

# THE BABBLER

## ORNITHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF ZIMBABWE NEWSLETTER

ISSUE #3: NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1994

### Mashonaland Branch

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## **MASHONALAND BRANCH ACTIVITIES**

### Regular Monthly Outings

1. Mukuvisi Woodlands: Sunday 6th November and 4th December 1994. Meet at Paget Road entrance at 6.30 a.m. There will be a vehicle guard in attendance.
2. Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary: Sunday 13th November 1994 and 11th December 1994. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre at 6.30 a.m.

### Saturday Afternoon Outings

1. 19th November 1994. Marlborough sewerage works. Meet at Marlborough Shopping centre between Elizabeth Windsor and Princess Margaret Road off Harare Drive at 2.00 p.m.
2. No December outing.

### Sunday Outing

1. 27th November 1994: Lyndhurst Farm (John and Jill Schots). Woodland, Grassland and Water birds. Bring your own tea and lunch. Meet at Queensdale Shopping Centre on Chiremba Road (Widdecombe Road) — opposite Athol Evans Retirement Centre) at 6.30 a.m.
2. No December outing.

### Evening Meeting

Thursday 17th November 1994: There will be a quiz organised by Mrs. Jacko Williams. Come and test your knowledge of birds and have a fun evening.

There will be no December meeting.

Meet upstairs in the Harare Museum at 6.30 p.m. There will be a vehicle guard in attendance.

**EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB**

Chairman: Mr. K. Dixon 62882 Mutare  
 Secretary: Miss G. Henning 4 Mimosa Court 2nd Street Mutare  
 Recorder: Mr. A.B. (Tony) Curtis 60181 Mutare

Outings

Saturday November 12th 1994	The Drifters	1400 hours
Sunday November 27th 1994	Burma Valley	0630 hours
Saturday December 10th 1994	Penhalonga	1400 hours
Sunday December 25th 1994	no meeting	
Saturday January 14th 1994	Osborne Dam	1400 hours
Sunday January 29th 1994	Cynara	0600 hours

The group assembles at the Museum in Aerodrome Road at the time stated. It is always advisable to check on arrangements by ringing Ken Dixon on 62882 or Tony Curtis on 60181.

**MATABELELAND BRANCH**Evening Meetings

Friday 4th November 1994. An evening with Ken Blake. We have invited Ken Blake back to show us some more of his beautiful slides. His evenings always prove entertaining and his slides are well worth seeing, so do come. Venue: 3a Holdengarde Avenue, Hillside at 8.00 p.m.

Outings

Sunday 20th November 1994. Umgusa Valley outing. We intend to visit an interesting area of riverine vegetation in the Umgusa Valley. Contact Penny Feather, telephone 44034 for further details.

AISLEBY. The dry conditions countywide have concentrated waterfowl at Aisleby and vast flotillas of ducks and Red-knobbed Coots were present in September including small numbers of Maccoa Duck and Cape Teal. Date and co-ordinator are as follows:

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> November 1994 Tim English 45688

Meet at Aisleby boom at 7.30 a.m. or contact the co-ordinator

Note: there is no outing planned for December unless members feel like a Christmas outing

Christmas Social – Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> December 1994. Mabukuwene Aloe Garden. This year we are returning to Mabukuwene Aloe Garden for our end of year Christmas social. Lunch is on an organised bring and share basis which Mary Banfield has kindly agreed to co-ordinate. All those interested should contact Mary tel. 71624. Meet at the Aloe Garden 12.30 p.m. for 1 p.m.

From the Chairman

The hot, dry season has struck with a vengeance with Bulawayo temperatures rising into the 30s. A number of trees have bravely flowered awakening dormant insect life, providing sustenance for the migrants, so far only European Bee-eaters, which arrived in Bulawayo on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 1994. In our garden a fruiting fig has attracted a large number of birds, two species of starling - Wattle Starling and Greater Blue-eared Starling, African Grey Hornbill, Red-faced Mousebird and a Black-headed Oriole to name a few. It is interesting to see the value of a stiff tail as the Red-faced Mousebirds scramble about amongst the branches, consuming figs at any angle. The marula is coming back into bloom and it cannot be long before the Willow Warblers are back. Please send me your sightings. Martin Smith

Skeletons: the ornithology department of the Natural History Museum, Bulawayo, is building up a collection of bird skeletons. For this purpose the specimens need not be in as good condition as is needed for the skin collection. All specimens would be most gratefully received and should be sent to:

The Hon. Curator of Ornithology  
Natural History Museum  
Bulawayo

#### TAIL FEATHERS

##### 1. DENBY FARM – 26 June 1994

It was a wonderful warm winter's morn when eleven of us set off to Denby Farm, Beatrice with alas, no 'experts' in our midst.

As we drove through the first of those barbed wire and pole contraptions called a 'farm gate' we were greeted by nine hundred and ninety-nine mombies who thought we were there to feed them, so followed the cars at a bellowing gallop. Do mombies gallop?

Abandoning the vehicles to the mercy of the mombies we started off quite well by identifying a Lilac-breasted Roller and a pair of Green-winged Pytilias who put on a splendid demonstration of 'how to Preen.'

However things disintegrated somewhat after this. It took half an hour, three books and very serious deliberation to identify a bush full of Wattled Starlings. Then someone, who shall remain anonymous, spotted a Yellow-bellied 'Starling' and another someone was heard to remark to said spotter "No wonder your list is ALWAYS longer than mine!"

Shortly after this an 'Egyptian Snipe' [African Snipe] was seen — at least we got the direction right - north of Zimbabwe.

Never have the pages of field guides been turned so fast and furiously, usually resulting in "Well it's either this, that or the other, take your pick" and every time a mombie spotted us in the distance all nine hundred and ninety-nine came thundering across hoping for a handout.

As for the poor dentist, three days out from Sweden, he must have thought he'd joined the inmates of a local asylum's outing by mistake. He couldn't believe that you went bird watching in AFRICA with ten dummies and nine hundred and ninety-nine mombies — he kept taking photographs to show his friends back home!

Of the 500 species observed 40 remained unidentified; however we do feel that the Yellow Bellied Starling should be submitted to Tony Tree, as a first in Zimbabwe. We have an outstanding dental photograph of it.

Our thanks to Lyn and Harvey Glen for their kind hospitality, their farm is a bird haven and well worth a visit.

Val Cameron

##### 2. Eastern Districts Bird Club PREMIER ESTATE — Old Mutare — Sunday 31st July 1994.

A new venue for some of us was Rob Truscott's Premier Estate and its environs. The area offers a varied habitat with riverine bush vleis, *Brachystegia* woodland and granite kopjies.

We first inspected the bushy banks of the Mutare River and the stony slopes above. First to appear was a Striped Pipit, quite uncommon hereabouts. Red-necked Spurfowl were calling clearly from all around and every few

minutes Black-headed Heron passed following the course of the river.

In a tall flowering gum tree 3 Grey Waxbills cavorted, showing off their crimson rumps. Alongside them were numerous bulbuls, African Yellow White-eyes, Black-headed Oriole, sunbird, canaries and Spectacled Weaver. Two African Black Duck took off as we approached the water. From the road bridge we saw Pearl-breasted Swallow and Lesser Striped Swallow, African Black Swift and both Black [? Pied Crow] and Cape Crow.

On arriving at the Pioneer Cemetery the large cleared area held great numbers of Green-winged Pytilia, Blue Waxbills, 2 more Striped Pipit, a Familiar Chat, a Pale Flycatcher and Namaqua Dove which seem very plentiful in our area at present.

Further into the Wilderness area we found Bearded Scrub-robin and White-browed Scrub-robin, African Hoopoe and Tropical Boubou. A Scaly-throated Honeyguide called but failed to appear. Then followed a long walk, fruitless except for Retz's Helmet-shrike but it was by then 11.30 a.m.

After a brief visit to the house to thank our hosts we wandered back via small dams and the river where we saw the day's first raptors, Black-chested Snake-eagle and an Augur Buzzard but not the resident Martial Eagles; it is always good to leave something for the next visit. 58 species were recorded

### 3. Fairholme Farm, Penhalonga. Saturday 10th September 1994

After a short August break, seven members began the spring watch by a very pleasant visit to Fairholme Farm, Penhalonga, home of Peter and Kathy Hurrell. There are three habitats to be searched here; the trees along the perimeter of the farm and the river, the fields of ripening wheat and the cleared fields, partly ploughed.

One of the first birds we spotted in the trees was a Yellow-breasted Apalis flicking about in search of insects. There were also firefinches, Green-winged Pytilia, mannikins and waxbills. Then a Golden-tailed Woodpecker was heard. On seeing large flocks of birds on the growing wheat one naturally plumped for Red-billed Quelea. In fact these were few in number while there were hundreds of Yellow Bishops and a few Tawny-flanked Prinia and possibly three different species of cisticola. Speckled Pigeons too were present. The swallows appeared to be a mixture of Lesser Striped Swallows, Grey-rumped Swallows and Pearl-breasted Swallows.

The bare fields contained African Pipit, Rufous-naped Lark and Swainson's Spurfowl. The only raptor in evidence was a Black-shouldered Kite high on a gum tree.

In all we counted 42 species; no doubt our next visit in the summer will yield many more. Thank you Peter and Kathy for inviting us. Ken Dixon

### 4. Matabeleland Branch Game Count Birds

The recent game count at HWANGE produced a number of interesting bird stories. The Hapgoods reported two incidents; the first involved an adult African Harrier-hawk who flew down to perch beside the water. In between his drinking his facial colour changed from a light white/pink to a deep red/pink colour. The explanation of this remains a mystery – presumably colour change is important in courtship but as no other bird was present, perhaps erotic thoughts are the answer!

The second incident involved a pair of Lanner Falcons who attempted to catch a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill. It was initially caught and forced to the ground where it was attacked by both birds. It managed to escape and flew into a dense thorn bush pursued by a falcon who succeeded in flushing it out into the open where it was again attacked by both birds who eventually managed

to kill it. It is interesting to hear of two birds co-operating in hunting and catching prey.

5. Verreaux's Eagle and other Raptors in the MATOPOS

The annual Verreaux's Eagle outing of the local branch of the OAZ saw ten cars and 26 people meeting at Retreat at 7.30 hr. on Sunday 25th September. The Kezi Road was taken along which a Wahlberg's Eagle was seen flying. Entering the Park at the 48.5 km peg, we travelled down the fence to the 111B nest. The whole party climbed up to the look-out point level with the nest, no mean feat. There was a large brown eaglet on the nest surrounded by white mutes. The adult birds were seen flying in the area. Then on to Mesilumi Dam, observing a pair of African Hawk-eagles on the way, assumed to be the pair from the lay-by nest on the Kezi Road. At the Mesilumi Dam the nest was empty, it was assumed to be fledged, as it was occupied on 17th September. Searching the area did not reveal its presence. A walk of some 2 km to the 105 nest, revealed a small chick only just forming its brown feathers, on the nest with its adult. This is a very late breeding attempt, perhaps the egg laid in Mid June. A watch will be kept on this nest to record the fledging date. Lunch was taken at Maleme Dam, in pleasant conditions with the breeze keeping away the mopane flies. After lunch a visit to the 28A stack nest was made, here an adult was standing on the nest together with a large brown eaglet. They stayed throughout the watch in the same relative positions without movement or feeding and ignoring each other – a strange observation.

At the gum-tree nest on the Circular Drive the African Crowned Eagle was sitting; hopefully it will be successful this year. In January 1993 a dead young eagle was picked up below the nest. Finally a call in at nest 13A, there the fledged young eagle was seen some 50m off the nest — a wonderful sight with the wind ruffling its pale coloured leg feathers and its wings raised to give the appearance of a large bird – a successful fledging after last year's failure.

The Verreaux's Eagle breeding this year looks extremely promising, out of 36 territories monitored one already fledged, two others off their nests a metre or two and 18 eaglets in various stages of development. Another breeding attempt is to be checked and there are 2 known failures, there are 13 other cases of no attempt at breeding this year.

G.E. Banfield

6. Wattled Cranes, RAINHAM DAMS

During my last visit to Zimbabwe in July 1994, on two occasions I have visited Rainham Dams hoping to locate and observe a pair of resident Wattled Cranes.

The first visit proved unsuccessful due to our late arrival; however we were still able to spot a couple of Square-tailed Nightjars as well as Black-crowned Night-herons and several Marsh Owls which have been relatively scarce in the area during the past years according to Dave Gray.

However this visit gave me a good feel for the extent and habitat to prospect on forthcoming visits. The second attempt was spent entirely calling and screening the horizon and zigzagging the area from the eastern boundaries to the northern reaches where the abattoir is located.

After a five hour unsuccessful search I returned to the dams to check the shores but despite a multitude of drumming African Snipe and a semi albino Buffy Pipit (which Jacko Williams had seen the day before) and White-backed Ducks — I still could not find a single Wattled Crane.

Only whilst retracing my steps on the southern shores of the middle dam (the one lying to the left of the main dam when facing north) did I realise what had gone wrong. Lying in front of me amidst scattered feathers a metre apart were two carcasses of two large birds. The feathers alone gave away the identity of Wattled Crane, the size of the sternum complex and pelvic regions, as well as the long tibia tarsal bones still bearing the large black epithelial skin scales. It was possible to detect the sexual dimorphism present in the size of both carcasses. A few metres away I found one skull that had its left flank missing but the dehydrated wattle was still visible.

The fact that:

- a) Both carcasses had clear tooth marks and beak marks from scavengers
- b) Both were lying in the grass a metre apart with no clear signs of dragging and plucked on the spot

reduces the likelihood of a double-impact strike by any predator, although it does not rule it out.

From previous experience on European Cranes and after discussion with Dr. A Allan from the Avian Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town (who obtained his doctorate working with Blue Cranes) we agreed that it looks more like the signature of some sort of intoxication or a hail storm. It is important that any other findings concerning other species found under similar mysterious death conditions be reported in order to establish what caused the death of the Rainham Dam's Wattled Cranes.

Christian Boix

#### 7. Trumpeter Hornbills

Between Gwaai River and Hwange, on the 17th August 1994, a pair of Trumpeter Hornbills was sighted at the 295 kilometre peg on the main road from Bulawayo to Victoria Falls. It was in the middle of communal lands where every second picannin carries a catapult, so the hornbills would have to be lucky to survive. Mention is made of this particular sighting as the birds were well out of their normal habitat, being the Zambezi Valley and the Eastern Districts.

Other interesting sightings during the middle of August 1994 were Black-winged Pratincoles over Salt Pan and Great White Pelican at Deteema Dam in HWANGE Game Reserve, where at the time there was an abundance of White-browed Sparrow-weaver, Meves's Starlings and Double-banded Sandgrouse.

A host of eagles were seen, over the period of a week, including Tawny Eagle, Steppe Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Booted Eagle, Martial Eagle, African Crowned Eagle, African Fish-eagle and Bateleur. All in all, 134 different species of birds were identified, including Kori Bustard, Black-bellied Bustard and Red-crested Korhaan. Ron Stuttaford.

#### 8. Grey Crowned Crane

Margaret Parrock's account of the lone Grey Crowned Crane (in Issue 2) prompts me to relate a similar tale from this end of Zimbabwe (Eastern Districts).

There has been a Grey Crowned Crane at CYNARA Farm (Old Mutare) almost continuously since April 1988 (perhaps earlier). I know of no other records from Manicaland, although the atlas results may contradict this. It was joined by another bird for several years, presumably of the opposite sex. No attempt was made to breed, so far as we could see, although courtship behaviour was observed once or twice (dancing).

One bird went missing for a long period, returning (we assumed it was the same bird) with a damaged leg. It eventually went missing again and is presumed dead.

The remaining bird seems to prefer the company of some Egyptian Goose, often flying with them and I wonder if this may be because of the similar wing pattern in flight.  
Does anyone else have stories of solitary Grey Crowned Cranes? A. B. (Tony) Curtis

9. African Waterfowl Census 1994

Two Whiskered Terns were seen by R P Accorsi in the pans around Main Camp HWANGE on 24th April 1994.

Ten African Black Duck seen on Wakefield Farm dams, Headlands by Reg Dawson. 24th April 1994.

Nineteen Black Herons, nine African Skimmers at the LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY by Edna Dundas on 24th April 1994. She also saw Caspian Terns the week before.

560 Cattle Egret counted at Nhora Dam CHIREDDZI by E J L Belmont, 10th April 1994. They came to roost in the evening and dispersed again at first light. Many people saw Little Bitterns this year.

4 African Crake by John McKersie on 14th April 1994 on Green Valley Farms, Doma.

4 Hadeda Ibis seen by Ken Dixon at CYNARA Farm, Old Mutare on 10th April 1994.

1 Kittlitz's Plover seen by Dave Rockingham-Gill on 18th July 1994 at Alpha Dam MHANGURA. In some places very heavy long grass made it impossible to get to the waters edge but where there was bare shoreline there was a concentration of plovers and sandpipers.

Same observer saw 9 Green-backed Heron on Piringham Dam 18th April 1994. 14 Kittlitz's Plovers. Crowned Lapwings returned to the MHANGURA area 17th April 1994.

2 White-backed Night-heron and 21 Rufous-bellied Herons on the Zambezi above the VICTORIA FALLS with 10 Allen's Gallinule. C J W Pollard. 15th April 1994. 150 Marabou Storks at the Victoria Falls Sewerage Ponds 26th April 1994 — C J W Pollard

19 Yellow-billed Storks breeding at Nhora Dam CHIREDDZI, 17th July 1994. E J L Bemont. They have not been recorded to breed in Zimbabwe before.

294 White-breasted Cormorant, 16 Goliath Heron, 42 Purple Heron, 1520 Southern Pochard, 129 Kittlitz's Plover, 56 Grey-headed Gull, 1 female Mallard. F M and T Couto, 13th July 1994 LAKE CHIVERO.

134 African Openbills, 31 Glossy Ibis, 55 Cape Shoveler; 2910 Red-knobbed Coot, 58 Pied Avocet, 540 Kittlitz's Plover, 10 Black-tailed Godwit, 1 male Mallard, 2 Whiskered Terns and 20 White-winged Terns and 10 African Skimmers on LAKE MANYAME. 11th July 1994. F M and T Couto.

Several wintering Osprey have been reported. 1 at Green Valley Ranch Dam 27th July 1994. G. Engelbrecht. 1 at AISLEBY Sewerage Farm 17th July 1994 (along with 105 Grey Crowned Cranes) by Martin Smith. Two at RYDINGS School reported by Mery du Plessis on 31st August 1994.

Counts for the African Waterfowl Census are done April and October (voluntary) and January and July (obligatory) at the same water every time. Those who would like to take part should contact D V Rockingham-Gill, Box 296, Mhangura.

RIFA: 29th September to 2nd October 1994.

The Mashonaland Bird Watchers Club's annual outing to Rifa, the Mashonaland Hunters' Association Education Camp at Chirundu was attended by 29 OAZ members and a wonderful caterer Harriet Bolton. We were delighted to welcome Ian and Eileen Milton from Bulawayo, Tom and Isabel Mercer, Ken Dixon and Ken Longden from Mutare and Reg Dawson from Headlands. It was great to have out of Harare members, hope they'll join us again.

The weather was hot but good for early morning and late afternoon birding. We were escorted by our resident Hunters Anton Howland, George Stanger and Chris Fenton-Wells to whom we are greatly indebted for their time and patience.

Our bird count was 162 with specials like Livingstone's Flycatchers, Southern Carmine Bee-eaters (approx 400 — 500 birds) Western Banded Snake-eagles. We also saw Wild Dogs and some lucky members saw two lionesses and a magnificent black mane lion. Thank you to Leslie and Hugh Maasdorp for making us feel at home, and to Harriet and our three hunters.

Dave Gray

#### NOTICE BOARD

1. The National AGM 1995 will be hosted by the Matabeleland Branch in Matopos from 10th to 12th March 1995. Please complete tear off Slip and submit to Martin Smith, P O Box 44, Bulawayo with your payment for accommodation as soon as possible.

2. Stuck with what to buy your family and friends for Christmas? Why not buy Dave Bygott's "Silly Birds". The publishers have promised a donation to the OAZ from each copy sold in 'Zimbabwe.

#### WANTED

Chinhoyi High School Conservation Club are looking for books, binoculars, etc. Any contributions to be sent to Mrs Jacko Williams, 14 Harare Drive, P O Borrowdale.

The Editors of *The Sunbird*, *The Barbet* and *The Babbler* thank you for your contributions in the past year.

Branch Committee and Editors wish all members a Very Happy Christmas and a wonderful birding 1995.



NATIONAL AGM 1995

Maleme Dam accommodation consists of double-bedroom and single bedroom chalets with conveniently situated communal ablution blocks and outside cooking facilities. Double-bedroom and one single bedroom Lodges with dining room, kitchen, bathroom, shower and toilet. All units are equipped with beds, mattresses, bedding, towels, refrigerator, essential furniture and basic cooking utensils. No crockery or cutlery is provided in the chalets. Chalets have two plate electric cookers. Table linen, crockery and cutlery are provided in the Lodges which are also equipped with electric stoves.

1 Bedroom Chalet	(2 persons)	\$40.00	per night	7 available
2 Bedroom Chalet	(4 persons)	\$80.00	per night	5 available
1 Bedroom Lodge	(2 persons)	\$60.00	per night	1 available
3 Bedroom Lodge	(6 persons)	\$180.00	per night	2 available
CAMPING per person per night \$10.00				

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Tear off

I \_\_\_\_\_ require the following accommodation  
 For \_\_\_\_\_ persons. I enclose my cheque for \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

To: Mr Martin Smith  
 P O Box 44  
 BULAWAYO.