destruction of the swallows' summer roost would have a serious impact on their numbers in Europe. A new approach was needed. The developers and environmentalists returned to the negotiating table and thrashed out specifics of the birds' flying patterns and requirements for aircraft. Once developers realised that the birds were in the air for no longer than an hour at dusk and dawn, that their nesting area was nearly 3km from the end of the runway, and that only about five percent of the flock tends to stray into the flight path, they were able to come up with a solution. The birds got 'radar love' – a special radar system was built in the US, at a cost of around \$300 000 (R2-million), to monitor the birds' movements and enable air traffic control to advise pilots of potential safety hazards. The radar scans an area of 3.7km both vertically and horizontally, and alerts air traffic control when unacceptably high numbers of birds drift into the flight path. The airport's Bird and Wildlife Unit is also alerted immediately. Because the swallows are so quick to fly off and come in to roost, flights may be delayed or have to slow their approach for only a short time. The system is up and running. However, as the birds are scheduled for departure north soon, airport management will have a good five months to work out the finer details before they return in October.

Malta – April 2010

During the first week of Spring Watch, BirdLife Malta volunteers suffered several violent attacks on an almost daily basis while recording bird migration and reporting illegal hunting and trapping incidents to the police. At a press conference on 20 April, the organisation released audiovisual evidence detailing hunting and trapping illegalities in the countryside. It also warned the authorities that violence against its members had escalated. Death threats and hate messages were splashed at lookout points for the birdwatchers, replete with xenophobic sentiment, depicting red swastikas next to RIP signs. Verbal abuse greeted the birdwatchers in

most places, and men with sticks violently approached them and some were beaten. Over a period of a week, the Spring Watch teams recorded at least 474 illegalities, 88.4% of which involved hunters shooting illegally in the closed season. A total of 744 shots were noted, and illegal hunting was recorded in almost all of the surveillance locations, which cover only a small portion of the Maltese Islands. The true scale of illegalities remains unknown because the police force is very thin on the ground. There were also several incidents of hunters shooting inside the Salina Bird Sanctuary.

Vultures have a keen sense of smell and are able to detect the scent of rotting flesh from 900m up in the air. German police are planning to use vultures to locate dead bodies that sniffer dogs can't reach. They will attach global positioning system tracking devices to birds and get them to find the corpses of people who have disappeared in remote areas. Policeman Rainer Herrmann said, "It was a colleague of mine who got the idea from watching a nature programme. "If it works, time could be saved when looking for dead bodies because the birds can cover a much vaster area than sniffer dogs or humans." They can even detect remains in woodland or in thick undergrowth and cover vast tracts of land.

Dear Carolyn,

I am trying to round up some second-hand copies of my Bundu Series books for my grandchildren. I need:

Birds Afieid – 2 copies – if not too expensive I could use another copy for my courses down here.

Birds of the Lowveld – 2 copies

Bird Safari – 2 copies

(I do have a couple of new copies of Birds of the Highveld)

Although it is less likely that members will have spares of the following SA books it would be helpful if you could mention them:

Garden Birds and More garden Birds of Southern Africa

Waterbirds of Southern Africa

Birds of Botswana.

I also have some friends down here who are looking for copies of:

The Complete Book of Southern Birds – Ginn, McIlhennion & Milstein.

Any edition would do. They are worth about R1500 for a copy in Very Good Condition. Proportionally less for grubby copies.

Please would folk e-mail me direct if they have anything?

Many thanks for your help

Best

Peter Ginn pqbs@cyberperk.co.za

Goods for sale on behalf of Ian and Mary Hesketh

Binoculars, 8x30 ALRO

Slide projector

8mm cine projector

Roberts Birds of South Africa, 4th edition

Ian Sinclair's *Field guide to the Birds of Southern Africa*

Michael Irwin's *Birds of Zimbabwe*

Peter Ginn's *Birds of the Highveld* (Bundu series)

Robert Burton – *Bird Flight*

Birdwatch Zimbabwe - signed copy by authors Derek Solomon and Jacko Williams

W T Miller - *Birds at Home*

Phil Hockey - *Birds in action*

Video – 'Newman's Birds – an introduction'

Please contact Di Rushforth dirush@zol.co.zw Tel: 04-741765 or 0912-312854