



## BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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### \*\*\*SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL TIME\*\*\*

**MEMBERS** – the new membership year begins on 1 April and I appeal to you all please to renew promptly. Whether you attend meetings and outings or not, your membership is important and supports our goal to protect biodiversity and conserve birds and their habitats through education, lobbying decision-makers and interaction with international organisations. In addition, your involvement with data collection through atlassing and submission of record cards is invaluable. As a member you get the newsletter, *Babbler*, every two months and two issues of *Honeyguide*, our internationally acclaimed journal, every membership year. All for a very reasonable annual fee. Donations towards these or any of our projects are always much appreciated.

Individual/Family members (incl. children under 17)	US\$ 25.00
Pensioners (65 & over), Students	15.00
Youth Club	5.00
Schools (high density)	25.00
Schools (private), Educational Institutions	50.00
Rest of Africa	40.00
Rest of World	50.00
Corporate members	75.00

➤ **CONTACT JULIA PIERINI** [JuliaPierini@birdlifezimbabwe.org](mailto:JuliaPierini@birdlifezimbabwe.org) **FOR INFO RE INCLUSION ON OUR WEBSITE**

Payment can be made direct to the BLZ office at 35 Clyde Road, Eastlea. Harare or by deposit into **BirdLife Zimbabwe** at **NMB Bank, Borrowdale branch. Account No. 260092014** or the **BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Chisipite branch** account at **CABS Account No. 1002399955**. It is VERY IMPORTANT please that you include your name on the deposit slip so it appears on the bank statement AND advise Carolyn Dennison by e-mail or phone, or your payment may not be recorded.

Please contact me, the national membership secretary, for all membership-related issues – new, renewals, payments, change of details, queries [CarolynDennison@birdlifezimbabwe.org](mailto:CarolynDennison@birdlifezimbabwe.org)

BLZ notices are now arriving from a new address [blzpublications@birdlifezimbabwe.org](mailto:blzpublications@birdlifezimbabwe.org) Add this to your address book/safe senders so your e-mail programme displays the messages correctly. You can also update your preferences and change your details online.

Please look on our Facebook page for great pictures and recent bits of birding news [www.facebook.com/BirdLifeZimbabwe](http://www.facebook.com/BirdLifeZimbabwe) and our informative website [www.birdlifezimbabwe.org](http://www.birdlifezimbabwe.org)

### Branch Activities

#### Mashonaland Branch

#### MASHONALAND BLZ – OUTINGS JUNE 2014 AND JULY 2014

##### JUNE 2014

**MUKUVISI**

Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2014  
(BLZ AGM Weekend at Bvumba)

No Outing

**CHIVERO**

JUNE – No Outing

**MONA VALE VLEI** Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2014 0700

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Outing**

GOSHO PARK, Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2014  
MARONDERA Meet at Mukuvisi Woodland Office 0700

**Saturday Outing**

BOTANIC GARDENS Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2014 0700

**3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday Meeting at Avondale Sports Club**

WATERFOWL COUNT Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2014 17.30 – 18.00  
Dave Rockingham-Gill  
GONAREZHOU PARK  
Andy Fussell

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**JULY 2014**

**MUKUVISI** Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2014 0700

**CHIVERO** Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2014 0700

**MONA VALE VLEI** Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> July 2014 0700

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Outing**

HIDEAWAY Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> July 2014 0700  
MANYAME DAM Meet at Prince Edward School  
\$5 p/p entry Bring a picnic/braai lunch (Waterfowl Count)

**Saturday Outing**

MARLBOROUGH VLEI Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2014 0700  
Meet at 7 a.m. on Newstead Rd (driving to the bottom of Princess Margaret Road off Harare Drive, follow the road round to the left).

**3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday Meeting at Avondale Sports Club**

RAPTORS AROUND HARARE Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> July 2014 17.30 – 18.00  
Neil Deacon

*BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Branch organises regular bird walks for its members and non-members free of charge (however there may be entry fees e.g. National Parks or a tip required depending on the location). For further information please contact Tony Alegria, [talegria@zol.co.zw](mailto:talegria@zol.co.zw) 0772 438697, (h) 490375*

**Evening Meetings are on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday** of each month 5.30 p.m. for 6.00 p.m. The venue is the Avondale Sports Club on Brighton Road between Sam Nujoma Street Extension and Upper East Road. There is a cash bar and a security guard.

**Directions to regular venues:**

**Mukuvisi** – Mukuvisi Woodland 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 150 metres on the left. Bring a reasonable tip for the guard, taking into account the value of your vehicle! Don't forget refreshments for after the walk when we record the number of species.

**Chivero and Rainham Dam** – Meet at Prince Edward School car park on Josiah Tongogara Avenue

**Monavale Vlei** – Meet on the B.S Leon side of Fenella Drive

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

## Matabeleland Branch

### Forthcoming Events:

- 1) JUNE: Judy Ross will host a bird walk in her Ntaba Moyo, Burnside garden on Saturday, 21<sup>st</sup> June at 8.00 a.m. Detailed directions of how to get to Judy's property will be in the June edition of Matland Musings.
- 2) JULY: Brent Stapelkamp will be giving a weekday presentation at the Museum – he is still to confirm the exact date.
- 3) AUGUST: Vernon Tarr will give a talk on small raptor identification – date still to be confirmed.

## Other Areas

**Mashonaland South** – Margaret Parrock 068-22005 or 0773-263673

**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](mailto:pgwidibira@gmail.com) for details.

**Lowveld** – contact Clive Stockil 0772-219204 or [clives@senuko.com](mailto:clives@senuko.com)

## National Office

### World Migratory Bird day

Commemorations for World Migratory Bird day will be done at Epworth Primary on the 23 May 2014. This is prior to a more appropriate celebration that will be done in November when the migrants would be around. This year's celebrations are running under the theme "Destination Flyways, migratory birds and tourism". United Nations World Tourism Organisation will be involved this year as they are running the Destination Flyways project. Among destination flyways are sites such as Lakes Natron and Chilika in Tanzania and India respectively. The theme seeks to harness tourism, ecological and social sustainability i.e. how can funds generated from tourism best used to benefit local communities. Epworth Eco-schools clubs have been selected for these preliminary migratory day celebrations and each of the seven schools involved will bring ten students and two teachers for the event. BirdLife Zimbabwe will put together a presentation for the day and school children will do poetry, drama, art and speech on the theme. Permission to enter schools for the day is being secured from the Ministry of Education, as BirdLife Zimbabwe does not have any documentation allowing it to work with government schools.

### Innocent Magunje

### BirdLife Zimbabwe' Voice' at the IUCN World Parks Congress.

BirdLife Zimbabwe, represented by Togarasei Fakarayi will join other organisations and institutions at the next IUCN World Parks Congress (WPC). The congress will take place in Sydney, Australia from 12-19 November 2014. Several thousands of people from all over the world (expected 4 to 7,000 delegates) will come together to discuss conservation and protected areas. The congress will enable conservation professionals to take stock of progress made since the previous congress, held in Durban, South Africa, in 2003. It will also discuss the challenges that have emerged since then. There was criticism that came after the last congress that the 'voice of Africa' was not loud enough, not clear, and finally covered by others. In this regard, IUCN Programme for African Protected Areas and Conservation (PAPACO) has decided to support a group of stakeholders working in and around protected areas (PAs) in Africa to attend and actively participate to the congress in Sydney, in November 2014. Togarasei Fakarayi is among the 22 participants selected for support from 152 applicants received by IUCN PAPACO. Toga will share with stakeholders his experience on working in Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs)/Important Bird Areas of Chimanimani-Nyanga Mountains conservation corridor, a model for participatory governance and management of KBAs in particular. Recently, Toga had participated in a preparatory meeting for the African group held at Acacia Camp, Kenya in April 2014. The objective of this meeting was to prepare key messages that will be brought to the WPC by a team of stakeholders

coming from all over the continent. The messages covered key aspects of PA good governance, PA management efficiency and the sustainability of conservation, illustrated by examples from different categories of protected areas. Together, they already delivered an initial comprehensive and consistent message about the present and the future of protected areas on the continent. However, preparations by IUCN PAPACO sponsored group are still underway for a more solid 'African Voice' to the Congress. Through this platform, BirdLife Zimbabwe will send a 'voice' to the congress on how BLZ is promoting participatory management of Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) for birds and biodiversity in the Eastern Afro-Montane Biodiversity Hot spots of Chimanimani-Nyanga Mountains conservation corridor. These KBAs are Important Bird Areas, which require co-operation of stakeholders for improved management and conservation of these sites. In addition to the key message highlighted above, Toga welcomes other messages that BLZ staff and members wish to send to this important congress.

**Togarasei Fakarayi**

## **Protecting Harare's Wetland Ecosystems for Nature and the City's People**

### **Update April / May 2014**

The past two months have been packed with action on the vleis – in fact, this is an understatement. Much has been achieved on the lobbying front with regard to the Marlborough Local Plan Amendment 1 which has been brought back down to planning levels after Marlborough Environmental Action Group (MEAG), Imagine Avonlea residents and Dr Ian Games gave persuasive presentations to the City Council Environmental Committee Meeting in April, which was also attended by City directors and planning officials. This was followed some time later by a meeting with the developers' planners and City planners at Cleveland House, which was well attended, by MEAG residents and project staff with 30 people present. We await with intense interest the outcome of these consultations. Alex Masterson and I once again visited the City Planning Department with regard to the Monavale Local Environmental Plan to determine when it will be approved by Council – in this case to protect the wetland – and we agreed EMA should provide a report on the suitability or not of building on Monavale Vlei which will accompany the Plan when submitted to Council for consideration and approval! It is critical for residents to lobby for the protection of Harare's wetlands. If we do not bother then it is assumed by the authorities that we are content for developments to go ahead. EMA often states that "more noise" from residents is needed to support their case against development on these fragile ecosystems.

MEAG has had a number of Committee Meetings during this period with a full residents meeting planned for the 24<sup>th</sup> May and a high profile clean up and wetland awareness day on Elizabeth Windsor Road on infamous dumping section adjacent to Marlborough Vlei on 14<sup>th</sup> June. A football match will follow this between youth groups at the Civic Centre. MEAG now has a lovely logo; a constitution, profile and work plan and is ready to register formally with EMA as a local environmental community organization, following up on the Local Environmental Action Plan Training Workshop of last year. A Vlei Scout has been selected who will start work officially in June. He belongs to the BLZ Youth Group and lives nearby the Vlei. Two bird walks have taken place on Marlborough Vlei and regular birding outings with BLZ and MEAG will take place on the 1<sup>st</sup> Saturday morning of each month.

The University of Zimbabwe, Biological Sciences Department water sampling surveys have begun. Three days in the field with Biological Sciences technicians and project staff collecting water samples from the Marimba and Gwebi Rivers and their tributaries took place and interesting results are coming up. Preparation for the commencement of the groundwater and insect surveys is underway.

On top of all this, the National Wetland Committee has been resuscitated by EMA with WWF support and sub committees have been formed to complete the outstanding Ramsar Information Sheets for 4 of the 7 Ramsar Sites by the end of June. Many meetings are being held to accomplish this task. We look forward to the National Wetland Dialogue, which is due to take place before end June.

Schools have been on holiday for the past month but are back this week and the first item on their agenda is a Post Card Competition on **Our Vanishing Wetlands. Water is life – Life is Water**. The Friends of the Gallery and The Italian Embassy are organizing this activity with support from BLZ, COSMO and EA. Another fine opportunity for wetland awareness.

And there is much more.... Reporting is on-going and at many levels. The first 6 monthly report is due in to BirdLife International for Jensen on 22<sup>nd</sup> May!

Appreciation is extended to BLZ staff and Council, COSMO and MEAG, BirdLife International and AAGE. V. Jensen Charity Foundation, for supporting the protection of Harare's wetlands. The involvement of EMA and City of Harare is acknowledged and appreciated.

**Dorothy Wakeling, Project Coordinator [cosmo@yoafrica.com](mailto:cosmo@yoafrica.com); 0772 376506**



## RECENT REPORTS AND SIGHTINGS

### Mashonaland

#### The July 2014 African Waterbird Census

The effort made by our counters in January 2014 was quite outstanding. Our thanks go to all who took part. About 72% of the waterbirds on our form were seen or heard. We hope that you will go and count the same places again in July 2014, as it is only with consistency that we will get an idea of what is there.

Some interesting facts from the counts were that there were no Saddle-billed Storks reported apart from Matabeleland, where 5 were seen and the Woolly-necked Stork, which are near-threatened, were not reported apart from in the Hwange National Park. The Grey Crowned Crane and Wattled Crane numbers are decreasing, as are the Corn Crake, Spotted Crake and Greater Painted-snipe. A bird, which has had a dramatic decline in numbers visiting Zimbabwe, is the Marsh Sandpiper. Also decreasing is the White-fronted Plover, which was only seen in Hwange NP.

The rarest birds seen were a Bar-tailed Godwit photographed by Brent Stapelkamp in March 2014 in Hwange and a Terek Sandpiper, seen by Jono Francis at Mana Pools National Park in December 2013.

The good news is that Osprey are on the increase with 4-6 reported on Osborne Dam Mutare, 4 at Mteri Dam Chiredzi, 2 were at Ngezi Dam, Chegutu, one was at Mandavu Dam, Hwange and one was at Aberfoyle Tea Estate, (Wamba Dam), Mutasa district. White-winged Terns and Whiskered Terns are always a privilege to see in a land-locked country and numbers seem to be increasing.

We would be very interested to hear of sightings of any of these birds at any time, so please send us the details.

The January count always has a lot of migrant birds. They will be on their breeding grounds in July and so our focus will be on the Afro-tropical species, with the exception of one or two birds that failed to migrate.

The July count should be done as close to mid-July as possible, but anything from mid-June to mid-August is acceptable. We can't afford to be fussy. Hopefully

we will receive some count reports from the Victoria Falls area, as we had no submissions for the January count. For poorly known and inaccessible places a form at any time of the year will be good. These other reports give us a much fuller picture than we can get in the January/July international time frame. Our priority is to get an overview of our waterbirds in Zimbabwe. The count form will be redesigned to make it more user-friendly and also easier to complete on computer. A separate form should be filled in for each new site visited. A sketch map showing site boundaries would be particularly useful, but a GPS location is very important.

Forms are available from [CarolynDennison@birdlifezimbabwe.org](mailto:CarolynDennison@birdlifezimbabwe.org) and all the forms should be back with us by **1 September 2014**, as we have to submit a report to Wetlands International for their annual all-Africa report.

If you can't get to your January site, say at Nyanga, maybe you can ask a friend to do it for you. If you know someone going on a houseboat at Kariba ask him/her to fill in a form for us. Remind them of the rule 'If in doubt leave it out'. If you see something unusual please tell us about it on your form. For example, two African Fish-eagles killing a juvenile Sparrowhawk at Kanga Camp, Mana Pools, reported by Shelley Cox in Zambezi Traveller, September 2013.

If you take a picture, share it, on [www.facebook.com/BirdLifeZimbabwe](http://www.facebook.com/BirdLifeZimbabwe)

Thank you once again and good luck for the July African Waterbird Count. We look forward to your reports.

David Rockingham-Gill [rgill@zol.co.zw](mailto:rgill@zol.co.zw)

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#### Birding in Mutare and surrounds – evening presentation – Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2014

This talk was delivered in two parts – lowland birding by Ken Dixon and highland birding by Jorg von Chamier.

Ken began his presentation by stating that he was birding in the UK right up to the time when he left for Rhodesia as it was then. His wife (Lynn) did not share his enthusiasm for birding in the UK due to the awful weather they have there most of the year and that his favoured destination was the local sewage ponds. When he arrived in Harare on the 30<sup>th</sup> April 1991, he stayed in Belvedere and began birding immediately and his first two garden birds were probably the Dark-capped Bulbul and the Pied Crow. He wasted no time

at all and soon had joined the BLZ in a Mukuvisi walk just a few days later (4<sup>th</sup> May 1991) where he met up with some of the Miombo specials. He soon added some Mukuvisi birds to his new list of birds – Miombo Blue-eared Starling and Black-headed Oriole amongst many others. That same afternoon he saw the Red-winged Starling in Domboshawa. *I think he must have thought he was in heaven seeing so many lifers in such a short time!*

He soon moved to his first house in Mutare in a suburb where all the street names were named after birds. He showed us a Mutare map with various birding spots in the town and nearby destinations. Within Mutare he came across some interesting birds –

Livingstone's Turaco, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill and Bat Hawk just to name a few. From his home he could see the Black-winged Bishop and nearby on the way up to Cecil Kop were Rufous-bellied Tits and Cabanis's Buntings. Some of the other interesting birds to be seen were Augur Buzzard, Miombo Rock-thrush, Red-throated Twinspot, Collared Flycatcher, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Cape Batis and Blue Swallows.

Ken then handed over to Jorg for part two of birding in Mutare and surrounds ...

Jorg began by showing us an African Dusky Flycatcher followed by a picture of the Bvumba Botanic Garden's dam and the essentials of a good outing - a braai with chicken and beer! He then showed us a series of slides all depicting how gloomy the place can

be - heavy mist on the roads and piles of cut timber. He also had some pictures of unusual flowers. He then presented many snaps showing various scenes in the Botanic Gardens - paths in the forest and various birders (including his wife - Celesta) all desperately trying to see birds in the forest canopy. On this particular trip he was showing Geoff Lockwood and a group of friends around and had Ian Riddell along as the Guru Bird guide. Various snaps of Seldomseen and spectacular scenery (including the Leopard Rock area) completed the presentation. Oh yes, in passing, Jorg did mention a few birds, which are unique to the area.

Now you know where to go for the specials!

Many thanks to both presenters for a most enjoyable evening.

## **BLZ MASHONALAND BRANCH VISIT TO RIFA EDUCATIONAL CAMP, CHIRUNDU, 14<sup>TH</sup>-17<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2014**

For some this was their umpteenth visit, for others, their first but for all Rifa never fails to satisfy on all levels, bush, birds, animals, and ambiance. This year was no exception; our group of 20 collectively identified 182 species in 3 days, ate like horses, slept like logs, talked 'til the hyenas came out and walked their legs off. They also, no doubt, caused serious concern for our 4 patient 'guns', Dave, John, Freedom and Leveson to whom we are extremely grateful for their protection and our survival.

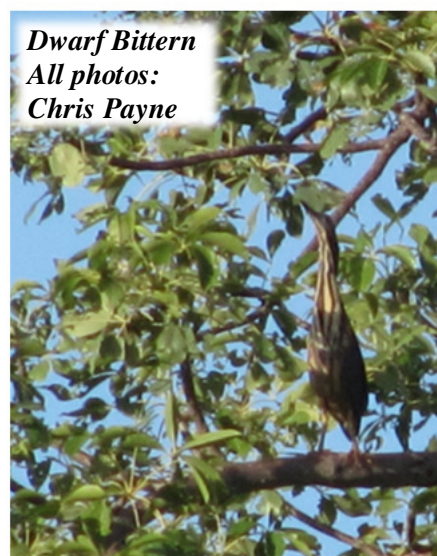
The reason for our wet season visit was to survey the many pans, which have water for only a limited period of the year and attract certain species not usually present. This we did on Saturday, driving first some 20km back towards the escarpment to visit Mhenza pan, the largest and furthest away. Most obvious were big groups of White-faced Duck, Comb Duck, Hadedda Ibis and a flock of African Openbill. Uncommon birds like Lesser Moorhen and Allen's Gallinule were numerous but not a single Common Moorhen or African Purple Swamphen was seen. *Specials were the Spotted Crakes and Black-necked Grebes!* African Jacana, Spur-winged Goose and Little Grebe were there in small numbers. Although there was little mud on the shoreline Wood Sandpiper and Common Sandpiper made the most of it and also a group of 7 Ruff. In the surrounding woodland we heard Lilian's Lovebird and Eastern Nicator and overhead flew Böhm's Spinetail, Bateleur and a White-headed Vulture.

The second pan was more interesting for raptors than waterbirds: we had Lappet-faced Vulture, White-backed Vulture and Hooded Vulture, an African Fish-eagle and an African Hawk-eagle. The only waders were Wood Sandpipers but in the woodland Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, African Paradise-flycatcher and a Red-eyed Dove were spotted along with the ubiquitous White-browed Sparrow-weaver, Meves's Starling and Emerald-spotted Wood-dove.

On our way to pan no.3 we came across many Arnot's Chats, Red-headed Weaver, Green Wood-hoopoe and African Hoopoe while the pan itself held Black-winged Stilt, Blacksmith Lapwing, Three-banded Plover and Great Egret. As we moved via small pans back towards camp we saw Black Cuckooshrike, Mosque Swallow, Woodland Kingfisher, Pied Kingfisher and Malachite Kingfisher, and African Golden Oriole.

We didn't have 'breakfast' or should we say 'Lundin' (Lunch cum Dinner) until after 1330 that day but we had no complaints.

On Sunday we again left the camp and drove through Chirundu to the Zambezi shore among the tourist cottages. The scrubby inland strip now hides a sewage works but it has not substantially changed the riverine environment and birding was still good. Highlights of our walk were Long-tailed Paradise-whydah, African Mourning Dove, 2 Grey-headed Parrots flying over, a White-bellied Sunbird, Sombre Greenbul, Red-backed Shrike and a Black-chested Snake-eagle. Fortunately, no elephant were lurking in the dense bush but it must have been a trying time for the 'guns'. At the furthest point of our walk we were welcomed to Jecha Point fishing camp and climbed up into their Lookout point for a view over the river and inland bush.



*Dwarf Bittern*  
All photos:  
Chris Payne



Back at camp, we were due for an afternoon's vulture watching. However, the delicious cows' heads and offal kindly supplied by Carswell Meats via Geoff Lowe failed to attract diners. Only two Hooded Vultures came and while they were eating their fill took off when other vultures began circling overhead. White-backed Vultures, White-headed Vultures and Hooded Vultures could be seen high above but only a dozen or so Hooded Vultures and a Bateleur approached the restaurant but chose to sit in nearby Rain Trees and study the menu before ordering. There they were mobbed by the resident White-crested Helmet-shrike. The expectant spectators slowly drifted off for a snooze as the afternoon progressed and missed nothing.

The next morning was a different story as the hidden camera revealed visits by a Leopard and Hyena and at first light the vultures finally succumbed to the tempting scraps left by the night visitors. In fact there must have been about 50 birds in all at one time or another.

On Sunday afternoon the sundowners were taken at "The Beach", a sandy stretch of Zambezi shore. This is where eagled-eyed Elspeth spotted an Osprey way out on top of a tree on an island. After 3 hot days and much walking most of the party chose to plant themselves on the bank and watch the sand while a smaller group walked to Long Pan with 2 'guns'. Not a very productive walk but we saw more White-faced and Comb Duck, Spur-winged and Egyptian Goose and many woodland species.

Both a long and a short walk were organised for Monday morning both of which were delighted to have good views of the Dwarf Bittern breeding at Mopane Pan not far inland from the camp. The long walkers visited the Chipandaure Cliffs, which at this time held only White-fronted Bee-eater as the Carmines had already left.



*Juvenile Diderick Cuckoo*



*Hooded Vultures*

Adrenaline pumped through our veins, as we often had to avoid the really thick jesse from which the sound and smell of jumbos emanated. No Retz's Helmet-shrike or Thick-billed Cuckoo this time but a party of 5 Southern Black Tit, lots of Grey-backed Camaropteras, Woodland Kingfisher, Horus Swift and 3 Long-tailed Paradise-whydah were seen and we heard Eastern Nicator and Klaas's Cuckoo.

The final count at brunch was 182 after which the organisers, hunters, cooks, permanent staff and management were warmly and sincerely thanked for making the stay such a success.

**Ken Dixon**

Dear All,

I took a look at this list of birds in relation to the *Annotated Bird Notes of the Rifa Camp near Chirundu 1987-2006*, which are as yet unpublished By Leslee Maasdorp and Anne Carrington-Cotton.

It was difficult because of the arrangement of species in this otherwise great work, which has been in the making for 25 years or more. For example in Dorothy's copy which she lent me the Arrow-marked Babbler fits somewhere between the Willow Warbler and the Garden Warbler.

The Black-necked Grebe has not been recorded there before; as far as I know it was once recorded at Ume River Mouth, many years ago. Only about 50 have ever been seen in the country.

The Hadeda Ibis seen on 15/3/2015 - not recorded before in February March or April. Was it at the pans or the



*Black-headed Heron*



Sundowner spot?

Lappet-faced Vulture – not recorded in January, February or March before.

Long-crested Eagle in Appendix 1 of Rifa Camp Notes; there is a record from the Zambian side of the river May 1992. It is a scarce visitor to the Zambezi Valley and only a few records exist. Seen around Camp 14/3/2014.



*African Openbills*

1 Osprey seen (below the Bridge) 16/3/2014 is a new record for the month of March according to the month-by-month blocks in Rifa Camp Notes. This year I have heard of maybe 15 sightings of Osprey in Mashonaland. None were seen by three different observers at Kariba. Cooper recorded it in March in the Mid-Zambezi Valley. Only a few records exist.

3 Amur Falcons were seen 16/3/2014. Cited as a rare migrant in the Rifa camp Notes. It looks as if the only other record was April 2000. [A flock of c.50 was seen at Long Pan on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2014]

1 Spotted Crake 15/3/2014 is a new record for Rifa Camp. Not reported in the middle Zambezi Valley either.

1 African Crake is a new record for March. It is listed as

uncommon. No Black Crakes were recorded.

14 Lesser Moorhen seen 15/3/2014. According to M & C it is rare in the area. Certainly only a few records exist.

Pennant-winged Nightjar: in Birds of Rifa Camp there are no records of it from December-August. So a March record is really very nice.

Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird: Birds of Rifa Camp say uncommon and little recorded. Not in March. So the record for 14/3/2014 is a nice record.

Sand Martin: Birds of Rifa say uncommon. 2 on the 15/3/2014 was a new record for March.

Black Cuckooshrike: Birds of Rifa Camp say uncommon. 1 seen 15/3/2014.

Sombre Greenbul recorded October-November (hot dry season) so one seen in March means they also occur in the hot-wet season.

Ashy Flycatcher not previously recorded in March.

Southern Black Flycatcher, not previously recorded in March at Rifa camp.

Overall a super list, by a great team of explorers, who saw ½ the birds of Rifa in 4 days, next visit must be in the cold-dry season.

Well done,

**David Rockingham-Gill**

Hi Tony and Geoff

I really enjoyed this trip and thought it very well organized.

Thanks to Tony, Linda, Elspeth and Dave, Freedom and the staff. Would love to see the camtrap of night visitors to restaurant site.

A comment: Need to ring a coucal or two and send blood samples to ADU to put to bed decades of confusion!

**Dorothy Wakeling**

*The Green Malkoha now seen at Mana Pools by Gill Bruce & Stretch Ferreira and others, Honeyguide 58(1), March 2012, page 68.*



*Lesser Moorhen*



*African Jacana*

**Some comments on the Bird List**

**Spotted Crake**

I used to think that Lesser Moorhens in flight might be spotted crakes because of the yellow bill and trailing legs! They flush from vegetation in shallow vegetation, fly away a short distance and then drop into cover. I worked out with a better view that they were Lesser Moorhens! Should be left out, as there is doubt! A photo with the modern cameras would show more detail. I would bet on this id!!

**Senegal Coucal**

Not common at Rifa. The very common coucal is the White-browed but it is not on the list!

**Amur Falcon and Lanner Falcon**

2 falcons flying at dusk at the river. Dorothy on the left said Amur, John Osbourne on the right said Lanner. You have recorded both! I did not use binos but am more in favour of Amur but I would be guessing.

**Black-necked Grebe**

Could the people who saw these please write notes on what they saw, behaviour etc.?

**Geoff Lowe**



Tony Wood has submitted notes supporting the Spotted Crake and Black-necked Grebe; in early March both Senegal and White-browed Coucals were seen at Rifa by Ian Riddell, Celesta von Chamier, Elspeth Baillie & Dave Winhall

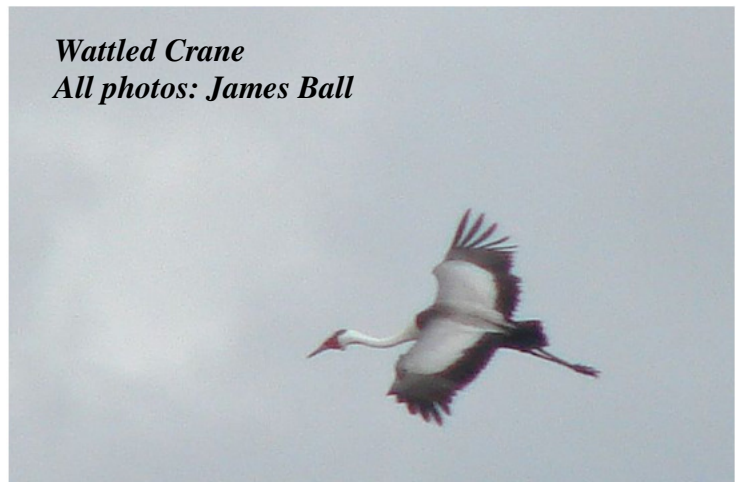


*African Mourning Dove*

**BLZ MASHONALAND BRANCH VISIT TO WIDGEON PAN AND DRIEFONTEIN SUNDAY 27<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2014**

What an exciting day!! 20+members and office staff, Melodious Lark at last, 3 Wattled Crane, an African Marsh-harrier and that tall, slim, silver-haired wader last seen at Bluff Hill in February but this time in much deeper water. No doubt the Rarities Committee will have to be called in once again. Probably a vagrant as it's certainly not in my Newman's.

Seriously though, it was a successful trip from all points of view and worth the long drive. Alex Masterson went down on the Saturday afternoon with 2 friends arriving well after dark and camping some 3-4 km down the Shasha Fountains Road that branches off to the right about 1.5+ km beyond the Pan. In the early hours of next morning a Southern White-faced Scops-owl was calling. They had camped among scattered thorn trees on the upper fringes of the wide-open grassland that soon gave way to miombo woodland, which included odd patches of big trees. A couple of hours were spent birding in this area, which also fell into the Widgeon Pan Pentad. There they recorded a





number of species – mostly common – that others near the pan did not see. Additional interesting species heard or seen included; Coqui Francolin and Shelley's Francolin, Grey Penduline-tit, Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler, Stierling's Wren-warbler, Scaly-feathered Finch, and a putative Fawn-coloured Lark, so rare there even Alex had not seen it before.

The main body of birders left Mukuvisi at 6.40 for the 180 km drive to Widgeon Pan located about 35 km south of Chivhu on the Zaka road. On reaching the turn off to Zaka, fourteen members, at Innocent's suggestion, decided to make a small detour, carrying on about 10 km or so along the main road to Constantia Farm in the hope of finding the prized Wattled Crane. The farmer, Keith Campbell, came out to meet us and pointed the group in the direction of his dam – only a couple of minutes away. A Wattled Crane is a regular visitor to the dam. He was very helpful and enthusiastic and told us that birders were welcome to visit anytime and to enjoy the various habitats there.



*Crowned Lapwing*

The near side of the dam was cultivated land, whilst on the opposite side there was beautiful woodland. Tempting though it was, the party couldn't stay too long as they were keen to get to the Pan. Consequently they only spent a short time viewing from the shore, but still managed to clock up quite a few species. A Pied Kingfisher at the water's edge and an African Pied Wagtail strutting around the ploughed land were seen as we drove up. Two Senegal Coucals could be seen a short distance away as well as a couple of Magpie Shrikes. A Giant Kingfisher flew over and some Egyptian Goose were out on the water. Other water birds were African Jacana, Black Crake and a Purple Heron, while other species seen included African Wattled Lapwing and Blacksmith Lapwing, Grey Go-away-bird, Swainson's Spurfowl, Lilac-breasted Roller, Zitting Cisticola and Levaillant's Cisticolas, Orange-

breasted Waxbill, and Red-billed Quelea. A Long-billed Crombec was also heard in the distance.

The remaining 7 drove directly to the Pan, which is not easy to find if it doesn't have water and there aren't familiar vehicles to be spotted. Fortunately one group had arrived an hour earlier and parked in view of the road. They were able to point out Little Grebe, Red-knobbed Coot, Red-billed Teal, a White-backed Duck, White-faced Duck, Spur-winged Goose and a Whiskered Tern, which was probably feeding young. They had heard Melodious Lark too which we later saw over the grassland.



*...that Silver-headed wader aka Alex*

*...and helper*

Most of us soon set out to circumnavigate the flooded area trudging through the dense speargrass, hoping to flush various LBJs. There were Zitting Cisticola and African Quailfinch all around and Pale-crowned Cisticola was identified by call. 5 Banded Martin appeared briefly and Grey Heron and Black-headed Heron were present with 2 Blacksmith Lapwings. More exciting was a moulting African Marsh-harrier and a small flock of African Openbill. The only wader seemed to be Wood Sandpiper but Ferdie Couto who knew the site intimately, having spent 2 years in the area some time ago, spotted a Ruff. Our circuit took 2 hours or more with frequent stops to scan the pan and grasslands. At one point we heard excited twittering and saw a pair of small birds circling above the grass with fast wing-beats.

These turned out to be Melodious Lark, a lifer for many of us.

Arriving back at the mound from which much scoping took place most of us decided it was munch time and settled down to watch from that vantage point while the rest of the group gathered. When all were assembled an initial count was made, which included many species observed by the office group, which had come via Constantia Farm. A little later, when we were debating where best to go to find Wattled Crane, lo and behold, a female of that species glided in on cue and landed on the far side of the pan soon to be joined by two more. At this point, those of us with afternoon plans decided it was time to leave while the majority set off for Driefontein Mission where BLZ



has long worked with the community and monitored the resident flock of Wattled Crane for the Crane Foundation.

Thirteen members initially set off for the Mission in the hope of sighting more Wattled or even Grey Crowned Cranes. Shortly after leaving Widgeon Pan, a Secretarybird was spotted, possibly nesting in a tree near the main road. The 20+km road to Driefontein deteriorated more and more as we went along, but eventually the lower Driefontein Dam wall was in sight. A Three-banded Plover and an African Pied Wagtail were seen below the spillway. After a long, tortuous drive the upper reaches of the dam came into view. Alas, no cranes of any type! During a walkabout, other birds seen included a Fork-tailed Drongo, African Stonechat, African Fish-eagle and a Lizard Buzzard, but the target birds remained elusive. Undeterred, they set off for the upper dam, located near Shashe Village. 40 Grey Crowned Cranes had been seen there in December. Again their luck was out – the only new birds seen were a party of Crowned Lapwings and a Common Fiscal. Time was now against them and they set off for home. Unbeknown to them, Tony Wood also visited the upper reaches of this dam and spotted a single Wattled Crane. On the way out another Secretarybird was seen – possibly the same bird, or the mate of the one seen earlier.

A great day ended in frustration when the group was caught up in a monumental traffic jam south of the Chitungwiza roundabout. Not a pleasant experience, resulting in some members reaching their homes at 9 p.m.



*Youth Group at Widgeon*



*Observers at Widgeon Pan  
clocking up 'specials'*

**Compiled by Ken Dixon from reports by  
A Masterson, D Wiggins, K Dixon and J Ball.**

### **BLZ visit to Mwanga Lodge, Bally Vaughan Game Park – 23 March 2014**

Twenty plus members converged on the home of Gordon & Debbie Putterill, set in the idyllic surrounds of granite hills, Miombo woodland and open grassland, and located just off the Shamva road about 40 km from Harare. Our hosts, who outlined the extent of their property and what we could expect to see, warmly greeted us. In particular, Gordon warned us about the herd of Buffalo, who are foot & mouth disease-free, as there were a lot of young calves with the females. They were to be treated with extreme caution and given a wide berth when sighted. During this talk we were treated to the sight of a Gabar Goshawk raiding an African Wattled Lapwing's nest and escaping with what looked like a nestling, hotly pursued by the parents. We split into two groups, one on foot and the others set off in vehicles to reach the kopjes and farthest parts of the extensive property.

With the call of a Black-crowned Tchagra in our ears, we started off with our hosts across the grassland and could hear the calls of several other birds. Soon we were into the woodland, but it was remarkably quiet. Gordon kept us interested with his extensive knowledge of bush-craft, identifying various trees,

bushes and a Makoni tea bush plant. In addition, we were shown the amazing webs and told stories of the Golden Orb and Bark spiders.

Mwanga Lodge is home to a number of lions and we were introduced to a large lioness that was kept in an enclosure of her own. Like a giant pussycat, she looked very friendly, but Debbie warned – 'don't touch!' Some young lion are kept near the house and other males kept separately in different sections of the farm. The bush remained very quiet as we made our way towards some flat rocky outcrops near the adjacent Bally Vaughan animal sanctuary. Suddenly, a Cinnamon-breasted Bunting caught our attention as it was spotted in a tree. This was one of the 'specials' of the area. An African Hoopoe could also be heard in the distance and European Bee-eaters overhead. We continued across the open rock and were then shown one of the first lodges established on the farm. All the time we were entertained with stories by our host and this made up for the lack of birds. A female Eland was spotted near the lodge and shortly afterwards a small herd of Zebra appeared to be following behind us.

Soon after we crossed the main entrance road we

struck a bird party, which included, amongst others, a Cardinal Woodpecker and a Tree Pipit. Continuing through the woodland, a Red-backed Shrike and several African Paradise-flycatchers were seen. Bright orange Musasa caterpillars stuck against the trees. This period had been the most productive part of our walk, but we now had to make our way back to the Lodge. Shortly afterwards we encountered five Blesbok. As we approached 'home', a Steppe Buzzard was spotted flying high overhead.

After a long trek – fortunately it was cool weather – we gathered to add up the tally and were told by the others that they had been equally unsuccessful with their search. Outside the fence was another group of Zebra and several female Common Ostrich. A total of

### **Monavale Vlei – April May 2014**

Bird migrants have since left and the local residents changed to their non-breeding and nondescript colours. We have had two video shoots by different TV media houses on both Monavale and Marlborough Vleis. This is part of our education and awareness exercises on the value of these fragile and threatened wetland ecosystems. COSMO has also received several visits to the Vlei from University of Zimbabwe Biological Sciences Department staff for hydrological water

**Jimmy Muropa**, Monavale Vlei Scout 0772 772 771; [cosmo@yoafrica.com](mailto:cosmo@yoafrica.com) [www.monavalevlei.com](http://www.monavalevlei.com)  
Conservation Society of Monavale Facebook Page

63 species were seen, which was somewhat disappointing, given the available habitat. However, as it turned out, no one had visited any water bodies and the only White-faced Duck had been seen in the distance near the Sanctuary. Notables included in the count were: Wahlberg's Eagle, African Cuckoo, Levaillant's Cuckoo, Striped Kingfisher, African Dusky Flycatcher, Brubru, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Stierling's Wren-warbler, Green-capped Eremomela and Grey-backed Camaroptera.

We thanked our hosts and as we drove away, the gauntlet had to be run through several female Buffalo and their calves. Another day in Paradise!

**James Ball**

sampling surveys, which will take place monthly for the next year. Residents are encouraged and are welcome to join us on our monthly third Sunday bird walks. Watch out for a new mammal species added to our list in the form of a Large Grey Mongoose. It was seen on 8 May 2014. It is fairly large, grey in colour, black tipped tail and a blackish face. There is always something to look forward to!

## **Matabeleland**

### **Lakeside Dam Walk – 12 April**

Only four members joined our walk on a rather miserable, cold, wet and breezy day. Once we had donned our waterproof clothing, we headed along Kabot Drive towards the dam, seeing Laughing Doves, Pied Crow, Dark-capped Bulbul and hearing the harsh call of Swainson's Spurfowl. In the vicinity of a partially built house we saw two Common House-martins, and flushed from the grass Scaly-feathered Finch, with their distinct black malar stripe which looks rather like a downturned moustache, and Blue Waxbill. We also saw our first Marico Flycatcher, one of the many that we would see, a couple of late departing Barn Swallows and European Bee-eater. African Palm-swift, Black-headed Heron, Pin-tailed Whydah and several Scarlet-chested Sunbirds were seen. As we approached the dam area, we trudged along the very muddy waters edge acquiring enough mud on the soles of our shoes to increase our height by a couple of centimetres! The dam proved to be rather disappointing with only Little Grebe, Red-billed Teal, Red-knobbed Coot, White-faced Duck (a pair with 8 chicks), African Sacred Ibis, Blacksmith Lapwing, Grey Heron, Reed Cormorant, Little Egret, Three-banded

Plover and Southern Pochard (two males and one female) being seen. We continued towards the dam wall seeing Marico Sunbird, Tropical Boubou, Jameson's Firefinch with its blue/black bill, Fork-tailed Drongo, Arrow-marked Babbler making their usual harsh bubbling chatter, Chin-spot Batis, and Black-throated Canary. Along and down below the dam wall, Common Waxbill, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Bronze Mannikin and Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler were seen. Heading back, we saw Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Purple Widowfinch, a flock of about thirty Red-billed Quelea, Red-faced Mousebird, Long-billed Crombec, Grey Go-away-bird, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Three-banded Courser and Crimson-breasted Shrike. On our walk we also heard Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Black-collared Barbet, Crested Barbet, Black-crowned Tchagra, Brown-crowned Tchagra and Rattling Cisticola. We ended the morning in the warmth of the Mundy home with a welcome cup of tea or coffee. Thank you to Peter and Verity.

**Peta Ditchburn**

## Ntabazinduna – 11 May

On a beautiful autumn day with clear blue skies, we were lucky enough to visit the property of Vernon and Shirley Tarr in the Ntabazinduna area, northwest of Bulawayo. Seventeen members congregated under the trees on their vast expanse of green lawn for tea. While relishing our tranquil and peaceful surroundings, we saw Meyer's Parrot, Magpie Shrike, Grey Go-away-bird, Dark-capped Bulbul, Laughing Dove, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill and Black-headed Oriole. Our peace was promptly shattered by the arrival of Arrow-marked Babblers! We then headed off for a walk seeing Black-headed Heron, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, the chattering White-browed Sparrow-weaver, six White-backed Vultures, Red-faced Mousebird, a pair of Marico Sunbirds, Marico Flycatcher, Crested Barbet, Long-tailed Paradise-whydah, two males with their

long black tails and one female, a female Chin-spot Batis, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Green-winged Pytilia, Rufus-naped Lark, Scaly-feathered Finch, White-bellied Sunbird, Blue Waxbill, Southern White-crowned Shrike, Cape Turtle-dove, Fork-tailed Drongo, Tropical Boubou, Acacia Pied Barbet, Black-collared Barbet, Natal Spurfowl and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow. We watched two Lilac-breasted Rollers chasing each other and making a very loud harsh call. We returned to the homestead where the braai fire was lit and then some members took a short walk to the dam but saw no further species of birds. Our sincere thanks to Vernon and Shirley Tarr for a most enjoyable day.

**Charne Rutledge and Peta Ditchburn**

## News from USA

*Mashonaland members will remember **Erin Murphy**, an enthusiastic birder who takes wonderful photos and who immigrated to the States with her family a few months ago. Here are some of her 'adventures'*

We started out in New York visiting my younger sister who is a model in Brooklyn. It was a bit cold and lightly snowy when we were there but, as we left for the next state, the snow came down heavily and was freezing. We were lucky to get out in time, because after that snow fall, flights were either postponed or cancelled.

Next we went to Kansas and stayed in Liberal for a while with my father's family – shopping, cafes and touring. The weather was great during the day but was pretty cold at night. We also went to Dodge City and saw an old movie about the history of cowboys and Indians and buffalo hunting, which was very interesting and then explored the exhibits of what Dodge City looked like in its early days. We visited their tourist bar which is set up so tourists can be part of the experience, where there was a sweet old gentleman who sat and played jolly tunes on the piano while we ordered the traditional cider (common drink in its day) called a Sasparilla – which has a sweet bubble gum flavour but is oddly, quite nice! We had a big family reunion for Christmas and New Year in Salt Lake City in Utah and I have been snow-boarding, skiing, ice skating, movie-watching, shopping and making a snow man!

Birds seen so far on my trip include Grackles, ducks, lots of Canada Geese, Pied Magpies [Black-billed Magpie], American Robins, Great Horned Owl, House Sparrows, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kingfisher and about 7 Bald Eagles (not one photo of these yet, but I was stunned at seeing this number of them in 10 minutes of driving along the mountains to the Grand Canyons.

Our next adventure was the amazing Grand

Canyons, where everything was so picturesque, but with lots of tourists of course. Then off to Las Vegas where we saw a fantastic Cirque du Soleil show, went bowling and in the casino saw an excellent view of Vegas from the top floor balcony. It was great!

In February we went to San Francisco looking at different areas near the city. We finally picked out a house in California in a place called Tomales, about an hour away from San Francisco. It is a beautiful area about 20 minutes from a private beach called Dillon Beach, which unfortunately is the breeding ground for great white sharks! So we won't be swimming there – however wind surfers do not seem perturbed at all! There are a couple of reasonable cafes near us and a very sad general store and postal service across the road. There is a big drought but there has been a bit of rain now and then, so the hills are beautiful and green!

I got a job as a cat sitter for 10 days, which paid around US\$200 so not bad for a first start! I am very busy these days working hard on a farm for an artist as his labour force assistant – but as 'oh God dear' as it sounds! I'm actually enjoying it and the pay is good.

I finally started joining some bird walks here with the Audubon Society. A few of the birds seen include Anna's Hummingbird, California and Spotted Towhee, American Mourning Dove, House, Tree, Yellow-crowned and White-crowned Sparrows, Purple Finch, Barn Swallows (recently arrived), Killdeer, Raven, American Crows, Red-winged Blackbird, European/Common Starling. Raptors include Turkey Vulture, Red-tailed Hawk, Coopers Hawk and several types of water birds e.g. Snowy Plovers, seagulls and thousands of Tern (I forget which!).



And from **Bruce and Doreen Bolnick**, who are in Massachusetts:

Doreen and I are doing very well. We bought a 50-year-old house adjacent to a 2200-acre Audubon sanctuary and are both involved in volunteer work at the sanctuary. FYI, Massachusetts Audubon was the world's first bird (and nature) conservation

organization – a direct predecessor to both national Audubon in the USA and the British RSPB. Spring migrations are just getting underway after an unusually long and cold winter. (*Written beginning April*)

## Tail Feathers

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### Vumba and Burma Valley

Early on Tuesday, 15th April 2014 I conducted a guided birding trip in Vumba and Burma Valley where our aim was “the specials” of the area. Upon arrival at Mr Conradie’s forest, the western side of the Vumba, we followed the trail I had newly constructed in the forest. The first sightings included the Black-fronted Bush-shrike, Olive Bush-shrike, Yellow-throated Woodland-warbler, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher and Stripe-cheeked Greenbul busy feeding in a *Polyscias fulva* tree (Parasol Tree). This provided good photographic opportunities for my clients who were from Rustenburg, South Africa.

I later explored another trail where we were treated to a variety of forest species: Swynnerton’s Robin, Red-faced Crimsonwing, Chirinda Apalis, Green Twinspot,

Red-throated Twinspot and White-starred Robin. My clients will never forget these viewings in their birding career.

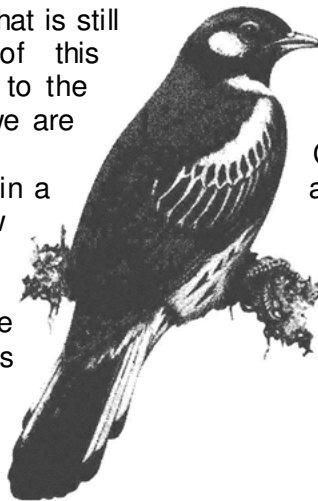
We later drove to Burma Valley to find a few Miombo species. We walked the trail surrounded by fairly big Msasa trees providing suitable habitat for a diversity of Miombo species and we picked up a bird party where we were treated to great sightings of Western Violet-backed Sunbird, Spotted Creeper, Green-backed Woodpecker and the Cabanis’s Bunting. Other species were not so abundant but we managed some nice sightings of the Miombo Tit when we walked back. It was a very good day for birding, ticking the most wanted birds before lunchtime.

**Peter Magosvongwe: +263779749336.**

## HONEYGUIDE

*Honeyguide* is one of the few publications of its kind in the southern African region that is still “alive”. We are very proud of this achievement which is largely down to the dedication of our contributors and we are very grateful for your support.

However, we now find ourselves in a rather worrying situation as the flow of submissions has been gradually slowing down and we have to face the fact that we too may have to close down – which is quite unthinkable, as we believe you will agree.



So we are appealing to you to let us have contributions in any shape or form. You will see this issue, for instance, carries not only technical papers but also informal material, such as stories in Short Communications, travel write-ups and even a poem!

So please don't feel you have to be a rocket (or any other) scientist to participate. Your support will be much appreciated.

**Julia Duprée**

### *Cuckoo-Time*

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February and March were Cuckoo months in my garden. Two juvenile Levaiant's Cuckoos were often seen, each with their respective group of Arrow-marked Babbler foster-parents. The cuckoos' mouths never seemed to close, as their diminutive parents tried to satisfy their demands. Of interest was the Babbler-like calls made by cuckoos. On 16 March it appeared as

if one of the juveniles had been reclaimed by two adult cuckoos.

An African Cuckoo and a Black Cuckoo were both seen in a Pride of India bush on 12 February. Both were probably juvenile birds. Possibly the same two birds were observed again on 17 March.

**James Ball**



*Arrow-marked Babbler & Levillant's Cuckoo*



*African Cuckoo*      *Photos: James Ball*

### *Liar! Liar! African bird uses elaborate ruse to steal food*

Credit: Tom Flower/Reuters

WASHINGTON (Reuters) – If you believe honesty is the best policy, you would have a hard time convincing the Forked-tailed Drongo. This tricky African bird is the pathological liar of the animal kingdom.

Scientists described on Thursday how this medium-sized bird brazenly deceives other animals by mimicking alarm calls made by numerous bird species – and even meerkats – to warn of an approaching predator in a ruse to frighten them off and steal food they leave behind.

The researchers tracked 64 Forked-tailed Drongos over a span of nearly 850 hours in the Kalahari Desert in South Africa close to the Botswana border to unravel this unique behaviour.

“They’re rather demonic little black birds with red eyes, a hooked beak and a forked tail,” said evolutionary biologist Tom Flower of the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

“They’re also highly aggressive and are renowned for attacking eagles and hawks, for which they apparently have no fear,” added Flower, whose study appears in the journal *Science*.

These birds, common in southern Africa, usually get meals the honest way, such as capturing insects in mid-air using their superb aerial skills.

But at other times, like on cold mornings when few insects are flitting around, the drongos turn to a life of crime.

#### **FALSE ALARM**

The drongos are able to mimic the sounds made by many different species that inhabit its desert environment, including birds such as Southern Pied Babblers, Cape Glossy Starlings, Sociable Weavers and

Pale Chanting-goshawks as well as mammals like meerkats.

The drongos carry out an elaborate con. They give their own genuine alarm call when they spot a predator approaching – essentially behaving as sentries – and other animals come to trust that this call signals real danger.

But they sometimes give this alarm call when no danger exists to fool other animals into fleeing and abandoning their food.

Then the drongos swoop down for a free lunch.

“All the animals in the Kalahari eavesdrop on each other’s alarm calls, which provide invaluable information about potential predators. It’s a bit of an information superhighway where all the animals speak each other’s language,” Flower said.

“Because drongos give reliable predator information some of the time, it maintains host responsiveness (of other animals) since they can never know if the drongo is lying or telling the truth,” added Amanda Ridley, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Western Australia, another of the researchers.

The scientists noticed that sometimes the other animals “get wise” to the con and ignore repeated false alarm calls. But then the wily drongos simply grab another tool from their toolbox of trickery – they mimic the alarm calls made by other animals, once again conning them into fleeing and leaving their chow behind.

Flower observed drongos mimicking more than 50 calls.

When stealing food from other animals, drongos are able to eat larger prey than they normally would be

able to capture on their own like scorpions, beetle larvae and even geckos.

"Crime pays," Flower said, noting that the stolen stuff accounted for about a quarter of the food eaten by the drongos.

"One could argue that the strategy of the drongo to steal food from others seems very dishonourable in human standards. But, yes, if it has found such a crafty way to catch food, which is usually much larger than the food items it catches itself, then we cannot help but admire this clever little bird's adaptiveness," Ridley added.

The researchers classify the drongo as "a klepto-parasite."

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There are many examples of mimicry and deception in the animal kingdom. About 20 percent of song birds mimic the calls of other birds, Flower noted.

"However, drongos are the only ones to flexibly produce the specific signals that best deceive their different hosts and to maintain their deception racket by changing signal when the previous signal failed," Flower added.

(Reporting by Will Dunham, editing by G Crosse)

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**Contributions for *The Babblers* 119 August/September 2014 may be sent to the editor anytime between now and 14<sup>th</sup> July 2014.**