



# THE BABBLER

Newsletter of BirdLife Zimbabwe

*Apr-May 2020*  
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## Hi everyone,

Well, we aren't going to be getting out birding for the next three weeks! The outings of the Mashonaland Branch are still shown in the programme but readers should consider them cancelled, at least for most of April.

So that pretty much leaves the garden (if you are lucky enough to have one) to explore, monitor your birds, insects or whatever, to keep yourself semi-sane, although some of us are only semi-sane to start with! NO problem. I'm hoping to get some better views of our Steel-blue Widowfinch chicks; they are noisy as all hell as they beg food from their Red-billed Firefinch 'mum', but annoyingly they keep to thick cover in the garden. The Whyte's Barbets are running out of figs but the Fern-leaf is just now producing a crop of attractive fruit to keep them happy, along with a team of other fruit-eaters. Unfortunately, the crop isn't as good as last year's...

*Thanks go to our faithful contributors but how about some birding news from the rest of you.* Now's the chance, while you are all sitting at home!

Stay healthy and happy and keep on birding.

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

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# Branch News

## Mashonaland

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### Bird outings around and about Harare

Ken Dixon

#### **CROWBOROUGH SEWAGE WORKS Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2012**

Perhaps not the most beguiling choice of venue but nine of us succumbed on an overcast, cool and windy morning. Personally, I was seduced by the memory of numbers of Yellow Wagtails running about in the fresh green grass just as I had seen them many years ago in the Yorkshire Dales, from which they have now all but disappeared. Unfortunately, they didn't appear here either. But many other birds did.



**Egyptian Geese on the pastures**

The sewage works themselves are out of bounds but there is a huge expanse of pasture with sparse bushes where the Harare mombé herd is free to roam – and our group too. Barn Swallows flew fast and low wherever we wandered and Abdim's Storks too were

everywhere. A family of Brimstone Canary sat on a roadside bush and a Gabar Goshawk chased a crow through the few trees. Sadly, the overnight storage ponds are now dry so we had to forgo the ducks and waders and set off across the fields. A flock of Common Swifts wheeled overhead, our first of the summer, and African Pipits and Rattling Cisticolas were widely distributed. Those with acute hearing picked up Pale-crowned Cisticola high overhead. In the area around the small pond we found lots of Black-winged Stilts, White-faced Ducks, Red-billed Teals and large groups of African Sacred Ibis and Egyptian Goose, 70+ of the latter. A Wood Sandpiper or two were also present. Ambling back to the road we followed a few pairs of Rosy-throated Longclaw. Continuing our fruitless search for Yellow Wagtail, we came across a fair number of Kittlitz's Plovers feeding in the short grass and spotted a Black-chested Snake-eagle in the now threatening rain clouds. As the cars were far distant and the rain near we sensibly decided not to cover the 'de-forest' but did see Common Fiscal and heard Diderick Cuckoo and a White-browed Robin-chat.

The group count must have been around 50 species, not bad for such a limited habitat.

#### **MONA VALE VLEI, Sundays 19<sup>th</sup> January, 16<sup>th</sup> February & 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020**

Still not much wet ground on this Ramsar site, except where pipes still haven't been repaired, but plenty of birds and a few, like the Black Coucal, haven't been deterred by the sparse rains received. Red-collared Widowbird, Yellow-mantled Widowbird and Southern Red Bishop were everywhere, tirelessly chasing or leading flocks of admirers through the grass. White-winged Widowbird were also present.

As we set out, a group of South Africans with their SA guide were leaving the vleï, having

tried the old rope-dragging method of searching for flufftail and crane: the outriders of the line of 6 had a rope round their waists, which they were dragging over the undisturbed patches of thick grass. In fact, Ian did see a Red-chested Flufftail flushed but we were all shocked by such antics. Dorothy bravely engaged them but managed to remain calm and reasonable while recruiting them to the COSMO cause. We did learn from them that they had raised a Corn Crane the previous day.

Nothing much else of note but 2 Red-billed Teal circled above us for a time and the Long-crested Eagle put in a late appearance to get added to the list of 60 species.



**White-winged Widowbird at Monavale**

In February, with rain at last kicking in, 6 of us rose early to greet the rare rallids and who knows what on this gem of a reserve. Gumboots or bare feet was the choice but bound to be worth it. The reality was sadly just the opposite and two hours later the bedraggled bunch were glad to take refuge in their vehicles and rush home to get dry without even completing the list which wouldn't have taken long as we identified only about 30 species.

There were of course noteworthy sightings like the cloud of European Bee-eaters dashing about madly, stuffing themselves with flying termites, a very vocal Great Reed-warbler and any number of Yellow-mantled Widowbirds and

### **HAKA PARK, Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> MARCH 2020**

There was a respectable turnout of members for this popular local venue, although the increased entrance fee of \$80 for BLZ members was quite a shock but not enough to send us back home on a perfect morning for birding.

Most of us headed down to the dam and river, noted Little Egret and Great Egret, African Jacana, Common Greenshank, Pied Kingfisher, etc. before setting out for a long riverside stroll. Birds appeared at frequent intervals, bishops and widowbirds, Cape Longclaw, Yellow-throated Longclaw and Rosy-throated Longclaw, African Stonechat, Little Bee-eater and European Bee-eater, Croaking Cisticola and Rattling Cisticola, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Common Fiscal, White-faced Duck and Red-

Red-collared Widowbirds. A Senegal Coucal was heard but no Black.

Traditionally we would have been led by Alex Masterson for his seasonal vlei walk but thankfully he was persuaded not to join us in his rather frail state. We wish him a full recovery. Great thanks to Dorothy and Jimmy for leading us on their home patch.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> March, 7 members and one South African visitor enjoyed a stroll or struggle through head-high Cosmos, Mexican Poppies, grass and reeds on a warm, calm, clear morning. Underfoot the paths were hard and dry except where the latest pipe burst had flooded a large area. 48 species were identified, number 48 being an African Marsh-harrier that was quartering the central vlei as we did the count.

Red-collared Widowbirds and Southern Red Bishops fought aerial battles and for once there seemed to be more Yellow Bishops than Yellow-mantled Widowbirds romping about. As usual Yellow-throated Longclaws made themselves conspicuous as they rose and called. We saw one juvenile Black Coucal, which would seem to indicate successful breeding on the vlei, and the Senegal Coucal called. Lots of Grey-rumped Swallows mingled with African Palm-swifts above us and European Bee-eaters were ever-present. Black-shouldered Kite, Yellow-billed Kite and Long-crested Eagle were the only birds of prey.

billed Teal. An African Fish-eagle called and Black-chested Snake-eagle flew over us. A rarer species found in the longish grass near the river was Broad-tailed Warbler.

Finally, we discovered a crossing point and turned to come back towards the woodland. My group failed to come across a significant bird party but others collected all the usual miombo species like White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike and Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Spotted Creeper, White-crested Helmet-shrike, Red-headed Weaver and many others. Our count was about 65 species and the outing in this ever-developing facility had been enjoyed by all despite the price.



## Dodington Estates, Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020

A dozen members assembled at CABS on a gorgeous day, ready for a trip to a new venue not far from town. Dodington Estates is on Alpes road between Wingate Golf Club and Wild Geese and Mazowe Springs: a few large, attractive houses are set in dense miombo woodland on the slopes of the Mazowe River, which, sadly, was not flowing as the necessary 430 mm of rain has not yet been received this season. Our hosts gave us a brief introduction to the local geography and invited us to explore one or all of three properties and we split into two groups to do so. I made the rash choice of joining the high impact group, which spent the next three hours bundu-bashing its way up and down the stony slopes of the meandering Mazowe.

Before long we found a miombo special, Southern Hyliota, along with African Yellow White-eye, Black-backed Puffback, Brown-crowned Tchagra, a Green-backed Honeybird and others. A Lizard Buzzard sat motionless on a high branch waiting for prey to appear. We stumbled down into the lush grass, which should have been the river, and up the other bank through dense regrowth to a ridge. A notable feature of the fauna was the proliferation of Golden Orb spider webs, much loved by the property owner. After another descent and scramble up to another ridge we came across an ultra-modern mansion with its

own impressive tarred entrance road. There, in some dense bushes overflowed by African Palm-swift, Little Swift and Barn Swallows, we found African Paradise-flycatcher, Blue Waxbill, Long-billed Crombec, Brubru, Grey-backed Camaroptera and Green Wood-hoopoe. Not wanting to be shot for trespassing we hurriedly climbed fences and crossed the road for the relative shelter of more dense cover. A small dam was discovered but yielded no birds so we were off again in the vague direction of the Mazowe. In fact, at one point we could look down the valley to Christon Bank and Thetford Estate. The most exciting feature of the return scramble was hearing, and then calling up, a Neddicky; two in fact. A lovely little bird that we no longer hear in Mukuvisi. Then came two Fiery-necked Nightjars that we all eventually saw sitting in the leaves under a tree. Next came an Ashy Flycatcher and Lesser Honeyguide. Finally, back near our starting point, we met the other group who had taken a very different route.

The count was made on the lovely terrace where our host, Sheila Dodington, generously supplied us with tea or coffee and biscuits. Many old friendships were refreshed and we learnt much about the area, its history and its birds. 65 was the total species count. We are very grateful to our hosts for the opportunity to wander at will through their property.

## MONAVALÉ VLEI Highlights 2019: Report to BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Branch AGM, 16 January 2020

Dorothy Wakeling, Monavale Vlei Programme Manager, 0772376506 and Jimmy Muropa, Vlei Scout, 0772 772771.

Conservation Society of Monavale Trust

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The Conservation Society of Monavale Face Book Page

### Observations

- 426 mm of rain was recorded on Monavale Vlei from for the 2018/19 season.
- As in 2018, burst municipal water pipes and fire hydrants purposefully left open, presumably to manage water pressure, kept patches of Monavale inundated throughout 2019. The Cape Longclaw is a permanent resident and the Red-chested Flufftail, which requires a perennial wet habitat, has moved

onto the Vlei year-round, alongside the Streaky-breasted Flufftail, a summer breeding migrant. The Temminck's Courser was absent during the dry season of 2019 as its breeding habitat, which is dry or burnt ground, was wet!

- 29 migrants bird species were recorded including Dwarf Bittern, Abdim's Stork, Yellow-billed Kite, Wahlberg's Eagle, Steppe Buzzard, Eurasian Hobby, Amur Falcon, Corn Crake, African Crake, Striped Crake,

Streaky-breasted Flufftail, Wood Sandpiper, Red-chested Cuckoo, Levallant's Cuckoo, Klaas's Cuckoo, Diderick Cuckoo, Black Coucal, Woodland Kingfisher, European Bee-eater, European Roller, Barn Swallow, Greater Striped Swallow, Red-breasted Swallow, Great Reed-warbler, Marsh Warbler, Willow Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, African Paradise-flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike.

The Vlei-loving widows and whydahs and seed-eating birds were all present and correct.

The total bird species list is 173 – four more than 2018.

- 406 local and international visitors came to Monavale Vlei during 2019.
- 15 schools visited Monavale Vlei: The French School, Warren Park High 1, St Catherine's School, Higherlife Academy, Harare International School, Bishopslea, Blue Hills Montessori, Little Giggles Nursery School, Westridge, Mubina Ibrahim, Sharon, St Georges, Bryden Country School, St Michaels Primary School, Hartmann House.
- 11 university students are intending to study different aspects of the wetland. They are studying at NUST, UCT, CUT, UZ and Bindura University.

### **Monavale Vlei Management and Activities**

- Judgment on the Monavale case was given on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2019 in favour of COSMO Trust. The landowner appealed to the High Court against the judgment made in the Administrative Court. The case will be heard on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2020.
- The Monavale Vlei monthly bird walks take place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of the month and are well attended.
- The COSMO Kids Club is running smoothly with over 30 children from Monavale and surrounding areas attending.
- The Monavale Indigenous Tree Nursery continues with outreaching tree growing skills to schools and the underprivileged. Tree Knowers and Growers appreciate the expertise of Wilson Mahere of COSMO.
- Schools and university students continue to visit and study the rich biodiversity Vlei and the value of Harare's wetlands.
- Ethical Birding is a must: grass-nesting local birds as well as migrant rallid specials are easily disturbed during the wet season by birders traipsing through the Vlei. Birders are encouraged to remain on the paths.
- We encourage birders to share their bird / animal sightings and photographs with COSMO to support the conservation efforts on the Vlei.

### **Monavale Daily Bird Records and Rainfall Statistics kept since 2005**

Monavale Vlei Bird Species Counted 2005 (210 Species) to December 2019 (246 Species)

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total Birds & Rainfall
132	129	122	119	90	95	99	99	107	105	96	90	<b>173</b>
67	66	33	47	53	46	47	48	49	49	37	55	<b>2019</b>
87	133.5	5.8	30.5							133	146	<b>535.8</b>
110	120	116	96	95	96	97	98	98	104	114	116	<b>169</b>
71	77	51	57	40	49	47	60	56	55	52	TBA	<b>2018</b>
108	237.5	157	32	48						73	97	<b>752.5</b>
135	133	128	103	100	95	98	105	104	112	114	114	<b>162</b>
79	76	67	31	54	30	49	55	53	54	59	65	<b>2017</b>
465.8	179.2	164.5	70	1					3	128.5	89	<b>1101</b>
129	132	134	127	101	96	101	100	99	107	114	119	<b>180</b>
63	62	40	57	42	45	50	37	39	46	70	58	<b>2016</b>
169	96	197	84	3.5					5	126	270	<b>950.5</b>
149	137	126	127	104	101	104	104	104	114	124	123	<b>178</b>
66	70	62	54	43	22	39	47	45	57	35	44	<b>2015</b>
234.8	147	73	12.2						10.7	43.1	147.6	<b>668.4</b>
141	139	125	117	97	94	96	97	98	114	123	136	<b>181</b>
80	62	53	36	41	34	56	34	48	57	71	82	<b>2014</b>
172	239.8	28.2	48						44	107	274	<b>912.48</b>

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total Birds & Rainfall	
138	135	134	113	102	97	100	103	103	119	119	125	<b>180</b>	<b>2013</b>
74	72	77	58	48	38	67	64	63	54	66	67		3 <sup>rd</sup> Sun
421	59.5	231	51.5						1.6	103.5	157.8	<b>1025.9</b>	
142	136	137	124	103	100	102	102	110	117	120	129	<b>178</b>	<b>2012</b>
72	62	59	66	56	32	65	32	47	57	62	70		3 <sup>rd</sup> Sun
267.5	171.5	173.5	24.5						37.5	94.5	215	<b>984</b>	
144	132	136	124	106	96	103	99	108	106	125	134	<b>177</b>	<b>2011</b>
66	71	75	61	56	56	48	58	45	66	68	80		3 <sup>rd</sup> Sun
221	75	62	9	1	2.5	9			35	115	419.5	<b>949</b>	
142	140	136	111	93	87	97	106	107	121	130	143	<b>181</b>	<b>2010</b>
62	66	61	54	46	54	32	64	63	62	83	78		3 <sup>rd</sup> Sun
207.5	171	49	178	3.5					25.5	126	152	<b>912.5</b>	
131	123	120	114	95	89	100	91	103	109	120	127	<b>163</b>	<b>2009</b>
70	51	59	49	45	47	37	47	44	51	61	57		3 <sup>rd</sup> Sun
197.5	130	165.5	20	40					4	142	183	<b>882</b>	
117	113	115	110	90	91	87	98	103	108	112	126		<b>2008</b>
52	53	52	45	25	45	45	50	40	47	64	71		3 <sup>rd</sup> Sun
383.5	38.5	43	33						9	167.5	253	<b>927.5</b>	
121	118	112	109	91	91	91	93	97	101	109	116		<b>2007</b>
58	69	53	53	40	39	53	53	55	57	73	52		3 <sup>rd</sup> Sun
174	58.5	92.5	45.5	2.5				4	2	168	540	<b>1087</b>	
116	114	115	107	85	90	86	92	92	101	104	106		<b>2006</b>
	58	52			49	35	48	41	36	48	52		3 <sup>rd</sup> Sun
279	171.5	155.5	3						9.5	65	148.5	<b>832</b>	
								43	63	95	100		<b>2005</b>
183	94	137	24	8				0.5	12	106.5	285	<b>850</b>	

### Seasonal Rainfall totals

2018/19	426	2011/12	1206.5
2017/18	803	2010/11	683
2016/17	1281.5	2009/10	938
2015/16	750.9	2008/09	982.5
2014/15	892	2007/08	1212
2013/14	750.61	2006/07	596
2012/13	1110	2005/06	1013

## Mashonaland East

*We don't hear much about the activities of the Mashonaland East Natural History Society (MENHS) so it is great to have some news of their activities of late. Ed.*

### January 2020 Newsletter

We held our 25<sup>th</sup> AGM at Jenny Mitchell's house on Rakodze on Sunday 12 January.

It was well attended. Minutes of the AGM are to be circulated separately.

AGM was preceded by a bird walk below the dam wall and up to the middle of the tobacco field. Two members (Stuart and Peter) rowed

up the dam and did a waterbird count. The walk was fairly successful with 48 different species being recorded.

Tea was taken after the walk and Jenny Mitchell provided a delicious cake to celebrate the chairman's birthday, after which The AGM was held.

The AGM was followed by a slide show of some of Colin's photographs of various camps between 2006 and 2012. Thanks to Sue for

compiling that. I will try and transfer all the camp photos from Colin's computer onto a flash stick and then members can borrow the stick to copy the photos to their own personal computers.

We then enjoyed a light luncheon, by which time it was raining quite heavily.

There had been reports of a sighting of a Spur-winged Lapwing out at Imire. Penny Raynor arranged an outing to Imire on Friday 17 January with the hope of seeing the lapwing. 7 members travelled out in two vehicles and thankfully the road was not as bad as expected. We visited a couple of the dams hoping to see the lapwing, but sadly that didn't happen. Both Riley Travers and our guide for the day said they had not seen the bird for a couple of days. We were fortunate to see a number of wild animals, including a lion, as we travelled between the dams.

We enjoyed a very pleasant day at Imire and hopefully we will get to go back there if the lapwing is sighted again. Our bird count for the day was 37.

Our next walk is planned for Sunday 2 February at Goshu Park at 07h30. See you all there.

Keep on twitching.

**Gez**

## February 2020 Newsletter

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Our February outing in Goshu Park took place on Sunday 2 February. In attendance were Jo Denton, Jenny Mitchell, Jenny Milne, Pete Banks, Phyllis Banks, Sue Bester, Gez Bester, Kay MacDonald and Pete Jackson. It was nice to have Kay with us. Sadly, she is gearing up to go back into the Valley so we may not see her again for several months.

We had a reasonable morning's birding and recorded seeing 37 different species. We got quite close to a raptor for a moment or two but again we were unable to identify it. The feeling was that it may have been a Brown Snake-eagle.

We encountered two birders from South Africa in the park. They had just seen one of the crombecs, which they managed to photograph. They told us they had a very successful birding outing in Harare the previous day or so seeing about one hundred and thirty different bird species.



Lichen (above) and impala (below) at Goshu. Photos I. Riddell



After the walk we enjoyed the usual tea and coffee and chatted about the March weekend at John Galt. Gez agreed to contact Cheryl Byrne for prices of various available accommodation and potential bookings.

Accommodation prices turned out to be a little above our budgets and so Jenny Mitchell organized a cottage at Connemara in Nyanga. Arrangements are now well in hand for a four-day trip to Connemara over the mid-March weekend.

Sue and I joined Phyllis and Pete Banks at The Knoll in Goromonzi for a few nights near the beginning of the month. We saw a good number of birds in the garden and on and around the dam. We observed a pair of African Fish-eagles near the dam and Sue managed to take some good photos of a Malachite Kingfisher from the canoe. Other water birds observed included African Jacana, Giant Kingfisher, African Black Ducks and Black Crakes. We saw falcons on the power lines about two kilometres from the Harare - Marondera road on the way in and out. On the way out we managed to take some photographs and they were identified as Amur Falcons. My photographs were not too good as I am still in "Guide mode" on the camera.



About a fortnight ago, Sue sighted a Levaillant's Cuckoo in the next-door garden in the Trust and a few days later both Malcolm Moodie and Jenny Milne reported seeing Levaillant's Cuckoos in their gardens.

We haven't had any feedback from the guide at Imire on the Spur-winged Lapwing. However, Malcolm has reported that some Imire clients observed a Blacksmith Lapwing being "taken" by a Lanner Falcon at one of the dams. It is quite possible that the Spur-winged Lapwing has also been "taken" or decided to move on.

Some friends of mine who have a smallholding out past Ruzawi School reported that about three weeks ago National Parks personnel managed to rescue a fledgling African Crowned Eagle on their property and their intention is to release it into Hwange National

Park. My friends were impressed by the size of this baby eagle.

While waiting in a fuel queue at Freca a few mornings ago I observed seven Common Mynas foraging around on the top of what would have been 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Pete Jackson says he has seen a lot more of them on the Halsted's lawns, especially after recent mowing.

Pete Banks and Stuart Wood completed the water bird survey. I am hoping to receive a copy of the return for record purposes.

Our next Sunday outings are:

1 March	Borradaile Trust
5 April	Rakodzi
3 May	Gosho Park

Keep on twitching.

**Gez Bester**

## Mashonaland West

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Kadoma and district experienced unbelievably variable weather from October to December 2019. Our natural surroundings suffered terribly and the barometer showed extreme weather somewhere, but the punishing heat continued! Eventually, the rains came and the water and vegetation conditions changed. The Mashuma River flowed through Kadoma on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2020.

We faithful birders continue with our weekly outings to many different places of interest. People everywhere are friendly, helpful and co-operative, especially when we hand out mangos!

Names of farms and dams around a roughly 80km radius of Kadoma that we visit: Claw, Pasi, Clifton, Devon, Charama, David Whitehead ponds, Martinfield dye ponds, Mandalay, Hove, Lion, Suri Suri, J.J. Odendaal, Hope, Doreen's Pride, Umfuli Creek, Ngezi, Mulberry, Sable and Rio sewage.

The Black-headed Herons started their heronry in late December in the tall trees near my house in the CBD, so it's chattering night and day. The White-winged Widowbirds are now plentiful in vlei and long grass around the town and the Southern Red Bishops are also around. Visiting Red-chested Cuckoo, Diderick Cuckoo, Jacobin Cuckoo, Klaas's Cuckoo, Black Cuckoo, Levaillant's Cuckoo and African Emerald Cuckoo are seen and heard.

Amur Falcons have been spasmodic but about 200+ were seen feeding on 17 & 18<sup>th</sup> January over the old Kadoma cattle feedlot.



**Egyptian Goose family at Suri Suri (above) & Marsh Owl at David Whitehead (below). Photos: Ruth Baldwin-Paice**



The many waterbirds at various places were recorded for the annual waterbird count. David Whitehead ponds on the morning of 11<sup>th</sup> January was wet and overcast. A pair of Saddle-billed

Stork was feeding in an adjacent maize field and in the ponds we had 47 Pied Avocet, 36 Black-winged Stilts and a pair of African Spoonbills – a Marsh Owl was near some acacia bushes.

At Hippo Creek on the Umfuli River the Hamerkop nest is occupied and being refurbished. Nearby, in the inlet, the African Finfoot is often seen by owners of the property.

Some of the wonderful variety of species we encounter are Brown-crowned Tchagra, Bennett's Woodpecker, Lesser Striped Swallow and others, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Green Wood-hoopoe and Common Scimitarbill, Green-winged Pytilia, Terrestrial Brownbul, Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Ashy Flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike, Retz's Helmet-shrike, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Croaking Cisticola, Woodland Kingfisher, Giant Kingfisher, Namaqua Dove, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting,

Golden-breasted Bunting, Brown Snake-eagle, Black-chested Snake-eagle and Lizard Buzzard.

*David Whitehead ponds – 14<sup>th</sup>  
March 2020*

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Our 7 a.m. visit was rewarding. It was bright, sunny, and calm and the large fresh water pond showed lots of sandy shoreline. We had 6 Grey Heron, 27 Blacksmith Lapwing, a pair of Spur-winged Goose with 3 youngsters, two pairs of Egyptian Goose, a pair of Hottentot Teal and Cape Teal, a Common Ringed Plover and a White-winged Tern. These were our specials and other waterbirds and woodland species were active all around us.

Let us continue to enjoy, appreciate and observe all around us. Zimbabwe has such a wonderful varied terrain.

**Margaret Parrock**

## Matabeleland

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### **Birding while waterfowl counting – Matobo National Park**

A visit out to Matobo National Park on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> January was going to be two-fold – to do the waterfowl count at the dams we usually cover and to collect rainfall figures from the various stations in order to complete last year's Verreaux's Eagle survey reports. Knowing that rainfall for this season had, thus far, been abysmal, we knew that most of the spots we usually count at would be dry or almost, so decided to try to do some other birding as we ventured along. The park generally though is looking lush and green and judging by the wash along the roads, there has been some rain. The broad-leafed teaks were coming into flower and there were the many and varied wildflowers peeking up through the grass but alas no flame lilies.

Just before reaching the entrance gate, a Black-chested Snake-eagle was hunting the skies and was the first to go on our list. Lesser Striped Swallows perched on the phone lines near the offices and a Black-crowned Tchagra could be heard calling along with an Emerald-spotted Wood-dove's mournful tune somewhere close by. After paying, we took in the first of the dams – Sandyspruit – which, like all the other water bodies is fast drying up. As we set up the spotting scope, a Spotted Flycatcher flitted back and forth from a branch in a nearby tree and a

Flappet Lark's clapping flap made its presence known. A male and female Red-backed Shrike were hunting for breakfast amongst some reeds as we picked up several Red-billed Teal dabbling around in twos here and there and another lot further along the bank, eventually recording a total of 27. Sadly, that was about it in the way of waterbirds except for a couple of Egyptian Goose and two Blacksmith's Lapwing. As we left the dam, two Common Scimitarbills flew from tree to tree in front of the vehicle in the company of two Southern Black Tits. A Natal Spurfowl close to the curio shop at the entrance gate noisily welcomed us into the park.

Arriving at the administration offices at Maleme, a pair of Red-winged Starlings mewled past, one of which disappeared into the eaves of the thatched roof, and a vocal White-necked Raven flew overhead. Yellow-bellied Greenbuls grumbled close by from some thick bush, a Red-eyed Dove could be heard and as we were leaving, we caught a glimpse of a Mocking Cliff-chat disappearing into a rocky outcrop. Down at the actual dam, we had the dismal sight of what was left of the water – a small and very soupy, muddy puddle below the wall, writhing with barbel and of course, no waterbirds to record except for one African Fish-eagle. We were, however, delighted to see a gorgeous male

Red-collared Widowbird and he looked as if he was in the company of a female. Close by, a Marico Flycatcher perched on a small thorny bush and several Yellow Bishops were also seen. Wire-tailed Swallows, in the company of some Common House-martins, were swirling overhead as a bunch of European Bee-eaters arrived to join them.



**Brown-hooded Kingfisher. Photo J&J Brebner**

Both Madingazulu and Nswatugi dams are dry, as was Whitewaters. Climbing up through the gap from Madingazulu to the Nswatugi vlei, a Black-backed Puffback's call followed us all the way and down in the vlei, a couple of Zitting Cisticolas zitted above the grass, a Rufous-naped Lark was calling and we heard plenty of Rattling Cisticolas as we drove along. While sitting having coffee at Mesilume, where the water is also fast evaporating, we had only recorded two Blacksmith's Lapwing and an African Fish-eagle but, as a Cape Turtle-dove entreated us to "work harder, work harder", a lone Egyptian Goose appeared out of nowhere from amongst the reeds, so four was the total waterbird count there! Grey Go-away-bird and Black-headed Oriole were added to the general list along with Klaas's Cuckoo and Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, both of which could be heard. At the Whitewaters offices, a crowd of Southern Masked-weavers were having a noisy discussion as a Southern Grey-headed Sparrow scratched around near the offices and an African Grey Hornbill flew by. Caterpillars must have metamorphosed in vast numbers this year judging by the amazing number of beautifully coloured butterflies seen flitting about, settling in numbers to drink from a damp patch surrounding a cycad that had just been watered.

As we were leaving the offices, a male African Paradise-flycatcher, with his incredibly long tail, was vocally darting about in the canopy of a nearby tree and a Lilac-breasted Roller was perched on a telephone pole.

Chitamba dam held a small muddy puddle, some of which looked like it was fairly fresh run off but again only four waterbirds were recorded - an African Fish-eagle and three Egyptian Goose. As we lumbered up the ghastly bit of road after the Whovi river, a Red-chested Cuckoo 'piet my vrou-ed" continuously and we, at last, saw our first Verreaux's Eagle perched on a high boulder. As we arrived at the picnic site at Mpopoma a chatty trio of Green Wood-hoopoes greeted us as they busily foraged from tree to tree and a cheeky Pin-tailed Whydah flitted to and from the dam, chittering and bossily showing off to some females fossicking on the ground. The dam was the lowest we've seen it and becoming very shallow. We only managed to record a total of 60 waterbirds, (14 species), which included three Great Egret, four Squacco Heron and a delightful little group of eight African Pygmy-goose paddling rapidly past a pod of hippo. A male Giant Kingfisher, sitting on a rock, stared into the water for ages before taking off and later we saw four Pied Kingfishers all out hovering, trying their luck. Five White-faced Duck gave us a vocal fly-by before settling back on the edge of the water close to two African Wattled Lapwings, while several African Jacanas dabbled about and a flotilla of Egyptian Goose consisting of two proud adults and four fluffy goslings swam out of the reeds, having been disturbed by some fishermen. Water Thick-knees were calling as an immature African Fish-eagle flew over the dam, followed by an adult bird and six Reed Cormorants were busily about ducking and diving. For a dam that is usually teeming with Little Grebe, we only recorded two! As we left the dam and were climbing back over the hill, a bushbuck ram ran alongside the vehicle for a short way before finding a gap in the rocks and disappearing from view as we recorded a Chin-spot Batis that we could hear. Closer to the entrance gate we saw a small group of zebra and adding a Southern Black Flycatcher to our list, we got to record 56 birds in all.

**John and Jenny Brebner**





## TEN COOL FACTS ABOUT EGGS

- ✦ In passerines, eggshell formation takes place mainly at night.
- ✦ Depending on species, eggshells can have anywhere from a few hundred pores to tens of thousands.
- ✦ An egg loses 18 percent of its mass, on average, between laying and hatching, mostly from water loss through shell pores.
- ✦ The size of the air cell is smaller in newly laid eggs, so they sink in water. Older eggs have more air space and will float.
- ✦ More than 100 types of antimicrobial enzymes are found in albumen, the egg white.
- ✦ Regardless of an egg's position, the yolk rotates so that in the early stages of development the embryo always floats to the top.
- ✦ Up to 10 percent of the calcium used for shell formation can come from the female's bones.
- ✦ A bird's ovum must be penetrated by multiple sperm in order for the embryo to develop.
- ✦ Precocial chicks, which hatch covered in downy feathers, come from larger yolks. Altricial chicks, which hatch naked, come from smaller yolks. With less food available inside the egg, the latter hatch at an earlier stage of development.
- ✦ The egg of an Ostrich is the largest living cell on Earth.

Source: The Most Perfect Thing, by Tim Birkhead; *Handbook of Bird Biology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cornell Lab of Ornithology.



## Useful Contacts:

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*Honeyguide* production: vacant

## 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!

Due to the instability of the local currency at present, subs are listed in USD, but may be paid in Zimbabwe Dollars at the Bank Rate on the day

Students	1.00
Youth Club Members (Unemployed)	1.00
Youth Club Members	5.00
Individual/Family members (incl. children under 17)	15.00
Pensioners (65 & over)	10.00
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\* If you would like recognition on our public forums, choose the \$200 Corporate Plan. To learn more about corporate sponsorship and BLZ projects, write to [JuliaPierini@birdlifezimbabwe.org](mailto:JuliaPierini@birdlifezimbabwe.org)

**Payment details.** Please deposit into BirdLife Zimbabwe account at **NMB Bank, (Borrowdale Branch) Account No: 260092014** or BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Branch, CABS (Chisipite Branch) Account No: 1002399955 or **Ecocash** – Merchant Code No. **22084**. You can **also** pay your subscription online with **Paynow**. Look on the BLZ website on the membership page [www.birdlifezimbabwe.org/joinus](http://www.birdlifezimbabwe.org/joinus), and click on the Paynow tab at the bottom of the page. This is especially important for our members outside Zimbabwe. You could **also** come to our office at 35, Clyde Road, Eastlea in Harare.

Some members are not informing us when they pay their subscription and when members deposit into the banks, the name shown on the statement is often only the first name and therefore we may not know who you are.

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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. \$40 entrance fee for BLZ members, \$60 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 \$15.00 RTGS per person.

## Mashonaland Branch

### *BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Calendar of Events: APRIL 2020*

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<b>Saturday 4<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Marlborough Vlei walk</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Sunday 5<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Mukuvisi Woodlands walk</b>	Meet at 06.30 a.m.
<b>Saturday 11<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Greystone Park</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
	From Rolf Avenue/Harare Drive traffic circle, turn east onto Gaydon Road. After 2 km turn right into Halford Road and preserve is 200 m on left.	
<b>Thursday 16<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Trees</b>	Meet 5.30 for 6.00 p.m.
	Tony Alegria, Avondale Sports Club	
<b>Sunday 19<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Monavale Vlei walk</b>	Meet at 06.30 a.m.
<b>Sunday 26<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Ngomakurira</b>	Meet at 06.30 a.m.
	Meet at CABS Northridge Park	

## *BirdLife Zimbabwe Mashonaland Calendar of Events: MAY 2020*

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<b>Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup></b>	<b>Marlborough Vlei walk</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup></b>	<b>Mukuvisi Woodlands walk</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Saturday 9<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Winsley Stud (Whitakers)</b> Meet at CABS Northridge Park	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Sunday 17<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Monavale Vlei walk</b>	Meet at 07.00 a.m.
<b>Thursday 21<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>Birds of America</b> Alison MacDonald, Avondale Sports Club	Meet 5.30 for 6.00 p.m.
<b>Sunday 24<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>Haka Park</b>	Meet at 07.00 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 154  
Jun-July 2020 any time before the 15<sup>th</sup> May.*