

THE BABBLER

ORNITHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF ZIMBABWE NEWSLETTER

ISSUE #4: JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1995

Mashonaland Branch

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MASHONALAND BRANCH ACTIVITIES

Regular Monthly Outings

1. Mukuvisi Woodlands: Sunday 1st January and 5th February 1995. Meet at Paget Road entrance at 6.30 a.m. There will be a vehicle guard in attendance.
2. Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary: Sunday 8th January 1995 and 12th February 1995. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre at 6.30 a.m. Beginners are especially catered for. Vehicles parked in a safe area.

Saturday Afternoon Outings

1. 21st January 1995. Haka Game Park. Meet in Cleveland Dam Car Park at 2.30 p.m. Come and look for woodland, grassland and water birds. Also a variety of nightjars.
2. 18th February 1995. Chedgelow Farm (Mr John Danckwerts). Meet at Queensway Shops on the Airport Road at 2.00 p.m.

Sunday Outings

1. 29th January 1995. Come and join Alex Masterson's informative and interesting annual vlei walk and find LBJs, flufftails, bitterns, etc. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Bulawayo Road at 6.30 a.m. Bring your wellies!
2. 26th February 1995. Monavale Vlei Walk. The last time to find vlei dwellers. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre at 6.30 a.m.

Evening Meetings

1. Tuesday 17th January 1995. Branch AGM. Derek Solomon will be the guest speaker – subject “A look at Bird Watching in South Africa”. Venue: Alexandra Sports Club – entrance on Prince Edward Street. Time 6.30 p.m. Please come to the new venue. Please complete tear off and return to Dave Gray as soon as possible, to indicate numbers for snacks. There will be a cash bar.
2. Thursday 16th February 1995. Mr. Michael Stuart Irwin will speak on “Looking back on Birding in the 40’s and 50’s in Zimbabwe” (Rhodesia). Venue Alex Sports Club at 6.30 p.m.

EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

Chairman: Mr. K. Dixon No phone at present
 Secretary: Miss G. Henning 4 Mimosa Court 2nd Street Mutare
 Recorder: Mr. A.B. (Tony) Curtis 60281 Mutare

Outings

| | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Saturday 14th January 1995 | Osborne Dam | 2.00 p.m. |
| Sunday 29th January 1995 | Cynara | 6.00 a.m. |
| Saturday 11th February 1995 | Vumba | 2.00 p.m. |
| Sunday 26th February 1995 | Nyanga | 6.00 a.m. |

The group assembles at the Museum in Aerodrome Road at the time stated. It is always advisable to check on arrangements by ringing Tony Curtis on 60281.

MATABELELAND BRANCHFUTURE PROGRAMMEEvening Meetings

Friday 6th January - Video Evening – ‘Life in the Freezer’. This is David Attenborough’s latest series which focuses on life in the Antarctic. We will be showing a couple of episodes which should be well worth seeing. Venue: 3A Holdengarde Ave. at 8.00 p.m. Contact Martin Tel. 42474 for details.

Friday 3rd February – Matabeleland Branch AGM. Notice is given that the Matabeleland Branch AGM will take place on the 3rd February at 49A Lawley Rd., commencing at 8.00 p.m. This will be followed by snacks and punch. We’ll provide the drink if you can bring a plate of eats. Please do come and support us and air your views.

Outings

Sunday 15th January. Aisleby Waterfowl Count. At present, the water level is low and a host of ducks and waders are to be seen. Hopefully by mid-January there will have been some inflow and the level will have risen. Do come and support us in this interesting survey. Meet at Aisleby Boom at 6.30 a.m. or contact the Co-ordinator, Martin Smith Tel. 42474.

Sunday 22nd January. Fort Rixon Dam Waterfowl Count. This area was first surveyed a couple of years ago and data are now beginning to show trends. All those interested should contact Penny Feather Tel 44034.

18-19th February. Gwaai River weekend. We are hoping to visit a ranch on the Gwaai River for this weekend. As yet details have yet to be confirmed. Hopefully there should be plenty of water and lots of interesting vegetation to peruse. All interested should contact Penny Feather Tel. 44034.

Sunday 26th February. Aisleby. Pasture and bush should be lush and green and a haven for a multitude of species, offering some rewarding birding. Meet at Aisleby Boom at 7.30 a.m. or contact the Co-ordinator Martin Tel.42474.

From the Chairman

Welcome to the New Year and hopefully rain. Here the Kalahari seems to be edging closer. How plants survive such prolonged heat is amazing. Most of our migrants have now arrived and recent outings to both Aisleby and the Cawston Block have produced some good sightings. Large brown raptors have reappeared in the sky, posing those nasty Steppe/Lesser Spotted/Tawny questions, whilst at ground level whydahs and widows are at interesting stages in moult. At AISLEBY in November, the thick grove of Acacia at the head of the main dam proved exceptional. Five species of cuckoo were present and we had a good view of a Common Cuckoo, also sighted and heard was an Ashy Tit in full song. Our morning tally was over a 100 species and it was a pity so few braved the heat and smell. It really is an invaluable asset. Do come and join us. Good birding. Martin Smith

TAIL FEATHERSMUSEUM MEETING, ALEX MASTERSON, THURSDAY 20TH OCTOBER, 1994

Alex Masterson took us on a whirlwind tour of Africa and introduced us to his "Top Ten" for Twitchers in Africa. These included the Cape Sugarbird from the Cape and the Sociable Weaver from the dry south. In Angola, birds to look out for are the Gabela Akalat and Heinrich's Robin-chat. In the Congo Basin, there is the fabulous Congo Peafowl and in Cameroon the very rare Bannerman's Turaco. If you get a chance to visit the Sudan look for the Shoebill and in Ethiopia try to see the peculiarly named Stresemann's Bush-crow. We once again wish to thank Alex very much for an interesting and entertaining evening.

Bryant Elliot

ROBIN GILMOUR'S FARM, SATURDAY 22ND OCTOBER, 1994

Twenty-one members travelled out to DOUBLE RO Nyabira to spend the afternoon at the farm of Mr and Mrs Robin Gilmour. Though it was a fairly cool windy and rainy afternoon a pleasant walk was taken down to the dam where we saw numerous waterfowl, a few waders as well as Marabou Storks and two White-backed Vultures waiting for titbits left over by the crocodiles in their breeding pens. We also had an excellent sighting of three Grey Crowned Cranes.

The walk around the dam was unfortunately cut short by a threatening storm but not before a fair total of 45 species was identified.

Certainly a highlight for one member was to discover to her delight and amazement that bird watching assumes another dimension when viewed through binoculars with both lens covers removed!

A Big thank you to our hostess for an enjoyable visit and for providing most welcome coffee and cake after our walk. Colin Rawson

DOROWA MINERALS: SATURDAY 30TH OCTOBER 1994

You sceptics will have to believe us this time. The Editor of *Sunbird*, his wife, Sally Perrett and an impartial observer from Headlands were all present. In total 116 species were identified, each individual seeing at least 100. What a great day we had! For once we were able to muster a reasonable group; seven Mutareans, two with their wives, Dave and Ida Gray and Sally Perrett from Harare and Reg Dawson from Headlands. The get together had been planned during the Rifa stay and turned out to be a great success.

As usual we began with a second breakfast while introductions were made. Then Eric brought out his ghetto-blaster and proceeded to send the avian inhabitants of the garden wild with his latest recording... of the Pearl-spotted Owlet. Many of us had not witnessed this before and were amazed to see such a range of birds appear, including the recording artist itself. Around 20 species appeared at the call including an early Spotted Flycatcher and a Grey-headed Bush-shrike. On our way to the usual viewing areas we called in to inspect the three small colonies of White-browed Sparrow-weavers which have never been present in previous years.

This very dusty, sparsely treed area also produced African Grey Hornbill, Green Wood-hoopoe, both Red-faced Mousebird and Speckled Mousebird, doves, Grey Go-away-bird and Meves's Starling.

From there we visited the largest dam which carried an array of duck, cormorant and waders which required quiet concentration. Among the many Red-billed Teal were 6 Hottentot Teals. White-breasted Cormorants aplenty were evidence of the cleanliness of the water, the Mine manager told us, not for the first time. Most of the Hirundines were Lesser Striped Swallow but we also saw Common House-martin and Brown-throated Martins and White-throated Swallow. The marsh area was too dry to produce the usual gallinule and crane but we spotted a lone Common Moorhen. Waders were abundant; besides all the sandpipers we identified Kittlitz's Plover, White-fronted Plover and even a Common Ringed Plover which had conveniently placed itself next to a Three-banded Plover so we could notice the difference. Eric Bowker informed us that this was a new species for him at Dorowa, the 308th on his list!

Between the flooded areas we picked up many run of the mill ticks as we traversed the thorny wastes; White-browed Scrub-robin, Familiar Chat, Rattling Cisticola etc. When we climbed (by car) to the top of the spoil heap we were met by another amazing variety of birds, many of them new for the day. There were African Spoonbill, Yellow-billed Stork, White-faced Duck and Egyptian Goose. Then Sally wandered off and found an African Snipe foraging just below a Rufous-bellied Heron. Tony then saw a Black-crowned Night-heron fly across and both Marico Flycatcher and Pale Flycatchers were spotted. The lone raptor was an African Harrier-hawk. Had we stayed longer I'm sure that piece of shoreline would have yielded more but we had to move on. Our final port of call was the airfield where we were led to the scrape of a Crowned Lapwing with two eggs.

From there we repaired to the Bowling Club where we were treated to a sumptuous lunch which in itself would have justified the journey. Though the atmosphere was convivial it was tinged with regret as this was the last visit we shall make under Eric's manager-ship. Many good memories were recalled as we sat around the lunch table. How lucky we are to have been introduced to such a rich birding area, how wise of Tony Curtis to have encouraged Eric Bowker to pursue this hobby. Many thanks to Sally Perrett and Ida and Dave Gray for coming all that way to join us. Ken Dixon

VISIT TO MVURWI RAPTOR NEST SITES, JOHN HOUGH, 30 OCTOBER 1994

24 members met at the 53km peg on the Mvurwi Road to spend an extremely interesting day with John Hough [Chivaza] visiting some of the nesting sites where he has made so many observations and done so much filming.

We were shown a Peregrine Falcon nest site in a pothole half way up a granite cliff. Both parents were present and there was one almost fledged young bird at the site. We saw some thrilling displays and heard their calls.

We then visited a Black Sparrowhawk on its nest in a Gum plantation near the village. Next stop was to the nest of a pair of African Wood-owls in a hollow tree in dense vegetation. John climbed up and lifted out the two chicks for us to have a good look at. Parents watched this proceeding with some anxiety.

We then went on to a large granite whaleback and were shown a Verreaux's Eagle nest half way up the cliff. The young had fledged and we saw it fly over and settle in a shrub growing out of the cliff face. Later the pair arrived with a prey item to feed to the young bird, giving us a fine view of both of them. A pair of Barn Owls was also nesting on this hill.

John then took us on a walk to show us a sequence of nest sites of Ovambo Sparrowhawk, Lizard Buzzard and Southern White-faced Scops-owl. He told us how, in a previous year the White-faced Scops-owl had actually evicted the Sparrowhawk from its nest and taken over. This observation is very interesting in that it is not mentioned in any of the literary sources available to us (I thank Michael Irwin for his assistance in this respect)

All the books say that these owls use disused nests of other birds ranging from doves to eagles. An act of eviction differs significantly, both ecologically and ethologically, from the mere taking over of an unused nest. In the afternoon John showed us an unoccupied African Goshawk's nest and some of his hides, including one where he put up an artificial nest for a Southern White-faced Scops-owl to use.

This was a thoroughly enjoyable and informative day and we all thank John Hough very much for taking the time to show us around. John Paxton

DRIFTERS, 12 NOVEMBER 1994

Another new venue for Mutare's birdwatchers was Lyn and Ros Rogers' Rest House 25km along the Harare Road. Despite the hot dry weather nine of us spent a rewarding afternoon in the acacia and msasa woodland and around the dwellings.

As we were being introduced to Isobel Mercer, our guide for the afternoon, our attention was diverted to a Red-backed Shrike, the first of the summer for most of us. In the garden we soon found the nesting Red-headed Weaver and resident Kurrichane Thrush, Crested Barbet, Red-backed Mannikin and Bar-throated Apalis among others.

The donga produced Village Weavers with attendant Diderick Cuckoo and a Striped Kingfisher. As we distanced ourselves from the habitation, we found Spotted Flycatcher, a Tchagra, White-browed Scrub-robin, Rattling Cisticola and Golden-breasted Bunting.

As the terrain got drier White-crested Helmet-shrike appeared and, another first for the summer, two African Golden Orioles and Arrow-marked Babbler. Our only raptor of the day was a Steppe Buzzard identifying itself by the pale band across its chest. The next habitat on offer turned out to be a watering hole which Gail and Dave had discovered some time before the rest of us. As I had visited it on the previous evening's recce, I went a little further and was rewarded for my abstemiousness by a Black Cuckooshrike, number 42 on the day's list.

Many thanks to Lyn and Ros for their warm hospitality, and to Isobel for her expert guidance. Ken Dixon

LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY: SUNDAY 20TH NOVEMBER 1994

A large gathering of bird enthusiasts met at the sanctuary at Lake Chivero. At first we divided into three groups and together saw 115 species. The highlight for some was to see an Osprey catch quite a large fish for its breakfast.

Our breakfast wasn't such a problem since Dave and Ida Gray had organised a bring and share meal for us underneath the shady trees.

The occasion was really quite a sad one since it was the last such outing under the able leadership of Dave Collis. Dave has been a member for many years and has given a great deal of his time to the Mashonaland OAZ activities, being Treasurer as well as Leader at many outings. We would like to wish him and Trish an enjoyable new life with their family in Australia. Bryant Elliot presented them with two original bird paintings by Steve Alpe from the Branch. And thank you to Dave and Ida Gray for their very well organised 'Champagne Breakfast'. Let's do it again! Sally Perrett

LYNDHURST FARM: SUNDAY 27TH NOVEMBER 1994

A return visit, for the Bird Club members. The early morning was beautifully cool and fresh and the Miombo woodland was alive with bird calls. The African Cuckoo and Jacobin Cuckoos called frequently but would not allow us to see them; however we did see the Diderick Cuckoo. Neddicky were very vocal and were carrying food to their young. A Streaky-headed Seedeater was feeding its fledgling on the wire next to the fence pole. Violet-backed Starlings and Miombo Blue-eared Starlings caught the morning sunlight on their lovely iridescent feathers.

Willow Warblers were everywhere, while African Yellow White-eyes and Green-capped Eremomelas were also busy in the leafy canopies. The African Paradise-flycatchers were very active and a lucky view of a male Green-winged Pytilia was delightful. Little Bee-eaters and European Bee-eaters and Black-collared Barbet and Crested Barbets added further colour to the scene. Our only raptor was a Lizard Buzzard. A stop was called for breakfast and on the way back to the cars excellent views were had of two Spotted Creepers working up a large acacia tree.

The day was heating up as we walked down to the dam where a Broad-billed Roller perched on a dead tree, welcomed us. Lots of African Sacred Ibis, a variety of waders including a Ruff, Squacco Heron and Purple Herons, Great Egret and one Saddle-billed Stork were seen but the dam was low and there was no shade. It was very hot down there so we made our way back to relax over our picnic lunch in the cool shade of a large tree. A very worthwhile venue for birding and our thanks to the Schots family for their hospitality. Sybil Duncanson

PELICANS

I would like to inform the Ornithological Association of the unusual and unexpected arrival of Great White Pelicans (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*) in the homestead dam here.

On the 11th September 1994, 37 pelicans arrived and made themselves quite at home. They were followed by a further 230 the following day. Many immatures amongst them. On the 28th September there were 200 birds. On the 3rd October 220. These fished in their coordinated groups and preened on the mud banks. On the 6th October only 29 birds were there. However the following day there were 96. A few were seen flying in from the west. On the 13th October there were 67 birds. And so they came and went until the 23rd of October when they all departed. No doubt the fish were finished.

The dam was only about 20% full but well stocked with bream and bass before the arrival of the Pelicans. In most places it was fairly shallow. No doubt ideal for Pelicans. I wonder where they came from?

I will be interested to know if there have been other sightings.

N.A. Gawler, West Nicholson.

Reed Cormorant Fishing Bonanza. On the 23rd October I visited the Council's UMGUSA Nature Reserve, which borders the Lower Umgusa Dam. A variety of waterfowl were to be seen, but of particular interest was a group of over 40 Reed Cormorants. All were actively swimming and diving, presumably in pursuit of a shoal of fish. All were grouped closely together and moved rapidly in the same direction, individuals frequently surfacing with fish which were quickly swallowed. The group moved close to the shoreline upon which 3 Little Egrets walked quickly stabbing at fish close to the surface. Were the fish being driven by a flock of Cormorants, or were they merely drawn together by a shoal of fish?

Martin Smith

SIGHTINGS

HILLSIDE: Migrant returns - Yellow-billed Kite. 9th August 1994; European Bee-eater - 17th September 1994; Barn Swallow 8th October 1994; Willow Warbler 16th October; African Paradise-flycatcher 8th October 1994; Red-backed Shrike 25th November 1994.

Martin Smith

AISLEBY: 101 Grey Crowned Cranes 9th October 1994; 7 Yellow-billed Stork 9th October 1994; 1 African Crake 9th October 1994; 4 African Snipe 9th October 1994; 3 Greater Painted-snipe 16th October; 6 Common Ringed Plover 16th October 1994; 4 Lesser Kestrels - 23rd October 1994; 1 Chestnut-banded Plover 30th October 1994.

Clive Townsley

Glen Livet: When the Glen Livet road was realigned a rocky cliff 30 feet or more was formed at a lay-bye. In this cliff is a vertical crack, 2 feet long but how deep? It is near the top of the cliff. One morning driving past about 10 a.m. I noticed a very large number of swallows or swifts circling over the road. Then I saw that the little birds were crowding into this crack. Some that could not get in hung by themselves on the rocks nearby. I identified them as Little Swifts. My observant neighbour had seen them flying in the same area at 7 a.m. I returned to watch them till 11 a.m. By 3 p.m. they had all departed. M.C. Potts

Dete

We are members of the Wildlife Society and Ornithological Association of Zimbabwe and enjoy receiving your Newsletters, the *Babbler*.

We were interested to note in your latest newsletter, at the Hwange Game count, of two Lanner Falcons attempting to catch a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill by forcing it to the ground.

We saw a similar incident at Matusadona National Park, in August 1992. Our incident had a happier ending (for the egret). Here are the details. Our game vehicle from Fothergill Island stopped to observe two Tawny Eagles circling above us. A Cattle Egret was also floating about up there and then, to our surprise, we noticed that one of the Tawny Eagles started to harass the egret, trying to force it downwards. The second eagle started its attack on the egret too and the two eagles took it in turns to pressurise the poor egret, lower and lower to the ground. When we all thought that the egret's end was near, when it would finally have to touch ground, the egret had a little surprise for the eagles and us. It had obviously had time to think about its predicament and as it came for its final touch down, the egret swooped straight towards us and then disappeared under our vehicle.

The surprised eagles who had thought that a meal was imminent, circled for a further 10 minutes, then gave up their pursuit in trying to locate their supposed meal and flew off.

The egret had the sense to stay under the vehicle until the eagles had finally departed, then it emerged, looked at us, then flew off to resume its day, a very lucky egret. It certainly deserved to win that day.

A couple of weeks ago I was listening to a radio programme about two gentlemen who were filming eagles, falcons etc in Zimbabwe, to produce a video about them. On the programme they were asked whether eagles had ever attacked humans before, the gentlemen said that to their knowledge they had never heard of an incident happening. As a matter of interest I would like to tell you about an incident that happened at Marongora in 1982.

It was round about lunchtime, when an African Crowned Eagle swept into the junior staff quarters and attacked a 7 year old girl, who weighed around 20 kg, and tried to carry her off. The eagle had gripped her around the neck and shoulders and tried to fly away with her. The scouts on hearing the girl's cries came running to her rescue and managed to knock the eagle off her and killed it.

We have a slide of the bird, taken after the event happened, as record for such an unusual incident.

The little girl was taken to the hospital to have stitches and treatment applied to her wounds. Another matter of interest is that we see regularly two Tropical Boubous (*Laniarius aethiopicus*) with white patches just above their eyes, at Chokomella Lodge, some 23 km from Dete.

The Boubou are seen almost daily, near one of the staff rooms where they come down to drink at the bird bath. Their territory is in and around the staff rooms. They periodically disappear for a couple of weeks and then suddenly they return again and can be seen almost on a daily basis.

So far we have only seen the two. There could possibly be more. We would be very interested to know if anyone else has recorded Tropical Boubou with the white patches just above the eyes, in other parts of the country.

Mark and Janette Brightman

BIRDWATCH 1995

This 24 hour Birdwatch will be on the weekend of 25th and 26th February 1995. If there are more than 20 teams taking part there will be prizes other than the Floating Trophy. These will be won on a draw system.

Cards can be obtained from Jacko Williams, 14 Harare Drive, Borrowdale. Send your name and address plus the names of the other members of your team, of which at least one other must be a member of the OAZ, your team name and area of operation, if known. Two or more OAZ members must identify each species recorded. Non-members who have participated in one or more Birdwatch should be encouraged to join the Association. We need Members. Prizes will be awarded to OAZ team members only.

NATIONAL AGM 1995

The AGM is to be held at Maleme Dam from 10th - 12th March 1995 at Matopos National Park

Please refer to Issue No 3 of *The Babblers* for information of accommodation available and for the tear off slip for booking your accommodation. Please come and join us at this very worthwhile venue.

MASHONALAND BRANCH AGM 17TH JANUARY 1995

I _____ will be attending the AGM on TUESDAY 17th January 1995, at Alexandra Sports Club, and will be accompanied by _____ persons.

Signed.....

Please return to Dave Gray
14 Fisher Avenue
BORROWDALE