

THE BABBLER

Newsletter of



BirdLife Zimbabwe
The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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PLEASE NOTE: New e-mail address for Julia Duprée: daliadupree@gmail.com

Subscription Renewal

Your membership is important to BLZ, whether or not you are able to attend the 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 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 the *Babbler*, every two months. The more members we have the more effective we can be at lobbying government, communities and local and international organisations. The BLZ membership year runs from April to March. Subscription fees are in USD and have not been increased this year, but donations towards *Honeyguide* and our other publications and activities are welcomed.

| | |
|--|----------|
| Individual or Family members (including children under 17) | \$ 25.00 |
| Pensioners (65 and over) Students and juniors | \$ 15.00 |
| Schools (high density) | \$ 25.00 |
| Schools (private) | \$ 50.00 |
| Corporate | \$ 75.00 |
| Rest of Africa | \$ 40.00 |
| Rest of World | \$ 50.00 |

Carolyn Dennison is responsible for membership issues, so please send all communications regarding new, current or old members, renewals, payments, change of details and other membership-related queries to her at rolly@zol.co.zw Tel: 747567 or 0772- 210240. Sylvia Muzavazi at the national office will continue to take your membership subscription payments or they can be given to Carolyn or a committee member at any outing. You can also deposit into the **BirdLife Zimbabwe** account **at 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 advise Carolyn by e-mail or by telephone.

BRANCH ACTIVITIES
Mashonaland Branch

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.

August/September 2013

| | | |
|----------|---------------------------------------|------|
| Mukuvisi | Sunday 4 th August 2013 | 0700 |
| | Sunday 1 st September 2013 | 0630 |
| | Sunday 6 th October 2013 | 0630 |

| | | |
|---------------|--|------|
| Chivero | Sunday 8 th September 2013 | 0630 |
| Monavale Vlei | Sunday 18 th August 2013 | 0700 |
| | Sunday 15 th September 2013 | 0700 |
| | Sunday 20 th October 2013 | 0700 |

4th Sunday Outings

| | | |
|--|--|------|
| Sunday 25 th August 2013 | Ewanrigg Bot Gardens Meet at CABS Northridge Park | 0700 |
| Sunday 22 nd September 2013 | Mbizi Game Park Meet Mukuvisi Woodlands Office | 0630 |
| Sunday 27 th October 2013 | Wild Geese Meet CABS Northridge Park | 0630 |

2nd Sat Outings

| | | |
|--|---------------------|------|
| Saturday 10 th August 2013 | Greystone Park | 0700 |
| Saturday 14 th September 2013 | Botanic Gardens Hre | 0700 |
| Saturday 12 October 2013 | Haka Park | 0700 |

3rd Thursday Meetings at Avondale Sports Club 1730 for 1800

| | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------|
| 15 th August 2013 | Report on Canada Trip – Tony Wood | 0600 |
| 19 th September 2013 | Snakes – Steve Durrant | 0600 |
| 17 th October 2013 | Gonarezhou/Vultures – Clive Stockil? | 0600 |

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.

Directions to regular venues:

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

2013 BLZ Mashonaland Away Outings

Outing 1. Hwange / Vic Falls as previously advertised

Outing 2.

There will be an away outing to Hippo Pools Wilderness Camp over the fourth weekend in September 2013 - arrive Friday 27th, leave on Monday 30th. All BLZ Members are invited. There are chalets at the camp at \$30:00 per person per night (PPPN) but you can also camp at \$10:00 PPPN. Brunch & Dinner will cost \$25:00 PPPD.

We look forward to seeing: Red-throated Twinspots, Pel's Fishing-owl, Livingstone's Flycatchers and other Hippo Pools specials.

Whoever is interested in going on this trip should email: talegria@zol.co.zw before 15th of September. A deposit of \$50.00 books a place for this outing.

Outing 3.

When all are sweltering in the heat at the end of October we will be going to a “cool place” in the Bvumba Mountains where full board and lodging will be provided. This outing is scheduled for the fourth weekend of October, arrive Friday 26th, leave on Monday 29th after the morning birding session. This is a repeat trip of last year’s successful outing and again we look forward to seeing Green Twinspots, Narina Trogons and other Bvumba specials.

We will be staying at Madrugada and Roger Castelin will be our host. Although more accommodation has been built since the last trip, there will be a maximum limit of 14 birders. A deposit of \$50.00 secures a booking for this outing.

Book by email to: talegria@zol.co.zw by 15th of October 2013. All BLZ Members are invited.

Please contact Tony Alegria on talegria@zol.co.zw or phone 490375 or cell 0772- 438697 if you want to book or ask any questions.

Matabeleland Branch

3 August: Waterfowl counts at Cowdray Park and SAST

The winter waterfowl counts will take place at Cowdray Park and SAST on Saturday 3 August, all day. For more information phone Julia Dupree – 246269, Helen Lewis – 242285 or Sandy McAdam – 242431.

18 August: Walk on NUST campus

We will be returning to the NUST campus to continue adding to our bird list for this area. We recorded 63 species within four hours on our last visit and hope to better that. There are many parts of the campus we have not yet visited. Once again we will be able to benefit from the company of Professor Peter Mundy. Meet at the main entrance on Cecil Avenue at 7:00. For more information contact Adele Edwards, phone 0712 366917.

17-20 September: WEZ Hwange Game Census

The annual 24-hour static water-hole game census, organized by Wildlife & Environment Zimbabwe Matabeleland Branch, will take place in Hwange National Park between 17 & 20 September. All teams are also asked to complete BLZ field cards and more and more interest is being shown in this each year.

Other Areas

Mashonaland South (Kadoma) – Contact: Margaret Parrock on 068-22005 or her daughter, Coralee on 0772-739370.

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 0773-524844 or pgwidibira@gmail.com for details.

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

Mashonaland East Natural History

Future events 2013

Aug – Sun 11 at 7.30am Rakodzi. This coincides with the holiday weekend

Sep - Sun 8 **7am** Peterhouse

Oct – Sun 13 **7am** Goshu

Our usual spring/summer camp will be organized to take place during October

Nov – Sun 10 7am Rakodzi

December – There is no organized walk

Please note that the monthly walks have been rescheduled to fit in with leave that is being taken by some of our members

Recent Reports And Sightings

Mashonaland

African Waterfowl Census

January & July 2012, January 2013

During the time under review, more than 70 species of waterbirds were recorded in Mashonaland, on the settling ponds in Chegutu, pans in Seki, vleis in Harare, 2 rivers, the Zambezi and the Mazowe, a few large dams, and some very small dams.

| Sites Covered | No Recorded & Species Total | | |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| | January 2012 | July 2012 | January 2013 |
| Art Farm vlei, Harare District | 75/9 | 917/9 | 64/7 |
| Ballantyne Park, small dam, Harare | | 8/3 | 22/6 |
| Biri, large dam, Zvimba District | | 929/36 | |
| Blair, small dam, Harare | | | 2/2 |
| Brookfields, 3 small dams, Harare | | 12/7 | 34/5 |
| Canon Kopje Farm, 2 small dams, Zvimba District | | | 29/9 |
| Chikokerano Pan, Seki District | | | 106/18 |
| Cleveland, large dam, Harare | | 36/10 | |
| Country Club Golf Course, small dam, Harare | | 33/7 | 35/6 |
| David Whitehead Settling Ponds, Chegutu District | | 41/4 | 130/14 |
| Greengrove, small dam, Harare | | 95/19 | 218/14 |
| Gletwyn, small dam, Harare District | | | 26/6 |
| Greystone Park, small dam, Harare | | | 13/8 |
| Hippo Pools, Mazowe river, Shamva District | 44/9 | 14/8 | 10/6 |
| Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary, large dam, Zvimba District | 363/22 | 227/16 | 97/8 |
| Lake Manyame, Zvimba District | | 2355/39 | 902/37 |
| Lake Manyame, Zvimba District* | | 3036/33 | 499/32 |
| Monavale Vlei, Harare District** | 209/22 | 109/11 | 47/13 |
| Mongwe Camp, Zambezi river, Hurungwe District | | 122/22 | |
| Mukuvisi Woodlands, small dam, Harare | 39/8 | 11/4 | 23/10 |
| Ngezi, large dam, Chegutu | | 139/11 | |
| Nyamepi Camp, Mana Pools NP, Zambezi river, Hurungwe District | | 191/22 | |
| Nyamungayi Pan, Seki District | | | 578/25 |
| Pamuzinda Lodge – dam, Chegutu District | | 38/4 | |
| Pamuzinda Lodge – river, Chegutu District | | 14/7 | |

* Two teams saw different birds

** Seen in one month

Species Highlights

African Darter *Anhinga rufa*. Has almost disappeared from Lake Chivero, where there were hundreds, probably due to uncontrolled netting. However, 46 were breeding at Biri Dam on 25 July 2012.

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*. 51 were seen at Lake Chivero on 7 January 2012, 22 were seen on 12 July 2012 and 64 on 19 January 2013 both on Lake Manyame; these were very high counts, showing they have benefitted from the huge growth of water lilies and waterweed recently. There could easily be more than 5 times that amount on Lake Manyame.

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* 2 were at Lake Chivero on 7th January 2012. One was seen on Lake Manyame 12 July 2012.

African Sacred Ibis *Threskiornis aethiopicus*. There has been a huge population increase in this species over the last 15 years or so around Harare. 28 were at Art Farm Vlei 4 July 2012, 66 at Lake Manyame 12 July 2012, 37 were at Biri dam 25 July 2012 and 175 and breeding on the Greengrove Nature Reserve Dam 20 January 2013.

Hadedda Ibis *Bostrychia hagedash*. While this bird has not yet appeared in Harare, it was seen at Bally Vaughan in the adjacent Goromonzi District in 2009. A more normal sighting was 3 at Nyamepi Camp, Mana Pools National Park, Zambezi River 13-14 by Bud and Liz Whitaker.

African Spoonbill *Platalea alba*. Was breeding at Biri Dam, 46 were seen on 25 July 2012? 10 were seen at Chikokerano Pan on 3 February 2013. It is nice to see that the population in Mashonaland is increasing.

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*. They are only occasional visitors to Mashonaland dams, and more often seen further west in Zimbabwe on more saline water bodies. 4 were at Biri Dam (2 adults and 2 juveniles) on 25th July 2012.

African Pygmy-goose *Nettapus auritus*. This species should have benefitted from the huge growth of waterweeds, but it seems not to have. However, Di Rushforth saw 3 on 19 January 2013 at Lake Manyame.

African Black Duck *Anas sparsa*. Once called the Black River Duck, 3 were at Hippo Pools, Mazowe river on 15 January 2012, one was seen in Mukuvisi Woodlands 6 January 2013, so close to Harare where I think 2 pairs persist. An unusual sighting was one on Chikokerano Pan on 3 February 2013, a habitat where they are not usually recorded.

Red-chested Flufftail *Sarothrura rufa*. One at Monavale Vlei 12 July 2012.

Streaky-breasted Flufftail *Sarothrura boehmi*. One at Monavale Vlei January 2012.

Corn Crake *Crex crex*. One at Monavale Vlei January 2012.

African Crake *Crecopsis egregia*. At Monavale Vlei January 2012 and at Art Farm Vlei 1 January 2013.

Lesser Moorhen *Gallinula angulata*. At Hideaway, Lake Manyame, 19 January 2013

African Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio madagascariensis*. 20 at Lake Manyame, 12 July 2012, 3 at Greengrove in July 2012, and 3 at Chikokerano Pan on 3 February 2013. They seem to be getting more common than they were.

African Finfoot *Podica senegalensis*. Penny Rockingham-Gill noted a female attack a male Hippo on 17 July 2010 at Hippo Pools, Shamva. While not part of the review period, the note was written up in Honeyguide and a further note said this behaviour had been seen 50 years before, but had not got into the literature. Maybe in other parts of Africa this has been seen. In our visits there the Finfoot disappeared, but in February 2013, it was again seen near the lodges.

Lesser Jacana *Microparra capensis*. 14 at Nyamungayi Pan and 2 more at Chokokerano Pan on the same day, 3 February 2013, were good counts. This bird is not often recorded in the African Waterbird Census.

Grey-headed Gull *Larus cirrocephallus*. 404 counted by Di Rushforth on 22 July 2012 at Lake Manyame must be a record, certainly a very large concentration.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*. Di and Basil Rushforth saw 2, and Bruce and Doreen Bolnick saw one, on 19 January 2013. So rarely seen in Southern Africa that it did not appear on the old African Waterfowl Census form. 32+ sightings by birdwatchers in this country in the last 60 years.

Common Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*. Also seen on 19 January 2013, at Hideaway, Lake Manyame by Bruce & Doreen Bolnick. It was a young bird and Bruce is familiar with the bird in North America. This is a very rare vagrant to this country. Bruce says he is 60% sure of his sighting and it could have been little else. Hopefully, other people will look for it. I. Riddell, D. Wakeling and P. Ward recorded an immature Lesser Black-backed Gull here on 24 January – was this a different bird?

African Skimmer *Rynchops flavirostris*. Six were seen on 19th January at Lake Manyame. They occasionally visit large dams in Zimbabwe. One of the Threatened Birds of Africa

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*. Two were seen on 19th January 2013 at Hideaway, Lake Manyame, and one was unusual at Biri Dam on 25 July 2012, when they should be in Europe.

African Fish-eagle *Haliaeetus vocifer*. 10 were at Lake Chivero, 8 July 2012, 26 at Lake Manyame 12 July 2012 and 11 at Biri on 25 July 2012. So maybe a population of one bird per 5 km of shoreline at the Manyame Lakes? Manyame River's three dams seem very attractive to fish-eagles, especially the immatures that have been kicked out of the breeding territories on the Zambezi.

African Marsh-harrier *Circus ranivorus*. One seen at Monavale Vlei, January 2012, and another at Nyamungayi Pan, 3 February 2013. In some years this bird is not recorded so seeing them again is encouraging.

Pallid Harrier *Circus macrourus*. Another bird, which was not on, the old African Waterfowl Census forms. Again seen by the Bolnicks's at Lake Manyame on 19th January 2013.

Comment

For one reason or another our shorebird counts (greenshank and sandpipers etc.) were very low. Certainly on the dams this is due to pollution by sewage or washed down fertilizer, which has grown aquatic weeds on the shorelines of the dams.

If birds are indicator species of our environment our shorebirds are telling us not all is well for them.

As a group not many storks were seen.

In Zimbabwe we have very modest figures compared to the many thousands of birds in Zambia; one of their sightings was of 2000 skimmers in flight at once, in front of a grazing herd of lechwe. As I wrote this report our Journal *Honeyguide*, 58(2) came to hand. This includes a nice article entitled *Monitoring Birds through counting and ringing around Manyame Lakes, Zimbabwe*, by N. Chiweshe and A. Caron (pp.138-159) on research done for a large scale avian influenza project, from 2007-2011, on Lakes Chivero and Manyame. In it they mention the disappearance of the Darter, last seen 13 May 2009, and a Malagasy Pond-heron *Ardeola idea* on Lake Manyame, 2 July 2009.

Hadedda Ibis. One was seen foraging with 6 Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* on 6th July on Lake Chivero, Zvimba District, also one district away from Harare.

A Cape Shoveler *Anas smithii*, ringed at Drummond Farm, Lake Manyame on 14 November 2008, and 28 birds seen on 4 July 2007. This bird is slowly getting more common on the Manyame lakes.

Another surprise was that only one Greater Painted-snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* was recorded on 3 November 2008 at Roger Beal Farm, Lake Manyame.

African Snipe *Gallinago nigripennis* were much more numerous and 35 were caught and ringed 2008-2011.

Acknowledgements

The following are thanked for taking part: Tony Alegria, James Ball, Bruce and Doreen Bolnick, Rolf Chenaux-Repond, Dave Dalziel, Richard Dennison, Ken Dixon, Fiona Greiffenberg, David Hasluck, Innes Louw, Geoff Lowe, Alex Masterson, Jimmy Muropa, Tadious Ndadzira, Duncan Parkes, Jane Rautenbach, Ian Riddell, Penny Rockingham-Gill, Di and Basil Rushforth, Dorothy Wakeling, Bud and Liz Whitaker, Peter Ward from Vancouver and the Mashonaland Bird Club. Also Gill and Charlie Bruce sent a form from Gorongosa Game Reserve, Mozambique.

David V. Rockingham-Gill Co-Ordinator

Mashonaland East Natural History Society - Newsletter # 115

Chairman - Peter Hadingham, tel. 04-497035. Secretary - Colin de Beer tel. 0279-23931

Report back from Imire 16 to 19 May 2013

It was a most enjoyable visit for the 18 participants that visited Imire Game Park.

Fifteen MENHS members and 3 guests set off from Marondera [2 from Harare] at about 9.30am on Thursday and met at Sable Lodge. We were welcomed with a lovely cup of tea and biscuits before being escorted to the Bush Camp by our designated guide Trymore.

While quenching our thirst at the Lodge we were amused by the resident very fat well-behaved domestic pig that joined our company hoping for some crumbs to come her way.

The Bush Camp has recently been fully renovated and a large classroom has been added to the infrastructure. There was ample and very comfortable accommodation for everyone regarding sleeping arrangements, ablutions, kitchen facilities and a large central boma where we gathered for our meals and meetings.

Once again we thank our catering ladies most sincerely for the fantastic meals they provided at lunch times and evenings, and Penny for the bacon and egg breakfast that she brought for Sunday brunch.

We started off with 2 days of good birding in lovely warm and sunny conditions and in the evenings we enjoyed sitting comfortably and warmly around the bonfire sipping our drinks before moving in to the roomy boma for the evening meal.

Saturday was drizzly at times and rather spoilt our birding plans for that day but we enjoyed walking again on Sunday morning despite it being cloudy and cool.

The count for the outing was 105 birds including a Secretarybird and a Burnt-necked Eremomela [which was seen in the exact same area on both our previous visits in 2004 and 2006].

The total was achieved with the excellent knowledge and skill provided by our guides Pete Hadingham and Julia Pierini and by the contributions of Pete Banks and Gordon Wilson whilst birding from the canoe

I must also mention that Trymore the guide was very pleasant and keen to learn as much as he could about birds. He took us on some interesting drives around the park [despite the Mazda getting stuck in the mud one afternoon] and we ticked 18 different mammals during our stay.

One morning close to base camp one of the rhinos on its way to the grazing area predictably started behaving badly and some birding walkers had to hurry back to the camp enclosure while 6 others endeavoured to hide behind a rather narrow thorn tree. There was no problem though as the handler quickly got the situation under control, but the intended walk became a drive instead. They like to refer to the incident as a narrow escape.

Many thanks Kate and Imire for such a wonderful outing.

Monavale Vlei Report June-July 2013

Winter is almost over and birders usually ask for that extra "special" species seen – whatever that means! Birds being birds I always believe there is something special about them, however "common" they might be.

An African Hoopoe face to face with an Olive Grass Snake? A Cape Turtle-dove cornered by a Common Fiscal and it retaliates, OR simply a Fork-tailed Drongo mercilessly harassing a Long-

crested Eagle? Each season birds never cease to amaze and amuse and that is what makes them special.

Winter at Monavale Vlei and its environs had pretty good sightings of African Black Duck, Lizard Buzzard, Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, Little Bee-eaters, Yellow-fronted Canaries, Black-chested Snake-eagle, Long-crested Eagle, African Stonechat, African Wattled Lapwings, Marabou Storks, Lanner Falcon, Pied Kingfisher, Malachite Kingfisher, African Cuckoo Hawk, Groundscraper Thrush and a new listing of a Brown-crowned Tchagra, seen on a 3rd Sunday outing of 19 May 2013.

As I write, the Vlei hasn't yet burnt and is still intact (pretty good). A closer look within these grasses will likely yield notably Zitting Cisticola, Croaking Cisticola and Rattling Cisticola. If you are lucky along Marimba Stream a Levillant's Cisticola might be found.

Jimmy Muropa, Monavale Vlei Scout 0772 376506

Pictures of birds from Monavale Vlei by **Jimmy Muropa**



Red-collared Widowbird



Groundscraper Thrush



Yellow-throated Longclaw



European Bee-eater

Matabeleland

**An irregular member's report on the BLZ AGM at Gonarezhou National Park, June 8 2013
PAUL HUBBARD: Independent researcher & guide and Associate Researcher, Natural History Museum, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe**

Gonarezhou is a fantastic game park that has long excited my imagination. The happy decision taken by the BLZ Council to hold the society's 32nd AGM in this remote wilderness area provided me with an excuse to visit this National Park for the first time. I was not disappointed. Arriving at Chipinda Pools a couple of days before the meeting gave us ample time to explore this massive park, the second biggest in the country and paradoxically, it seems, the least developed. I feel this is a benefit rather than a hindrance though because it gives one a true taste of wilderness. Once you move away from the comfortably developed Chipinda Pools campsite, it feels as though the horizon is merely the next destination, rather than a limit.

The park is clearly benefitting from its partnership with the Frankfurt Zoological Society. The roads, in the main are quite good, especially compared to other National Parks in the country. We observed repairs and upgrades to infrastructure wherever we travelled. The people were repairing roads, fixing directional signs, and even building new facilities. The tented camp at Chipinda Pools is a new development that will accommodate two people very easily and six with a great squash; you had better be good friends or close family if more than four of you are staying in them! We opted to camp, however and enjoyed hot water thanks to solar geysers that performed well, even in the often-cloudy conditions.

Chilojo Cliffs provide the park with its most spectacular scenery and have to be seen in person to be fully appreciated. The cliffs are basically the eroded northern face of a massive sandstone hill, and the multi-hued bands of sandstone seem to constantly transform colour in the changing sunlight during the day. We visited them twice, once to look at the vast majesty looming high above the Runde River and the second time to ascend the cliffs from the southern end and gaze at the incredible vistas. Thick *mopane* forests, studded with mighty baobabs which dwarf even the elephants that meander along the river banks stretch beyond human vision, and the reds, yellows and orange winter foliage adopted by most trees complement the vividly coloured sandstone. These are sights that should be seen and treasured by everyone who lives in this country.

The area near the rivers, as you'd expect in such an arid region, is a birder's paradise. I had my first ever sighting of a Blue-spotted Wood-dove, hiding in a flock of the more common Emerald-spotted Wood-doves at Chivilila campsite, overlooking the large Selawandoma Falls. Pied Kingfishers abound and watching their delicate predatory movements as they hover above the numerous pools and dams is a delight. Late one night in our camp at Chipinda Pools I heard a Pel's Fishing-owl, uttering its mournful call into the inky darkness. Bateleur abounded and watching their graceful antics provided much entertainment in the hot and lazy afternoons. The large numbers of Parrots, both Meyer's and Brown-headed, is a delight to the soul after having recently read of their endangered status. As someone who spends the majority of their working life in the Matopos it was a taste of home to see a majestic pair of Verreaux's Eagles soaring in the thermals above the imposing Chilolo Cliffs. According to Clive Stockil, there are only two nesting pairs known in the whole area so this was a special sighting indeed.

A convocation of vultures hinted at the presence of a kill, but we could not get a visual on the carcass. More exciting than the thought of seeing lions (or any other predators) was a confirmed sighting of Cape Vultures, together with the usual Lappet-faced, White-backed and White-headed. Speaking informally at the AGM, Clive Stockhill reported on worrying statistics on vultures killed through Temic (Aldecarb) poisoning in the park; almost 300 in three years. Poachers will deliberately poison carcasses to kill the vultures that are often a tell-tale sign of their nefarious actions while the birds are also being hunted and killed to provide necessary *muti* supplies for the market in traditional medicines in Zimbabwe and South Africa. What can BLZ do to help arrest this worrying plunder?

At a shade over two hours, this has to be one of the shortest AGMs on record, fact for which I am grateful to Tony Wood and Julia Pierini for their handling of the timing of various reports. The BLZ Council must be commended for arranging for the attendance of the office staff through a slight surcharge on those who booked accommodation through BLZ. It was a pleasure to hear from all of them about their on-going work and efforts in education and research. From listening to the various reports, BLZ has many achievements to be proud of, especially in light of the financial misappropriations, which nearly crippled the organisation. The future looks bright though because of hard decisions taken by the Council and I for one am convinced a corner has been turned. Time will tell.

Post-AGM, we sat on the destroyed Runde River Bridge and watched a magnificent sunset. Egyptian Geese swam gracefully on the pools of water that were transformed into liquid gold by the dying rays of the setting sun. For those who took part in the discussion on what happened to the bridge, the real story, as told to me by Colin Saunders, is that during the 1970s civil war, the bridge was knocked down by an adventurous freedom fighter called Jekanyika, using recoil-less rifle. He wheeled it to the bridge under cover of a large herd of cattle, whose spoor eliminated the tracks of the gun when he had done the job. The bridge was repaired, and was then washed away by the huge floods caused by Cyclone Eline in the year 2000. So both stories being told around the fires were right! The evening social braai was a welcome chance to swap news with a few friends and colleagues in the society.

We spent a couple more days in the Park, travelling around, game viewing and bird watching. I cannot wait to revisit this park again in the near future. Paradoxically and perhaps strangely I also look forward to the next AGM because it will hopefully be hosted outside of Harare; the Matobo Hills, Eastern Highlands, Victoria Falls, Mana Pools are all possible contenders and birders' paradises.

For those visiting the area in the future, I have no trouble recommending the best book I have yet discovered on the area: *Gonarezhou: A place for elephants* written and published by local doyen Colin Saunders. Now in its second edition, the book is an invaluable companion to the area and its ecology, history and future. John Osborne's trilogy (*A Guiding Son*, *A Ranging Son* and *In the Shadow of a Baobab*) and Allan Wright's *Valley of the Ironwoods* and *Grey Ghosts at Buffalo Bend* are wonderful personal introductions to the Park in its early days.

Trip to Umfula Adventures – 22 June

Helen Lewis

Umfula Adventures.... getting there was quite an adventure.... the road after the end of the tar was not to be taken at speed, but careful manoeuvring around the goats, rocks, cattle, donkeys, stones, wash-ways, scotch-carts, etc., was well worth it. Breath-taking views of the hills and valleys as we approached the homestead gave us a real sense of anticipation of a special day out. On arrival at the Umfula homestead we were warmly greeted by the owner, Ralph Strydom who provided unending pots of tea, chocolate brownies, hot cross buns, and homemade rusks while we sat on the beautifully manicured front lawn overlooking the valley below and were treated to birdlife at its best. A Lilac-breasted Roller, several Fork-tailed Drongos and a Crested Barbet squabbled over something mysteriously only known to themselves, flitting from the fence

to a small tree near our tea tray. (I think the drongos were eying our Chocolate brownies!!) There were many Grey Go-away-birds and Greater Blue-eared Starlings enjoying the berries in the trees nearby who were joined by weavers, Black-headed Orioles and others. With the proliferation of birdlife around the tea table it was hard to drag ourselves away and take a walk down the riverbed below. But we braved it and had a lovely couple of hours among the trees and also out into the Bushveld in search of additions to our list. All in all we sighted about 45 species in and around the farmhouse and in the bush around the riverbed. After our return from the walk we were met with more tea, a jug of cold water, and more chocolate brownies and hot cross buns!!

We left the homestead to return to Bulawayo and decided to “pop in” to the nearby dam to see if there was anything of note there. We were well rewarded. After arriving and seeing only two Egyptian Geese, we decided to take Ralph’s advice and walk around the small hill to the rest of the dam area. What a surprise! On one small rocky promontory there was a Hadedda Ibis, Water Thick-knee, African Pied Wagtail, Three-banded Plover and a Malachite Kingfisher. We continued round the hill to see two huge crocodiles sunning themselves on the bank. They did not appreciate our presence and took to the water. We then disturbed a Giant Kingfisher and mate, Pied Kingfishers, Red-billed Teal and a solitary African Black Duck. A pair of African Hawk-eagles soared above the dam as we were preparing to leave – a great finale to a fabulous day.

All in all during the day we saw or heard 67 species and had a memorable day. It was a pity only 5 members took part.

Tail Feathers

An interesting observation of mammal/avian behaviour!

On the first morning of our annual dassie count in the Matobo National Park, with telescope set up to zoom in on any unsuspecting dassies emerging from their cosy dens to soak up the early morning sun which was creeping slowly down from the heights of tallest kopjes, turning the jumble of massive boulders tumbling into the Maleme ravine a beautiful golden colour, we spied two klipspringers, lying sunning themselves as well.

A short time later, they were joined by two others and while three of the animals bounded off with breath-taking leaps across the massive boulders, one animal remained, standing stock still almost camouflaged against the grey of the rocks. A Red-winged Starling flew down onto his head and started administering a facial, pecking away between his horns! This bird then fluttered down on the rock near his front hooves while another Red-winged Starling took over, landing on his back near his head and proceeding to peck away inside each of his ears. This went on for perhaps eight to ten minutes. As the scene was some way away across the gorge, we weren’t sure if the starling hopping around at the klipspringer’s front hooves was benefitting from its friend’s investigation of the antelope’s ears, but judging by its behaviour, it certainly looked like it. Just thought this might be of interest to some!

John and Jenny Brebner – Matabeleland Branch, BLZ

My Regular Visitor

Living in Avondale in a small complex with a small garden, I have a mandatory compost heap in the corner. I also have two Pied Crows who regularly visit my compost and I have noticed they like eggshells and any other small offering they find. Recently I had two pork chop bones (I usually give these to a friend for her dog) and decided to throw these on the pile. The crow must have been watching, as he was down as soon as I went inside. I watched him remove the big bone on to the lawn, pick at it very fastidiously and with it in his beak he strutted across the lawn to the flower bed, where he dropped it at the edge of the bed and then proceeded to cover it with dried leaves blown there. What a clever bird!

Jeanette Cross

Mystery at Hamerkop nest.

At 8am on 4th June five Hamerkop were having a noisy interaction at their nest and around our house, which made such a racket that it attracted the attention of Pied Crows, Lizard Buzzard, Black-shouldered Kite, Long-crested Eagle and Gabar Goshawk. What a spectacle. After all these visitors had left three Hamerkop lined up on the roof to regain their composure.

Their nest is at eye level for us just near our boundary fence in the fork of a Msasa tree, which is being strangulated by an indigenous fig tree. Both trees are on the slope of the hill in the neighbour’s property. The entrance we cannot see as is placed on the eastern side. In mid March a massive hailstorm brought down a carpet of twigs and branches from the large Common fig, Jacaranda and Msasa trees. The Hamerkop arrived the following morning and collected this material, together with the recently slashed grass, and worked diligently making

their nest, which they completed over the next two months, but maintenance continues all the time. They are usually very active around the nest in the early mornings and evenings. During the day they are out and about collecting their diet of Platannas and whatever else they enjoy, mostly from our dam at the bottom of our property but now that this has dried up they are obliged to seek their meals further from home probably at the pond down the road.



Hamerkops on the roof **D. Wakeling**

This morning, 20 July, I noticed a snowy white patch on top of the nest thinking it must be a wad of cotton wool. Through binos it turned out to be a dead chick about 20 cm long. Apparently this has been here for at least a week but was overlooked as Hamerkop bring all sorts of rubbish to construct their nests. Also on top of the nest is what looks like the remains of a Cattle Egret. Now we must pay closer attention to determine whether or not the Hamerkop have abandoned the nest and which species has taken over, if any. The Crows have been so aggressive around the nest could they have perpetrated this evil deed? Or did the chick perish and the parents removed the corpse leaving it lying on the nest? Or is all of this the young of a cattle egret whose predator chose the large nest to feast on and not a Hamerkop chick at all?

D Wakeling

Contributions for The Babbler 114 October 2013/ November 2013 may be sent to the Editor anytime between now and 14th September 2013.