

THE BABBLER

Newsletter of



BirdLife Zimbabwe
The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

ISSUE # 108 – October 2012 / November 2012

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****Subscription Renewal****

Subscriptions are now due for the 2012 to 2013 year, which runs from April to March.
Subscription fees have been increased in order to cover publication costs and are in USD:

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 renewals

Payment may be made at the Office, to a Branch Committee Member at an outing or you can deposit it into the **BirdLife Zimbabwe** bank account: **NMB Bank, Borrowdale Branch; Account no: 260092014** 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.

Your membership is really important to BLZ, whether or not you are able to attend meetings and outings. Birds are indicators of the health of the environment and the fact that you are a member supports the on going conservation and ornithological efforts undertaken by BirdLife Zimbabwe members and staff. This in turn supports the preservation of Zimbabwe's biodiversity, its avifauna and natural habitats, which are becoming increasingly threatened. As a member you receive our world-recognised journal *Honeyguide* twice a year and our newsletter, *TheBabbler*, every two months. The more members we have, the more effective we can be at lobbying government, communities and local and international organisations.

**NOTICE OF A SPECIAL GENERAL MEETING OF MEMBERS OF BIRDLIFE
ZIMBABWE TO BE HELD AT AVONDALE SPORTS CLUB ON THURS 18TH
OCTOBER 2012 AT 1730 FOR 1800HRS.**

Sadly, our President-elect, Dr Neil Deacon, has, for personal reasons, been forced to resign this post. Therefore, the membership needs to elect a replacement who may be already on the Council or may be an ordinary member. Please send in nominations for this prestigious and demanding position, first obtaining from the candidate permission to put forward their candidature. At present we do not have alternative candidates. If you cannot be present, please obtain a proxy form from the BirdLife Office and give it to a member who will be present. The election will take place at the beginning of the meeting at 1800hrs.

K Dixon (Hon Sec to Council)

Branch Activities

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.

October/November 2012

Mukuvisi	Sunday 7th October 2012	0630
	Sunday 4th November 2012	0630
Chivero	Sunday 14th October 2012	0630
	Sunday 11th November 2012	0630
(Meet PE School car park)		
Monavale Vlei	Sunday 21st October 2012	0700
	Sunday 18th November 2012	0700

4th Sunday Outings

2 nd - 5 th	November 2012	Vumba Weekend....
24th - 25th	November 2012	Birding Big Day weekend
24th Nov – 1st	Dec 2012	Mozambique Trip

2nd Sat Outings

Saturday 13th October 2012	Rainham Dam	0700
Saturday 10th November 2012	Rainham Dam (Meet PE School car park)	0700

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.

Thursday Meetings at Avondale Sports Club 1730 for 1800

Thursday 18th October 2012	Ferdi Couto on Warblers
Thursday 15th November 2012	Owls by Tony Alegria

Bvumba Outing

There will be an outing to the Bvumba Mountains where full board and lodging will be provided. This outing is scheduled for the first weekend in November, arrive Friday 2nd, leave on Monday 5th after the morning birding session. Green Twinspots, Narina Trogons and other Bvumba specials are our targets!

We will be staying at Madrugada and Roger Castelin will be our host. A deposit will be called for nearer the time.

Book by email to: talegria@zol.co.zw by the end of September 2012. All BLZ Members are invited.

Mozambique Outing

There will be an outing to Mozambique during the last full week of November, arrive November Saturday 24th, leave early the next Saturday (1st December). The African Pitta & Green-headed Oriole are on top of our most wanted list! We will be staying very close to the Gorongosa National Park, which is one of our destinations as is Mount Gorongosa. For the second half of the trip, we will be staying at Catapu. This trip comprises full board and lodging and only eight birders can be accommodated. To book for this trip, a non-refundable deposit of \$200.00 is required – estimated total cost \$400-500.00. If you have booked for the trip and can't make it at the last moment, it's up to you to find a replacement. We could end up with a waiting list, so it may not be too much of a problem! Although all BLZ Members are invited to go on this trip, first come first serve – only eight places available!

Outings and Directions to regular venues

Please note ** New starting time from September is 06.30am

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 and Rainham Dam

Meet at Prince Edward School car park on Josiah Tongagara Ave

Monavale Vlei

Meet on the B.S Leon side of Fenella Drive

For info: Tony Alegria talegria@zol.co.zw, cell: 0772 438697, (04) 490375

Matabeleland Branch

4-11 October: Bird Week at the Natural History Museum

A special bird display is being put together as a joint project between the Natural History Museum and Birdlife Zimbabwe Matabeleland Branch. In addition during this week the Museum has arranged a series of lunchtime lectures focusing on birds. On each day the lecture begins at 1p.m. Details of the lectures are as follows:

- Thursday 4th: Opening of display and talk on **The Black Eagle Survey** by Cecilia Hubbard
Friday 5th: Talk on **Some Threatened Birds** by Professor Peter Mundy
Tuesday 9th: Talk on **Birds in the Rock Art of Zimbabwe: healing spirits and God's messengers** by Paul Hubbard
Wednesday 10th: Talk on **Hummingbirds** by Richard Peek
Thursday 11th: Talk on **Ostriches: Do they really bury their heads in the Sand?** By Gavin Robinson

The display promises to be very interesting and informative so do make a point of visiting the museum at this time.

For more information contact Jean Cranston on 0733 893390 or 242921

20 October: Walk at Whitestone School

We're going to try something a little different on this occasion and instead of our usual morning walk we will be doing this walk in the late afternoon. After the walk we are all invited to adjourn to the nearby home of Bill and Helen Lewis (6 Betsi Gordon Close, Burnside) for a bring-your-own braai. Meet at the entrance to Whitestone School on Whitestone Way, Burnside at 4 p.m.

For more information contact Helen Lewis on 242285 or 0772 262636

24-25 November: Birding Big Day

The 7th annual Zimbabwean Birding Big Day (BBD) will take place over the weekend of 24/25 November. This is a national, not a branch event. The aim of the event is for teams to identify as many bird species as possible in either a continuous 24 or 36-hour period and within either an area with a radius of 50 km or a garden. As teams may be made up of 4 people, of whom only 2 must be members of BLZ, BBD provides an ideal opportunity to introduce new people to the joys of birding and to increase awareness of our wonderful bird life. You can take BBD seriously and dash around the countryside trying to reach the magic 200 species mark, or you can make it an opportunity to spend some time with like-minded friends with a bit of birding on the side. Getting sponsorship is not obligatory and you should not let this put you off taking part. However any money you can raise will go into your branch's funds and will be much appreciated. Last year two teams raised over \$900 each – showing just what can be achieved. To spur you on in your efforts to seek sponsorship each member of any team which raises over \$100 will receive a cloth badge commemorating the event. So make this the year you start your collection! Entry and sponsorship forms can be obtained from your branch chairman or from Adele Edwards email admin@dambari.com.

1 December: Christmas Bistro

Can we seriously be talking about Christmas? Where did the year go? Before you start filling your diary with Festive Season engagements make a note that our annual Christmas Bistro will take place on the evening of Saturday 1 December. Once again Cecilia Hubbard has generously offered to host this event. Details of the cost, menu, etc., to be advised nearer the time but you can start booking your places now.

For more information contact Cecilia Hubbard on 0772 433733

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

Mashonaland Thursday evening 19th July 2012

Some basic facts about stars, constellations and the night sky in general- Tony Alegria

Raptor ID part 1 was to be the topic for the third Thursday of July, but unfortunately this did not take place as the presenter was unable to be there. At short notice, Tony Alegria modified a Power Point Constellation /Star presentation which he had used for the Astronomical Society and came to the rescue.

He began by showing a series of slides on what can or cannot be seen in the night sky which not only depends on where you are on earth in terms of latitude but also on the time of the year. If a person were to view the stars all night (from about one hour after dark till one hour before sunrise), only about 15% on either side of the Sun would not be visible due to the glare of the Sun. How much of the sky we can see of the northern latitudes is dependent on the time of year. We get the best views of the northern skies during our winter when the Big Dipper (or the Plough) can be seen. How many hours of darkness can be used for looking at the stars depends on the tilt of the earth and your location. There are huge extremes of seeing at the poles – weeks of continuous darkness to weeks of continuous brightness.

Although, we are travelling at great speed through the heavens and also rotating around our axis, it feels like we are motionless and that everything out there is moving around us. He described the Ecliptic as being an imaginary line, above our heads, which all the Zodiac Constellations and all the planets, our moon and Sun follow. Yes, there are 12 Zodiacal Constellations (Aries, Taurus, Gemini, etc.) along the ecliptic which astrologers use for their forecasts.

The brightness and colour of a star (a star is a sun and our Sun is a star!) depends on its distance from its size, how hot it is and us – blue is hot and red is not so hot! However, you need a good imagination, as everything is ish – bluish to reddish! He showed a few slides comparing the size of our Earth to the other Solar System objects and then compared our Sun with other suns – on this scale our Sun is very small!

Although all stars appear to be equidistant, as if all were on a three dimensional screen, this is not the case – the closest star is 4.2 light years away and the furthest object visible to the naked eye, is the Andromeda Galaxy at 2.4 million light years away.

It was important for sailors to identify stars quickly as they were relied upon for navigation. Initially there were 46 constellations. An obvious group of stars was used to define a stick figure or an outline resembling a mythological person, an animal or a monster. The names of these ancient Greek constellations were Latinised and additional constellations were added once the southern skies became visible to European explorers. In the old days cartographers often divided the sky in differing ways to depict their chosen shapes, whilst changing other

cartographers' figures – thus the shapes and number of constellations kept being changed. This anarchy ended when the International Astronomical Union set the present 88 constellations.

He showed the same constellations as depicted by star magazines, books and star programs to have different shapes; thus different stars can be joined up to show different shapes within a constellation.

So, what are constellations? They are arbitrary groupings of stars, invented to break up the sky into smaller, more manageable pieces thereby making it possible for the human mind to identify the stars visible at any given time. Thus a constellation is an area in the sky that normally contains an obvious set of brightish stars within a boundary. It's the stars within the boundaries that can be selected and joined to make up the shapes we know. The best examples are probably the Southern Cross, Scorpio and Orion.

With few exceptions the star patterns bear little resemblance to the people or creatures they are supposed to represent. The connections are symbolic! Birds are well represented by: Apus – The bird of paradise; Aquila – The Eagle; Columba – The Dove; Corvus – The Crow; Cygnus – The Swan; Grus – The Crane; Pavo – The Peacock and Tucana – The Toucan. Thanks Tony...

**Mashonaland Thursday evening 20 September 2011
'The Value of the Harare Wetlands and their Threats'.**

34 people attended the BirdLife Zimbabwe meeting at Avondale Sports Club on Thursday, September 20, 2012.

Dorothy Wakeling gave us a wonderful talk about the wetlands of Harare – how they work, why we need them and how are they threatened were some of the topics she spoke about. This is just a brief summary of a very interesting presentation – thanks Dorothy!

Nick Hart

Waterfowl Survey 27th July 2012 Biri Dam

4 lucky members spent a marvellous day in a boat on this huge but relatively unknown dam south of Chinhoyi and Banket. It was originally constructed by a group of 68 commercial farmers from the surrounding area and has matured into a very attractive peaceful stretch of water. There is evidence of widespread netting and weed on the fringes points to the presence of sewage but otherwise it is unspoiled and home to myriads of waterfowl. We launched from the well-appointed fishing camp on Urundi Farm, popular with particularly bass fishermen from far and wide.

Within minutes we were out among the birds, marvelling at the large group of African Spoonbill nesting and feeding not far from the shore. A huge dead tree looked like a high rise block of flats with nests at many levels; on the top floor were the White-breasted Cormorant, below them the African Darter and on the lowest section the Reed Cormorant. Young could be detected in many nests and the noise and stench was impressive. Nearby an overwintering Osprey sat in another skeletal tree and there were African Fish-eagle galore.

As recorder I was kept extremely busy noting numbers of African Jacana, African Sacred Ibis, egret, heron and duck. Noticeable were Yellow-billed Stork in twos and threes and the occasional African Openbill. White-faced Duck dominated but we also saw Red-billed Teal, 4 Southern Pochard, Little Grebe and Egyptian Goose. The most exciting sighting without doubt was a family group of Greater Flamingo, 2 adult 2 young. The farmer told us later that they appear annually as does the pair of Grey Crowned Crane seen earlier. Every now and then we spotted a delightful little Malachite Kingfisher in the reeds. Pied Kingfishers were numerous and we also had Giant, Striped and Brown-hooded. A single Black Heron is also worth mentioning and 2 Collared Pratincole.

After a couple of hours we headed back towards the camp to explore other stretches of the shoreline. Risk of damage to the hull of the boat from the stumps just below the surface forced us to stay well away from the shore in places and also brought us to some attractive rocky areas where we had good views of land birds. A Mocking Cliff-chat was unexpected as we compiled a longish list including Greater Honeyguide, Golden Weaver, Terrestrial Brownbul, Emerald-spotted Wood-dove and Lilac-breasted Roller. Only one wader, a Three-banded Plover was observed.

Hirundines were also scarce, just a few Wire-tailed, Grey-rumped and 2 Lesser Striped Swallow.

After 5 hours of birding bliss we returned to camp for the journey home. Our host, Larry Ferreira, a bushman of note, entertained us with tales revealing an intimate knowledge of fish, birds and mammals, and a great love of his lands. For instance, did you know that the Scarlet-chested Sunbird warns of the presence of snakes and Black-headed Heron love swallowing them whole? We are most grateful to him for this opportunity to bird here and to Tony for offering, preparing, towing and driving both boat and bakkie.

Ken Dixon

Mashonaland Branch visits to Xanadu farm, Ruwa (1731C3) 22 August 2012

About 15 people were out in parkland of Xanadu Farm (better known as MacDonald Timbers) behind the industrial estate at Ruwa.

We saw about 115 species in 3 1/2 hours. There was a Black Heron on the dam near the house, and an African Spoonbill further away. A Peregrine was possibly the most unusual bird seen, because the woodland lends itself to Lanner Falcons better. A Black-chested Snake-eagle hunted over the drylands. Common Sandpiper and a Wood Sandpiper were back at the waters edge from Siberia, if they didn't overwinter with us. An African Snipe was put up in the grassy edges of the dam and 3 Temminck's Coursers were in dry maize stubble when we were trying to identify an African (Grassland) Pipit. Klaas's Cuckoo was heard but not seen.

A Spotted Eagle-owl was displaced when we were parking cars under its roost, and Meyers Parrots were heard. It is nice to see they are still thriving on the outskirts of the city. Two Cape (Black) Crows were unusual, and the Pied variety was common. An Ashy(Blue-grey) Flycatcher was seen and an Amethyst Sunbird female was building a nest in the miombo woodland, while a male was at the top of the same tree, but not helping. A Brimstone Canary was also recorded. At the barns were Red-winged Starlings and House Sparrows. A flock of 13 Orange-breasted Waxbills were on burnt grassland near the dam and that's where I saw all the same game recorded in our last visit to Xanadu Farm see Babbler 93 page 13. The only new animal was a squirrel in the woodland. We saw the following game in this area: Giraffe, Wildebeest, Sable, Impala and Waterbuck.

Make a note of our parrots as they are under threat. It's nice to see them still around the outskirts of Harare. *TheBabbler* 93 page 13.

28/3 2010. -Hot and wet

22/8/2012 Hot and dry.

Next time we must go in the cold dry season.

Thanks to the property owners for having us on the farm.

D.V.Rockingham-Gill, 4 Fernleigh Road, P.O.Borrowdale rgill@zol.co.zw

Mashonaland Saturday Club: Botanical Gardens Sat 15TH Sept 2012

Welcome maintenance work has taken place here in recent months, the restaurant is open once again And the Interpretive centre, destroyed by fire a few years ago is now smartly re-thatched and in use. The latest initiative by some diplomatic ladies is the relabeling of many tree species. For joggers,

Dog-walkers and the general public the most important improvement is the cutting of grass allowing One to roam freely over most of the area, even up to the Parks HQ and St George's.

A dozen or so of us shuffled and scuffled our way through the leaves, chatting animatedly and now And again turning attention to the birds of which there were relatively few. We all saw the regulars; Blue Waxbill, Kurrichane Thrush, Dark-capped Bulbul, Southern Masked-weaver galore, Pied crow, Red-billedQuelea, Crested Barbet, Fork-tailed Drongo, Variable Sunbird and Red-eyed and Laughing Dove.

The more observant found Green-backed Pytilia, Black-headed Oriole, Southern Black Flycatcher, White-browed Robin-chat, Copper and Amethyst Sunbird, Common Scimitarbill, Green Wood-hoopoe and Hoopoe, with African Palm swift overhead. In all 65 species were identified.

It was a pleasant stroll, a relaxed, enjoyable couple of hours for us all. We thank Julia Pierini for giving up her time to lead us.

Ken Dixon

Mashonaland Branch Walk On Monavale Vlei Sunday 16th Sept 2012

Talk about climate change; it's supposed to be cold in June and July, windy in August. On 16th September it was both on Monavale Vlei and fewer than usual birds were consequently seen, only 46 species by the time we retreated, but no doubt Chief Spotter, Jimmy, will have extended the list In the course of the day. And almost the whole vlei has now been burnt driving away some species But encouraging others and allowing the cold wind to sweep the whole area.

If you haven't taken a walk with Jimmy on the vlei you must do so one day. You can stand beside him, Look up, down and all around and you see no birds. Jimmy, on the other hand, sees African Palm-swift and Little Swift and Wire-tailed Swallow high in the sky, weavers, warblers and bishops in the reeds and Crowned Lapwing and Marsh Owl in the grass. And he's not kidding you because they appear in your Binoculars eventually. The abundant Pied Crow lead you to others; over Monavale they are always Chasing Gabar Goshawk, both normal and melanistic, Ovambo Sparrowhawk and Black-shouldered Kite. Others, too big to miss are Black-headed Heron, Cattle Egret or too noisy to ignore like African WattledLapwing. One bird that gave us good views was Dark-capped Yellow Warbler

No summer migrants yet but you couldn't blame them for staying somewhere a bit warmer for now. Thanks to Dorothy and Jimmy for leading us and keeping us informed of developments on that precious vlei.

Ken Dixon

Hwedza Mountain outing September 21st to 24th 2012.

We saw 107 birds on Hwedza Mountain over the weekend. We saw only one Black-faced Swee, whichwas our target species. On an isolated mountain range, one can only speculate as to how many Swees there are. What is the minimum number to sustain a population?

Tony Alegria

Harare Garden Bird Survey 2011-12 Sheet 13 28 May to 24 June 2012

The wheel has turned full circle and we are back to the middle of winter. What an interesting and instructive exercise this has been, lending substance to our impressions of bird activity in our gardens. Most of us, I'm sure, found new species for our garden lists and also realized that certain birds that we thought ever present disappear for a few months.

Despite the cold weather, those who sent in their forms recorded an average of 30 birds with a few in the 40s. Village Indigobirds still singing and Barn, Southern White-faced Scops-owl and Spotted Eagle-owl well distributed across the city, as were Lizard Buzzard and Gabar Goshawk. If you need House Sparrow or Groundscraper Thrush on Big Birding Day, try the Dominican Convent!

We thank all those who regularly sent in their forms to BLZ and we know there are many more who didn't but either kept lists or at least took more notice of the birds in their gardens. Please keep up the good work and send for Tony's new monthly form. A more scientific analysis of the findings will appear soon.

Ken Dixon

Monavale Vlei Report August-September 2012

August saw a number of fires occurring, however alert members of the community quickly put them out. By the end of the month much of the vlei had burnt save for a small stretch that is still intact. This stretch of grass cover has provided much needed roosting area for our Marsh Owls. In fact the last big fire on 22nd August flushed 12 Marsh Owls. Other bird species seen in August included Marabou Storks, African Cuckoo Hawk, Yellow-billed Kite, peregrine Falcon, African Harrier –Hawk, Red-faced Mousebirds, Southern White-faced Scops Owl, Pearl-breasted Swallow, African Stonechat, Little-rush Warblers, African Pipits, Yellow-throated Long-claws, Grey-headed Bush-Strike, White-winged Widowbirds, and Yellow-fronted Canary. A dead Black-headed Heron was found on the Vlei with a broken leg.

In September burst water pipes flooded much of the Vlei. A unique charm is now characterizing the Vlei with lush green grass on one side, contrasting with the burnt area on the other. The resultant flooding brought with it a Three-banded Plover, African Wattled lapwings, Grey Herons, Purple Heron and Sacred Ibis. The other bird species seen in September were Lesser Striped Swallows, Reed Cormorant, Black Stork, Ovambo Sparrowhawk, Wahlberg's Eagle, Black-chested Snake Eagle, Black Crake, African Reed Warbler, Levillant's Cisticola, African Paradise Flycatcher, Thick-billed Weaver to mention but a few. Summer season is now with us and we eagerly anticipate migrant arrivals! A community member reported seeing a Clawless Otter!

Jimmy Muropa, Monavale Vlei Scout, COSMO 0772 772771

Matabeleland

Waterfowl Count in Hwange National Park Sinamatella / Robins Area – 30 July – 02

August

Adele Edwards

As part of the bi-annual waterfowl counts (carried out in January and July) Matabeleland regularly covers 3 sites within Bulawayo (Aisleby, Cowdray Park and SAST) and also sites within Matobo and Hwange National Parks. This year I was privileged to be able to join Cecilia Hubbard in doing the counts in the Sinamatella and Robins areas of Hwange NP where we counted at 9 sites: in Sinamatella – Sinamatella River, Salt Springs, Mandavu, Masuma and Shumba; in Robins – Big Toms, Little Toms, Deteema, Croc Pools and Salt Pans. The park was already frighteningly dry, with very little natural surface water remaining and the game relying almost exclusively on pumped pans for water. As is the trend each year the number of waterfowl seen was much lower than had been recorded the previous January. In some cases this was not surprising, for example with the exception of a few over-wintering birds there were none of the migratory waders around. But where do all the Egyptian Geese and Red-billed Teal disappear? With all our projects, no matter how much information we gather, there always

seem to be more questions than answers! Despite the relatively low numbers there were several less-frequently-seen species around to make the counts interesting, such as Greater Flamingos, Yellow-billed Storks, African Spoonbills and Pied Avocets at Mandavu, and Black and African Openbill Storks, White-backed Duck, Cape Teal and Cape Shoveler at Salt Pans.

In addition to waterfowl, over three days Hwange provided us with a host of other bird species (147 in total) – starting in Main Camp with a great sighting of the yellow form of the Crimson-breasted Shrike. Early on our first morning at Sinamatella, after enjoying a first cup of coffee while watching the changing colours in the sky and seeing the vlei below us gradually lighten and come alive, we decided to take a quick walk along the old restaurant building to check the view from there. Three hours and 37 species later we returned having walked all along the edge of the plateau to the bottom of the camp site and back along the fence line, passing the tourist office where the Sabi Stars were a blaze of colour. During our travels we saw Red- and Yellow-billed Oxpeckers; we saw five species of Hornbills – Red-billed and Southern Yellow-billed, African Grey, Bradfield's and Southern Ground-hornbill; raptors included Tawny and Martial Eagles, African Fish-eagle, Bateleur, African Hawk-eagle, Lizard Buzzard, Black Sparrowhawk, Shikra, African Goshawk and African Harrier-hawk. Over last year's game count large numbers of immature vultures were recorded and we decided to keep a special lookout for breeding vultures. We spotted our first nest by chance; we'd stopped in an open grassy area to look at a Pearl-spotted Owlet perched on a single stick, and then noticed in the distance a White-backed Vulture in the top of a tall acacia. On closer examination we made out the nest with another bird sitting in it. Once we had our eye in we managed to locate at least ten more nests. At different times we also saw Hooded, Cape, White-headed and Lappet-faced Vultures. The trip really was a reminder that there is a lot more to Hwange NP than loads of elephant and the big five!

Field trip to Bvumba - 11-14 August

Jenny Brebner

At the invitation of Roger Castelin, eight intrepid adventurers from BLZ Matabeleland set off for the Bvumba over the August long weekend, to spend a few days birding at Roger's Madrugada Lodge. Forsaking the Birchenough Bridge road, we travelled up through Mvuma, Chivhu, Nyazura and then on to Mutare. Stopping shortly after Chivhu for a cup of tea, most of us were baffled by a calling bird but eventually caught sight of a very vocal and handsome Lizard Buzzard. Through to Nyazura, it was very picturesque although extremely dry with only a few animals, mostly goats chewing on left over mealie husks and a few skinny cattle while bird sightings mostly consisted of Pied Crows, a few Cattle Egrets and Fork-tailed Drongos as well as the odd scruffy bald necked chicken and a turkey or two.

The lodge is nestled half way up the side of a mountain and reached by a rather precipitous and rocky road. We understood that Madrugada, a Portuguese word, roughly translates to "the quiet time before dawn" and it is so appropriate when one looks out at the stunning view from the top lawn, particularly in the very early morning before the first birds start calling. Tall, graceful trees rise up from the Montane Forest below, over which one gazes out onto a magnificent vista of mountain upon mountain, way into the distant Mozambique range. Once unpacked, settled in and having explored the surrounds, Roger took some of us on a late afternoon walk through the forest below the lodge, while others stayed behind to enjoy the comings and goings at the bird bath - African Firefinches and Red-throated Twinspots, the flitting of several shimmering sunbirds amongst the beautiful, colourful Azaleas lining the top lawn, as well as two Ashy Flycatchers hawking from the low bushes, while a very friendly Tropical Boubou hopped ever closer searching for dinner.

Walking through the forest can be quite an eerie experience, particularly in the still of the late afternoon. As everywhere in Zimbabwe right now, it was terribly dry - much drier than we had expected - but still wonderful and totally different to what some of us had experienced before.

Little paths led off here, there and everywhere, beckoning us to follow. During the evening we could hear the African Wood-owls tuning up and the Fiery-necked Nightjar could be heard far off.

The following morning, Roger had organised for Peter, the world-renowned guide from Seldomseen, to give us a guided walk through the forest below the lodge. What an amazing two hours! For us novices, it was extremely difficult to see the birds, as the canopy and undergrowth were still quite thick despite the dryness. Peter is exceptional and was soon pointing out all manner of species, identifying mostly by sound at first. We would stop and stand quietly while glancing all around and a few times we managed to train our eyes through the foliage towards the sound and then pick up the bird. Peter was also able to "call" in several birds, which was amazing to watch.

At the end of the forest walk, we came out onto one of the roads and most of us had more luck seeing birds from there. In the eaves of one of the lodges, two Scarce Swifts* sat cuddling up, while below all manner of sunbirds - Variable, Scarlet-chested, Collared, Amethyst, Olive - flitted amongst the flowering bushes below, a small flock of Silvery-cheeked Hornbills were playing about in a stand of gum trees, raucously calling to each other, a pair of delightful African Firefinches scratched around on the road in front of us in the company of several Yellow-fronted Canaries and a female Yellow Bishop while Singing Cisticolas "sang" all around us and an African Emerald Cuckoo called in the distance (so Peter said, anyway!). We were all treated to a magnificent sighting of an Olive Bush-shrike intent on finding breakfast in a shrub very close to where we were standing and what made it extra special was that it was a buff morph specimen. A very obliging Brimstone Canary sat for ages on the power lines, allowing discussion as to how to identify it against the Yellow-fronted Canary.

Walking back through the forest, heading for the lodge for breakfast, Peter called in a Square-tailed Drongo and later a Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird that we all got a fleeting glimpse of. After a sumptuous brunch and a bit of a laze back at the lodge, Roger took us for another walk through the forest but on different paths, firstly to show us a magical fairy dell where forest ferns covered the forest floor before showing us an enormous strangler fig in the process of strangling probably one of the tallest trees in the forest. It was truly amazing as we climbing in, around and through this magnificent specimen. Then it was off along a rough and sometimes precipitous route to visit the mystical Chinamata Falls. Fortunately four of the less agile members of the party decided against climbing down to the viewpoint, which was just as well. As it was, those of us who did go down had a hilarious and probably more rapid descent than expected as we slid most of the way down on backsides! Again, because of the dry, not nearly as much water as usual going down the falls but still a magical sight.

On the Monday, we set off after breakfast for the Botanic Gardens. We were pleasantly surprised to find it still in reasonable shape, all things considered, and spent a few lovely hours, walking around or sitting quietly on a bench somewhere, soaking up the atmosphere. The Azaleas and Camellias near the pond were in full flower as were the bottle brush bushes so again, a myriad of shimmering, flitting sunbirds adding their sparkle to the glorious blooms.

Thick-billed Weavers were spotted in the reeds on the far side of the pond, illusive Livingstone's Turacos called continuously from the tall trees climbing up the side of the hill, while several bright eyed flycatchers hawking from the low branches of the bushes had some of us delving into bird books for identification.

*The Scarce Swift is a rare bird that was first found in the Vumba in about 1989 and was new to Harwin's list (*Honeyguide* 40 suppl.1) If identified correctly, two in the caves of a building is most unusual as they are not known to roost in them!

On then to Leopard Rock where we'd hoped to have a jaunt around the golf course. However, the course was closed as there was a competition running so we only had a short stroll down to the dam to see what we could see. Leaving there after a snack lunch, we stopped to view a Silvery-cheeked Hornbill at fairly close quarters – that casque is amazing - as well as a rather scruffy Samango monkey mum and her baby sitting close to the road. It seems that it is obligatory to stop in at Tony's Coffee Shop if visiting Bvumba and this was our next port of call, where, after inspecting everyone else's tea and cake, we made our choice of six huge slices of cake to share between the nine of us along with our preference of drinks. While waiting for tea, we birded from the front lawn, looking out over the still bare pear trees in front. Quite an experience that - tea at Tony's!

It was back to the lodge from there as time, sadly, had run out and the other planned activities had to be put on hold. Once back at the lodge, some just relaxed while others took the opportunity to walk off a bit of the chocolate with a late afternoon stroll. Going down a short path at the back of the lodge we were startled by a burst of distress calls from the Samangos, with bodies exploding through the canopy, and upon glancing up, saw an African Crowned Eagle skimming through the forest. We also came across a Red-capped Robin-chat, which obligingly hopped in and out of the bushes, virtually at our feet while we stood quietly by.

Rising early on our final morning, the view from the lodge was magnificent. The ghastly haze from wild fires, which had obscured most of the views the previous day, had cleared over night. The birds were just beginning to stir and in one of the tall trees butting up from below, a small troop of Samango monkeys was patiently waiting for the first rays of the sun, some of them eating off the fruit while the youngsters had a game of tag amongst the branches. Looking around at the back of the lodge, we managed to identify a couple of other birds –Black-tailed Waxbills and Sombre Greenbills, previously heard but not seen.

Over breakfast, we had a tally up of the number of species seen, some of us luckily adding a great number to our "life" list although still missing out on some we would have liked to have seen! Next visit perhaps? All in all we saw seventy-seven different birds. Quoting from a fabulous little book called "Bvumba - Magic in the Mist", part of the forward reads - "They say you have to be somewhat eccentric to live in the Bvumba..." We had a great weekend and yes, we did meet some wonderful characters!

Peri-urban Potter - 18 August Adele Edwards

A small but select group found the time to join in the latest in our series of 'potters' – when we go birding at places where one would not normally think of looking for birds. On this occasion the three venues were all cemeteries!! And again the number of birds and the number of species seen was a pleasant surprise. Our thanks to Judy Ross and Julia Dupree for organizing the event.

Talk on Vultures at The Boma, Hillside Dams - 7 September Helen Lewis / Adele Edwards

1st September was Vulture Awareness Day – a day set aside for promoting awareness of the status of vultures, many species of which are endangered or threatened. The following Friday Professor Peter Mundy gave us a talk on vultures, sharing with us his passion and enthusiasm for these birds. Worldwide vulture numbers are declining. Probably the best-documented case is that of the White-backed Vultures in India where over the last 40 years the population has decreased from millions to less than 60,000. The main cause of this decline is the use of the drug Diclofenac for the treatment of cattle. In India cattle are sacred and are not eaten by humans. Vultures usually devour the carcasses of any cattle that die. The Diclofenac, taken in with the cattle meat, builds up in the vultures where it causes kidney failure.

Africa's vultures are also on the decline. Forty years ago hooded vultures were common but this is no longer true. The Cape Griffon is threatened. There are a number of reasons for these declining numbers including electrocution on power lines, poisoning – when the vultures eat the carcasses of predators which have been poisoned by farmers, and a more recent but growing threat where vultures are being killed for use in traditional medicine.

Our thanks to Peter for his very interesting talk and also to the staff at The Boma.

Bird outings

Birding weekend at Mana July 2012

We stayed at the Makuti travel lodge, which is a great place to stay and bird - throughout the day is lovely babble and chatter of bird repertoire. Cabanis's Bunting is common along with an assortment of sunbirds, flycatchers and Helmet-shrikes.

The escarpment produced great African Hawk-eagles, African Crowned Eagle, Augur Buzzard and Yellow-billed kite. Late afternoon on the edge of the escarpment boasted brilliant views of Mottled Spinetail and Mosque Swallow.

The following morning we entered the park very early for the day - we clocked up most of the Vultures and Snake-eagles and the general birding was great and the game viewing was delightful.

We got to the river at about eleven o'clock and were treated by a pair of Plain-backed Pipit** (lifer for my wife) and a crippling view of a female Greater Painted-snipe (another lifer) probing on the edge of a mud bank. Accompanying here were Wood Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper and Common Greenshank (all fairly early arrivals). We sat and fished a mere 20 feet from a 13 foot crocodile which clearly did not want to enter the ice cold water.

We headed back to the car for lunch and noticed no sign of Lillian's Lovebirds. The Winter Thorns (or albidas) were loaded with fruit so it is only a matter of time before they arrive in their hordes.

Our drive back to Makuti was amazing - plenty of elephant, Lillian's Lovebird in the Mopane and an Ayres's Hawk-eagle four feet from our vehicle paying absolutely no attention to us at all! This was the third and final lifer and a great one at that.

It is such a joy to be out in the bush revelling in the perfection and purity of nature!

Jono and Jen Francis

** The Plain-backed Pipit is another rare bird beset by identification problems that hasn't been recorded from the Zambezi Valley since Atlassing days, when there were very few records. What records there were, were 'cleaned' from the atlas data and it doesn't appear in *Roberts* or field guides but is included in Faansie Peacock's *Pipits of southern Africa*. Its status is unclear and all records require substantiation.

Taking relatives from Cape Town we went camping at Hippo Pools for the weekend.

We heard the African Wood-owl above Mahogany Lodge, and later we found the feathers of one that had been eaten by something (maybe genet). Ian Jarvis told us that Leon had found the body of a Pel's Fishing-owl under an African Crowned Eagle nest. The Pel's Fishing-owl had just returned, it had not been there during winter. So maybe there is another pair. Close by we found a confiding Verreaux's Eagle-owl chick. Tadiou saw 3 or 4 Southern Carmine Bee-eaters, but I only saw 1 on 9th September 2012. Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters were heard at Amm's Mine, where a Lanner Falcon had a brood of three chicks in the old nest of a Black Stork, and nearby in the old Lanner nest was one whole abandoned Lanner egg. Dickinson's Kestrels were going in and out of the old Hamerkop nest below the weir, and Wahlberg's Eagle were seen mating near the hide at the dam, and at their nest.

African Green-pigeon were difficult to see but commonly heard. One Eastern Saw-wing was seen with Lesser Striped Swallows at the dam, and a pair of Familiar Chats was there as well. We must have seen 10 flocks of White-crested Helmet-shrikes, but only once was a White-breasted Cuckooshrike with them (They are commonly seen together). 6 species of flycatcher were on the riverbank, Ashy, Pale, Chin-spot Batis, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Livingstone's and the African Paradise-flycatcher. (The first recorded this year by me).

There were only 4 sunbird species in all those flowers but upwards of 50 male Scarlet-chested and only one Collared Sunbird, the other two being Amethyst and White-bellied. The commonest bird was undoubtedly the Yellow-throated Petronia; maybe we saw 3 or 400 always feeding in the Burning Bush, *Combretum microphyllum* flowers.

The only weavers seen were 2 Red-headed. A small flock of Red-backed Mannikins were on the riverbank degraded by the gold panners, and two Golden-breasted Buntings were further inland in drier leafless woodland.

A new camp, also owned by the Wilderness Africa Trust, is opening up at Nyagande, about 10km upstream, on the Mwera side of the river, and in time it will be good to compare the avifauna of the two places, called Sunugukayi, it is next to an old D.C.'s sub office, and a wreck of a campfire project. Mutawatawa is about 10 kms away. It overlooks a nice pool and maybe the fishing will be good

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African Finfoot sightings:

KYLE (LAKE MTURIKWE)

1. Near Glen Clova through Popoteke Gorge.
2. Upper reaches of Mtilikwe Gorge, and in the Gorge.
3. Upper reaches of Popoteke Gorge.
4. Upper reaches of Mucheke River and at Hippo Gorge.
5. Point of Bushman Ridge at entrance of Bompst Bay.

CLAW DAM (UMSWESWE)

1. Riverside creek left of club site.
2. Little Makarati River, upper reaches.
3. Main Makarati River near road bridge.
4. Umsweswe River near Umsweswe Ext. and upper reaches of river.

BIRI DAM (HUNYANI)

1. Upper Urindi River.

2. Upper Hunyani (Manyame) River.

LAKE CUNNINGHAM REC. PARK (MAYFAIR DAM)

1. Rietfontein shoreline.
2. Upper Insiza River.

LAKE MANYUCHI

1. Mundi River, upper reaches.
2. Nuanetsi River, upper reaches.
3. Manyuchi River, upper reaches.

MAZWIKADEI

1. Upper Munene River.
2. Upper Mukwadzi River.
3. Rockface downstream of Ayeshire club site.

OSBORNE DAM.

1. Nyatanda River.
2. Odzi River.
3. Rockface just upstream of dam wall.

POOL DAM.

1. Upper Umfuli (Mupfure) River.

BLACKMOREVALE DAM (CHAKARI)

SUSUGI DAM (RAFFINGORA DAM)

DARWINDALE DAM (LAKE MANYAME)

1. Gwebi River.

Of course the Zambezi Chobe junction, (Mombove Rapids) fairly common sightings.

Clive Harris *harrisca@zol.co.zw*

Tail Feathers

Geoff Hawksley (who lives near Juliasdale, Nyanga), about 5km down the Chamakowa Rd) saw (and took a photo of) a Swee Waxbill on a birdbath in his garden on the 8th August 2012. He often gets the Common Waxbill and the Yellow-bellied Waxbill, but he had not seen the Swee Waxbill itself before now. He has since had fleeting glimpses of it, and it seems to have a mate.

A first for me...

A Red-backed Mannikin in my Monavale garden on Sunday 23rd, 2012.

Fiona Greiffenberg

Contributions for The Babbler 109 December 2012/ January 2013 may be sent to the Editor anytime between now and 14th November 2012.

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