

THE BABBLER

Newsletter of



BirdLife Zimbabwe
The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

ISSUE # 104 – February 2012 / March 2012

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****Subscription Renewal****

Our membership year runs from April to March.

Individual or Family members (including children under 17)	US\$ 25.00
Pensioners, Students and Juniors	US\$ 15.00
Schools (high density)	US\$ 25.00
Schools (private)	US\$ 50.00
Corporate members	US\$ 75.00
Rest of Africa	US\$ 40.00
Rest of World	US\$ 50.00

Subscriptions due by 31st March 2012.

Payment may be made at the Office, to 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 Sylvia Muzavazi, either by faxing the copy deposit slip or by e-mail. sylvia@blz.co.zw

Corporate membership packages

Corporate member \$75

Executive corporate \$170

BLZ corporate partner \$500

For further information on corporate packages please contact Dr Chirara at chip.chirara@blz.co.zw

Donations towards *Honeyguide* and our other publications and activities are welcomed.

BirdLife Zimbabwe wishes to acknowledge its Sponsors and Corporate Members

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The Mashonaland Branch AGM was held on Thursday 19 January 2012 at 6 pm at Avondale Bowls Club.

47 members attended the AGM.

The following annual reports were presented during this meeting.

Chairman's Report	Tony Alegria
Treasurer's Report	Sally Britten
Mukuvisi Woodlands	Dave Dalziel presented by T Alegria
Lake Chivero	Richard Dennison
Monavale Vlei	Dorothy Wakeling
Saturday Walks	T Alegria
Rainham Dam	Alex Masterson

Sally Britten, Treasurer, and Celesta von Chamier, Member, did not wish to stand for re election. Newly elected members to the Committee were, Debbie Wiggins as Treasurer and James Ball as a member.

The 2012 Mashonaland Branch of Birdlife Zimbabwe is as follows:

Chairperson	Tony Alegria	490375 (h) 0772438697
Vice chairperson	Dave Rockingham Gill	882412 (h)
Hon. Treasurer	Debbie Wiggins	882851 (h) 0772252651
Hon. Secretary	Linda Fussell	333896 (h) 0772364421
Members	Julia Pierini	303178 (h) 0772894562
	Nick Hart	0774329430
	James Ball	481351 (h) 0772310351

The Chairman, in his report, thanked all members for their continued support and attendance at two Saturday and four Sunday outings during the month. He also thanked all the monthly Thursday evening speakers who have contributed much interest on various topics during the year.

There were three successful long weekend outings during 2011.

20 members and visitors visited RIFA near Chirundu over the Easter weekend.

22 Birders visited Kopje Tops Camp in Mavuradonha during the first week in September.

12 Birders stayed at New Years Gift, Tanganda Tea Estate from 23-26 September.

In February 2012 there will be another visit to RIFA. All BLZ Members are encouraged to participate.

The Harare Garden Bird Survey was launched in June 2011. Mashonaland members were encouraged to participate. Ken Dixon has volunteered to go through the results and will soon give us some feedback.

After the AGM Celesta von Chamier gave a very entertaining photo presentation. Bird photos taken from the long weekend away outings at RIFA, Mavuradonha and New Years Gift, Chipinge, were shown. Celesta von Chamier, Nick Hart and other members of Birdlife Zimbabwe took these photos. Bird photos were taken at Hideaway, Darwendale, during the Annual BLZ AGM held in June 2011. Mukuvisi Woodlands, Lake Chivero, Monavale and Rainham Dams are also very interesting venues and good opportunities for photographs. The Harare Garden Bird Survey has had some lovely photographs submitted by Mashonaland members. 701 birds have been ringed during 2011. There were some close up photos of many of the birds ringed on those occasions. Several members recorded their own experiences in Gonarezhou and elsewhere around Zimbabwe.

Thank you Celesta and Nick for putting together this wonderful photographic presentation for our Thursday evening meeting.

Message from The President

BLZ has flown into 2012 with such energy and enthusiasm, it is wonderful: waterfowl counts, regular outings, surveys, ringing, Office programme activities and proposal writing on the go, World Wetland Day celebrations and much more ... birding visitors arriving to seek out our wetland specials and for those of us in Harare, very heavy rains have fallen which will no doubt bring in some interesting bird sightings. Behind the scenes much takes place in the administrative arena to support our various activities. I acknowledge recent achievements and donations and wish you all successful birding this year.

BLZ Website: BLZ is very proud to announce its brilliant new website. We are indebted to Jessica Grimault and Celesta von Chamier for donating their time and expertise in building this site over the past year. Our sincere gratitude is extended to you both for presenting us with such a fine promotional and communication facility. Positive feedback is pouring in! Visit www.birdlifezimbabwe.co.zw <<http://www.birdlifezimbabwe.co.zw>> and send your updates and contributions to Dr Chirara for inclusion on the site.chip.chirara@blz.co.zw

BLZ Facebook Page: Joerg and Celesta von Chamier have also donated their time and expertise in setting up and managing our Facebook Page. This attracts a flow of favourable responses from all around the world. Many thanks for yet another contribution to BirdLife Zimbabwe.

Fundraising for *Honeyguide* 57(2): BLZ is delighted to announce it has received a US\$500 donation from **NMB Bank Limited** towards the printing costs for this issue of *Honeyguide*. This substantial donation is much appreciated, with our grateful thanks extended to the NMB Management.

Big Birding Day: a record number of teams participated in November's Big Birding Day, bringing in valuable records from all over the country. Well done to the co-ordinator, Adele Edwards, to the teams and their sponsors. (See the results later in this issue. Ed)

Ringing Donation: Grateful appreciation is extended to Cecilia Manson who has donated her very valuable ringing equipment to the BirdLife Zimbabwe Ringing Programme, which is in great need of such equipment. Thank you, Cecilia.

Donation of Books and Journals: Michael Irwin has given yet another large collection of important ornithological books and journals to the BirdLife Zimbabwe Library – thank you very much, Michael.

Donation of Paint: Fiona Greiffenberg has received 60 L of paint for BLZ from three paint companies, who have been awarded Corporate Membership in exchange for their donations. This will be used to repaint the National Office.
Dorothy Wakeling

Announcements

It has been decided that it is more appropriate to place an obituary for Jack Amonie in *Honeyguide* 58(1).

Errata Corrige

From Ken Dixon

It has been brought to my attention that there was an error in my article on the New Year's Gift visit in late Sept reported in *Babbler* 103 p16, line 7. I wrote 'Ashy Tit' which should have been 'Ashy Flycatcher'. I hope nobody rushed down there to find this species, as it has never been recorded so far south.

Forthcoming Activities

The Birdlife Zimbabwe National AGM will be held on Saturday June 9th 2012 at 10am at Hideaway Lodge, Lake Manyame . Further details to follow. *Please diarise this event.*

Contact a committee member if you need transport to any of the events. **Members, non-members and beginners are welcome** – don't worry if you do not have a pair of binos – there is usually an extra pair at most outings. There are no BLZ charges for any bird walk or evening presentation. However there may be entry fees (e.g. National Parks) or a tip required depending on the location. Remember to bring chairs and refreshments.

Mashonaland Branch

Evening Meetings are on the 3rd Thursday of each month. 5.30pm for 6.00pm. 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.

Outings

Mukuvisi	Sunday 5th February 2012	0630	Sunday 4th March 2012	0630
Chivero	Sunday 12th February 2012	0630	Sunday 11th March 2012	0630
Monavale Vlei	Sunday 19th February 2012	0700	Sunday 18 March 2012	0700

4th Sunday Outings

Sunday 26th February 2012 Ewanrigg Botanical Gardens 0630

Sunday 25 March 2012 Tavistok Farm. Meet at Agrifoods 0630

First Saturday – 4th February 2012 Vlei Walk between Dandaro and Teviotdale Road, Borrowdale. Meet and park just off Whitwell Road approx 100 m from B/dale road traffic lights. Dirt road covered by quarry dust on left side virtually opposite a huge billboard. Walk led by Alex Masterson. Time 0630

2nd Sat Outings

Saturday 11th February 2012 Rainham Dam 0700
Saturday 10th March 2012 Rainham Dam 0700

3rd Saturday Outings

Saturday 18th February 2012 Botanic Gardens 0700
Saturday 17th March 2012 Haka 0700

Thursday Meetings at Avondale Sports Club 1730 for 1800

Thursday 16th February 2012 Hwange visit – Nick Hart
Thursday 15th March 2012 February RIFA visit – T Alegria

Mukuvisi

Mukuvisi Woodlands directions: "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 150metres 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.

Chivero

Meet at Prince Edward School car park on Josiah Tongagara Ave

Monavale Vlei

Meet on the B.S Leon side of Fenella Drive

RIFA - Away outing mid February 2012.

Matabeleland Branch

11 February: Branch AGM

The Annual General Meeting of the Matabeleland Branch will be held at 10:30 a.m. on Saturday 11th February at the home of John & Jenny Brebner - 24a Inverleith Road, Burnside. Please bring chairs and your own copies of the agenda and minutes of last year's meeting, which have already been circulated. As always we are looking for new committee members. Nomination forms should be completed and handed to either the Chairman (Cecilia Hubbard) or the Secretary (Betty van der Merwe) before the start of the meeting. The meeting will be followed by a bring-your-own lunch; braai fires available.

For more information phone Betty van der Merwe 0772311954 or Cecilia Hubbard (w) 287692 or 0772433733

26 February: Walk at Lakeside

Hopefully we will again be able to add to our species list for this area. With luck we will have had some rain by then (the situation is pretty dire at present) and will find a few water birds. Meet at Lakeside at 7:30. Bring a chair and tea for after the walk.

For more information phone Cecilia Hubbard on (w) 287692 or 0772433733

10 March: Black Eagle Breeding Survey 2012 – start of season briefing

This year will be the 49th consecutive year this survey has been running! The annual start-of-season briefing for participating teams will be held at 3:30 p.m. at the home of Cecilia Hubbard – 20 Eglesfield Road, Fortunes Gate.

For more information phone John Brebner (h) 242634 or Cecilia Hubbard (w) 287692 or 0772433733

24 March: Walk at Mabukuwene

Walks at Mabukuwene are always interesting because of all the little nooks and crannies in amongst the granite outcrops. Meet in the car park at 7:30. Bring a chair and tea for after the walk.

For more information phone Gaynor Lightfoot (h) 241008

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 pggroup.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

Recent Reports and Sightings

National Office

IBA monitoring project report

Important Bird Areas (IBA) monitoring activities by trained site-based monitors continues in eleven Protected Areas in Zimbabwe. Site monitors will be expected to complete and submit IBA monitoring forms by end of October of each year. However whilst information may be gathered in IBAs, there is need to fundraise for additional resources to ensure that key results are achieved. Fundraising is the major focus this year apart from coordinating national site monitoring. Funds

allowing in the near future, other areas of global conservation importance will also be explored. Most of the conservation work by BirdLife Zimbabwe is undertaken in IBAs and priority will be accorded on that basis. Those with new ideas on how we can improve the on-going project and willing to participate in IBA monitoring are most welcome. IBA monitoring forms can be obtained from BLZ offices or can be sent by e-mail. For further information please contact Kanisios at kanisios@blz.co.zw.

Kanisios Mukwashi, IBA National Project Manager

Education Department Update for the Babbler January 2012

The Education Department has managed to produce a DVD for the World Bird Festival that was held at Twin Lakes Private Primary School on 7th October 2011. More copies of this DVD will be made and distributed to BAP schools and stakeholders. The BAP newsletter for the January to April term is under compilation and will be sent to the voluntary editor – Ken Dixon shortly. BirdLife Zimbabwe is likely to partner the Environmental Management Agency and other environmental organisations as resource persons in the commemorations of the World Wetlands Day set for Harare schools and stakeholders on the 10th February 2011.

The Education Department is also compiling folklores on birds and the environment to be used in the Bird Awareness Programme. If considerable numbers of the folklores are gathered, a small publication can be made and distributed to schools as resource materials for the programme. On another note, data capturing in an academic project to assess the effectiveness of BAP in influencing crane conservation in the Driefontein Grasslands is set to start beginning of February. The student attached in the department, Yamurai Zimowa, will look into use of indigenous knowledge systems in promoting conservation of birds and the environment in the Driefontein Grasslands.

Rueben Njolomole – Education Officer

Conservation: Plotting A Way Forward?

If we hope to make any progress towards the conservation of birds in Zimbabwe, we need to prioritize and focus on the aspects that are of most concern. This is easier said than done, since with alarming regularity we hear of yet another species or habitat in crises requiring our urgent attention. The volume of sensational information, much of it contradictory, combined with the apparent hopelessness of the situation is quite likely to send the most committed conservationist running for the closest sand-pit in a complete state of confusion. Therefore, we must not forget our fundamental mission, which is to which is to preserve avian species diversity. The Important Bird Area (I.B.A.) program was the start to this process and these areas were selected primarily because they were critical or representative habitats, which supported core populations of our bird biodiversity. While this was vital to securing species diversity it does not necessarily guarantee continued survival of all species.

Certain species might not be particularly well represented in, or served by I.B.A.'s, and of course none of the birds are confined to I.B.A.'s, so still may exposed to human pressure in one way or another.

These are the species that need to be identified for specific conservation action. Identifying and prioritizing where conservation effort is required is logically most often done by assessing the population of each species, and then compiling a 'Red' data list. Obviously accuracy and consequent confidence in this list depends on the accuracy of the distribution and population data used for the assessment. Zimbabwean data of bird distribution and populations for many species is at best out of date and for others wholly deficient.

It was therefore commendable that the committee for the Red data list compiled a functional list of species categorized according to perceived threat. Much debate surrounds this list and I am sure will continue to so into the future. Nonetheless perceived Red Data status of the various species provides a starting point in identifying and prioritizing those, which require conservation effort. However, deficiencies in the data surface when putting this into practice as species, which are considered endangered elsewhere in the sub-region seemly, are secure in Zimbabwe. This might well be the case for some species, e.g. Martial Eagle, but is unlikely for others, such as Kori Bustard. The bottom line is that we don't really know and would be remiss if we ignored population trends elsewhere in the sub-region.

To this end, a conservation meeting was convened last year with representation from both membership and professional staff to map out a course of action that will progress development of species action plans for conservation of threatened species. It was in this meeting that the similarities and disparities between the Zimbabwean Red Data List and other opinion were identified and considered. It was clear that this task is not as simple as it may seem as the threat to a single species often extends to related species and those allied through habitat. For example, the Hooded Vulture has just been placed in the endangered category by IUCN, yet we also know that all other vulture species throughout Africa are exhibiting dramatic population declines. Do we focus just on Hooded Vulture or consider vultures as a group when determining conservation action plans?

A similar argument can be applied to African Marsh Harriers. Do we focus on them and ignore Grass Owls (which are considered to be threatened in South Africa)? Will the Wattled Crane action plan not also be of benefit to these two species? How do we deal with Miombo avifauna since this is where the greatest level of endemism occurs? If fragmentation of this habitat continues a whole suite of species might be affected. It is a very large can of worms.

In the interests of progress all information on conservation status was rationalized and short-list of species was compiled. The list in no particular order of importance is as follows:

Vultures

African Marsh Harrier & Grass owl

Taita Falcon

Wattled Crane

Kori Bustard

African Skimmer

Parrots & Lovebirds

Southern Ground Hornbill

Blue Swallow

Miombo species

Swynnerton's Robin

Perusal of this list will no doubt raise questions about omissions and inclusions. However, this is a starting point as with the exception of possibly two species we have little knowledge of the current status of most of these species. There are concerns that many of them have declined, as they are not being seen in historical numbers. Clearly these are qualitative assumptions, but we believe there is a wealth of data hidden amongst field cards and bird lists which may provide quantitative indication of population status. For example, there are records of Lovebird numbers amongst the Rifa lists, numbers of Kori Bustards seen whilst surveying for Wattle Cranes and so on. Finding and extracting this information then determining what action needs to be taken is a mammoth, but vital task. We believe that the only way of tackling this exercise is to form Special Interest Groups, which will hopefully attract individuals with expertise or a passion for certain species or groups of species and promote their conservation.

So we take this opportunity to invite all members to consider contributing to these special interest groups and we are especially keen to find a co-ordinator for each of the Special Interest Groups. If you are willing to get involved please contact to the following people:

Dr Rob Rees manarobrees@gmail.com

Neil Deacon neilrobindeacon@gmail.com

Ringling Overview 2011

We ringed fewer birds this year than last year. 646 birds were ringed and 45 were recaptured. Two of our birds were recovered both at place of ringling. A Laughing Dove found dead after 3 months and a Kurrichane Thrush killed by a cat after about a year. Interesting birds ringed included Little Sparrowhawk, African Jacana, Orange-breasted and Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Fiery-necked and Square-tailed Nightjar, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Bearded Scrub-robin, Yellow-throated Woodland-warbler and Cape Robin-chat.

We ringed at a number of places around Harare, including Monavale, Mukuvisi, Greystone Park Nature Preserve, Afdis Ponds, Stapleford, Chivero and Ewanrigg. Longer trips were made to Seldomseen in the Vumba and Hippo Pools. Many thanks go to all the people who allowed us to

ring on their properties.
Dave Dalziel

Field Cards

The observations on ROS/ BLZ field cards are being computerized. This data input is going very well.

If you have any old field cards that haven't been handed in, please could you do so? These can be handed to either to the BirdLife Zimbabwe Offices, or to a committee member. Or email digitized cards to fielddata@blz.co.zw, or contact Fadzai Matsvimbo at the Office.

I have been the field card organizer for longer than I can remember, Douglas Ncube & I have kept a catalogue of all 15000 cards so far handed in. (Hand written in exercise books). This card registration exercise is on going alongside the computerization of the cards.

There also maybe other survey forms to hand in: Nest Record Cards, African Waterfowl Census forms, even old Southern African Bird Atlas project forms.

Many Thanks, & Have a Great New Year

David Rockingham-Gill, 4 Fernleigh Road, P O Borrowdale, Harare or rgill@zol.co.zw

Mashonaland

Mash Branch Visit To Monavale Vlei Sunday 18th Dec 2012, 7 A.M.

COSMO (Conservation Society of Monavale) is an impressive organization; not only does it have the ear of Harare City Council and EMA and is invited to educate the rest of the town's population on the importance of maintaining the city's wetlands but it now seems capable of arranging suitable weather conditions for its monthly walks. On the dot of 7 a.m. the overnight rain stopped as Dorothy had predicted and fair weather teased 80+ species into view.

The highlight for me though was an amphibian, my first African Bullfrog, of about 20cm diameter, lying motionless just under the surface of one of the new temporary pools. I would not have spotted it but Jimmy had no problem. Apparently, a few have been seen flattened by cars on Fenella Drive recently and my wife came back from Bulawayo a few days ago telling me she'd asked her driver what those round stones were doing in the road causing everyone to slow down and weave. Bullfrogs again.

One of the avian highlights was the Black Coucal, very visual and vocal while wherever we looked there were widows and bishops in various stages of breeding dress. In the reeds we both heard and saw Great Reed-warbler, African Reed-warbler, Lesser Swamp-warbler and Dark-capped Yellow-Warbler. In the acacias along the stream we saw a Willow-Warbler and a few Variable Sunbird. The tall, dry grass attracted Yellow-throated Longclaw, Rufous-naped Lark, Orange-breasted and Common Waxbill and Bronze Mannikin and the Swainson's Spurfowl stood atop raised mounds and squawked for Zimbabwe. There were very few swallows but plenty of Palm Swift and 6 Little Swift. Otherwise, above us were Cattle Egret, Sacred Ibis, Black-headed and Purple Heron, a Steppe Buzzard, the usual Black-shouldered Kite, large groups of European Bee-eater and Amur Falcon.

Back at the tree nursery, we were serenaded by the resident Black-crowned Tchagra and others but Steve's coffee stall stole most of our attention. Yet another Xmas treat for the brave who had set out on a very damp, grey, unpromising morning.

Ken Dixon, lynken@mango.zw

Rainham Dam Outings

We are about to enter the completion of the first 12 months since Rainham became open to bird club members following a period of some ten years of rather restricted access. BLZ and those who have been to this venue during 2011 have enjoyed entirely cordial relations with the new occupiers. Lets keep it up – No criticisms even of fish netting please. We are most grateful to the BLZ office staff for helping to re-open access and express our thanks. We also thank the Parks and Wildlife Authorities who facilitated the new introductions and the new occupiers for granting us this privilege.

When visits began again in March 2011, the water levels on the two dams were high and spilling at the western end of the smaller dam. The first visit on 14 January 2012 owed that water levels have

again reached full capacity. The condition of the dam walls that are now some 60 years old has deteriorated however and seepage means that the vlei below is perennially wet and full of bull rushes. This year the water level in the dams however never receded below the inside margin of the emergent vegetation on either dam so there was never an exposed muddy margin to the water and there were very few records of waders during the past year. In one of the intervening dry years there had been records of Collared Pratincole breeding on the extensive bare dry mud flats of the virtually empty dams. This year absence of waders has been a major change from the times of previous regular visits.

The visit of 14 January was well attended with one group doing the smaller dam and vlei below the wall and the other doing some of the thornveld and the big dam. More eyes, more records: in fact a total of just over 90 species in the period 07.30 to about 10.45. Over 200 White-backed Duck were estimated to be on the big dam, up from over 90 in December. African Purple Swamphen were teaching half grown young how to strip bull-rush stems to get the pith, Pied and Giant Kingfishers were in evidence and Black Coucal and Broad-tailed Warblers were in the vlei. Star performer of the day however was a Grass Owl. These birds usually flush, fly away for 50-100m and then dive back into the grass within 10 seconds, probably to an already known alternative roosting sites. But this bird flew round and about more like a Marsh Owl and flew just over its human admirers on more than one occasion. It made as if to land a couple of times but aborted the attempts before eventually finding an acceptable place. – A new boy on the block who has yet to establish a series of acceptable stopping places?

Alex Masterson

Mashonaland Branch Visit to Borrowdale Brooke on Sunday 22nd Jan 2012

28 members and friends assembled in the Spa car park at 0630, squeezed into as few vehicles as possible and approached the gate to the estate under the supervision of their 'tout' Nick Hart. In the event it was easier than getting through Beitbridge and we were soon parked alongside the golf course, the setting for our walk. We are most grateful to Nick, Vernon the local group leader and the members who accompanied our foray. It was cool, overcast but dry so birds were fairly plentiful. Our first shallow dam produced many Moorhen, Black Crake, a Reed Cormorant plus our first of many flocks of Sacred Ibis. Cattle Egret flew above and perched on every available post or bush. There were also Greater-striped and Wire-tailed Swallow and Palm and Little Swift. At the approach of the early golfers we split into 2 groups and moved to separate fairways. We found Wattled Lapwing and various smaller species like Levillant's, Red-faced and Croaking Cisticola, Variable Sunbird, Streaky-headed Seedeater and a couple of Greater Blue-eared Starling. The wet off-course areas on the periphery with reeds and small acacias proved to be productive; both Black and Senegal Coucal called, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, White-browed Robin-chat, Red-collared Widow, Yellow Bishop and Dark-capped Yellow Warbler soon joined the list while White-faced Duck and 2 Egyptian Goose flew over. Strolling along the fairways was most pleasant and we were never long without new sighting; Southern Red Bishop caused excitement at first as they buzzed around above the reeds but there were soon so many that we searched for other species like the Scarlet-chested Sunbird and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow in the gardens away from the marshy areas. When pressure from the golfers became too much we repaired to Nick's patio to compile a very satisfactory list of 67 species. Vernon had predicted only 30 at the beginning of the walk so our competence had been thoroughly proved. If you can gain entry this is a well worthwhile venue with or without a set of golf clubs.

Ken Dixon

Monavale Vlei Report December 2011 to January 2012

The Vlei's outlook is absolutely wonderful with lush green grasses, sedges, flowering and other plants characterising the area. The rains have provided ideal conditions for our elusive migrant species such as the Streaky-breasted Flufftail, Striped Crake and Corn Crakes. Fantastic birding has been recorded recently which include some of the following species: Lanner Falcon, Levillant's cuckoos, Abdim's Storks, Spotted Flycatcher, Amur Falcons, Red-backed Shrike, Willow Warbler, White-winged Widowbirds, Marabou Storks, Steppe Buzzard, Black Coucal, Brimstone Canary, African Black Ducks (which are also breeding on the pond of the top 9 holes of the Sherwood Golf Club along with the White-faced Duck), European Roller, Copper Sunbirds, Red-chested Cuckoo, Southern Carmine Bee-eaters, Small Buttonquail, Malachite Kingfisher,

African Marsh-harrier (special mention) and Little Bittern amongst others. An Ovambo Sparrowhawk has been sighted a couple of times and a new listing for us. Giant Bullfrogs and breeding Barbel have since spawned; tortoises can be seen along the Vlei's verges. Duikers are around though it's now difficult to spot them in the new taller grasses on the edges. We should mention a very special sighting of an immature African Fish Eagle seen on 27 January 2012 at about 10.6am. It was flying round the Vlei possibly looking for Barbel that were abundant in pools of water. 2 Long Crested Eagles were flying within its vicinity. Later several Pied Crows were mobbing the Fish Eagle which subsequently flew due north.
by Jimmy Muropa, Monavale Vlei Scout, cosmo@yoafrica.com

A note from Dorothy Wakeling. 178 bird species were seen during 2011, with our overall list standing at 233 birds. Rainfall to date this rainy season is 835mm, 27 January 2012. Yesterday afternoon over 100mm was recorded in a few hours. Last year's total was 674mm. We have on our property in Monavale a little dam which is about to spill, with a pair of resident White-faced Duck, but not sure yet if they are breeding. Although on our list they have never stayed as they are now.

The Harare Garden Bird Survey – a comment

In *Babbler* 103 Tony Alegria raised a pertinent question about the differences in the number of species seen in gardens, some being species rich and others poor, and what did this mean?

This difference probably arises from observer effort and experience more than anything else!

True, there will be differences between gardens based on habitat but I fear that we will not be able to discern this through the survey. The effort devoted to finding birds will make a difference to the weekly list, something I have found myself – if I go out actively searching a few times a week I get more birds than when I don't. I suspect Bronze Mannikins are about on a regular basis but lately I haven't recorded them, and lately I have been lazy or too busy to get about the property as I did in the beginning... is this the reason for what will appear as an apparent movement? In the same *Babbler* Tony Wood asked how long Red-backed Mannikins had been sharing the birdbath with the Bronze Mannikins, adding 'Surveys make us much more vigilant'. Too true but we have to be vigilant in the first place and consistently so!

There is also the matter of those who are new to birding and aren't (we hope) putting down 'guesses' and thus recording fewer species, and others who work all week and can put in little time to surveying their garden. We have no indicator of observer effort or observer days, as there was in the Atlas period, so have to accept this variance as a fault in our method and not something to which we can attach too much significance.

Ian Riddell

Birdlife Zimbabwe Harare Garden Bird Survey 2011 – 2012

General remarks

We have had an encouraging start with 71 registered participants. The data from all submitted forms have been entered on a central database thanks to lots of hard work on the part of the office staff for which we are very grateful. There are a few teething problems: a few sheets have no sightings which probably indicates a technical problem in forwarding attachments and 12 of those registered are yet to successfully forward sheets.

All but one of the participants live north of Samora Machel which means that eventual findings will not apply to the whole of the city. In addition, 2 or 3 are technically too far north. The best covered suburbs are Greendale (5), Borrowdale (4), Alexander Park and Marlborough (2) and the rest with 1 each.

Codes seem to have been correctly applied but please use 3, not 1, unless the bird actually uses your garden for catching insects, scavenging or drinking. Please don't record birds seen from your garden when looking out over a vlei or agricultural land but neighbours' gardens are quite legitimate.

Some species are confusing for all of us. A glance at the distribution maps in your field guide should help you avoid wild errors. Tricky ones are Southern Masked and Lesser Masked-weavers; the latter is not really a Harare bird. It has a Yellow eye and grey legs unlike the Southern

Masked-weaver, which has a red eye and pink legs. They both have plain backs while the Village Weaver has black and yellow spots. The Collared Sunbird is not an urban bird. It has a shortish beak and green back while the very common Variable (Yellow-bellied) is larger, has a long beak, blue-green back and a broad purple breast band.

SHEET 1: Weeks 1-4, 27.6.11 – 24.7.11

29 forms were received with an average of 34 birds per garden. Gardens ranged in size from 1 hectare to 10 acres. Highest count was 67. The majority of us have Laughing and Red-eyed Dove, Purple-crested Turaco, Crested Barbet, Arrow-marked Babbler, Kurrichane Thrush, White-browed Robin-chat, Dark-capped Bulbul, Grey-headed Sparrow, Variable Sunbird, Blue Waxbill, Red-billed Firefinch, Masked Weaver and Bronze Mannikin. Common over flyers are Cattle Egret, Pied Crow, Black-headed Heron and Sacred Ibis. Cape Turtle Dove were recorded only in the west and northwest (Marlborough, Meyrick Pk). Lots of raptors were recorded: 6 Lizard Buzzard, 8 Gabar Goshawk, 6 Long-crested Eagle, 4 Shikra and Little Sparrowhawk. The Barn Owl (8) is frequently heard or seen while a White-faced Scops-owl was noted for the first time in 35 years in Borrowdale. The Fiery-necked Nightjar was heard at 6 locations.

Breeding was recorded for Red-billed Firefinch, Masked-weaver and barbets. Grey Go-away birds (6) are becoming more common and Fiscal Shrikes (5) less so. There was only 1 Yellow-fronted Canary, 1 Brown-hooded Kingfisher and 2 House Sparrow. Relative rarities were an African Spoonbill, a Black Sparrowhawk, a Magpie Shrike and 2 Red-backed Mannikin.

Harare Garden Bird Survey 2011-2012: notes for The Babbler

SHEET2: Weeks 5-8, 25.7.11 – 24.8.11

35 forms were returned, 30 complete, 1 with 1 page only and 4 without sightings. Highest count was 67 on a large property and 33 was the average. August was marked by a fair amount of breeding of weavers, barbets (specially provided logs were successfully utilized), firefinches, mousebirds, doves, sunbirds and a Gabar Goshawk. And a lone Paradise Flycatcher arrived in week 8.

Otherwise, Village Indigobirds began to appear and 2 Thick-billed Weaver were noted. A flock of 40 Common Waxbill were still in a B'dale garden but disappeared soon after. Meyer's Parrot were spotted in Alex Park and Greendale, 3 African Grey Hornbill passed through. Raptors were as before except for an African Harrier-hawk and a Peregrine, which became enmeshed in a net over a fishpond in Christon Bank. The Fiery-necked Nightjar still called over a wide area. Palm and Little Swift were overflying all areas but a Grey-rumped Swallow was the only hirundine.

Ken Dixon

Matabeleland

Birding Big Day – 26/27 November 2011

Adele Edwards

Birding Big Day took place over the weekend of 26/27 November and was a great success with a record number of teams (18), from all around the country, taking part. Results of the counts are shown below. Participating teams were encouraged to find sponsors for their teams, with the money raised going towards funding branch projects. Not many teams were successful with their fund raising but two teams did exceptionally well with the Bundu Bunch bringing in \$900 and the South West Wanderers \$930! A fantastic effort. Congratulations to both teams.

TEAM NAME	NO. OF SPECIES	LOCATION	TEAM MEMBERS
GARDEN: 24 hour			
CharDae	14	Bulawayo, Suburbs	C & D Mitchley
Gillott Family	10	Bulawayo, Burnside	A, C, E & B Gillott

GARDEN: 36 hour

Glen Top Twitchers	42	Harare, Glenwood	L Agiotis & M Cannon
50 km: 24 hour			
Crazy Bustards South West Wanderers	177	Harare	J Pierini, J Rautenbach, N Hart & D Dalziel
Team G.L.A.D. Singita Pumashana Guides	162	Gwanda	C Hubbard, T & L Wharam T Alegria, K Dixon, R Gilmour & G Lowe
Falcon College Mycofeathers Tweeters The Lightfoots	155	Harare	B Fouche, J Diza, T Siabwanda & F Musuka
	140	Chiredzi, Malilangwe	L Oosthuizen, G & H MacDonald & S Bryant
	81	Falcon College	C Sharp, R Burrett & A Edwards
	66	Matopos	J Kets, S Peters & M Frame
	48	Bulawayo	G & E Lightfoot
	18	Matopos	
50 km: 36 hour			
Bundu Bunch Sanjul Vic Falls Turacos	212		G Douglas, J Francis, R Thompson & J Cragg
	177	Matopos / Aisleby	J Dupree & S MacAdam
	172	Vic Falls 15km radius Chiredzi, Hippo Valley Lodge	G & M Blair V Hadingham, J Mitchell, P Banks & G Wilson
MENHS2	156	Chiredzi, Hippo Valley Lodge	C deBeer, P Jackson, K MacDonald & P Hadingham
MENHS1	153	Sinamatella	S & S Long
The Longs Kari & Mike	151	Bulawayo	Karen & Michael Learmonth
80			

Christmas Bistro – 10 December Adele Edwards

Once again our end of year function was a great success. Thirty members gathered at our chairman's home to enjoy delicious food and good company. Our sincere thanks to Cecilia, Tony and families for making it such an enjoyable evening.

African Waterfowl Census – January Adele Edwards

The month has been a busy one for those members participating in the twice-yearly waterfowl counts. Sadly Bulawayo received very little rain in January; but on the positive side it meant all the sites were accessible and the counts could go ahead as scheduled. Aisleby, Cowdray Park and SAST as well as Hwange and Matobo National Parks have all been covered. Results are still being compiled and will be made available at a later stage. Thanks to Julia Duprée for coordinating these activities.

Hwange Birding Blog

Brent Stapelkamp of Lion Research brent.conflictcats@gmail.com has his Hwange Birding Blog up and running at <http://hwangebirder.blogspot.com> for anyone interested in Hwange's Avifauna.

Abiding Bird Mysteries

The case of the unfortunate Short-tailed Pipit

There has only been one record of the Short-tailed Pipit *Anthus brachyurus* in Zimbabwe and it got shot! And anyway if it had not been so I would not now be writing about it!

It is a very little known species and in all my extensive travels I have never encountered it. On the other side of the Zambezi in Zambia it occurs locally in very small numbers, mostly in the north in short dry grass on watershed plains where there are scattered bushes. There it is considered to be an intra-African migrant and is known to wander considerably. In South Africa it is thought either to be resident or a partial migrant that is generally rare and irregular in its occurrences, where it is to be found on grassy hill slopes as in the Drakensberg and to spend the winter lower down in seasonally flooded grassland. But what exactly was it doing in the excessively hot and dry Beit Bridge area where it was collected on nearby Nottingham ranch on 9 November 1981? But anyway it had chosen somewhat unwisely to land on a well-watered lawn, which must have looked rather like its chosen habitat. The point is, surprisingly, that there exists some exceedingly good short-tailed pipit habitat and not all that far off! And there I am thinking of the swampy grasslands further downstream on the Limpopo river floodplain - and that could well have been to where it was heading? And such country is to be found downstream from Chikwarakwara where the international boundaries of South Africa and Mozambique adjoin in the area widely known as Crooks Corner.

I have only visited this part of the country on one occasion while accompanying the Falcon College Buby-Limpopo expedition in December 1974. Immediately I realised its potential but time was short and I then had other objectives in the nearby Selungwe Hills. But it was here that the flooded grassland and swamp back from the Limpopo appeared to be an ideal habitat and not only for this elusive pipit. Furthermore, this is a part of the Limpopo-Mwenezi Pans system and one of our Important Bird Areas! The nearest thing ecologically to this must be the swampy grassland to the north of Beira in Mozambique around Savane, and from where this pipit is also known. And the Locustfinch, which has also been recorded there, could just as easily range much further south, and it would be an ideal habitat for African Snipe and much else beside. Quite obviously then, this intriguing habitat needs to be looked at more seriously and from the conservation aspect as well. But I am afraid that I will have to leave that to others and an area that is likely to bring some very interesting rewards and very little known and rarely visited by anyone. But be careful when you get there, as it is not known as Crooks Corner without very good reasons!

M.P.S. Irwin rolly@zol.co.zw

What about those Grey Tits

There can't be very many among us now who remember that 50 years ago only one species of Grey Tit was recognised in southern Africa and that was *Parus afer*! Otherwise here in Zimbabwe what we now call the Miombo Grey Tit (or more simply Miombo Tit) *Parus griseiventris*, was then simply regarded as being a race of its more southern relative, which occurred with us largely in the acacia bush in parts of Matabeleland. Since then of course it has been recognised that there are two species rather than one, with the separation subsequently of the Ashy Tit *P. cinerascens* from its more southerly relative the Grey Tit, which has a purely South African distribution. But here again I prefer the name Acacia Grey Tit to that of 'ashy' and being more descriptive.

But sorting out these relationships all began way back in 1953 when I collected an Acacia Grey Tit in the canopy of a flat-topped *Acacia abyssinica* tree at Juliasdale in Nyanga. And it was soon to be shown that both species occurred together in parts of Mashonaland with each more or less confined to its own specific habitat. Work on these birds in Angola showed a position that was broadly similar. And nobody of course now would be likely to confuse one for the other! Each is clearly habitat specific and differs in many ways, including voice.

A problem however still remains, and what precisely is the distribution of the Acacia Grey Tit in our Eastern Highlands? And even up at Nyanga, I am not aware of any other records and probably because nobody looks? The only other record that I am aware of is from the Vumba where there are again groves of *Acacia abyssinica* and where it is recorded from Badger's Bend but without any other specific information. And the question must follow, does it occur further southward as up at Banti or in the Chimanimani district where there must be suitable habitat? And yet again, are the birds that occur in the highlands the same as in the dry thorn bush in Matabeleland? That is very

much an open question and how closely linked are they to such flat-topped acacia trees? It remains all very much an open question and we clearly have a great deal to learn about these interesting birds and particularly their ecology. I would therefore suggest that you should now get out and do something about it when so much remains to be discovered!
Michael Irwin

Travel

India

Winter Birding In Gujarat State, India

From the 5th to the 9th of December, 2011 I was on a business trip in India. As all good bird watchers know, you should never be without your binoculars on a trip, so I brought mine with me. My associates were not bird watchers but they did give me some support. We spent our time in Ahmedabad, Gujarat State. This city is a commercial centre about 430km north of Mumbai as the House Crow flies with a population of about 6.5 million people.

Although we were in the middle of the northern hemisphere winter and on the latitude of the tropic of cancer we were less than 100km from the sea at a low altitude so the weather was warm, dry and very comfortable. The only cause for discomfort was the air pollution from traffic and this was very significant at Mumbai airport. It was at Mumbai airport that I saw my first lifers in the form of the House Crow and the local species of feral Rock Pigeon.

Business hours are from 10am to 6pm and sunrise was at about 7am while we were there. By getting up at about 6,30am I was able to walk from our hotel to a park about a kilometre away before most of the city was up and about. The most striking thing about the birds in the city centre is the large numbers of Black Kite, House Crow, Common Myna and Rock Pigeon. I estimate that there must have been about 1,000 Black Kite in the city centre and, as it was the breeding season, there were many nests. Because birds are not persecuted there they are very confident, so many kite nests were only about 6 meters above the ground and you can just about grab birds by the tail as you walk past them. Another interesting thing that I noticed was that there were no small seed eating birds about and most birds were the size of Common Myna or larger. This may be due to the large population of striped squirrels/chipmunks. Other common birds were Rose-ringed Parakeet and Laughing Dove. In the middle of the park was a medium sized pond with a resident pair of Pond Heron, that are similar to Squacco Heron in appearance, and these birds were unperturbed by the large number of people doing their morning aerobic exercising.

In the course of our business we were driven around and I managed to add to my bird list from other parts of the city. I also managed to buy a comprehensive field guide of all the approximately 1,300 bird species in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives for \$20. Below I have listed the Ahmedabad birds that I saw and have split them into those that are found in southern Africa and those that are not.

Ahmedabad Birds Seen

Found in Southern Africa

Cattle Egret
Black Kite
Laughing Dove
Rose-ringed Parakeet
Little Swift
Common Myna
House Crow
House Sparrow

Not found in Southern Africa

Indian Pond Heron
Grey Francolin
Indian Peafowl
Yellow-footed Green Pigeon
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared Dove
Asian Koel
Green Bee-eater
Dusky Crag Martin
Black Drongo
Red-vented Bulbul
Jungle Babbler
Common Tailorbird
Black Redstart
White Wagtail
Purple Sunbird

Our business hosts very kindly offered us some free sightseeing so I asked if we could possibly visit the famous Nal Sarovar bird sanctuary. This sanctuary is a shallow lake of about 120 square km in area and about 65km from the city centre. Our hosts kindly agreed to sponsor our visit there and advised us to leave by 5am in order to get there at about 6,30am, as many of the water birds tend to move away from viewing area when the sun is well up because of increased visitor disturbance in recent years. The entrance fee is 200 rupees, which is about \$4, per person and you park near the entrance where there is the start of a causeway that connects the shore to an island about 2km away where you can hire canoes and rowing boats.

As I was the only birdwatcher we were only there for 2 hours so we elected to walk along the causeway. Unfortunately, on our walk to the island, we were being constantly pestered by about a dozen touts, who were trying to convince us to hire a boat to look at the less accessible birds. This made birding difficult as most of the birds were new and had to be looked up in the field guide. Regardless of this problem it was a wonderful experience to see vast numbers of strange water birds in the early morning light of a foreign land and I would have been happy to spend all day there. We were there at the right time of the year because of the influx of large numbers of winter migrants from the North. Some of the waterbirds also found in Zimbabwe and that are uncommon here were common there and they included Garganey, Purple Swamphen, Green Sandpiper, Black-headed Gull and Yellow Wagtail. Please find the Nal Sarovar bird list below.

Nal Sarovar Birds Seen

Found in southern Africa

Little Grebe
 Black-necked Grebe
 Great Egret
 Grey Heron
 Purple Heron
 Woolly-necked Stork
 Glossy Ibis
 Garganey
 Black-shouldered Kite
 Common Moorhen
 African Purple Swamphen
 Black-winged Stilt
 Black-tailed Godwit
 Green Sandpiper
 Black-headed Gull
 Barn Swallow
 African Stonechat
 Yellow Wagtail

Not found in southern Africa

Little Cormorant
 Indian Cormorant
 Intermediate Egret
 Black-headed Ibis
 Greylag Goose
 Ruddy Shelduck
 Cotton Pygmy-goose
 Sarus Crane
 Common Coot
 Greater Coucal
 Common Hoopoe
 Bank Myna
 Rosy Starling
 White-eared Bulbul

So in total 56 bird species were seen of which 26 are found in southern Africa and 30 are not. Of the 26 that are found in this region 5 of them were lifers so I gained 35 international lifers.
 Richard Dennison

Mozambique

Vilanculos Specials

Apart from the blue, emerald and beige streaked waters of Vilanculos bay, a cosmopolitan city life and the gorgeous Bazaruto Archipelago islands within reach, Vilanculos offers excellent birding with a little bit of heat-resistant effort.

Our rustic 'beach cabana's' indigenous garden to the south of Vilanculos city proper, neighbouring the wonderful Archipelago Lodge and one stand short of the beach, has erratically attracted some exciting species. Our final deduction is that our plot offers the two rare delights of thick, un-cleared bush and water. The bush has developed greatly since 'greenies' put up a fence, yet the trees, apart from the cashews (which the birds love), remain small to medium in height. Many of the birds rely on the lower-level shrub cover. Most surrounding properties have no cover, and increasingly so. We have concluded that bird seed is not the main attraction in our garden, though it has certainly fattened the doves and happily also the megalomaniac male Pin-tailed Whydah, making him slower in his air raids. More likely, as fresh water is hard to come by in this rain shadow area, the birdbaths are the prime avian attraction. Grey Waxbills have become regular visitors to them, as have Red-backed Mannikins, White-throated Robin-chats and Bearded Scrub-robins and various more common garden birds. A resident flock of Lemon-breasted Canaries was another treat for a few months before mysteriously departing without warning (Are they known to move seasonally?)

We have also been delighted to find a Green Woodpecker in our vicinity, with Madagascar Bee-eaters being frequent fly-overs in summer and Gorgeous Bush-shrikes haunting the denser bush. Indeed, one was seen accompanying its chick this Christmas-time. Other good ticks spotted over this recent holiday in the garden and on neighbouring properties alone were Grey Sunbird (located by its very loud call), Eastern Nicator, Pale Batis, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Lesser Honeyguide, Collared Sunbird, Collared Palm-thrush and Red-backed Shrike. The trend for birds to be very active in the early morning, dead quiet at midday and active, but less so than at dawn, in the evening is very pronounced because of the heat. Another un-missable treat for birdwatchers are the lakes adjacent to the Vilanculos entry road, in particular a small, heavily vegetated pond close by on the left of the road as you approach town. You may see waterfowl, African Marsh-harriers and Collared Pratincoles flying above and around it if you look closely. Here, we have come across African Purple Swamphen, White-backed Duck, African Pygmy-goose, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Purple Heron, Lesser Jacana and Pied Avocet over a number of visits.

The Vilanculos seashore birds (in my very humble opinion in this area!) fail to trump those of the dune thicket or the freshwater lakes. We have however seen a Eurasian Oystercatcher on Banque Island (the southernmost island of the Archipelago), where, it seems, it is a regular vagrant.
Emma Holland

Tail Feathers

African Broadbill at Mavs

An African Broadbill has been found near to Kopje Tops (Mavhuradonha Wilderness). Daryl Martyn, a pro guide working with us, found the bird whilst on an anti poaching patrol and then I went back to the site with Cathy Sharp who was staying with us at the time, and we all saw the bird again.

It was displaying very vigorously and we were able to approach to within 20 – 30 meters.

We will be monitoring to see if the bird is resident or not.....would be wonderful to be able to guarantee a sighting for other birders!

James Varden james@vardensafaris.com

Drongo Capers

For a couple of weeks I was watching the antics of a Fork tailed Drongo (are they still called that) that had a nest with chicks high up in a forked branch of a tall tree on the boundary of my property. The Drongo fiercely defended "her" tree chasing away any bird that tried to settle on it. I watched her tackle birds quite a bit bigger than herself, including doves and crows. She wouldn't let any of them come near.

One day I was standing on a flowerbed in that part of the garden. I was bending down looking at what I thought might be a termite nest. As I straightened up the Drongo flew right at my head, skimming past me only a few inches away. It was clearly a warning attack. The bird then landed on a nearby telephone wire and chattered angrily at me. When I looked up I realised that I was directly under the nest, although it was a long way above my head. I abandoned the gardening and left the

Drongo the victor of the encounter.

My Roberts bird book says Drongos are aggressive at the nest and even attack man. Nice to see the birds in action isn't it, even if you are on the receiving end.
Olive Thornton

Total Wipe Out

For the last half an hour I have stood watching the annihilation of those termite alates foolish enough to emerge before dark. The silent flock of a few hundred Amur Falcons swoop and sweep at tree height, and lower, over the garden; not a single alate escapes! The gentle rain of gossamer wings spiral back to earth around me, what a magnificent experience. From the skies a Pied Crow or two join the harvesting and the Fork-tailed Drongos hawk from the trees. On the edge of the lawn are a few Laughing Doves, no doubt fattening up too. In the tall hedge the Senegal Coucal picks off those alates rash enough to crawl up the plants over the termitarium. The Spectacled Weavers are probably partaking of the feast but I haven't been paying them much attention.

At 18h20 the falcons start to thin out, winging off to their roost (probably the nearby Tafara roost) and at 18h28 the last ones have left, quite replete I should think. Only now does the alate survival rate climb from the bottom of the graph – interestingly, now is the time a few African Palm-swifts take their turn as the gloaming descends.

Mmm, what code shall I use for the Garden Bird Survey? Well, they were overhead for sure, a grey area, but really directly using the garden even if they didn't land; I think '1' is justified under these circumstances.

Ian Riddell, Greendale, 9 December 2011

The Frenzy Continues...

And on 12 December I was roused from the cottage at 18h15 by the noisy screams of Little Swifts. Odd, I thought, and looking out of the window could see quite a large flock in the front garden, with a few European Bee-eaters and African Palm-swifts mixed in. So it was out with the binoculars again, standing in the middle of a grand prix with high-speed racers screaming passed; sometimes the urge to duck was almost irresistible. Yes, more termites were being annihilated, and the swifts shot passed at a frenetic pace, much lower than the relatively sedate Amur Falcons of the 9th. It was interesting that the main body of swifts kept together and did circuits though there were others out of synch snatching up termites against the flow – but no collisions!

Fork-tailed Drongos were there again and Dark-capped Bulbuls worked the lower levels; on the lawn at least 6 Kurrichane Thrushes were feasting and 2 of their recently fledged youngsters with heavily spotted fronts were most attractive. A new arrival to the garden, a Spotted Eagle-owl, roosts in the bushes and young trees over the termitarium and he/she was clearly interested, intently watching morsels fluttering passed, but didn't attempt to catch any – perhaps I was too intimidating. A few dragonflies kept low too, not risking their depredations in the path of the hectic birds.

At 18h34 most of the Little Swifts had left and the palm-swifts predominated. The bulbuls became noisier and occupied higher levels with the now bolder dragonflies, but still no termites were escaping. The eagle-owl blundered out of his roost at 18h37, raising the bulbul noise level even higher, and swept into a nearby exotic fig; I took the opportunity to leave too, lest the owl should return to catch a few termites to start the night. A few Little and palm-swifts were still at it.

Ian Riddell

Hillside Park, Harare

At 6,30am on 25/12/11 while walking our dog in Hillside Park I saw 3 Black River Duck and 2 Red-billed Teal on a pond. This pond had formed from rainwater runoff after heavy rain the previous night and covered about a hectare. Although this pond forms in years of good rainfall it is the first time that I have seen ducks on it.

Regards,
Richard Dennison

Interesting Bird Observations in Harare

It is known that the Greater Honeyguide parasitizes the African Hoopoe. But Robin & Sally Rind were lucky to actually spot this African Hoopoe feeding the juvenile Greater Honeyguide in their garden in Marlborough on 22 Nov 2011.

I was very excited to hear a Broad-billed Roller calling in my garden this weekend (3/4 Dec 2012). It seemed to be on it's own. I found him eventually on one of the exotic trees in my garden. I have only ever seen these birds in Mana Pools, so I was thrilled.

Amethyst Sunbird and Purple-banded Sunbird are also pretty much resident in my garden too, which is great.

Not long after I saw the Roller, there were 2 Meyer's Parrots feeding off the *Cordia abyssinnica*. I have heard the parrots on a few occasions but haven't seen them.

Leanne Agiotis, Milton Park, Harare

Strange Behaviour of Purple-Crested Turacos

In the wild I have never seen these birds on the ground. But over the last couple of years, I have seen them on the ground in three different Harare gardens. Has anybody else noticed this? If so please let our Editor or me know. And what are they doing down there? Not just one or two hops and then up into the tree tops again, but fossicking around. One suggestion has been that they are looking for snails and eating them. Thrushes are noted for this behaviour and in England they use particular stones as anvils against which to bash the snails to break their shells. In Harare the Crested Barbets eat garden snails. What else?

All comments greatly received – thanks.

Alex Masterson

When Will Mynas Reach Harare?

Common Mynas continue to spread northwards through Zimbabwe, Botswana and Mozambique. Mynas were first found in the Lowveld and Southern Matabeleland. By 2010 mynas had reached Bulawayo. They also now occur in Masvingo but they may well occur elsewhere in other towns? I have an unconfirmed sighting from central Rusape in June 2011. We really don't have many observers throughout the country.

Although initially adapted to life close to people in urban areas there is recent evidence that they are also able to survive in natural areas even in dry areas. An alarming report of a pair of mynas, which were seen at Hwange Safari Lodge in October 2011, has been received and there are earlier reports from the Matetsi Safari Area and Kazungula. In December 2011 a pair of mynas was seen near Shapi Pan, Hwange National Park.

Mynas will use a number of sites for breeding including man-made structures such as the eaves and ceilings of buildings, leafy trees, and nests of other birds. Mynas compete strongly with indigenous birds for food and nesting sites. In the lowveld they often use Buffalo Weavers nests and they have been reported evicting Crested Barbets from their nest holes. They have also been reported killing the chicks of other birds, which are taken out of nests. This versatility contributes to their success. It is likely that the myna will have some impact on the populations of some of our common urban birds.

The range expansion of the Common Mynah is being monitored in Zimbabwe and information may be sent to Geoff Lowe at wildfire@mweb.co.zw. Have these birds reached Harare yet? The movement appears to occur mainly in the early rain season and this is probably due to better availability of food at this time of the year?

Geoff Lowe

The Southern Ground – Hornbill – Dendera A booming bird – “du, du dududu”

The call of Dendera is well known and words are set to the plaintive tone of the wife (female bird) and the gruff voice of the practical husband (male bird).

Shona:

Female: “*Riti! Riti! Mwana waenda!*”

Male: “*Ndizvo, ndizvo ndizochengeta vashoma*”.

Literally translated as:

“Riti Riti! The child is gone!”

“All right, the fewer mouths to feed!”

Or

“I will have less trouble getting food!”

The duet call was rendered in songs: a popular song refers to the birds feeding on a tortoise and is still sung in Matabeleland:

Ndebele:

Female – “*Umtwana sedobi fudu lwake*”.

Male – “*Aklethe lapha Kengimhlephu hlephunele
Mina yise wakho*”.

Translation:

Female – “The child has picked up a tortoise”.

Male – “Bring it here so that I can pick it into pieces since I am the father”.

Shona:

Female – “*Dendera –Dendera Mwana wanhonga kamba*”.

Male – *Ngaauye – Ngaauye ndimutsemurire*”

Juvenile –

What did the Juvenile say?

Nothing shows rural people more clearly that their environment has changed than the disappearance of Dendera. People tell me “I used to hear and see this remarkable bird as a child, now we never see it”. This lament is repeated wherever I go in the Vumba, Honde, Marange Bulawayo, Karoi or Shamva. When I wear a Dendera t-shirt, folk in offices and shops are eager to tell me stories about this iconic bird and ask where it has gone. They talk of a Dendera band and of a place near Mudzi called Dendera. Older people realize the chopping down of trees and human disturbance and hunting has degraded the environment making it impossible for wildlife to survive in farming areas.

L Maasdorp

I do not want. I will open it

Notice Board

For Sale

- Set of 6 eagle prints, 69x57 cm mounted and framed with non-reflective glass, ex-boardroom. Artist A.H. Barrett (South African, I think) African Fish-eagle, (Black) Verreaux's Eagle, Martial Eagle, Tawny Eagle, Jackal Buzzard, African Crowned Eagle. \$360
- Roberts Vol. 7

Contact I Riddell, 0772 117054, 492452 or gemsaf@mango.zw

Contributions for The Babbler 105 April 2012/ May 2012 may be sent to the Editor anytime between now and 14th March 2012.

Addenda to *The Babblers* 104

Increase in Membership Subscriptions

BLZ Council unanimously agreed at its January meeting to increase subscriptions in order to cover printing and publishing costs of *Honeyguide*. Various alternatives were discussed, one being that subs would stay the same but members could order and pay separately for *Honeyguide*. However, this idea was discarded as it could well jeopardize the future publication of our flagship journal.

RSPB core funding combined with a sizeable regular anonymous donation kept us in a comfort zone for a number of years but both these contributions fell away three years ago. A sizeable donation through a fundraising effort covered the second issues of volumes 55 (2) 2009 and 56 (2) 2010.

57 (2) 2011 has been printed but we are still looking for funds to pay the printer. The possibility of an offshore donation was unrealised. We gratefully acknowledge \$320.00 from an anonymous donor, \$500 from NMB Bank Limited, \$310.00 from the LBJ / Cisticola Course held in Bulawayo recently, and \$20.00 from Doreen and Bruce Bolnick, which will go toward the printing of 57(2). We are now seeking the remainder, around \$2400.00.

As mentioned in *The Babblers* 103 a price comparison was undertaken between the printing technologies, with digital printing being more economical than lithographic. Lithographic printing only becomes cheaper with a run of over 1000 copies. Our print run is currently 400. We are fortunate that our printer has not increased his prices since he began printing *Honeyguide* some years ago.

Michael Irwin's departure for the UK

Michael Irwin is leaving Zimbabwe to return to his homeland after what he describes a 63 year African Safari. The 24th April is the anniversary of his arrival! He hopes to leave by mid May in order to make the most of the English summer. The decision to leave was a difficult one for Michael to make, but in the end it was made for him, as it is simply not financially possible for him to remain in Zimbabwe, and he does have family in the UK for support.

Michael is our Zimbabwean ornithological icon. We do not want him to fly off. We are very sad that he is leaving but understand that he must go. Much more will be said before his departure.

Meanwhile, Michael has a number of valuable original bird paintings by famous artists which he is anxious to dispose of as soon as possible. Photographs of these paintings will be shown at the next Mashonaland Branch evening meeting on Thursday 16th February and at the Matabeleland Branch AGM this Saturday 11th February. Once reserve prices are known the method of disposal will be announced.

Dorothy Wakeling