

# THE BABBLER

## ORNITHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF ZIMBABWE NEWSLETTER

ISSUE #15: NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1996

### Mashonaland Branch

Chairman: Mr B Elliot 302465  
Secretary/  
Treasurer: Mrs I Gray 885406  
Members: Mrs D Varden 8879124  
Mr G Lowe (W) 665133  
Mr D Rockingham-Gill 882412  
PRO Mr K Barrow 732457  
Editor: Mr D Gray 885406

### Matabeleland Branch

Martin Smith 42474  
Mrs P Feather 44034  
Mr W Goodwin 64121  
Mr M Smith 42474

### Postal Addresses:

Committee: P O Box CY 161, Causeway  
Editor: 14 Fisher Ave, Borrowdale

P O Box 44, Bulawayo  
P O Box 44, Bulawayo

### BLUE SWALLOW SURVEY, Nyanga National Park 9 -10 November 1996

This is our chance to do something towards the conservation of the Blue Swallow in particular, and birds in general. It is hoped that a Blue Swallow expert from South Africa will attend. PLEASE come and help! It will be a fun weekend. Let's fly the OAZ flag high and not be found wanting. If you can make it contact Dave Gray on Harare 885406 and advise if you require accommodation. There will be a briefing on Friday 8th November in the hall opposite Rhodes Nyanga Hotel. Dinner will be provided by the Hotel at a special rate.

### NATIONAL AGM

The National Annual General Meeting will be held on 22nd March 1997. Please make a note in your 1997 diary. Further details in the next issue.

### MASHONALAND BRANCH ACTIVITIES

#### Outings

1. Mukuvisi Woodlands: Sunday 3rd November 1996 and 1st December 1996. Meet at Paget Road entrance at 6.30 a.m. There will be a vehicle guard in attendance.
2. Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary: Sunday 10th November 1996 and 8th December 1996. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre at 6.30 a.m. Beginners are very welcome. Bring your chairs. See Page 2

Saturday Afternoons

1. 16th November 1996. Crundall Brothers Ostrich Farm, off Glen Forest Road. Meet at Shell Garage, Borrowdale Road opposite Sam Levy's Village at 2.00 p.m. A good area of miombo and grassland.
2. No December outing.

Sunday Outings

1. No Outing in November because of the Hippo Pools weekend - Friday 22nd - Sunday 24th November 1996.
2. 8th December 1996. End of year breakfast at Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary. Please complete tear-off if you will be attending. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre.

Weekend Outings

Rifa Weekend - 13th-16th December 1996. See attached form for details.

Evening Meetings

Thursday evening. 21st November 1996. John Sievi will talk on Birds' nests. Venue: Alexandra Sports Club between Blakiston and Prince Edward Streets. Time 6 for 6.30 p.m. Cash bar available.

No December meeting.

**EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB**

Chairman: Mr K. Dixon 62662 Mutare  
Recorder: Mr A B (Tony) Curtis 60281 Mutare

Outings

Saturday 9th November 1996 Bvumba 2.00 p.m.  
Sunday 24th November 1996. Cynara Farm 6.30 a.m.  
Saturday 16th December 1996. Drifters 2.00 p.m.

The group assembles at the Museum in Aerodrome Road at the time stated. Transport and binoculars are available if prior notice is given. Contact Ken Dixon 62882 (home) or Tony Curtis 60281 (home).

**MATABELELAND BRANCH**Future Programme

Friday 1st November 1996. Bird ID and Video Evening. A potpourri of identification problems: calls, video clips and pictures. Venue: 34 Holdengarde Avenue at 8 p.m.

Sunday 8th December 1996. Christmas Social. A midday braai at Mabukuwene. Meet from 12.30 p.m. onwards at Mabukuwene or contact Martin Smith for details.

Outings

Matopos weekend 15th - 17th November 1996. We have invited the Botswana Bird Club to visit Matopos and intend to camp at Maleme, arriving Friday afternoon departing Sunday. All interested to contact Martin Smith.

Sunday 15th December 1996. Gladstone Farm/Ingwe Lodge, Matopos. We have been invited to this attractive area to draw up a bird checklist for the lodge. Further details contact Martin Smith or Warren Goodwin.

Aisleby

Sunday 1st December 1996: A slight departure from our normal month end date due to other OAZ outings. (See Midlands programme), which

members might like to attend. Meet at Aisleby boom at 7 a.m. or contact Martin Smith.

#### MIDLANDS BRANCH

Co-ordinator: Mr B W Beekes P O Box 55 Shurugwi 152-6422

Saturday 26th October 1996. Hope Valley Farm (Mr Tommy Venter), Gweru. 25km Kwekwe side of Gweru. Meet at farm at 7 for 7.30 a.m. Bring your lunch and refreshments.

Weekend Friday 22nd to 24th November 1996. Central Estates, Mvuma. There is a Southern Carmine Bee-eater colony here. Directions - near the 167km peg on the Harare/Mvuma road there is a sign 'ZHA' next to a buffalo skull. Proceed along this road for about 5 km to the camp. This is a self-catering, camping weekend. Toilet and shower facilities are available. It is hoped to organise a slide show for Saturday evening. The branch will hold its AGM on the 24th at 12 noon.

#### REPORTS

##### Mashonaland

##### Weekend 30th August - 1st September 1996

Eight Mashonaland birders joined with Midlands and Matabele members for a most enjoyable weekend at SEBAKWE POORT and Echo Park, KWEKWE. The less adventurous who could not bring themselves to negotiate the cliff face with only a piece of fencing wire for support, missed seeing a pair of African Finfoot and an immature. A good count of 11 Raptors and 4 Robins besides numerous other species were seen but the main feature was the Black Storks. What a fantastic sight. Thank you Bernard for organising this weekend.

**Dave Gray.**

##### Saturday 21st September 1996, GLETWYN QDS 1731C3

It is obvious that birding cannot compete with Davis Cup tennis because only 5 members attended this outing. Although the species count was only 49 we did see our first European Bee-eaters and Barn Swallows of the season. Two Wahlberg's Eagles circled overhead and an African Hawk-eagle took off as we parked our vehicles. This is an interesting area close to Harare.

**Dave Gray.**

##### Eastern Districts

##### Saturday 10th August 1996, CYNARA Farm QDS 1832D3

The day started badly; the pair of Cardinal Woodpecker who had delighted us for weeks courting, hole-excavating, feeding their nestlings tirelessly, had definitely gone. A young African Harrier-hawk had, despite protests from bulbuls, Crowned Hornbills, the woodpeckers and others, succeeded in annihilating the happy family. I needed uplifting and Cynara of course, would brighten the day.

On a lovely afternoon we saw 76 different bird species, a Common Duiker and a large Leguaan. Tony Curtis says that he has never seen so much water on the farm which means there is not much shoreline for the arriving waders but the reeds are spreading, offering habitat for Common Moorhen, crane and gallinule. We did see Common Sandpiper and Wood Sandpiper and Common Greenshank. Our first bird was a Spur-winged Goose, rare here, standing proudly on its rock. The Grey Crowned Crane was in evidence among many herons, egrets, goose and

plovers. Both Spotted Thick-knee and Water Thick-knee were skulking among the rocks and our winter visitors, the Capped Wheatear could be seen. On the smaller dams were White-faced Duck, Red-billed Teal, Comb Duck and Little Grebe and Reed Cormorant and White-breasted Cormorant while an African Fish-eagle glided over the water. African Jacana of all ages were abundant and much later we saw probably 600 Cattle Egret arriving to roost on the new dam.

The woodland was fruitful - supplying new species every few minutes. The closely cropped pasture was alive with pipits, larks and numerous Red-billed Queleas. The quality of light was sublime, allowing species like the Scarlet-chested Sunbird to show themselves off to their best advantage. It was dusk before we dragged ourselves away from this idyllic scene. Thank you to the Bennet family for allowing us access to such a rich area. **Ken Dixon.**

Sunday 29th September 1996, Stapleford QDS 1832D2

Seven of us left town at 0640 and we had the pleasure of Abasi Jana's company.

Our over-ambitious plan was to descend the escarpment beyond the John Meikle Research Station into the Nyamkwarara river valley. The first birding stop along the scenic road to the Research Station was to check on some African Black Swifts and Eastern Saw-wings. The swifts were nesting there and amazingly a bird flew at high speed and disappeared into a crevice in the apparently solid rock face, later emerging at the same speed. This spot produced Striped Pipit, Olive Sunbird, White-necked Raven and African Olive-pigeons.

Beyond the Research Station the road descends steeply with hairy hair-pin bends. We stopped again and "collected" a Dark-backed Weaver and an Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon which we would have missed without Abasi's help. This pigeon is, I think, still on the Zimbabwe rarities list and is very secretive and restricted to the shrinking montane forest. Further on we saw and/or heard Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Gorgeous Bush-shrike and Olive Bush-shrike, Black-backed Puffback, Yellow-fronted Canary and the ubiquitous Dark-capped Bulbul. I'll resist rapturous descriptions of scenery but must mention the Pale Batis and the Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher spotted and identified by Abasi who is based at ABERFOYLE where he conducts bird walks and his claim to fame is the Palm-nut Vulture which he has been observing for two years. He now reports that a mate for this rare bird has recently arrived.

We welcomed Gerry and Jill Zambra newcomers to our outings but experienced birders and we thank Bridget Holland for the luxury transport, refreshments and strenuous driving. **Tony Curtis.**

Midlands. Weekend 30th August - 1st September 1996. SEBAKWE POORT.

We camped at Echo Park near Dutchman's Pools on the Sebakwe River, QDS 1829D4; the main location of birding was at Sebakwe Poort QDS 1829D3. Habitat was varied and the turn out of 31 members was good. A total of 147 species was recorded.

The cliffs at the Poort are about 130m high and about 200m along the base. The Black Storks nest mainly on the SW cliff-face and can best be viewed from the summit of the NW cliff, reached after a stiff climb. The storks were magnificent with many stages of development and different activities in evidence. Nine nests

appear to have been active with an estimated 20 to 30 storks. Young, half grown chicks and recently fledged juveniles and various adult displays were observed. Peter Mundy believes this colony of Black Storks normally territorial in behaviour, to be unique in the world!

A pair of Lanner Falcons was present and their chick could be heard calling. A parent wedged a rodent in the cliff face, in an apparent attempt to induce the chick to fly. The African Black Swifts and Alpine Swifts were seen. A special treat was a pair of African Finfoot and an immature. **Bernard Beekes.**

HARARE Garden Bird Survey - What has happened to the Dusky Lark?

Going through Harare's Garden Bird records is liable to bring surprises. I have fed several thousand garden bird records into the computer and among them are twenty records of the Groundscraper Thrush, but none of the Dusky Lark. Why? Next time you see a Groundscraper in your garden especially during April and May, have a closer look.

The Dusky Lark is unusual. It breeds in Angola, Zaire and Zambia during the cold months and then performs a moult migration to Natal and Mozambique. It occurs in Zimbabwe on passage and is more in evidence in some years than others. In 1956 in BULAWAYO I recorded it in April and May and later in May at Redbank, HWANGE and Livingstone. It is more common in Matabeleland but I should have expected 12 years of observations in Harare to produce a few records. It does appear in Harare as evidenced by the note from the Rhodesian Ornithological Society Bulletin No. 32, dated September 1960 by H G W Bass: "The check-list records the Dusky Lark as occurring uncommonly in woodland in Mashonaland. It may, however, be a regular passage migrant through Salisbury. I observed 4 in Highlands on 9th May and a single bird in the Drill Hall grounds on 11th June. I recall seeing a few birds about the same time last year.

The bird is well illustrated in Roberts although the bill and tail appear longer, giving a slenderer appearance - giving a first impression of a small sized Groundscraper Thrush but the build is wrong. On the ground the stance and behaviour were pipit-like - more horizontal than upright, actively running about with bobbing head. The birds had a curious habit which they seemed to indulge in when the day had warmed up, stopping for a moment and flexing their wings above their backs - or they stayed motionless for long periods. Despite Roberts saying they are shy they permitted a close approach and when disturbed flew around and alighted not far from where they took off. The food taken was insects, though one bird was seen pecking the surface of the tennis court - possibly for grit - as there was no evidence of insect life at that spot."

The Editor (Yours truly) added "The author of the above writes I have only been in S. Rhodesia for a year so the attached note may not contain anything of particular interest. (It does).

The Dusky Lark seems to be rather irregular in its appearance, and is also frequently overlooked. The above description is accurate and the mannerism of flicking their wings above their backs is a valuable field character. Its plumage resembles the Groundscraper Thrush

fairly closely but the Jizz is different. The thrush holds itself upright; the lark parallel to the ground and it's habit of stretching its wings out behind which I think of as "shrugging its shoulders" - **Dr. R M Harwin.**

#### An OKAVANGO Birdwatching Experience

On 19 July we drove into Botswana from Bulawayo via Plumtree. An overnight stay at Nata Sanctuary produced no flamingo sightings, but the pelicans were still congregating at the mouth of the Nata River. The following morning's drive to Maun was uneventful. Our flight over part of the vast and beautiful floodplain that afternoon was on the other hand wonderful.

Due to average rains in Angola after a long drought the delta did not experience flooding until June in the southern area and the water will probably not reach Maun this year. The locals expressed disappointment but we were enchanted by the plains of water seen from the air. As we approached Chiefs Island we flew high over a flock of 50 or more Wattled Crane. We saw an Osprey while reclining in our mokoro; we see them in Australia so it was special to see them in Africa. Other sightings of interest were Swamp Boubou, Yellow-billed Ducks, Long-toed Lapwings, Hartlaub's Babblers and Burchell's Starlings.

After a stimulating 6 days we flew northwest to Xakenaxa which is within the borders of Moremi Park where there are extensive Mopane forests and against this wonderfully varied setting we saw 4 African Skimmers sitting by a pan, Brown-throated Weavers, a Slaty Egret and Banded Martins. Our total of species was 148 and we also spotted a few lovely mammals including the elusive Sitatonga - and a couple of lions. **Rob and Karen Donnan.**

#### Botswana Birding Selinda Concession

We were lucky to be able to spend a week in the Selinda Concession next to the Zibidianja lagoon. This is supplied with water by the Kwando River and empties into the Linyanti swamps, in times of flood water enters the Selinda spillway pushing towards the Okavango and also flows into the Savuti. Surrounding the lagoon on the eastern side is a fringe of riverine vegetation with some magnificent trees - Jackal berry, mangosteen, knob-thorn and wild bird plum to name a few. On the western side the landscape is more open with palm covered islands. Birdlife proved interesting and a contrast to Zimbabwean avifauna. The palm trees yielded a variety of raptors, nesting White-backed Vulture, Red-necked Falcon and Dickinson's Kestrel. The riverine vegetation proved particularly rewarding - both African Red-eyed Bulbul and Dark-capped Bulbul feeding within the same tree, a colourful Schalow's Turaco and Arrow-marked Babblers and Hartlaub's Babbler foraging within the undergrowth. Large flocks of Burchell's Starlings fed on fruit and at night a variety of bird calls were heard interspersed with those of trumpeting elephant, roaring lion, howling hyaena and grunting hippo. Fiery-necked Nightjar called from in land whilst Swamp Nightjar sung from the swamp edge. Owlets were well represented - African Scops-owl, Pearl-spotted Owlet and African Barred Owlet. The only large owl seen was the highlight of the trip - a Pel's Fishing-owl, struggling to be heard above the roars of

two male lions. At the waters edge shortly after dawn thousands of doves flew in to drink, followed by large flocks of Burchell's Sandgrouse and Double-banded Sandgrouse, their soft calls just audible from 500 metres. During the heat of the day African Marsh-harrier foraged over the reeds, Martial Eagle pursued francolin and White-headed Vulture flew in to loaf and drink. We were occasionally distracted by four legged activity - a lioness stalking kudu and lechwe and finally catching a warthog, elephant wallowing in the mud and numerous antelope and zebra held our interest. In conclusion a memorable week with a tally of over 120 species including plenty of lifers. **Martin Smith.**

#### Interesting Sightings

Place - "Tomatin", Spring Heights Road off Shamva Road. GPS ref:

S 17 43 771 E 31 12 058

15th August 12.20 p.m. 5 White-backed Vultures over flew W to E

16th August 4.05 p.m. 1 Black-chested Snake-eagle mobbed by Pied Crow

8th Sept. 10.00 a.m. 2 White Storks over flew NNE to SSW

The White Storks are a first for my property and bring its species total up to 165 in 24 years since 1972.

**Mac Kirkpatrick**

Late August 1996. African Olive-pigeon HARARE BOTANIC GARDENS. **Frances Allan.**

#### **TAIL FEATHERS**

##### Report on Blue Swallow from *The Star* - 21st May 1996

It has been a disastrous season for the Blue Swallow in South Africa. At the two remaining Blue Swallow breeding sites in Mpumalanga (Ed. Eastern Transvaal) only 11 fledglings survived. Rain washed away nests and limited feeding hours because the birds eat on the wing and dine on flying insects. Squeezed into two single pockets of montane grassland, the birds had no alternate feeding areas. In these conditions, adults put everything into trying to stay alive and neglect their fledglings" says Richard Huggett, Chairman of the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) working group.

At the Sable/Graskop site there were 13 active nest sites and 8 fledglings survived. At the second site Kaapsehoop, only 3 fledglings survived from 8 active nests. Normally 3 eggs are laid twice a season, with 2 to 3 eggs hatching per clutch. At Kaapsehoop in the 94/95 season, there were 10 fledglings from 8-10 pairs. This season 25 birds returned but there will only be 8 breeding pairs. They produced 34 eggs, of which 11 hatched. Of these 6 were taken by predators. Ultimately 4 fledged and 1 died. Blue Swallows tend to feed in grassland drainage lines. Rehabilitating drainage lines specifically in Blue Swallow habitat is recommended. Burning is necessary to rejuvenate these areas to help improve the feeding. Rain was not the only factor in the deterioration of the Blue Swallows, Huggett stressed. The only other populations of Blue Swallows are in the Karkloof, near

Pietermaritzburg in Kwazulu Natal, the Eastern Highlands in Zimbabwe and Malolotje in Swaziland, where the population is declining. Peter Lawson, a Committee member of EWT, made the point that the birds migrate up to Uganda but don't breed there. On a trip to Uganda last winter, Evans, (a student at Potchefstroom University) visited Blue Swallow habitats and did not see one bird. Lawson says that there are possibly only 200 Blue Swallows left in the world. Thanks to Flag Stableford for this~

#### Video Tape Library

There are seven videos in the OAZ library. They are:

1. Newman's Birds Volume 1 - An Introduction
2. Newman's Birds Volume 2 - Okavango Magic
3. Haunt of the Fishing-owl
4. An Introduction to Water Birds of South Africa
5. Guy Gibbons Birds of the Kruger National Park (Bird calls)
6. AECI - Beginners Guide to Bird Song of Southern Africa
7. Hyaena: The Sisterhood

These are obtainable from John Paxton at Lasovsky Brothers, 14 Robson Manyika Avenue Harare. Phone 794611/2/3.

Loan Fee \$10 for 3 nights (The fee will go towards the purchase of further tapes). If anyone has tapes they would like to lend or donate to the library, please contact John Paxton.

#### For Sale

1. Back numbers of *Honeyguide* will be available in the Mukuvisi Woodlands shop at a nominal fee.
2. Kodak Carousel slide magazines, 11. Each holds 80 slides. Price: \$220 each. Interested persons contact Mike Marriot Phone Harare 492059 between 7 and 9 a.m. or after 5 p.m.
3. "Silly Birds and More Silly Birds of Southern Africa" are great fun books to have and to give as presents. They are readily available, with other books by David Bygott at all good bookshops.

#### Wanted

Anyone with a Mana Pools Lodge booking who cannot take it up. Please contact Dave Gray Phone 885406 or 14 Fisher Avenue Borrowdale.