



# THE BABBLER

Newsletter of BirdLife Zimbabwe

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## Hi everyone,

Readers of this newsletter will have noticed the increase of reports from Matabeleland over the past few months. This is due to the new committee and its re-joining the BirdLife flock. Such participation is most welcome - this newsletter national, after

all, and it is great to have news and content from other parts of the country, rather than just Mashonaland and our keen Chegutu-Kadoma birders. Now all we need are reports from other areas...! So please put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboards, and send in your news about what happening around you. It is also nice to hear from new 'birds', not just the same old mocking-chats.

Winter is warming up a bit at the moment and hopefully those minimum temperatures are on the rise. August outings are still on 'winter time' but in September we are back to 06h30 starts for our regular spots. Maybe then I'll come out of hibernation! Happy birding everyone.

Ian Riddell [gemsaf@mango.zw](mailto:gemsaf@mango.zw)

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Committee	MASHONALAND (Code 024)	MATABELELAND (Code 029)
<b>Chairperson</b>	Innes Louw <a href="mailto:hararebirdwalks@gmail.com">hararebirdwalks@gmail.com</a> 0776-190795 2490466 (h)	John Brebner <a href="mailto:brebnerj@acolchem.co.zw">brebnerj@acolchem.co.zw</a> 0782-781108 2242634
<b>Vice Chairperson</b>	James Ball <a href="mailto:jameszwe@gmail.com">jameszwe@gmail.com</a> 0772-310351 2481351 (h)	Vacant
<b>Secretary</b>	Kelvin Hein <a href="mailto:bushpig48@gmail.com">bushpig48@gmail.com</a> 0782-005889 2338714 (h)	Merlyn Nkomo <a href="mailto:merynomsa@gmail.com">merynomsa@gmail.com</a>
<b>Treasurer</b>	Debbie Wiggins <a href="mailto:wigpd2015@gmail.com">wigpd2015@gmail.com</a> 0772-213309 2882851 (h)	Gaynor Lightfoot <a href="mailto:gayetoes21@gmail.com">gayetoes21@gmail.com</a> 0712-402341
<b>Members</b>	Geoff Lowe <a href="mailto:d.i.systems@mweb.co.zw">d.i.systems@mweb.co.zw</a> 0776-090632	Karen Learmonth <a href="mailto:afspec@yoafrica.com">afspec@yoafrica.com</a> 0772-231819 2240055 (h) 2244990 (w)
	John Vekris <a href="mailto:gakamira@africaonline.co.zw">gakamira@africaonline.co.zw</a> 0772-381582	Clare Hubbard <a href="mailto:skunkiezw@yahoo.com">skunkiezw@yahoo.com</a> 0712-231416 2231329
	Laurence Shadwell <a href="mailto:adderley@iwayafrica.co.zw">adderley@iwayafrica.co.zw</a> 0712-800905 2487670	Cheryl Nel <a href="mailto:nelstruck@gmail.com">nelstruck@gmail.com</a> 0782-735220
	Patrick Shadwell <a href="mailto:patrick.shadwell@gmail.com">patrick.shadwell@gmail.com</a> 0715 979 640	Dean Kendall, Karen Element, Jenny Brebner
<b>Membership</b>	Sylvia Muzavazi <a href="mailto:sylvia@blz.co.zw">sylvia@blz.co.zw</a> 2481496 (w)	
<b>Babbler Editor</b>	Ian Riddell <a href="mailto:gemsaf@mango.zw">gemsaf@mango.zw</a> 0772-117054	

#### National Office

Office hours: Monday to Friday 8.30 – 4.30

35 Clyde Road, Eastlea, P O Box RVL100, Runiville, Harare, Zimbabwe

Telephone: 024 – 2481496

E-mail: [birds@zol.co.zw](mailto:birds@zol.co.zw)

Website: [www.birdlifezimbabwe.org](http://www.birdlifezimbabwe.org) also [www.facebook.com/BirdLifeZimbabwe](https://www.facebook.com/BirdLifeZimbabwe)

**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Finance/Administration Manager**  
**Conservation Officer: Special Species**  
**In charge of IBA/KBA's**  
**Messenger:**

Julia Pierini  
Sylvia Muzavazi  
Fadzai Matsvimbo  
Togarasei Fakarayi  
Vengai Dengu

#### **BirdLife Zimbabwe**

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# Branch News

## Mashonaland

### McDonald Timbers aka Xanadu, pentad 1750\_3110, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019

It was a distinctly chilly last minute rush to get to Mukuvisi Woodlands on my bike on this Sunday morning and I won't be doing anything so rash again this winter! Fortunately, not everyone had gathered by the time I arrived at 07h05 and when all had, we managed to squeeze the seven of us into two vehicles and headed out to Ruwa. There was a bit of puzzlement about the directions and instead of turning left into the industrial area to the usual gate at the timber factory, we kept going straight on the tar, turning right to arrive at a new but locked wrought iron gate - so far, tick Pied Crow. But we had lost the other car so whilst we sought to contact the manager we had time to twiddle our thumbs and phone our wayward friends. They shall remain nameless (since the driver had the directions and I'm sure had been here before!), and found they had neglected to turn off the main road and were heading for Ruwa-via-Beira and all points east, the scenic route. Suitably redirected, our errant vehicle and the manager got to us at about the same time and we wandered through the streets of what will be a new housing estate, replacing the fields we used to go through, and arrived at the houses.



As usual we headed for the south side of the farm, crossing the dam walls of the two dams, which were alarmingly low! The patch of miombo here was very quiet and more housing was pressing urgently at the fence like a virulent urban sprawl virus, eager to overrun this remaining rectangle of green from all sides. On the edge of the woodland a splinter group got two Spotted Thick-knees, the most unusual indigenous bird of the day. I swung around

through the adjacent patch of woodland, also very quiet, to join another splinter group on the west side of the lower dam. Here we looked over the expanse of water plants at a number of Spur-winged Goose, a nice flock of Glossy Ibis, with the more typical Egyptian Goose, Blacksmith Lapwings, African Jacana and others. In the middle ground, on a jumble of stranded granite boulders, Debbie pointed out a large water monitor. Across the way, on the wall, the others ticked Senegal Coucal, various swallows and Brown-throated Martin, Orange-breasted Waxbills and more. Making our way across the upper reaches of the dam (a shortcut for the adventurous provided by an Indiana Jones-type fallen tree bridge) to the east side, I joined the others where a large flock of LBJs making incursions from a *Lantana* thicket to the bare ground below proved to be mostly Pin-tailed Whydahs.



Spur-winged Goose and Glossy Ibis on the lower dam



Pin-tailed Whydahs in non-breeding dress caused some identification errors, being confused for widowfinches and Southern Grey-headed Sparrows





**Tree bridge navigation – another place & time...**

Some of us headed towards the east fence and some gums from where African Fish-eagle called and had a sighting of a Copper Sunbird in a thicket of bushes. On the grassy field a lonely Bontebok eyed us warily and I had a flash-sighting of an African Fish-eagle disappearing into the middle of a large gum, pursued by Pied Crows – we later spotted a large nest deep in the tree. Circling around to the northeast patch of woodland there were a few more birds to add like Brubru, Red-winged Starling, African Yellow White-eye and Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, but a large gravel pit has been opened in this area. With the low water levels it was easy to take a shortcut to the houses via the top of the upper dam and of interest was not one but two melanistic Gabar Goshawks flying into the gardens. Here some of the residents regaled me with their difficult 1+hr task of identifying a

Black-collared Barbet that had earlier collided with a window – you guessed it, they weren't birders!



**The top dam at a low level. With the headwaters of these dams being developed the future water supply is under threat!**

On the lawn overlooking the dam we did the bird list, which eventually ended up at 78 species, what with last minute additions that obligingly flew passed, the most exciting being 3 Pied Avocets that flew around the dam wall before nipping over to the lower dam. A mystery duck also made an appearance, swimming around the wall area but too far for positive ID – it looked very much like a Gadwall with the white rectangle on the speculum but even if it was it surely must have been an escapee!

Many thanks to the McDonalds for another visit to their property on this winter morning.

**Ian Riddell**

### **Branch visit to MONAVALLE VLEI, Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2019**

I must admit the vleI looked rather bleak and frosty at 7 a.m. but as the sun warmed us up and brought out a few birds the prospect quickly improved. In the end, mainly thanks to Jimmy and Moses, we were able to list 48 species, not bad for midwinter.

There were lots of flocks of non-breeding brown birds which we had to study closely to identify as Red-collared Widowbird and Yellow-mantled Widowbird, Southern Red Bishop and Yellow Bishop. Yellow-throated Longclaw were present in fair numbers flying low over the grass showing their white tail feathers and drooping

wings. A pair of Gabar Goshawk swooped around us hunting for rodents while a Lizard Buzzard watched from a gum tree. Along the streams, in the reeds, were Lesser Swamp-warbler and Dark-capped Yellow Warbler with Red-billed Quelea. Perhaps the most interesting sighting was a juvenile African Goshawk, difficult to identify in flight but perched showed its spotted front. A flock of 7 Egyptian Goose flew by and a Purple Heron rose from the tall reeds as we made our way to the golf course.

**Ken Dixon**

### **HARARE BOTANIC GARDEN – Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2019**

A select group of BLZ members and a Dutch visitor, who thought it was pleasantly warm, braved this manicured but frosty venue early on Saturday. A Long-crested Eagle was the first

sighting before we made for sunny patches from which to view and identify birds, often high in tall trees catching the sun. Whyte's Barbet, Streaky-headed Seedeater, Green-winged

Pytilia, and Brown-hooded Kingfisher were soon on our list, plus Purple-banded Sunbird and Amethyst Sunbird and many Red-eyed Doves. A Lizard Buzzard called and Laughing Dove 'laughed'.



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geonix@manago.zw

Careful combing of the big bamboo eventually revealed the Magpie Mannikin and one observant member found the Black-throated Wattle-eye after the rest of us had given up. Others birds of note were a Cardinal Woodpecker, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Copper Sunbird and Miombo Double-collared Sunbird hopped about on the ground. It was interesting to watch the Grey-rumped Swallow flying low over the mowed area near the Nyanga Flat-tops, hawking insects and diving into the rat-holes in which they nest at this time of the year.

46 was a creditable score for July, the count being conducted in warm sunshine.

**Ken Dixon.**

## Matabeleland

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### **BLZ Matabeleland eBird Global Big Day – bird outing to Tshabalala – Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> May**

A chatty bunch of White-browed Sparrowweavers greeted two of us at the Tshabalala gates at 7 a.m. on a sunny morning with a stunning blue sky above, as several Pied Crows cawed overhead. While waiting, hopefully, for others to arrive, we birded around the offices, managing to record 15 species within as many minutes. An irate Lilac-breasted Roller was having a vocal altercation with a Pied Crow but a Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler chirruped away happily in a thorn tree near us as a Scarlet-chested Sunbird fossicked around a parasitic growth in the same acacia. Seven Green Woodhoopoes chortled close by as they flew from tree to tree, investigating the bark with great gusto, and several Dark-capped Bulbuls sat sunning themselves while having a good morning preen. A Brown-crowned Tchagra skulked through the bottom of a bush; a Red-headed Weaver and a Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird joined the list as we heard a Pearl-spotted Owlet somewhere out in the bush; Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills and Cape Turtle-doves were busily about as Swainson's Spurfowl, of which we saw many, were heard. A Marico Sunbird's glorious green sheen with its blue-violet breast band shining in the sun had a brief argument with his Scarlet-chested cousin.

Driving down to the one and only water source, a pumped water trough, a Yellow-bellied Greenbul and a Long-billed Crombec

were added to the record as a squadron of Red-faced Mousebirds flew past. A Senegal Coucal sat out in the open, its pale breast standing out against the green and Magpie Shrikes, their long tails blowing in the slight breeze, hung about a few thorn bushes. As we approached the trough, Cape Turtle-doves and several rowdy Grey Go-away-birds festooned the trees surrounding the trough and while sitting having a cup of coffee, Blue Waxbills and a couple of Cinnamon-breasted Buntings flew down to drink. A Gabar Goshawk cruised past and a little later, several Little Bee-eaters twittered overhead. A couple of Fork-tailed Drongos flitted about and a chattering gaggle of Arrow-marked Babbler arrived. A third member of our branch turned up to join us and on her way in had seen Scaly-feathered Finches and covey of Crested Francolin with six little ones. Moving along down towards the river, we took a short walk seeing Red-billed Firefinches, a Brubru, a White-bellied Sunbird, Green-winged Pytilias and a Chin-spot Batis was heard, as was a White-browed Scrub-robin and a Tropical Boubou. On our way to the dam on the southern boundary, several Namaqua Doves flew off the road in front of the car and we saw a couple of flocks of White-crested Helmet-shrikes. The dam was empty but a damp patch attracted a plethora of little birds that were continuously flitting back and forth, obviously



getting some moisture – flocks of Blue Waxbills, a few Black-faced Waxbills, Yellow-fronted Canary, Red-billed Quelea and several Long-tailed Paradise-whydahs, and we finally spotted a Violet-eared Waxbill female amongst the crowd. Two Common Scimitar-bills flew past as a Tawny-flanked Prinia noisily called from a thorn bush. Red-eyed Doves were heard and on our way down to the northern dam, which was also dry, there was a large bunch of Southern

White-crowned Shrikes, crowding each other and appearing to quarrel.

We finished off doing a circuit round the old lands, which are pretty bushed up now, and came across the enormous lion enclosure that has recently been built and expecting occupants in a couple of weeks' time (???) Tshabalala, very rarely, disappoints as a birding venue and we listed 47 species.

**John and Jenny Brebner, Karen Learmonth**

### **Dassie survey weekend – Matopos 24<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019**

Not many people will know that 2019 is the 56<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the inception of the Verreaux's Eagle Survey in the Matobo Hills, a breeding survey, which is the longest running survey of its kind anywhere in the world. The Matabeleland Branch of BLZ has kept it running through thick and thin and their teams, as well as doing nest checks during the season, also conduct an annual dassie count. While a dassie count has been done for many years, the branch only took over this task some 13 years ago and it was decided then that the count be conducted annually towards the end of May. Hyrax is the main prey base for the Verreaux's Eagle in the Matobo Hills providing 99% of their preferred diet. While the dassies, Yellow-spotted (*Heterohyrax brucei*) and Rock (*Procavia capensis*), appear to be thriving within the park, both in the recreational side and the Whovi, which is the game park, sadly, there is very little evidence of many, if any, animals in the adjoining communal areas. Animals have been trapped for karosses, tourist gimmicks and food. Thus, all the historical nests in those affected areas are now derelict. There has been evidence of snaring within the park too, which is of grave concern.

A question often asked is "How on earth do you count them?" Watching carefully, the older animals emerge first to warm up, followed by the sub-adults, then the juveniles and lastly the pups will emerge. It is, usually, all very orderly! Most dassies sit to warm up for a while but as the day warms, the animals will start to disperse to feed so it's time to pack up.



**Hyrax enjoying the sun. Photo: I. Riddell**



**Skull of Yellow-spotted Rock Hyrax *Heterohyrax brucei***



**To some degree, the shape of the rostrum and other small skull formation differences separate *Procavia capensis*. Particularly premolar 1, which is often missing in *capensis* (lower jaw); overall length of premolars 1-4 which are the same as length of molars 1-3, are other differences**

So... by six o'clock in the evening of Friday 24<sup>th</sup> May, twelve 'black eaglers' had arrived at Rowallan Park, Matopos, to set up camp for two

nights for the duration of the 2019 dassie count. This annual event is not the most popular, taking place at the onset of winter and requires getting up really early two mornings running when most folks usually have the luxury of lying in over the weekend! However, once the morning's count is over, it does give teams the opportunity to check up on their allotted Verreaux's Eagle nests as the first reporting period ends at the end of the May. Each year it is mooted that "THIS year's dassie count should be the last" but, then, everyone, generally, ends up having an enjoyable, fun time.

That evening, settled around a nice, warm fire and with supper of soup and bread being prepared, teams received their site allocations for the two days and, for those who had not yet been able to check their various nest sites, arrangements were made for later the following morning. Teams started heading out from quarter to five onwards on Saturday morning, just as dawn began to lighten the sky. By late afternoon after a busy day and everyone safely back in camp, there was plenty to chat about and much laughter around the campfire while a delicious potjie and rice supper was consumed, followed by the remnants of the death-by-chocolate birthday cake started on the night before (Happy birthday, Tony!).

We are, personally, very lucky to have two really beautiful dassie sites to count from. The first morning we did one in the Maleme Rest Camp, seated between Black Eagle lodge and lodge number 9, overlooking the gorge. Counting would NOT be possible without the use of a powerful telescope as, when the sun rises, the warmth and light slowly move down the opposite range some way across the gorge and a few animals start to appear. As we arrived, an African Goshawk flew high overhead, vocalizing as they do, and a pair of White-necked Ravens flew about making their usual cawing din. Once we'd settled down, a murmur of Red-winged Starlings, around 60+ birds, flew over, their liquid notes clear in the still of the morning. The resident African Fish-eagles were busy nest building, adding to their already large nest just below Fish Eagle lodge, their haunting cries – the sound of Africa – echoing up and down the valley. There was no sign, sadly, of the resident Verreaux's Eagle pair but, as they had had a late chick last year, they are probably having a rest this season. Dark-capped Bulbuls sat in cuddly twos,

gossiping, while warming up in a sunny spot and a couple of dainty Bar-throated Apalis skittered about in a small fig tree. The melodious notes of Black-headed Orioles were often heard and as we watched a cute, little long-nosed shrew dash about under a large boulder, a Mocking Cliff-chat sat atop another boulder, having a serious morning chat to itself. Once we'd completed the morning's count, we joined some others for most of the rest of the day on a nest checking few hours along the Lower Maleme road.

Arriving back at camp, a little party of White-crested Helmet-shrikes flitted about close to our tent as Fork-tailed Drongos swooped around, hawking insects, and a group of chortling Green Wood-hoopoes flew from tree to tree investigating for morsels. Later, a rowdy bunch of Arrow-marked Babblers maraudered through camp. Fairly early in the evening a Spotted Hyena was heard whooping – something none of us had heard in the Matopos before – and overnight, that strange pig-like grunting from impala rutting was heard several times.

Rising early on Sunday morning after a much cooler night, our next dassie count was at the top near White Rhino cave and our favourite, despite the clamber up in the half dark; as the years roll by it seems to get a little steeper each time! The vista of the hills from there is stunning and as the day wakes up, the sun rises between two massive granite monoliths to the east, slowly painting in the colours to the range in the west. Again, several Dark-capped Bulbuls huddled together, warming up while several of their cousins, Yellow-bellied Greenbuls, grumbled away close by and the Black-collared Barbet's call echoed about the hills. A couple of African Grey Hornbills mewed overhead. Natal Spurfowl noisily 'kakked' down in the valley and later Crested Francolin joined in. An Emerald-spotted Wood-dove's melancholy song was heard every so often and a rather gloomy Boulder Chat glared balefully out at us while sheltering under an overhang. As we observed a Verreaux's Eagle come and go from a nest in the distance, dassies began to appear in dribs and drabs and we were lucky enough to count a few pups this time, having seen no youngsters at our count the previous day. Back in camp, once everyone had returned and filled out the necessary forms, catching up on the bird list and swapped a few stories of the morning, we sat

down to a cheerful, shared breakfast before packing up and returning home.

All-in-all, the teams logged 57 bird species. Others seen or heard – Chin-spot Batis, Yellow-crowned Bishop, Tropical Boubou, Black-throated Canary, Senegal Coucal, Black Crake, Pied Crow, Cape Turtle-dove, Red-eyed Dove, Brown Snake-eagle, Lanner Falcon, Southern Black Flycatcher, Grey Go-away-bird, Egyptian Goose, Little Grebe, Greater Honeyguide, Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, African Jacana, Pied Kingfisher, Black-shouldered Kite, Blacksmith Lapwing, African Scops-owl, Barn Owl, African Green-pigeon, Three-banded Plover, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Lilac-breasted

Roller, Magpie Shrike, Swainson's Spurfowl, Cape Glossy Starling, Black Stork, Black-crowned Tchagra, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Southern Black Tit, Blue Waxbill, African Yellow White-eye, Golden-tailed Woodpecker.

Many thanks to all those who took part, to Clare for organising the roster, to Elton and Gaynor for the suppers, to Karen for organising the venue and to Neil Rix and Rowallan Park for a wonderful weekend.

**John and Jenny Brebner, Karen Learmonth, Helen Lewis, Gaynor and Elton Lightfoot, Judy Ross, Cindy and Howie Sellick, Mark and Shirley Swannack, Tony Wharam.**

### **Fuel Queue Birding**

Having risen before the crack of dawn, packed up the coffee basket, greeted Wol, our friendly Spotted Eagle-owl who has, for over two years now, roosted in our garden daily, we set off to join the (supposedly) pensioners fuel queue near the City Hall. As the sun began to tinge the sky with pink, quickly turning to lemon yellow, we caught up with all manner of folks we hadn't seen in a while!

A couple of Municipal workers arrived to sweep the litter and rubbish clogging the roadside gutters into piles near the yellow dustbins (note – not IN the dustbins). As they wandered off to continue their desultory sweeping, so the Pied Crows descended to peck with great gusto through the piles, picking up one or two tasty tit bits. The crows, along with the help of a gusty, cool breeze swirling about, assisted to spread the rubbish back from whence it had come. A crowd of House Sparrows across the road fussed about gossiping like housewives of old as two of their number did a tightrope routine along the thin railings of a balcony above them. A few Rock Doves floated down to wander through a deserted fuel station forecourt opposite and several groups of Common Mynas flew by, their voices continually heard

throughout the long wait. (They are, actually, very attractive birds, particularly in flight!) Southern Grey-headed Sparrows also fossicked in the rubbish on a dusty corner while above the St John's Cathedral spire, martins and swifts flew about in twittering clouds, enjoying the early morning sun – the only ones I could identify positively were African Palm-swifts. What caught my attention more than anything, though, was the astounding number of African Sacred Ibis flying over in droves of between ten and forty birds at a time and they just kept coming. They looked as if they were heading off in the direction of Aisleby but it got me wondering as to where they all roost overnight. The occasional Grey Heron or Black-headed Heron languidly flapped in their wake and a few Glossy Ibis were amongst several of the groups too. A small gang of Cattle Egrets were also seen as they flew over in formation.

So...as time passed and the queue grew, becoming more and more shambolic with tempers rising, having thought I must remember my binos next time, once I'd got my fuel I hoped there wouldn't be a "next time"! (Wishful thinking?).

**Jenny Brebner**

### **Birding around the block – Take two!**

Having done a report earlier in the year when it was wet, I realised that on my morning walks, I hadn't really been taking much notice of what birds are around now that we are in the depths of winter. So I made a conscientious effort on my way round one morning at the end of June....

Having got up before the sun, Wol, our friendly Spotted Eagle-owl, arrived as usual for his morning snack of a few chicken hearts and then flew around the garden with me as I set the sprinklers hoping to take advantage of what little electricity we may have that morning. He called softly to me before landing in a huge Tipuana where, several times now, we have seen



him busily excavating a hollow between two large branches – perhaps preparing a home? He often flies there as it's getting dark in the evening, does a bit of furious scraping and scratching with both talons and beak, before setting off on his nightly forays.



I had to rely mostly on audio to pick up the birds and as it was a still, frosty morning, the dust from vehicles speeding past lay thick and heavy in the air. Getting to the top of the road, a lovely old fig, with gloriously spreading branches, housed several Dark-capped Bulbuls and a Tropical Boubou skulking in its lower limbs. Somewhere on the other side of the wall, I could hear a Yellow-bellied Greenbul grumbling. Dark-capped Bulbuls were many all along my route, mostly sitting cuddled up trying to warm up in the early morning sun. Numerous, too, were Black-collared Barbets, their strident calls coming from every direction and the Crested Barbet's trill was often heard, with one or two sighted, perched on a pole top, also enjoying a bit of morning sun. A flock of between fifteen and twenty Red-faced Mousebirds took off from a candelabra tree where I have seen them several mornings recently, pecking through the fruits at the top of each branch, and, investigating the top of a desiccated sisal flower was what looked like a Streaky-headed Seedeater. A couple of Pied Crows were having an argument at the top of an Ilala palm where there's been a crow's nest for many years. Perhaps a domestic spat or a real estate dispute? They soon took off, the one chasing the other. Pied Crows along the route were pretty numerous too, including a cantankerous old codger with a crooked foot whom I see mostly on a Wednesday – dustbin day – when it's trying to peck through a dustbin bag. It is not in the least bit concerned with my efforts to chase it off! From a garden opposite the Municipal reservoir, four Red-eyed Doves

flew out from a fig tree and a trio of Laughing Doves sat on a telephone line. A dusty looking Brown-crowned Tchagra flew up from the grass and, landing in a tree, disturbed several Cut-throat Finches, while just around the corner a Magpie Shrike sat on a rusty fence line. As another car flew by, showering me in a cloud of dust that would not dissipate, I stood for a while watching a small flock of Bronze Mannikins, several Blue Waxbills and two Red-billed Firefinches fossicking away in the dusty grass, while a bit further along an African Hoopoe was trying unsuccessfully to dig its scimitar-like bill into the dry, hardened ground before taking off and trying again a bit further along. I could hear a Common Scimitarbill calling as well as a Black-crowned Tchagra, while Kurrichane Thrush, Black-backed Puffback, White-browed Robin-chat and Chin-spot Batis could be heard calling from various lush gardens along the way, and somewhere way off, Helmeted Guineafowl trilled. Having heard the Grey Go-away-bird, I then saw two having an early morning chat at the top of a beautiful, spreading thorn tree. Back along the home stretch and passing Hornung Park Club, I could hear Crowned Lapwings, which usually frequent the fairways on the golf course in numbers and a Black-headed Oriole flew past, its melodious notes delightful in the still morning. Just before rounding the final corner, I stood for a while watching a petit White-throated Robin-chat, flicking through leaf litter near a rocky outcrop. The little bird hopped really close to my feet, fixed me with a bright eye for a moment or two, then continued, quite happily, with its foraging. I usually find these birds quite shy so it was lovely having that moment to myself and it did not fly away as I continued on my way.

Down the driveway, I could hear a pesky bunch of Arrow-marked Babblers and found them annoying Wol, trying to have his morning nap. Although he never seems to take much notice of them, they do crowd him and kick up such a ruckus! And, of course, they incite other birds from round about to join in, so a Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, several Dark-capped Bulbuls, a vocal Fork-tailed Drongo and a surprising number of African Yellow White-eyes had gathered to add their half cents worth.

So...there are quite a few birds around to be taken note of!

**Jenny Brebner**

# Mashonaland West

## Kadoma-Chegututu News

On 6<sup>th</sup> April, Sigrid Stone and I were fortunate enough to have sufficient fuel to head out to Mandalay Dam, situated between Eiffel Flats and Kadoma. It didn't take long for us to find African Purple Swampheens, which delighted us, five of them, gleaming in the early morning sun! We were so fortunate to be able to observe these shy, elusive birds foraging in the shallows and moving among the bulrushes and sedges growing on the dam periphery.



**African Pygmy-goose. Photo: Ruth Baldwin-Paice**

Mandalay certainly proved to be full of surprises – we were entertained by a busy Black Heron (doing its umbrella dance!) whilst colourful European Bee-eaters soared overhead. Red-billed Teal, Comb Duck, White-faced Duck and White-backed Ducks, along with several pairs of African Pygmy-goose, busied themselves among the vast expanse of water lilies. We were pleased to see a pair of Red-knobbed Coot moving sedately through the lily leaves and flowers, and several Black Crakes that dashed in and out of the bulrush fringe. Three energetic Pied Kingfishers were hovering and diving for fish whilst a lone Malachite Kingfisher waited patiently for its prey on a dried grass stalk. Two Hamerkops flew up from the shallows. Upon reaching the eastern side of the dam, we spied a well-camouflaged Squacco Heron and a shy Purple Heron, which were happily added to our list. Minutes before our departure, we were very fortunate to see a magnificent Black-chested Snake-eagle swoop down and catch a small snake on the water's edge.



**Malachite Kingfisher. Photo: Ruth Baldwin-Paice**

Whilst moving through the grassy surrounds we heard Zitting Cisticolas and in the distance a single Swainson's Spurfowl calling. Long-tailed Paradise-whydahs, White-winged Widowbirds and Southern Red Bishops, along with several other seed-eating species, were seen flitting through the grass. Many other more common bird species were seen.

We left the dam before noon after a most enjoyable morning's birding! Sadly, these crucial wetland areas are threatened throughout Zimbabwe, along with a plethora of bird and other animal species that are dependent on them for survival. Wetlands are precious and vital for the health of the environment.

**Ruth Baldwin-Paice**

*Sunny days but cold at nights as we have our winter weather.* The birds and animals behave according to their surroundings, so changes take place all the time. Most mango trees in Kadoma are loaded with blossoms (14<sup>th</sup> July) the same time as last year, so we wonder what summer rains are ahead for this year?

Outings continue to aid us in July in waterbird count.

Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> June

A sunny cold day, but a visit to Devon dam on the Mombe river *en route* to Claw dam was rewarding, such clean water, with very little disturbance in the vicinity.

### **Birds of Note**

5 White-fronted Bee-eaters, 25 African Jacanas, 3 Little Grebes, 2 African Fish-eagles, 6 African Sacred Ibis, 1 pair Spotted Eagle-owl (disturbed from a large tree), 5 Grey Crowned Cranes ( probably same group seen previously at Clavershay farm).

### ***Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> July***

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Another worthwhile outing to the Makaroro family farm on the Suri Suri River near Chakari mine, and farming continues despite being surrounded by artisanal miners.

### **Birds of Note**

78 White-faced Ducks, 4 Fulvous Ducks, 2 African Fish-eagles, 1 Black-chested Snake-eagle on roadside, 14 Black-headed Herons (in green crop of barley), 4 Blacksmith Lapwings, 4 African Wattled Lapwings, 4 Black Herons, 6 African Jacanas, 2 Green-backed Herons, many Namaqua Doves (on ground by roadside).

### ***Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> July***

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A cold windy but sunny day to Martin spur textile ponds was very rewarding.

### **Birds of Note**

3 Little Grebes, 2 Reed Cormorants, 53 African Sacred Ibis, 13 Glossy Ibis, 115 Black-

winged Stilts, 4 Blacksmith Lapwings, 4 African Wattled Lapwings, 26 Red-billed Teals, 7 Hottentot Teals.

The textile factory is functioning well, so there is a continuous outflow of dye waste water which settles in the various ponds, where it evaporates and so makes good shoreline feeding for waders. Food must be good and plentiful with big numbers of birds counted.

At Mandalay dam (on the same day) near Eiffel Flats, we sat having tea, and watching for any activity on the water along the edge.

### **Birds of Note**

2 Reed Cormorants, 91 White-faced Ducks, 3 African Pygmy-goose, 7 Africa Jacanas, 6 Black Crakes, 6 African Wattled Lapwings, 1 Three-banded Plover, 13 Common Moorhens, 4 African Purple Swamphens, 7 Red-knobbed Coots, 5 Red-billed Teals, 1 Hottentot Teal, 1 Squacco Heron.

All the above water birds visits have been recorded and submitted for African waterbird census.

We birders of Kadoma/Chegutu continue our outings, where possible, and what nicer way to bring peace and tranquillity to our fractious lives.

**Margaret Parrock**

## **Out and about**

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### **Birding in Sango Ranch, Save Valley Conservancy**

Being part of the Vulture Team *en route* to the southeast lowveld of Zimbabwe on a mission to carry out a Vulture Safe Zone (VSZ), an assessment at Sango Ranch was not only a pleasure to me but also presented an important birding opportunity away from the usual Harare birding hotspots. The road was quiet, even as we left Harare on a beautiful Saturday morning, the first of June 2019. Apart from the hassle of finding fuel, the journey was perfectly smooth. Situated in the east of the country, Sango Ranch is unquestionably one of the richest biodiversity areas in Zimbabwe. Stretching from the Bikita Hills in the west and crossing various habitats to the Save River in the east, Sango provides visitors with around 60,000 hectares of untamed Africa. It is one of the ranches making up the popular Save Valley Conservancy, home to the

famous big five vis; elephant, lion, rhino, leopard and buffalo.

We arrived late afternoon and the VSZ assessment and nesting survey was set to begin the following morning. As we drove in, a pair of adult Southern Ground-hornbills with a juvenile could be seen wondering up and down the bush. This was complemented by a flock of White-crested Helmet-shrikes partying along with plenty of Meves's Starlings and Dark-capped Bulbuls. Of greater interest, especially to any birder, were marvellous sounds of various bird species calling from all directions, confirming that Sango Ranch is an important bird area worth visiting. White-backed Vultures could be seen soaring high up in the sky in search of dead carcasses, I guess! Although rarely seen near the main camp, it didn't take us long to spot a Lappet-faced Vulture flying past in the twilight.



In the night, Barn Owls and Spotted Eagle-owls could be heard tuning up to the grumbling sounds of Lions.



The following day, we woke up to the morning calls of the early birds and the Arrow-marked Babblers and Black-backed Puffbacks were as plentiful as Dark-capped Bulbuls and were very common in the acacia thickets at the main camp. The thickets just behind the lodges at the main camp overlooking the Musaizi River to the east were frequently visited by the Purple-crested Turacos, Fork-tailed Drongos, Violet-backed Starlings, Lilac-breasted Roller and the Green Wood-hoopoes during our stay. The first assessment and nest survey took us to the west of the ranch, driving along its boundary with Chishakwe to the north. On the way we were treated to a charming sighting of a Klaas's Cuckoo perched motionless on an acacia tree, only able to identify it after a comprehensive consultation with my field guide since it was my first sighting. The Emerald-spotted Wood-doves continuously flew in front of the vehicle until disappeared into the thickets. Further west, we saw a juvenile Bateleur still in its brown plumage perched in a baobab tree. While we were enjoying nice views of it and trying to take a snap, a Meyer's Parrot swooped passed in front of us to perch a distance away. Several other majestic Bateleurs, both juvenile and mature, were to be spotted later on soaring high up in the sky. On one of the artificial pans that

we visited, about six White-backed Vultures were preening and drinking, while a flock of Yellow-billed Oxpeckers took to the air as we arrived. A pair of Grey Go-away-birds in the vicinity was unsettled, calling in their usual way to inform game animals of approaching strangers.



**Emerald-spotted Wood-dove. Photo: Ian Riddell**

Going further down the ranch towards Save River, we approached Suni, a huge natural pan teeming with water birds. Two Hamerkops were spotted taking to the air and an African Fish-eagle was seen perched on a Msasa tree branch vigilantly scouting the pan for fish! Further along the pan, some Cattle Egrets could be seen slumbering in the sun, while a shower of Crowned Lapwings took to the air complaining loudly as we drifted closer to the banks of the pan. A Pied Kingfisher, White-faced Ducks, one Yellow-billed Egret, Reed Cormorants, African Wattled Lapwings and a plenty of Blacksmith Lapwings are some of the other birds that I recorded at the pan. Tawny-flanked Prinias and a Red-faced Cisticola could be heard calling from the nearby bushes. A pair of the Black-headed Oriole passed over our heads calling as headed towards the edge of the pan. We went further down to the Save River with high expectations of seeing vulture nests. However, we were unlucky as all we could see was a heavily silted Save River with plenty of weaver nests along the river bank.

The following day, our survey took us mainly to the eastern part of the ranch following the Musaizi River down to its confluence with Save. I constantly took advantage of any chance to cast my eyes high skywards scouting for more birds. Although it was a bit cloudy on the day some birds were active and there were plenty of them in some areas. It was good spotting and learning about the Double-banded Sandgrouse

at one of the artificial pans that we visited. Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills and Meves's Starlings kept us company and we continually saw them all the way.



White-backed Vultures (above) at a kill at Sango and Violet-backed Starling (below) in January 2018. Photos: Ian Riddell & Roger MacDonald



Going further down towards the Save River, we approached another natural pan, Changa, where we decided to take a breather, enjoy some refreshments and sit and enjoy the bird life. Casting my eyes across the pan, a Grey Heron and a Purple Heron were sharing the same tree, perched on opposite sides enjoying the sunshine. A gorgeous Saddle-billed Stork stood motionless in long grass on the far side of the pan as African Jacanas potted about on the waterlilies. Several other Grey Herons sat perched on a stump far across the pan. We noticed a crowd of Egyptian Goose as well as several other Reed Cormorants and a Pied Kingfisher. From where we sat we watched a Goliath Heron slowly negotiating the waterlilies, surprisingly without submerging. On the way back to the main camp several Red-billed Queleas, Red-billed Buffalo-weavers, Natal Spurfowls and Helmet Guineafowls added to the list, giving a superb ending to the Sango Ranch trip. All in all, I managed to keep record of a total of 79 bird species. However, an experienced birder could have done better, given the abundance of bird species in the area. Special thanks to Fadzai Matsvimbo who greatly assisted me in identifying and naming the majority of the bird species that I didn't know.  
**Shingirai Sakarombe**





Atlassers will know that the SABAP2 website has been redesigned. The reasons are presented in this (June 2019) [YouTube Webinar link](#) and you can also click on the **Resources** tab on the site for other presentations, which will be added from time to time. You might like to watch this 'BirdLasser - Submit an atlas card' video, which deals with the basics and this has been followed by a 2<sup>nd</sup> presentation (SABAP2 Webinar 2 - 3 July 2019) 'BirdLasser Tips and Tricks: Logging your Sightings'. A future presentation will be added next month, more on BirdLasser, so visit this site occasionally to see what's new.

### ***A pied-phase Gabar Goshawk***



What is no doubt a very rare sighting, a Gabar Goshawk showing melanism and leucism. Investigations will be done to see what previous examples can be found in the literature and published in *Honeyguide*.

**Ian Riddell, Harare**



## Useful Contacts:

CEO/Ringing Programme: Julia Pierini [JuliaPierini@birdlifezimbabwe.org](mailto:JuliaPierini@birdlifezimbabwe.org) 0772-894562  
Rarities Committee: Ian Riddell [gemsaf@mango.zw](mailto:gemsaf@mango.zw) 0772-117054  
BLZ Library: [piumosso@zol.co.zw](mailto:piumosso@zol.co.zw) 2304298; 2481496  
Special Species: Peta Ditchburn [specialespecies@blz.co.zw](mailto:specialespecies@blz.co.zw) 0775-940714, 029-2230075  
Mashonaland South: Margaret Parrock 068-22005 or her daughter Coralee 0772-739370  
Eastern Districts: Sue Fenwick 0779-408557 [ingram.sue@gmail.com](mailto:ingram.sue@gmail.com)  
Mashonaland East Natural History Society: Chairman Peter Hadingham 024-2497035  
Secretary: Colin de Beer 0279-23931 [jcdb1936@gmail.com](mailto:jcdb1936@gmail.com)  
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## BLZ MEMBERSHIP

BirdLife Zimbabwe's membership year is from April to March, but you can join any time.

**Even if you don't attend meetings and outings**, your membership is really 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 records is invaluable. As a member you get the newsletter, *The Babbler*, every two months and two issues of *Honeyguide*, our internationally acclaimed journal, every membership year. All for a very reasonable annual fee.

Especially in these difficult economic times, donations towards any of our projects are always much appreciated and you may consider mentioning BLZ in your will!

Individual/Family members (incl. children under 17)	US\$ 25.00
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## Branch Activities

**Friends of the Vumba** is a community initiative that employs 3 trained scouts to protect the wildlife – tracking for snares and arresting poachers of game, birds and wood. We also support an education outreach into the schools in the area, mostly focussed on birding but more recently extending into wider environmental issues such as WESSA's Water program, rubbish health awareness, alien tree harvesting and indigenous tree planting.

### Directions to regular venues (Google Earth co-ordinates):

**CABS Northridge Park** -17.777494, 31.090782. From town drive along Borrowdale Road, turn right into Whitwell, next right into Ridgeway North, next right into Northend Road and first right into Northridge Close. Drive to the end of the road and go through a security boom into Northridge Park.

**Marlborough Vlei** -17.742715, 30.990416. Meet at the bottom of Princess Margaret Road, off Harare Drive and follow the road round to the left. Park on the short road midway along the bottom of Princess Margaret.

**Mukuvisi Woodlands** -17.851935, 31.092010. 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 tip for the car guard. Don't forget refreshments for after the walk when we record the number of species. The **public car park** is off Hillside Road, -17.835393, 31.089111.

**Prince Edward School car park** -17.818721, 31.036462. Josiah Tongogara Ave.

**Monavale Vlei** -17.806770, 31.010579. From Quendon Road turn into Lyndhurst Road, at bottom follow right hand bend, take first left and second right to BS Leon roundabout. Second exit is Fenella Drive. Meet on Fenella Drive.

**Haka Park** -17.843391, 31.143369. From the traffic circle at the Mutare Road/Harare Drive intersection, continue 500m and turn left, follow the road (770m) to the Haka sign and boom on the left. If entering through the boom on Harare Drive (-17.828473, 31.140253; 1.9 km north of the circle) make your way to the meeting point. \$12 entrance fee for BLZ members, \$20 others.

**Avondale Sports Club** -17.785100, 31.041972. Brighton Road, Harare between Sam Nujoma Street Extension and Upper East Road. There is a cash bar and a security guard. A minimum charge of \$2 per person at the door please.

## Mashonaland Branch

### *BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Calendar of Events: AUGUST 2019*

<b>Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup></b>	<b>Marlborough Vlei walk</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Sunday 4<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Mukuvisi Woodlands walk</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Saturday 10<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Haka Park</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Thursday 15<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>My involvement with Friends of Hwange</b> Presentation by Dave Dell, Avondale Sports Club.	Meet 5.30 for 6.00 p.m.
<b>Sunday 18<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Monavale Vlei walk</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> - Sunday 25<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Kent Estates, Norton -18.012013, 30.664112</b> <b>Weekend of Birding Activities – camping or day visit</b>	

Directions to their offices: from Harare, go past Norton, over the rail flyover for 1.6km. Turn left on Skyline Rd (which is the same as Chibero College but may read Lake Chivero!). Travel c.6km, then turn right at the Kent Estate signs. Travel a further 7km and go directly to the office next to the workshops and on to the dams. Bring all your camping equipment, food and drinks to set up on Friday evening, or you can do a day visit on Saturday. A Star talk will be given by Tony Alegria and a visit to CCC is planned to view the vulture restaurant. Loos, shower & braai area provided. Covers a range of biomes & plenty of owls call at night.

*BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Calendar of Events: SEPTEMBER 2019*

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<b>Sunday 1<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>Mukuvisi Woodlands walk</b>	Meet at 06.30 a.m.
<b>Saturday 7<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Marlborough Vlei walk</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Saturday 14<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Umwinsidale</b> Meet at CABS, Northridge Close.	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Sunday 15<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Monavale Vlei walk</b>	Meet at 06.30 a.m.
<b>Thursday 18<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Bird trip to Ethiopia</b> Presentation by Alex Masterson, Avondale Sports Club.	Meet 5.30 for 6.00 p.m.
<b>Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup></b>	<b>Lanark Farm (Irvines)</b> Meet at Prince Edward School car park	Meet at 06.30 a.m.

For further information, please contact Innes Louw, [innes.louw@ames.co.zw](mailto:innes.louw@ames.co.zw) or [hararebirdwalks@gmail.com](mailto:hararebirdwalks@gmail.com) 0776 190795

### Other Areas

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

**Eastern Districts** – Second Saturday of every month **The Vumba Walk**. These vary from the Upper to Lower Vumba areas and occasionally may extend into Penhalonga, Burma Valley, and even Chimanimani. Many birding enthusiasts join us although it is not officially a birding walk. They are usually hosted by either a Vumba resident or a commercial venue such as Tony's Coffee Shop, Forest Hills Lodge, White Horse Inn or the Botanical Gardens and the walks will often traverse private properties not always accessible by the public. Contact Sue Fenwick 0779-408557 [ingram.sue@gmail.com](mailto:ingram.sue@gmail.com) for more details.

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

### Are you using the **BLZ Mashonaland Calendar of Events** on your smartphone?

On your Google account on your computer, click the Google Apps icon (9-dot square) and click **Calendar**. Under My calendars, on the left, tick the box for BLZ Mashonaland Calendar of Events, or try this [link](#).

On your phone go to your calendar – mine is called S Planner – and tap on *More* (yours might say something else but it is your calendar menu) and then *Manage calendars* or whatever yours says. Under Device, the phone, my Samsung has *My calendars* – make sure that is on/ticked, further down it has my Google account – turn on all relevant items and the BLZ Mashonaland Calendar of course. There may be a box/switch to sync your phone with your Google account and this must obviously be on.

Phones and their menus are different but hopefully you can work it out...  
...and always have events easily available on your phone.

*Please send contributions for The Babbler 150  
Oct-Nov 2019 any time before the 15<sup>th</sup> Sept.*