

# BABBLER

## BirdLife Zimbabwe

A PARTNER DESIGNATE OF BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL

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### COMMITTEES

#### Mashonaland Branch

|                          |        |        |
|--------------------------|--------|--------|
| Chairman: John Saunders  | ☎      | 490167 |
| Members: Jennifer Carter |        |        |
| Richard Dennison         | 747567 |        |
| Helen Fraser             |        |        |
| Di Rushforth             | 741765 |        |
| Pat Saunders             | 490167 |        |
| Nigel Steyn              | 776993 |        |

#### Matabeleland Branch

|                |   |       |
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| Martin Smith   | ☎ | 42474 |
| Julia Dupree   |   | 62401 |
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### ACTIVITIES

#### NATIONAL

The National AGM will be held over the weekend 24-26 March 2000 at Kyle National Park provided the fuel situation has improved. Those who have made bookings or who have indicated that they will be attending the AGM will be notified nearer the time about any changes to the venue.

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#### MASHONALAND BRANCH

##### Regular outings

1. Mukuvisi Woodlands: Sundays, 5 March and 2 April 2000. Meet at the Paget Road entrance at 6.30 a.m. There will be a vehicle guard in attendance.
2. Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary: Sundays, 12 March and 9 April 2000. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre for departure at 6.30 a.m. Bring your chairs and tea. Beginners are most welcome.

##### Saturday afternoon outings

1. 18 March 2000: Chedgelow Farm. Meet at Rushforth Service Station, Airport Road at 2.30 p.m. Bring chairs and refreshments.

2. 22 April 2000: Greystone Park Nature Reserve. Meet in the car park, Halford Road at 3.30 p.m.

#### Sunday outings

1. 26 March 2000: Haka Game Park. Meet just outside the entrance gate at 6.30 a.m. There are entry fees payable which are approximately \$20 per adult and \$25 per car. Bring chairs and refreshments.
2. 30 April 2000: Sunnyside Farm, Concession. Meet at Ashbrittle Service Station, Golden Stairs Road at 6.30 a.m. Bring chairs and refreshments and make a day of it.

***Please note that these outings have been arranged subject to the availability of fuel. Members are urged to share transport wherever possible. If you have any queries please contact Di Rushforth.***

#### Thursday evening meeting

1. 16 March 2000: Alex Siemers, a well-known educationist, will talk about schoolboy expeditions of the era 1951 to the late 1970's. This will be most interesting – don't miss it!

Venue: Bowls Pavilion, Old Hararians Association, Drummond Chaplin St., Milton Park. Time – 6.00 for 6.30 p.m. A cash bar and pies will be available. There will be a security guard.

***There will be no evening meeting in April owing to the Easter holidays.***

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### MATABELELAND BRANCH

#### Evening Meetings

Friday 3 March 2000 – Dr L. Grimes – Co-operative breeding in Yellow-billed Shrike/Long-tailed Shrike – Dr Grimes is currently working at Petra High School but spent 15 years in Ghana where he was able to study the West African equivalent of the Magpie Shrike. He will show slides and possibly some 16 mm footage of his study. Venue: CBC Staffroom/study base at 8.00 p.m.

Friday 7 April 2000 – Raptors, Waders and miscellaneous footage – I have recently acquired one of Bird guides videos on identification which, although largely based on British Birds, covers many species which are common to us and the tips on group identification are particularly useful. I will also show a selection of home video footage on Zimbabwe birds. Venue: 3A Holdengarde Avenue at 8.00 p.m.

#### Outings

Saturday 18 March 2000 – Hillside Dams – The Upper Dam has received an appreciable inflow of water and flooded a considerable area of rank vegetation, producing some interesting habitat for migrant crakes and moorhens. Grass has grown and the area is looking particularly attractive so join us for a sunset ramble. Meet at the Aloe Garden Car Park at 4.00 p.m. or contact Martin.

Sunday 16 April 2000 – Chipchase – Barbara and Jimmy have recently visited this property and found plenty of interest. In view of the current diesel crisis we have planned a local outing. This will be an afternoon outing meeting at Chipchase at 3.00 p.m. For details and directions contact Barbara – Tel: 41983.

#### Aisleby

There will be no outing in March due to the National AGM at Kyle.

Saturday 29 April 2000 – this will be a Saturday afternoon outing, so meet at the boom at 2.30 p.m., or contact the co-ordinator – Martin Smith.

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### EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

Secretary: Mr Tony Curtis ☎ 020-60281; Committee member – Ken Dixon ☎ 020-658 19

#### Outings

Saturday 11 March 2000      Vumba    2.00 p.m.  
Sunday 26 March 2000      Rusape    6.00 a.m.

*Details of the April meetings will be circulated to members as soon as possible.*

We leave from the Museum in Aerodrome Road at the time stated. Transport and binoculars are available if prior notice is given.

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#### **Karoi Bird Club**

Co-ordinator: Mr K Mitchell P O Box 398, Karoi ☎ 064-630220  
 Secretary: Mrs M Mitchell P O Box 398, Karoi ☎ 064-630216

Rydings School Interpretive Centre

Saturday 4 March 2000 6.00 a.m.

Saturday 1 April 2000 6.00 a.m.

Other outings

Saturday 26 February 2000 Yawanda Farm 6.00 a.m.

Sunday 19 March 2000 Kevlyn Farm 6.00 a.m.

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#### **MIDLANDS BRANCH**

Co-ordinator: Gavin Conway ☎ 054-24058 (home) 24666 (work) e-mail [giconway@icon.co.zw](mailto:giconway@icon.co.zw)

Day Outings

**Gweru** Please contact Gavin for details of outings which may be planned in 2000

**Masvingo** Contact Lynne Wilkins ☎ 039-63657

**Kadoma** Contact Margaret Parrock ☎ 068-3644

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#### **REPORTS**

##### **NATIONAL**

##### **NEWS FROM COUNCIL**

Grant from RSPB for an Administrative Office and staff

BirdLife Zimbabwe has received a grant sufficient to cover the costs of running an administrative office and to employ a full-time Administrative Officer and typist/receptionist. The Administrative Officer, whose appointment will be announced shortly, will carry out many of the duties currently being undertaken by volunteer members of Council as well as promote the association both in Zimbabwe and internationally.

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#### **MASHONALAND BRANCH**

##### Ngoni Chiweshe – Thursday 18 November 1999

Ngoni Chiweshe (a scout with the Department of National Parks and Wild Life Management) visited us from Bulawayo and told us about his five-month raptor course in the USA during the latter half of 1998. Ngoni was one of 5 candidates chosen worldwide out of a possible 243 and was the only one from Africa. The course was held at the 13 000 acre Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania. We learned that in the 1930s Hawk Mountain had been a well known area for hunters who, each year, slaughtered hundreds of hawks which were on their migratory route. In 1933, a member of the Audubon Society in New York, Rosalie Edge, purchased a piece of land in the area and it was declared a sanctuary and conservation area in 1934. An ornithologist, Maurice Brown, began working at the Sanctuary when he initiated a conservation programme and began a survey of the number and types of raptors which migrated annually through the area. His wife, Emma had the unlikely job of sitting at the gate to the Sanctuary, chasing away hunters. She was most unpopular with the hunters and was often threatened and shot at. The survey has continued for over sixty years and in that time an average of 19 000 birds of 16 species have been recorded on their migration down this route.

Ngoni showed us slides of some of the beautiful birds which pass through the area and explained to us how they were identified. The Red-tailed Hawk was the most common hawk with the American Bald Eagle and the Golden Eagle being the only eagles seen in the area. Two vulture species also use this migration route, the small, uncommon Black Vulture which has a sense of smell and the common Turkey Vulture.

Thank you, Ngoni, for an interesting and informative talk. I hope you didn't miss your train! **Di Rushforth**

#### 12 WELSTON ROAD – Saturday 20 November 1999

We had a good turnout of 13 members for this outing to the GLEN FOREST area, north of Harare. The main attraction of this venue is the scenery as much of the property is along hillsides and the Thinyika River runs through the northern end of the property. A total of 53 species was recorded with highlights including White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Southern Hylia, Whyte's Barbet and Violet-backed Sunbird. Thank you to Sue and John Hollaway. **Richard Dennison**

#### Branch AGM – 20 January 2000

About 40 members attended the informal AGM when changes to the committee were announced. The Chairman, John Saunders, gave his report outlining the activities of the branch during the year. John thanked those members, who had decided to stand down, for their hard work during their term of office and especially to Dave and Ida Gray for their sterling efforts for the Branch.

#### MUKUVISI WOODLANDS Report

John Shaw gave us a most interesting report of the results of the monthly outings into the Mukuvisi Woodlands. John began where he had ended off the previous year by commenting that the first Sunday of the new millennium was the 2nd and that, despite his invitation to join him on that day, only two people had arrived for the walk. John commented that perhaps it had been because people did not think that he was "Y2K compliant", or most probably that it had rained during most of the night and was still raining that morning. John therefore decided to call off the walk – the first time this had happened in the 25 years he had led the walks.

Highlights of birds recorded during 1999 were a Giant Kingfisher (February and March), Collared Flycatcher (not seen on one of the outings but recorded by John Paxton in January), Lesser Grey Shrike and Red-backed Shrikes. Orange-winged Pytilia (an April record and the only one during the year), a pair of Dusky Larks (June), Miombo Rock-thrush, African Cuckoo Hawk, a male Steel-blue Widowfinch in breeding dress in August, Wood Pipit, Black Cuckoo (a new bird for the list for the Woodlands). In October, John Sievi had pointed out 30 nests or nesting holes of 19 different species of birds. Several miombo specials seem to be on the decline in the Woodlands and John gave us rather depressing figures relating to the Southern Black Tit, i.e. in the period 1976 to 1980 there were 22 sightings, 18 sightings in the years 1981 to 1986, 16 sightings during 1982 – 1991, 6 sightings in 1992 to 1996, 1 sighting in 1997 and no records at all during 1998 and 1999.

#### LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY Report

Richard Dennison informed us that the rainfall had been good for the previous four years and consequently the vegetation cover in the woodland area was good. Total species recorded during 1999 had been 202 – about average for the last 7 years. Total number of species recorded since 1992 had been 277. Highlights during 1999 were: 4 species seen which had not been recorded since August 1992 when regular recording commenced. These were 3 Slaty Egrets (April), 1 African Rail (June), 1 White-breasted Cuckooshrike (July) and 1 African Crake (December). Other species of interest were Little Bittern, Hottentot Teal, European Honey-buzzard, African Purple Swamphen, Allen's Gallinule, Lesser Moorhen, Pied Avocet, Green-backed Honeybird, White-winged Widowbird. The lowlight of the period was when 4 vehicles got stuck in the mud in February!

#### MARLBOROUGH VLEI with Alex Masterson – Saturday 22 January 2000

Many thanks go to Alex Masterson and his pooch for the popular annual vlei walk on a steamy, sunny afternoon, attended by 30 people. Alex treated the group to a pre-walk chat, explaining that the grass height at this time is perfect for bird spotting, and which species we should *expect* to see – for example the three longclaws, various crakes, Yellow-mantled Widowbird, both Marsh Owl and African Grass-owl, Montagu's Harrier and Pallid Harrier, warblers and hundreds of Barn Swallows with Grey-rumped Swallows. Many optimistic souls wore tackies for the very boggy terrain, which made walking quite an exercise. When we encountered a small stream, Janet Joyce was heard admonishing her eight-year-old grandson 'Now don't fall in the water' – and then promptly fell in herself! We were treated to many sightings of both Marsh Owl and Black Coucal and also to the Rosy-throated Longclaw, Little Rush-warbler and Sedge Warbler, Eurasian Reed-warbler, Red-collared Widowbird, Pin-tailed Whydah, Common Waxbill and Orange-breasted Waxbills and Southern Red Bishop. Also

Bronze Mannikin, Red-billed Quelea, Cattle Egret, a Grey Heron, Cuckoo Finch and Diderick Cuckoo. We heard/saw Zitting Cisticola, Levillant's Cisticola, Croaking Cisticola and Pale-crowned Cisticola. Towards the end of the walk some birders were beginning to tire of all the splashing about and trailed behind. "The troops are getting weary" commented Alex, so we headed back to the cars, under a pretty sky, with a rainbow and microlights as the sun sank. **Colette Wiles**

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## **MATABELELAND**

*From the Chairman*

Having had the opportunity for UK winter bird watching this last holiday, it was pleasing to be able to return to our far more hospitable climate. Binoculars rarely mist over and frozen hands which fail to have sufficient strength to focus binoculars are unheard of. Despite this, it was interesting to view UK waders in winter plumage and compare appreciable numbers of Black-tailed Godwits with our single individual seen at AISLEBY last year. Flocks of Brent Goose also proved impressive, being far sleeker and more robust than our rather cumbersome Egyptian Goose.

Here, our wet spell in mid-January managed to produce about a quarter of our annual rainfall in just over a week, producing some delightfully soggy conditions and even some run-off. The Upper HILLSIDE Dam has gradually begun to fill, with the head waters surrounded by lush, rank vegetation – ideal for skulking water birds. On Saturday, 15 January, 2 Dwarf Bitterns were present and Lesser Moorhen have also been reported. At CBC, our mixed wood plot held appreciable numbers of migrants with at least 5 Thrush Nightingale being present on Saturday, 29 January, one being caught and ringed. Red-backed Shrike and Garden Warbler were also present, adding to avian interest in this small, conserved area. On the fields and even out at AISLEBY, Abdim's Storks were conspicuous by their absence. Outings to Aisleby in the 80's nearly always recorded reasonable numbers of both storks and Yellow-billed Kites, whilst our January count failed to yield a single Abdim's Stork! Whether this is a true reflection of the population or merely a change in movement due to rainfall and food remains to be seen but it does underline the importance of long term observation and data collection. Please do continue with your support. Good Birding. **Martin Smith**

### AISLEBY Waterfowl Count – Sunday 16 January 2000

Wet conditions and early morning rain meant that the count was attended by a select few, but despite this, plenty of note was to be seen. Yellow Wagtails were present in the wet pasture land with a group of 5 being recorded in flight. Ruff, Wood Sandpiper and Little Stint were also present and a pair of Greater Painted-snipe recorded at the Bird Dam. The Upper UMGUSA was spilling and the sound of flowing water was a delight in our drought prone region. The dam held a small number of waterfowl which was as expected with appreciable dispersal to breeding grounds. Little Grebe numbers were down to a mere 12 and only 3 Comb Duck recorded.

In the lands not a single Grey Crowned Crane was to be found in contrast to our July '99 count when over 70 were present. Grass levels were suitable for Corn Crake although a walk through to the Umgusa inlet failed to flush any. At the Ibis Dam, levels were high and had flooded substantial areas of vegetation offering ideal habitat for skulkers. Allen's Gallinules were seen, along with a tantalising glimpse of a Lesser Moorhen. A single female Western Marsh-harrier was present, which was particularly pleasing following the absence of records from the previous year. Our count total yielded 2 898 birds of 50 species as opposed to 6 459 of 48 species recorded in July 1999 highlighting the value of Aisleby as a winter refuge. **Martin Smith**

### Waterfowl count at Fort RIXON Dam – Sunday 23 January 2000

Fort Rixon has gained the reputation of being extremely wet on waterfowl count days, so much so that we tend to land up paddling around like the ducks and waders we have come to count. Everyone who joined us on 23 January was pleasantly surprised (especially Julia), therefore, when this day dawned fair and, in spite of some cloud build-up during the day, not a single drop of rain descended upon us. There has obviously been some excellent rainfall in the area recently as the dam was apparently 81% full, as against 65% at the same time last year. Although the island in the centre is still there and acts as a refuge for the water birds, it is much reduced in extent and the higher water levels resulted in fewer species and fewer numbers overall. In January 1999, we saw a total of 745 birds of 42 different species. This year, the figures were 498 and 27 respectively. Those of interest were the lone Pink-backed Pelican, two Yellow Wagtails, a pair of White-backed Duck and one Fulvous Duck with a party of White-faced Duck. There were fewer waders

but terns were plentiful. Of those identified, most were White-winged Terns. The speciality of Rixon Dam is pratincoles, which we have recorded on several January counts. This time there were about 8 of them resting on the island. Occasionally they would fly for a short distance before landing again. They were probably Black-winged Pratincoles but the distance was too great for positive identification. There seemed to be a lot more activity in the *Acacia* bush than on the water. Cuckoos and warblers were much in evidence. Two of the latter were Thrush Nightingales. After lunch, some of our number were led to honey by a Greater Honeyguide. On the way to Rixon Dam one couple reported seeing a male Montagu's Harrier – most likely the one we have seen three times before in the same area. On our way home we stopped for tea at a small dwala beside the Fort Rixon road. We disturbed a pair of Spotted Thick-knees, then watched a circling flock of around 40 White-backed Vultures with up to four Lappet-faced Vultures amongst them. Other species seen along the road were several European Rollers and one Lesser Grey Shrike. Our final sighting was a large flock (circa 50) of Amur Falcons, hawking insects over open country in the Bembezi area along the main Bulawayo – Harare road. Our outings to Fort Rixon always bring us interesting birds – watery or otherwise. **Penny Feather**

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#### **EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB**

##### CYNARA Farm, Old MUTARE – Saturday 13 November 1999

Although this is one of our favourite haunts, only two club members attended which made Nigel and Kylie Steyn visiting from Harare doubly welcome. At Cynara the main dams remain almost full with the result that there is very little suitable shoreline for the waders which remain unusually scarce. Only a solitary Common Greenshank, one Wood Sandpiper and one Common Sandpiper were seen, with a small number of Three-banded Plovers. Even the Wattled Lapwings and the Blacksmith Lapwings were scarce. Except for a few White-faced Ducks, ducks and geese were completely absent. One Squacco Heron was present, one Purple Heron and a few Grey Herons and a solitary African Sacred Ibis. The Helmeted Guineafowl population seems to have recovered fairly well after the serious poisoning incident a few months back and Red-necked Spurfowl were seen twice during the afternoon at widely separated places. Raptors were represented by a single Yellow-billed Kite. Several Diderick Cuckoo were both heard and seen. Palaeartic migrants were represented by Barn Swallows, Willow Warblers and a Red-backed Shrike. An unusual sighting for Cynara was a Greater Honeyguide – I have only one previous record for this bird at Cynara – in May 1995. It was in the same tree as a Crested Barbet; the latter being one of the hole-nesting species parasitised by the Greater Honeyguide. The total count for the afternoon was 70 species. **Tony Curtis**

##### JULIASDALE NYANGA – Sunday 28 November 1999 Ruadzi Primary School, Pangara Ranch and Barton's Chicken Farm (the latter two being in Cumberland Valley)

In the opinion of Martin Matende, who has attended almost all of our outings for the last 8 years, this was probably the most interesting and rewarding of all. It was such a pity that only 4 of us took advantage of the Juliasdale members' preparation. After a lovely drive through the Mutasa Communal Lands on a wonderful summer's day, we met at Ruadzi Primary School, near London Store. There were a dozen local members waiting for us with Blue Swallows swooping all around them and in the nearby compound. Our friends had already recorded 14 species so we were well on the way to a good count. A drive of 1.5 km brought us to the school and more hirundines; this time Greater Striped Swallows, Eastern Saw-wing and Grey-rumped Swallows. Rufous-naped Lark and Wailing Cisticola were everywhere on the grassy slopes down to the stream. Around the nearby kopjie circled a pair of Wahlberg's Eagles – perhaps the owners of the nest in a shady *Erythrina*. There were Cape Crow, an insistent Lesser Honeyguide and lots of Red-collared Widowbirds and Yellow Bishops in the reeds of the stream bed. Our schedule demanded we leave this super spot and take the Cumberland Valley road. I was surprised to see the pine, gum and wattle eventually give way to indigenous woodland and a much drier landscape. Having pulled up en route to identify Grey-rumped Swallow, we noticed a Grey-headed Kingfisher sitting on a sapling. After some 10 km we came to the Pangara Ranch owned by the Stockdales who immediately offered us a welcome cup of tea. Then Chris, their local raptor expert, led us on a walk through riverine bush onto ancient farmland marked by regular heaps of stones removed from there to allow cultivation many years ago. In this bit of what Chris called Matabeleland, we found hundreds of Blue Waxbill and Jameson's Firefinch, bunting, Long-billed Crombec, Willow Warbler and Violet-Backed Starling. On returning to the farm, we

passed a small dam with Giant Kingfisher, another Grey-headed Kingfisher, Wattled Lapwings and Three-banded Plover. Then came the paddock with 6 Groundscraper Thrush, Familiar Chat, Red-headed Weavers and Southern Masked-weavers, a Brubru and so on. Although it was fairly early, we were all exhausted by the hot sun and the walking. After a rest and fascinating conversation about the local Zorse (hybrid horse x zebra) which Val Cameron had seen only a couple of days before, we were off again. Another 5 km down the valley, having stopped for White Stork, marsh-harrier and African Harrier-hawk, we came to Phil Barton's chicken farm where, in the large clump of *Acacia*, we were amazed to see a large family group of White-browed Sparrow-weaver which had been around for at least 6 years. And we were told there were 2 more family groups on neighbouring farms despite our being well to the east of their normal range. Those same *Acacia* were alive with other species too: Long-billed Crombecs galore, Diderick Cuckoo, Spotted Flycatcher, Rattling Cisticola, etc. When we finally set off home, our list was over 70. We give sincere thanks to our Juliasdale friends for introducing us to a part of the Nyanga area we had not seen before and to our various hosts for being so helpful. **Ken Dixon**

#### MOUNTAIN HOME, PENHALONGA – Saturday 11 December 1999

This Club outing was attended by only 3 members and, although this is an ideal number for a bird walk, it was nevertheless disappointing and emphasised the point made at the recent meeting that attendances at outings have generally been poor and tending to become even poorer over the past year. We need more feed-back from members to tell the Committee how to make our meetings more attractive – please make your moans heard! Perhaps on Saturday it was the threatening weather which deterred people but it turned out to be an idle threat and not a drop of rain fell on us.

On this visit to Mountain Home we were able to visit a part of the estate not usually accessible – the far side of the new dam for which we once again are beholden to John who suggested it and made it possible. The area is within the game reserve and consists of rather sparse msasa woodland with many small areas of grassland which was consequently not very productive for birds – I have never understood why msasa woodland is always poorly supplied with birds. There were very few water birds on the dam – we saw only two or three Reed Cormorant, one White-breasted Cormorant and a solitary African Darter, two Little Grebes and a pair of African Black Duck. The usual African Fish-eagle was around and sitting in a dead tree at the water's edge was a Bronzy Sunbird – which can hardly be counted as a water bird! Eastern Saw-wings were seen several times and various other birds, not all positively identified! A visit to the small dam near the horticultural area, to the river crossing and to the sawmill area added several more species including a very good view of a Long-crested Eagle and our final total was about thirty. Not a huge haul, but a very pleasant outing.

By the time this appears in *Muscan* and *Babbler* members will have received and I hope read a newsletter with the programme of meetings for the first three months of the New Year. Following the General Meeting in November there has been a couple of changes to the Committee. Everyone was sorry that Bill Chadder had decided to stand down (to devote as much of his time as possible to his ringing projects – with which we can sympathise) and Tony replaces Ken as Secretary but Ken, thank goodness, remains a committee members as do Bridget and Jane. But we lack a Chairman – some gentle persuasion will no doubt be applied somewhere. **Tony Curtis**

#### MURAHWA'S HILL MUTARE – Saturday 8 January 2000

The first Club outing of the new year coming just before the start of the new school year was not expected to attract a large turn-out. In fact there were two enthusiasts – Trevor Cook (Juliasdale) and myself. We began from the Mugamba Drive entrance and climbed to the Eastern Ridge. The vegetation is now very dense and the paths very narrow, making for difficult birding. Had we been unable to identify a few calls, our list would have been even smaller than the 23 species we managed to log. The list included Red-capped Robin-chat, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Cape Batis and Grey-headed Bush-shrike. Later, half-an-hour spent at the top of the old Christmas Pass road, we added Gorgeous Bush-shrike, an African Paradise-flycatcher, Common Waxbill and 7 more species.

**Tony Curtis**

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## Karoi Bird Club

### Protea Farm KAROI – 30 January 2000

Alex and Pam van Leenhoff very kindly had us back for this bird walk. Having visited them in October, only 4 of us, were interested to see what number of species we would pick up and were greatly rewarded with 122 compared to October's count of 87. 10 of us set off plus one dog – hopefully to flush the African Crake and we did see one take off from open land into cover, unfortunately against the light and not clearly seen. Nevertheless, we spent some time at the nearby dam and had a great time watching Lesser Moorhen, Allen's Gallinule, Little Bittern, White-faced Duck, Comb Duck, White-backed Duck and African Black Duck, African Pygmy-goose, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron and Green-backed Heron, African Jacana and that little jewel – Malachite Kingfisher. White-backed Vultures were in the open land opposite, feeding on a dead heifer and Trumpeter Hornbill were in the trees behind. Going through the woodland, we disturbed a couple of nightjars which we were unable to identify. We stopped to look at all the different mushrooms that had popped up after the rain – Alex assured us that the purple and orange ones were edible! Some species of birds seen were White-browed Scrub-robin (singing) African Green-pigeon, Levillant's Cuckoo, Diderick Cuckoo and Black Cuckoo (heard), Black Cuckooshrike, Green-capped Eremomela, Willow Warbler, Yellow-throated Longclaw and a Black Coucal which was heard. At the next little dam were Greater Painted-snipe and a juvenile Allen's Gallinule which we had at first mistaken for an African Crake. We listened awhile to the Great Reed-warbler grating and creaking while well hidden in some reeds. At the main dam, a boat trip found us Marsh Sandpiper – four of them stepping along in single file on the very edge of the water in the grass – and we saw Wood Sandpiper and Common Sandpiper, Ruff and Common Greenshank. The highlight to finish off was the sighting of African Fish-eagle and Osprey. Bee-eaters seen were European Bee-eater, White-fronted Bee-eater and Little Bee-eater. Overhead were White-rumped Swift flying with another large swift but we could not decide whether it was an African Black Swift or a Common Swift. I must mention the beautiful little Green-winged Pytilia who stopped only long enough for us to have a quick look at him. Our walk was made all the more interesting by the mushroom discussions and tree debating and identification along the way – not to mention the swim in the dam on this very hot and humid morning topped off by a scrumptious breakfast served on the shoreline by Pam and Alex and we thank them for their hospitality once more – they were rewarded by a lovely shower of rain as we left. **Merle Mitchell**

### RYDINGS School Interpretive Centre

Walks continue each month – 134 species for the month of December, the most interesting being the melanistic form of Gabar Goshawk – so interesting. Others seen were Greater Painted-snipe, Black-winged Stilt, Glossy Ibis, Yellow-billed Stork, African Fish-eagle and Osprey! African Stonechats were in the vleis together with all the widowbirds, whydahs and bishops in their summer finery. Some woodland birds were Lesser Honeyguide, Bearded Woodpecker, Brubru, Grey-backed Camaroptera, Red-backed Shrike, Copper Sunbird and White-bellied Sunbird, Pearl-spotted Owlet and Barn Owl and a Burchell's Coucal [? Does not occur]. Amur Falcon and African Hobby were in the skies. **Merle Mitchell**

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## TAIL FEATHERS

### White-rumped Babblers at RAINHAM DAM

Michael Irwin points out that the “babblers” reported in the previous issue of *Babbler* as having been seen at Rainham Dam would in fact have been a flock of Wattled Starlings! For information, Hartlaub's Babbler (the only Babbler to have a white rump) is restricted in southern Africa to the Okavango Delta and along rivers in eastern Caprivi, Chobe and Zambezi. It enters Zimbabwe along the Zambezi River upstream from the Katombora Rapids.

**Editor**

### Crane Working Group workshop – Dullstroom, South Africa – November 1999

Sue Childes (Project Officer of BirdLife Zimbabwe) and Tracy Couto (Ornithology Research Unit of the Department of National Parks and Wild Life Management) attended a workshop held by the South African Crane Working Group (SACWG) of the Endangered Wildlife Trust. The focus of the workshop was to initiate and coordinate crane conservation programmes in southern Africa and to develop a dynamic network of skills, research, ideas and information exchange. Representatives of the SACWG visited Zimbabwe in June 1999 to assess the position with regard to the cranes in our region. Wattled Crane is Zimbabwe's most endangered bird but unfortunately the Department of National Parks and Wild Life Management does not have sufficient time to concentrate its efforts on just one species and is also severely



under-funded for such a project. Nevertheless, in 1996, Tracy Couto completed a ground census of Wattled Cranes in the Felixburg/Featherstone Region. Zimbabwe has therefore set up its own Crane Working Group which will shortly produce a Crane and habitat Action Plan to protect the species. Wattled Cranes are very much in danger and your records of sightings should be sent in to the Special Species Survey. Details of this Survey are included with this newsletter. **Editor**

#### Wanted – Bird Ringers

Bird ringing is a fascinating hobby which enables one to enjoy the sun, the rain and the wind, out in the countryside, while taking gentle exercise, or sitting, feet up on the verandah, waiting for the garden birds to catch themselves. One does need the patience of Job to disentangle the little dears, many of which bite, but experience with fishing line or a ball of wool after the cat's been at it is an advantage and it is not all that difficult to learn. There's the excitement of catching something which should not be there, discovering just what is flying round in your patch, ringing the first babies of the season and learning all the little signs which tell of age, sex, breeding state and so on, things which a mere birdwatcher can never spot. Then, having stuck a uniquely numbered ring on your bird, you may have the thrill of re-catching it many years later, or of having it reported from the DRC or even Russia!

But while catching and ringing are fun, we do need people who are prepared to go a little bit further and not only learn something about our birds for themselves, but pass it on to others. So little is known about even Africa's commonest birds that almost any little fact is worth publishing (in *Honeyguide* or *Babbler*) and a simple trapping study of bulbuls or waxbills in your garden over a year or two could turn up very valuable information on their behaviour. Unfortunately, to start one needs to be trained by a licenced ringer and thereafter the initial cost of nets and other equipment is relatively high, but, with careful use, nets will last for several years so that the annual outlay is not all that great. You do not need to be a scientist, merely to have an enquiring mind. You do not even have to be a birdwatcher, although it is useful to know the difference between one kind of bird and another, but here *Roberts* is your bible; preferably an edition which gives subspecies descriptions and measurements, because South African and Zimbabwean birds often differ in size and sometimes even in appearance.

I ask all qualified ringers (especially inactive ones) to get a permit and start training the new generation (most of the old lot are getting a bit long in the tooth now) and 'would-be' ringers must collar the nearest qualified person and ask to be trained. Amateur ringers around the World have provided much of the information which we have on birds and, in Zimbabwe, where there are practically no professional ornithologists, the amateur contribution is extremely important, provided they publish! **Mrs Dale B Hanmer**, P O Box 3076, Paulington, Mutare

#### Birds feeding on flying ants

From the Mandara, HARARE, area comes a report from Mr D J Shelton of around 60 Yellow-billed Kites flying in a thermal on 1 November and again the same sort of number flying in a thermal with Abdim's Storks on 12 November. Also in November (5<sup>th</sup>) a column of small flying ants [termite alates] attracted many species of birds amongst which were Common Swifts, African Palm-swifts, Little Swifts, Alpine Swifts and White-rumped Swifts, Red-breasted Swallows, Lesser Striped Swallows, White-throated Swallows and Barn Swallows, White-bellied Sunbirds and Variable Sunbirds, Dark-capped Bulbul, Southern Masked-weaver, Violet-backed Starling, African Yellow White-eye and African Paradise-flycatcher.

#### Interesting and unusual sightings – WHITEWATERS DAM, GWERU

In mid-November, flamingo were flying overhead but were not identified. During the period 27 December 1999 to mid-January 2000 the following were recorded at the dam: a solitary Black Heron (this bird has been seen over Christmas for the past three years), Purple Heron and White-backed Night-heron, African Finfoot, African Spoonbill, Little Bittern, Fulvous Duck. On New Year's Eve whilst travelling by boat and using a spotlight, a red-legged "duck" was seen but on closer investigation it was identified as a female African Finfoot. Thousands of Barn Swallows perched on the reedbeds all over the dam. At one point it was like a mist of swallows. After midnight, while travelling on the dam, many thousands of swallows were seen as well as a Little Bittern. Several swallows were caught and identified as Barn Swallow and Wire-tailed Swallow. This occasion was the first that we had seen swallows roosting in the reedbeds of the dam.

On 2 January 2000 we located a nest of a White-backed Night-heron in the topmost branches of an *Albizia amara*, about 5 metres above water level. After two weeks there were three pale blue eggs in the nest which were measured and weighed. The nest appeared to have been an old Green-backed Heron's nest as they also breed in the area. **Gordon Conway**

In the central Ethiopian highlands, recent work at two marshes which hold the only known breeding population of the endangered White-winged Flufftail *Sarothrura ayresi* has resulted in the exciting discovery of the first nest and eggs. The nest, found by Yirmed Demeke of EWNHS (BirdLife in Ethiopia) and Barry Taylor of the University of Natal was in a flooded meadow with grass, sedges and buttercups. The globular nest was situated in dense vegetation and was woven of growing grass blades and small sedges with a short side entrance. The 3 eggs were pure white, like those of other flufftail species. Once discovered, the surroundings were restored to as natural a condition as possible and a visit 6 days later revealed a full clutch of five eggs. This long-awaited discovery should facilitate the search for breeding habitat and nests in South Africa, the only other country where this species occurs regularly. The known global population of White-winged Flufftail is only 750 birds, the majority of which occur in Ethiopia at the 2 known breeding sites. These sites are located on state-run farms which are about to be privatised. As there is no restriction on the use to which a purchaser may put the land, there is the danger that the wetlands could be modified or even drained. Ethiopian Government and NGO personnel are being approached in an effort to alert them to the international importance of the two sites and to lobby for the preservation of their wetland habitat.

#### Crazy Ants threaten Christmas Island's Endemic Birds

The Yellow Crazy Ant *Anoplolepus gracilipes* is causing major problems for the ecosystem of Australia's Christmas Island and threatening the survival of the five endemic birds found there. Crazy Ants, so-called because of their frenetic movements, have been accidentally introduced to other islands across the tropics where they have invaded native ecosystems, sometimes with devastating effects. On Christmas Island, the Yellow Crazy Ants are killing the native Red Land Crabs. The crabs feed on leaf litter and the seedlings of rain forest trees, but in areas of high Crazy Ant infestation the crabs are eliminated and dense carpets of seedlings appear, with unknown implications for future forest composition. However, a more obvious impact of Yellow Crazy Ants is their habit of farming sap-sucking scale insects. High infestations of these cause stress to rain forest trees, causing canopy die-back. This could have a pronounced effect on birds like the endemic vulnerable Abbott's Booby *Papasula abbotti* which nests in the tops of forest trees. Another, more direct impact of the ants is that they actively prey on the native insects and birds living on the island. The implications of the invasion for Christmas Island are presently unclear, but rapid changes in the habitat, depletion of food resources and interference with nesting, particularly the direct predation of nestlings, must all be bad news for the island's birds.

These two reports are from an article compiled by Richard Thomas, Communications Manager, BirdLife International and Editor of *World Birdwatch*.

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#### **NOTICEBOARD**

##### Office space for the Administrative Officer and staff

The Administrative Officer and staff of BirdLife Zimbabwe will commence work in April 2000 and we are looking for a suitable office. If any member has a cottage or similar accommodation in the Borrowdale/Mount Pleasant area (2-3 rooms) which might be appropriate which they would be prepared to rent at a reasonable rate, please contact Dave Gray on Harare telephone 885406. Ultimately, the aim of BirdLife Zimbabwe is to raise sufficient funds to build its own headquarters on a site in the Mukuvisi Woodlands. Approximately \$1.5 million (at today's prices) will be required.

##### Vehicle for Bird Awareness Programme

A good, second-hand pick-up vehicle is urgently required by the committee of the Bird Awareness Programme so that regular visits can be made to the selected schools. If you have a vehicle which might be suitable please contact Mrs Leslee Maasdorp on Harare telephone 883316.

##### Membership of African Bird Club (ABC)

The African Bird Club, which is a part of BirdLife International, was formed to encourage observers to visit lesser known areas of Africa to actively search for globally threatened and near-threatened species. It aims to provide a worldwide focus for African ornithology, encourage an interest in the conservation of the birds of Africa and develop a Conservation Research Fund for the region. The ABC produces a twice-yearly colour bulletin which is filled with interesting articles about birds throughout the different areas of Africa. Membership of the ABC is open to anyone with the individual membership fee currently being £15 per annum. BirdLife Zimbabwe members will, however, have to pay a subscription rate of only ZW\$750 per annum and these funds are retained by BirdLife Zimbabwe for use on a specific, conservation project in Zimbabwe. If you would like to join the African Bird Club, please complete the form included.

Blue Swallow survey

Ms Sue Childes (Project Officer of BirdLife Zimbabwe) is looking for volunteers who would be prepared to visit known breeding sites of Blue Swallows (November to March) and maintain records of observations. The cost of fuel used for such recording would be paid to volunteers. This would suit residents in the Eastern Highlands or regular visitors there. Sue would also appreciate any casual records of sightings of Blue Swallows. Her address is: P O Box BW 53, Borrowdale, Harare, or her cell phone number is 011 604849.

Discounts for members visiting the southeast Lowveld and Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe

A reminder that 15% discount is being offered by Inns of Zimbabwe, Malilangwe Trust and River Lodges of Africa to bona fide BirdLife Zimbabwe members. These offers are valid until 30 June 2000. Details of the rates and the accommodation are available from Di Rushforth or John Saunders.

Bird Festival 2000

Again a reminder about the Bird Festival to be held over weekend 24/25 June 2000. Bookings for stands (ground area only) which are 3 m<sup>2</sup> each can be made now for a rental of \$500 for the weekend and anyone who wishes to exhibit articles which are bird related can take a stand. If you are interested, please contact On Safari International on Harare 487703 or 486869. We are still looking for volunteer helpers to assist over the weekend directing traffic, manning the information desk or helping to set up displays beforehand. Please contact Di Rushforth on Harare telephone number 741765 or Cell: 023 404629.

Checklists for Robert McIlwaine National Park

Checklists drawn up by Tracy and Ferdie Couto are available for sale at \$10 each. Contact Pat Saunders on ☎ 490167.

New members

We welcome the following new members:

Mashonaland Branch

Dr and Mrs J Clatworthy, Ms J Cocco, Mr G C Cripwell, Mr and Mrs D Dc Burgh-Thomas, M J M Dove, Mrs J Faasen, Mr and Mrs G J Fance, Mr and Mrs A L Gray, Mr and Mrs P B Holthuy sen, L Hudson, Mr and Mrs F Knott, D Nyika, Mr and Mrs D J Saunders, D A D Sharples, R W Small, W J D Small.

Karoi Bird Club (Karoi Branch)

Brandon Farm School

Eastern Districts Bird Club (Manicaland Branch)

Mr and Mrs PB Clarke, Mr and Mrs J A Oldknow

Matabeleland Branch

Miss T Ball, Mr and Mrs R L Gray, Sean Ireland, Mrs D Paterson.

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