

THE BABBLER

ORNITHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF ZIMBABWE

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Mashonaland Branch

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BLUE SWALLOW SURVEY, Nyanga National Park 9 -10 November

To all members who took part Thank you and well done. A report will be printed as soon as all results have been received and collated.

NATIONAL AGM

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

MASHONALAND BRANCH ACTIVITIES

Outings

1. Mukuvisi Woodlands: Sunday 5th January 1997 and 2nd February 1997. Meet at Paget Road entrance at 6.30 a.m. There will be a vehicle guard in attendance.
2. Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary: Sunday 12th January 1997 and 9th February 1997. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre at 6.30 a.m. Beginners are very welcome. Bring your chairs and tea.

Saturday Afternoons

1. 18th January 1997. A Mystery Tour. Meet at the Belvedere Shopping Centre at 2.30 p.m.
2. 15th February 1997. Haka Park, Cleveland Dam. Meet at Park gate at 2.30 p.m. There will be an entrance charge. A very worthwhile area with woodland, grassland and waterbirds.

Sunday Outings

1. 26th January 1997. Alex Masterson's Vlei walk. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre at 6.30 a.m. Bring your wellies.
2. 23rd February 1997. Gosho Park, Marondera. Meet at Ruwa Shopping Centre, Mutare Road at 6.30 a.m. Bring chairs, tea/lunch. There is a \$15 entrance charge.

Thursday Evenings

1. 16th January 1997. Branch AGM. Venue: Alexandra Sports Club. Time: 6.00 p.m. Wildfowl Trust will give a presentation. There will be a cash bar. Please complete tear-off, to assist with the catering for snacks.
2. 20th February 1997. John Paxton will speak on his recent trip to Ghana. Venue: Alexandra Sports Club 8.30 p.m.

EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

Chairman: Mr K Dixon 62882 Mutare
 Recorder: Mr A B (Tony) Curtis 60281 Mutare

Outings

Saturday 11th January 1997 Cynara Farm 2.00 p.m.
 Sunday 26th January 1997 Dorowa Mine 6.00 a.m.
 Saturday 8th February 1997 Imbeza Valley 2.00 p.m.
 Sunday 23rd February 1997 Mapor Estate Odzi 6.00 a.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 BRANCHFuture Programme

Evening Meeting: Friday 7th February 1997:- Branch AGM. Notice is hereby given of the Matabeleland Branch AGM to be held at 3A Holdengarde Ave. Hillside at 8.00 p.m. This will be preceded by a social and braai; we will supply punch and braai fires. Please bring your own food, eating utensils and deck chairs from 6.30 p.m. onwards. For further details contact the Chairman on Telephone 42474.

Monthly Outings: Sunday 19th January 1997:- Aisleby Waterfowl Count. The dam level should be high so we aim to tackle this from the water with at least two boats. Please do come and help with this census, the more people involved improves our coverage and makes the exercise easier. Meet at Aisleby boom at 7.30 a.m. or contact the Chairman.

Sunday 26th January 1997: Fort Rixon Dam Waterfowl Count. The mid-winter count produced a low tally of birds, hopefully with some inflow and weed growth, more will be present in January. Meet at Fort Rixon Dam at 9.00 a.m. or contact Penny Feather for further details. Tel. 44034.

Sunday 18th February 1997: Esigodini Valley outing. We have yet to finalise our route for this outing so please contact the Chairman for further details. Tel. 42474

Aisleby

Sunday 19th January 1997: Waterfowl Count.

Sunday 23rd February 1997: Hopefully given some rain there will be plenty to see; either meet at Aisleby boom at 7-30 a.m. or contact the monthly Co-ordinator George Banfield. Tel 71624.

From the Chairman

The last month has been considerably active for the Branch with progress at Aisleby. Reeds have been cut, the Causeway repaired and a frame positioned for shade cloth. A second viewing platform has been planned, and its construction approved by Council. Foundations are now in the process of being dug and the superstructure erected. We are also intending to concrete the surface of the Causeway and provide a handrail, all enhancing birding at the Ibis dam.

We also held a joint outing with the Botswana Bird Club and this proved to be one of the wettest weekends of the year and our programme had to be modified to cope with the descent of 50mm of rain. Hopefully we can repeat the event at a drier time of the year.

Finally a small group of us travelled to Chikwarakwara, some 120km south east of Beitbridge on the banks of the Limpopo. This proved to be a fascinating area with a wide range of Lowveld specials, our most colourful sighting being a pair of Gorgeous Bush-shrike. Though a communal land and a considerable distance from Bulawayo, its well worth a return visit in the future.

Please do continue your support, good birding - **Martin Smith**

MIDLANDS BRANCH

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

There are no immediate dates to hand. Any dates will be notified by Bernard. Looking ahead, it is planned to have another Sebakwe Poort/Echo Park weekend towards the end of August beginning of September, for those who missed out last time.

REPORTSMashonaland

A visit to HIPPO POOLS: 23rd to 25th November 1996 1731B2

Those members who visited the Hippo Pools near Shamva during the last weekend in November were justly rewarded. It was very hot, as was expected, and there was much rain during the second night but it had cleared by morning and activities were not interrupted. Together we saw 137 species including some fine views of the Narina Trogons which had taken up residence near the camp. A few of us had a good sighting of a very silent African Emerald Cuckoo in the camping site. This bird is reported to parasitize on the Grey-backed Camaroptera and the Black-backed Puffback, both of which were much in evidence.

Other less common birds which were seen includes Dickinson's Kestrel, an Osprey, Racquet-tailed Roller, Greater Painted-snipe and Red-throated Twinspots. A hungry croc was seen taking an Egyptian Goose, which, nevertheless put up a good fight. **Sally Perrett**

Eastern Districts

Cynara Farm, Old MUTARE: Saturday 12th October QDS 1832D3

Having attended an OAZ Council meeting in Harare the previous Saturday where I had reported disappointing numbers for recent outings, I was delighted to find no less than 12 others waiting at the Museum. We had planned to visit Mutare Heights to escape the heat of the town but a midweek visit had been disappointing. This, coupled with the fact that we had 2 American visitors, gave us no other choice - CYNARA!

A leisurely stroll around various areas produced 76 species - nothing rare or even unexpected, but a wonderful afternoons birding. As it was Waterfowl Census month we visited all the dams and were richly rewarded. There were 50 Comb Duck, 15 Egyptian Goose, 80 White-faced Duck, a few Red-billed Teal, plus a sprinkling of Little Grebe, Reed Cormorants, sandpipers, heron and plover, 1 African Sacred Ibis and the Grey Crowned Crane.

In the farmyard 30 or so of the 150 Cattle Egret were enjoying showering under the sprinklers and African Hoopoe flew from ground to tree. In the meadows were pipits and the odd Rufous-naped Lark kept up its song. The woodland produced a multitude of new species and Reg's little dog chased an almost imperturbable Spotted Thick-knee. At various times we had all seen the Capped Wheatear, which normally move away much earlier in the season. We climbed wearily into the cars and after checking on the big dam which as usual was quiet, apart from a few waders, we all agreed that once again Cynara had spoiled us with its wealth of birds. **Ken Dixon.**

Crake Valley Farm, VUMBA: Sunday 27th October QDS 1932B2

Despite the advanced point of the dry season and the agreed need of rain, the Essex Valley looked resplendently green under the early morning sun as we sat on the stoep of the Boswell-Brown's lovely old farmhouse. A White-browed Robin-chat family called from the lawn, while an African Paradise-flycatcher cavorted in the tree above. A strange-looking raptor flew past, giving the impression of a Bat Hawk but it failed to reappear.

Having learnt the history of cheese making in the area, we set out past the herd of cattle being hand-milked and in the pasture noted the first of many Brown-hooded Kingfisher. The habitats of the farm are very varied and all of which offer their share of birds. The woodland was full of the calls of Grey Go-away-birds/Livingstone's Turaco, coucal and ground birds and the Yellow-bellied Waxbill, Common Waxbill, Bronze Mannikin and Red-backed Mannikins delighted us with their activities. In the damp vleis widowbirds and African Stonechat were plentiful, and the next woodland area offered the most pleasing sighting of an African Pygmy-kingfisher. Hopefully there will be many more sightings of this attractive little migrant. The forest area was quiet apart from Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Sombre Greenbul,

Fork-tailed Drongo, White-eared Barbet and a couple of Silvery-cheeked Hornbills. We saw clearly the resident Long-crested Eagle circling above. Hugh collected us in his pick-up, having thought we were lost or had expired in the midday heat and as we had about 50 on the list we gave in easily and returned to base for homegrown coffee and scones. How fortunate we were to spend the morning in such a beautiful location with wonderful hosts. **Ken Dixon**

Partridge Hill, Essex Valley Road, Vumba: QDS 1932B2

Saturday 6th November 1996

This was a new venue for the seven of us who braved the afternoon heat to search for that disappearing species, the Blue Swallow. Before reaching the dam which has been a breeding place for this swallow in recent years, we were attracted to the forest area which was full of sound. Here we found Olive Thrush, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher and a very busy Klaas's Cuckoo.

Down at the dam, which incidentally holds a few introduced waterbirds, we found lots of whydahs, widowbirds and warblers (Dark-capped Yellow Warbler). Where the spillway ran into rough marshland we could see many swallows and swifts and it wasn't long before we caught sight of our first Blue Swallow in the company of the Eastern Saw-wings, Lesser Striped Swallows and many Barn Swallows. One sat on the long grass while the other over-flew the area.

Over the water, later, we saw one or two more but probably only 2 pairs in all. This was confirmed by Cecilia Manson and Peter who visited the same site the next day.

Other interesting sightings were Gurney's Sugarbird, Tambourine Dove and Swallow-tailed Bee-eater. In all we managed a list of 45. While we were sweating it out in the field, my English visitor who'd been sitting in the shade reading and writing saw a pair of White-throated Robin-chats building a nest. **Ken Dixon.**

Matabeleland

AISLEBY October Outing. QDS 2028B1

This monthly outing proved to be exceptional, with an amazing variety of waterfowl and a considerable number of raptors. The water level in the Upper UMGUSA Dam had fallen appreciably exposing large areas of moist mudflats, ideal wader habitat. Large numbers of Red-billed Teal and Egyptian Goose were present mostly asleep on the shoreline. On the water Southern Pochard, Red-knobbed Coot, Fulvous Duck (25) and Maccoa Duck (9) were sighted. Close in shore Little Grebe were particularly active feeding amongst an algae rich soup. At the waters edge a large number of waders (1000 plus) were present. Most were Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint with small numbers of Ruff and the occasional Common Greenshank. Careful study through the telescope revealed an unusual wader, intermediate in size when compared to the accompanying Little Stints and sandpipers. The bill was black, straight and roughly head length, legs were black. Underparts were white with no visible markings, upperparts were also white except for a contrasting grey shoulder.

In flight broad white bands were visible enabling it to be distinguished amongst the other waders. In conclusion, despite its lack of action a Sanderling, rarely recorded at Aisleby.

Our Trip to the Camp with No Name: 22nd - 24th November 1996 QDS 2231A4
It would probably be quicker to tell you what we didn't see like frigatebird, pitta and Ostriches (though a couple of us thought we saw one grazing on the roadside, but it turned out to have an udder). Our final tally was 137.

To get there, you go down to Beitbridge, turn left and then right onto gravel for what our navigator (that is to say the one holding the map) said was something between 120 and 180 km and right again when you reach "a large baobab at the top of the hill from where there's a beautiful view and you can see the river". This charming little camp is built on the very edge of the Limpopo, not a hundred miles from the Bubi, and looks across to northern Kruger. Its unspoiled wilderness embraces a wide variety of habitats - sand, puddles, riverine forest, kopjies, acacia groves and grassland. The girls shared a chalet with running ablutions and the men another with traditional facilities.

We spent our first sunset admiring the sunset, a family of Saddle-billed Storks and a few waders, including a lethargic Grey Plover, that were poking around a puddle in mid-stream (actually as the Limpopo was definitely great but neither green nor greasy "mid-sand" would be appropriate. A delicious meal was followed by sleep punctuated by jackals, a hyaena and Freckled Nightjars but not by the expected mosquitoes.

Morning dawned with a wonderful chorus (if you exclude the pathetic contribution from Trumpeter Hornbills which would be better named "Squeakers" and off we went into the nearby bush. Immediately we found an active bird party including a Black-throated Wattle-eye and something (LBJ) which turned out to be a Red-faced Cisticola. As the rustling bushes proved to be non-buffalo, we boldly moved inland and were surrounded by flittings (Sombre Greenbul), pipings (Orange-breasted Bush-shrikes), squawkings (Broad-billed Rollers) and whistlings (Bearded Scrub-robins). A kopjie revealed signs of early settlement including a 1950's paraffin light, hornbills and flowering baobabs.

Back for breakfast during which we saw three kingfishers, including Striped Kingfisher, a Crowned Hornbill and heard Purple-crested Turaco over in South Africa. We spent the rest of the morning about 8 km up river on two buggies (you know those things with bulbous tyres that go anywhere), pausing briefly to look at a group of Temminck's Coursers and Greater Painted-snipe near a mid-river island. We flushed Night-herons near one puddle and half a dozen middle-aged crocs which slank (or slunked) into another. Other shorelines revealed waders and plovers, including a pair of diminutive White-fronted Plovers, and the ever-present (ever gloomy) Grey Plover. Our final puddle was

occupied by Egyptian Goose and Spur-winged Goose, Saddle-billed Storks and a solitary Hadedda Ibis.

After lunch we watched 4 male elephants grazing peacefully over in Kruger, and then headed inland to an acacia grove absolutely humming with everything from Meves's Starlings and Violet-backed Starlings and a Red-backed Shrike to Spectacled Weavers and a Lesser Honeyguide. Flying over were African Openbills, Yellow-billed Storks and Black Storks and in the trees a shrieking Giant Kingfisher.

We had delicious roast chicken (yes, it was definitely chicken) for supper and next morning set off inland the other way - but had hardly left camp when one amongst us (the one who kept saying his binoculars were broken and he couldn't see anything) spotted an African Cuckoo Hawk - then a African Crowned Eagle, Lappet-faced Vultures and White-backed Vultures and a Wahlberg's Eagle. Anyway, we meandered on into a river bed with huge yellow bark acacias and this is where we eventually found the Gorgeous Bush-shrikes that had been calling for hours (but only after crawling around on hands and knees in impenetrable bush, past an old lions den identified by half a donkey carcass and a huge lump of pooh. Those who could focus on them said we also saw Bohm's Spinetail, Mosque Swallow and Wire-tailed Swallows and we all had good views of the four bee-eaters present.

Our hosts, Jan and Alex Strauss (Savannah Safaris) were wonderfully hospitable and for sure would welcome anyone who'd like to spend a quiet time in this lovely wilderness. They are based at Beitbridge.

Midlands

NYORORO Farm, CHATSWORTH 11th - 13th October 1996.

The farm lies in the centre of QDS 1930B4 at an altitude of approx 1500m. It lies on Kalahari Sands, whereon most rainfall soaks in. This results in extensive and permanent wetlands, bordered by wide grasslands, in turn, bordered by well developed Miombo woodlands.

Turnout was good, with an attendance of 33 with an excellent contingent from Masvingo and Chiredzi, including some new members. Harare was represented by Jacko and Deborah. We camped at the cottage of Keith Harvey's daughter, Kate Raath and we are grateful to Keith, Jeanette and daughters Kate and Lynne for making possible this successful weekend outing. Keith was our indefatigable guide, rousing us out at 0600 each morning, leading us to Driefontein dam, Widgeon Pan and places of interest. Jaap Jovner's care and protection of Widgeon Pan is appreciated and applauded.

A total of 150 species were recorded.

As anticipated the waterbirds were the feature of the weekend, especially the Wattled Cranes. Their future here seems secure at present. 22 Wattled Cranes were seen at DRIEFONTEIN. 2 (possibly a pair with hidden chick) at WIDGEON Pan and 12 at Nyororo, including 1 immature. 72 Grey Crowned Cranes were seen at Driefontein. 110 Spur-winged Goose

were seen at Widgeon. "Harvey's Takeaway" inadvertently organised a dead heifer for us. This was attended by 172 Vultures (165 White-backed Vultures plus 4 Lappet-faced Vultures), and sundry Pied Crows, Yellow-billed Kites and Marabou Stork.

Special sightings were the Cape Longclaw and Rosy-throated Longclaws, two Spotted Thick-knees, 5 Marsh Owls and at the homestead birdbath, a Southern Hyliota. **B. Beekes.**

TAIL FEATHERS

A sad tale for the Babbler

Of all the dogs that have ever owned me, by far the best companions have been the two little Jack Russell's, mother and daughter, who were not only self-appointed back seat drivers and wild life spotters when I drove around the farm, but who waxed extremely indignant when I left them behind, in the event of an off-farm trip.

On an early morning run last Wednesday, Kube, the daughter and smaller of the two, was inadvertently left at home, but must have decided to follow the bakkie. On my return trip, about 3 km from the house, I was confronted with a very large Martial Eagle at the side of the road and to my dismay saw that he had killed the poor little dog.

We not infrequently lose lambs from eagle predation, and I have witnessed quite a variety of small mammals, birds and reptiles being taken, but never a dog. Her size and exposure on an open road were her undoing. **Keith Harvey.**

The mating of Swifts

A book titled *The Natural History of Selborne* by the Rev Gilbert White is an English classic which makes the most pleasant reading for a bird lover. In a letter to a friend in 1774 he advances something new and peculiar (to use his own words), which relates to the Common Swift. This is what he writes: Swifts tread or copulate on the wing; and I would wish any nice observer, that it started at this supposition, to use his own eyes, and I think he will soon be convinced. In another class of animals, viz the insect, nothing is so common as to see the different species of many genera in conjunction as they fly. The swift is almost continually on the wing; and as it never settles on the ground, on trees, or roofs, would seldom find opportunity for amorous rites, was it not enabled to indulge them in the air. If any person would watch these birds of a fine morning in May, as they are sailing around at a great height from the ground, he would see, every now and then, one drop on the back of another, and both of them sink down together for many fathoms with a loud piercing shriek. This I take to be the juncture when the business of generation is carrying on.

I have not found any comment on this as regards other swifts in modern publications and cannot but wonder if this method of mating is confined only to the Common Swift? **Peter Cresswell**