

BABBLER

BirdLife Zimbabwe

THE BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL PARTNER IN ZIMBABWE

Member of IUCN, The World Conservation Union

ISSUE #52 – JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2003

COMMITTEES

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THANKS

Di Rushforth is stepping down after 6 years as Editor of *Babbler*. On behalf of all members of Birdlife Zimbabwe, I wish to thank her for a superb job and wish her a well-earned rest.

ACTIVITIES

NATIONAL

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2003

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT THE TWENTY-SECOND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF BIRDLIFE ZIMBABWE WILL BE HELD AT MALEME REST CAMP, BULAWAYO ON SATURDAY 19TH APRIL 2003.

The Rest Camp has been booked for 2 nights, Friday 18th and Saturday 19th. A booking slip is enclosed. Any members who wish to stay longer should make their own arrangements with National Parks. The agenda will be sent out with the March/April issue of *Babbler*.

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Regular outings

Mukuvisi Woodlands: Sundays, 5 January and 2 February 2003. Meet at the Paget Road entrance at 6.30 a.m. There will be a vehicle guard available.

Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary: Sundays, 12 January and 9 February 2003. Meet at 6.30 a.m. at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West. Bring chairs and tea. Beginners are most welcome and spare binoculars will be available. We encourage members with children to attend.

Saturday MORNING outings

25 January 2003: Marlborough Vlei walk with Alex Masterson. Meet at 6:30 a.m. Directions: drive to the end of Princess Margaret Rd. turn left and continue to the new houses. Parking is in a short cul-de-sac with a small fenced off area at the end. Please bring a tip for the security guard and remember it can be quite wet underfoot so bring suitable footwear.

Saturday afternoon outing

15 February 2003: Afdis settling ponds, Stapleford. Meet at 2 Helena Road, Marlborough at 2:30 p.m. where cars can be left in secure parking. Bring chairs and refreshments.

Sunday outings

26 January 2003: The second Marlborough Vlei walk with Alex Masterson. To keep numbers to a minimum, please attend only one of these popular walks.

23 February 2003: Christon Bank Nature Reserve: Meet at 6:30 a.m. at 2 Helena Road, Marlborough where cars can be left in secure parking. Bring chairs and refreshments.

Thursday evening meetings

16 January 2003: Branch AGM which is on an informal basis when the Committee for 2003 will be decided. Reports will be given by David Dalziel (Mukuvisi), Richard Dennison (Chivero) and Ian Riddell (Marlborough Vlei). Pies are available and a variety of salads will be provided. Please bring a knife, fork and plate.

20 February 2003: Oscar Mitumbili will talk on 'Captive Breeding of African Hawk-eagles' and 'Black Sparrowhawks Nesting around Harare'. Not to be missed!

Venue: Bowls Pavilion, Old Hararians Association, Drummond Chaplin Street, Milton Park. Time: 6.00 for 6.30 p.m. A cash bar and pies will be available. Security is provided.

Thursday outings to Marlborough Vlei

As there will be 2 walks in late January with Alex Masterson, only one will be led by Ian Riddell, on 9th January. In February, dates revert to 2nd and 4th Thursday (13th and 27th). Meet at 4.00 p.m. provided Ian is available. For confirmation contact Ian Riddell on 339716, or gemsaf@mango.zw. Bring cash to pay for security. Directions: drive to the end of Princess Margaret Rd, turn left, continue to the new houses – parking is in a cul-de-sac with a small fenced off area at the end.

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Evening Meetings

Friday 7th February – Branch AGM. The Branch AGM will be held at 3A Holdengarde Ave., Hillside, commencing at 8.00 p.m. As in previous years, it will be preceded by a braai and social, fires will be provided but please bring your own food and utensils, from 6.00 pm onwards.

Monthly Outings

Sunday 19th January – Aisleby Waterfowl Count – At the time of writing the Upper Dam was only half full, which will make it considerably easier both to see and count birds. Please do come and assist, meet at the Boom at 7.30 or contact Martin Smith.

15/16th February – Proposed Matopos camping weekend, all interested to contact Margie Pearce

Aisleby

Dates and Co-ordinators are as follows:-

Sunday 23rd February Co-ordinator Clive Townsley

This will be an early morning outing, those interested should contact Clive.

Hillside Dams

Dates for our monthly rambles are as follows:

Friday 31st January Meet at the Lower Hillside Dam Car Park

Friday 28th February at 4.00 p.m. or contact Martin.

EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

Contacts: Ken Dixon ☎ 020-65819 Jane Clegg ☎ 020-65610

Sunday 26th January Stonechat Cottage, Upper Vumba 6.00 a.m. B. Holland 61369

Sunday 23rd February Hillside Golf Course, Mutare 6.00 a.m. J. Clegg 65610

The Museum is the departure point and, PROVIDED PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS ARE MADE, transport and binoculars may be arranged.

Karoi Bird Club

Co-ordinator: Kevin Mitchell P O Box 398, Karoi ☎ 064-6358 or Cell: 011 408023

E-mail: mitch@africaonline.co.zw

Secretary: Merle Mitchell P O Box 398, Karoi ☎ 064-6436

ACTIVITIES

Rydings School Interpretive Centre Walks are conducted the first Saturday each month at 6.30 a.m.

MIDLANDS BRANCH

Gweru: Contact Kevin Barry ☎ 054-27316

Masvingo: Contact Lynne Wilkins ☎ 039-63657

Kadoma: Outings will be held at 7.00 a.m. on the 3rd Saturday of each month

Contact Margaret Parrock ☎ 068-22005 for details.

REPORTS**NATIONAL**Education Department – Education Director – Leslee Maasdorp

- At Honde Valley, schools are becoming more involved with conservation of the habitat. The improvements made will benefit both birds and people.
- At a schools' gathering at Katiyo School a photography production team from the Ministry of Education began work on a video on school projects such as bird ringing under Dale Hanmer. It was suggested that BLZ T-shirts were available for purchase to advertise the schools' programme.
- A co-ordinated programme is being developed in the Chitungwiza / Chiota districts to enable schools in our education programme and adult clubs to work more closely together for the benefit of both groups. Sharing resources such as binoculars makes good sense.
- Funding has been received for the translation of *Enjoy the Birds of Zimbabwe* into Shona and a start has been made on this production.
- 9th October saw networking between WEZ and BLZ bear fruits as a joint workshop for teachers from Hurungwe/ Karoi district was held at Makonde Interpretive Centre in Karoi, Rydings School. The workshop was aimed at introducing BAP to schools from this district.
- Vumba / Burma Valley cluster had its first quiz competition on 1 November. Thanks to good organisation from the cluster co-ordinator, Mr Chikuku of St Werghburghs Primary School, and the secretary, Miss F Dimha of Kaswa Primary School.
- On 16 November early morning the Education Manager led a group of 38 students from two secondary schools and their teachers onto a bird watching walk to Manyame Dam and its surrounding miombo woodland. The participants were equipped with binoculars donated by RSPB and ferried all the way to Zimbabwe by Mrs Dorothy Wakeling. Thank you Dorothy. Chitungwiza schools and Clubs will use these binos. This is the first of many bird watching walks for schools.
- The Education Manager successfully conducted a half day training workshop on 22 November for 12 teachers from 6 Chitungwiza Secondary Schools.

Meeting the Staff

Administrative Assistant – Mrs. Alice Chamunorwa

From Alice: "I am married to Robert and we have a four-year-old son, Ryan. I did my secondary education at Roosevelt High School here in Harare. I was one of the first two people to be

employed by BLZ on a full time basis in April 2000 as Administrative Assistant. My work involves dealing with all membership queries for both in and out of Zimbabwe members, from the time of recruitment up until one becomes a member. Apart from being involved on the membership side, I do the general administration work for the office. For any queries that you as a member might have, I will be more than happy to assist you. I look forward to a long and happy stay at BLZ.”

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Mazowe Sailing Club — Sunday 29 September 2002

This outing occurred just after the Rifa weekend and, coupled with the current fuel shortage, it was probably not surprising that only two of us turned up. If the fuel continues to be scarce we may have to reduce our number of outings in future. We have had a steady, easterly wind in the last week and this has blown the LAKE CHIVERO water hyacinth towards the dam wall and Mazowe Sailing Club. The resulting pile up of surface weed and the absence of mud flats probably reduced the number of shore birds compared to the Chivero Bird Sanctuary in recent months. Although the Familiar Chats could not be found, the African Golden Orioles, which were plentiful last year, did not disappoint us as 5 were recorded. The other highlights included 3 African Green-pigeon, 100 Little Swift, 1 White-breasted Cuckooshrike and 1 Spotted Creeper. A total count of 51 species was recorded. **Richard Dennison**

Birds and People of HONDE VALLEY — Thursday, 17 October 2002

A really good number of people were at this excellent presentation. Leslee Maasdorp, Dorothy Wakeling and Abasi Jana spoke about the work being done in the Honde Valley and we learned about the success of the project.

Leslee explained that the terrain of the Honde Valley is very steep with the natural vegetation being low altitude rain forests with patches of Miombo woodland. Fifteen years ago the wetlands in the area were intact but in more recent years they have been taken over by agriculture. One of the wetlands around the Wamba River has been affected by the construction of a dam and this loss of habitat has had dire consequences for the Anchieta's Tchagra (or the Wamba bird as it is now called in the area). From two birds their number has now increased to seven but the work must continue.

Dorothy Wakeling explained that the programme being introduced in the area has been one of awareness and that teachers had been invited to attend workshops where they had been shown how to develop the Bird Awareness Programme in their schools. Practical support was also given to the schools in the way of written material and, thanks to a bird club in Germany each school now had one pair of binoculars. Nurseries were also developed within the school grounds and shrubs and trees were grown which would attract birds. Since the programme had been introduced in the Honde Valley there had been a dramatic decrease in the number of birds killed by catapults.

Abasi Jana took us through the slide presentation and we were treated to quality photographs which emphasised the wonderfully special birds that occur in the area. Abasi does field work with the children so that they can learn to identify the different species.

Leslee Maasdorp thanked her Education Committee for their support and hard work for the project and she said that she was particularly grateful to Dale Hanmer who demonstrated ringing of birds to teachers and the children. This experience was invaluable with children and teachers being able to actually handle the birds, making such a difference to their awareness of the various species. Also to be thanked were DED for funding the project and to Gisela Locherer for her role working with the Education Committee. The management of Aberfoyle had been very supportive and additional sponsorship had been received from the RSPB and CIDA.

Slides for the evening had been provided by Peter Ginn, Martin Harrison and Gisela Locherer and the slides of the Anchieta's Tchagra had been sent to Zimbabwe by Mr Johann Grobbelaar who had spent hours with Abasi Jana in a hide photographing the Tchagra on the nest. **Di Rushforth**

GREYSTONE PARK Nature Preserve — Saturday 19 October 2002

Jennifer had arranged for members of Rio Tinto's Harare Head Office staff to join us in our walk in the Nature Preserve. Rio Tinto plc, together with BirdLife International, have established a programme – The Birds and the Environment – within a Five Year Agreement. It is based on the concept that a relationship between business and an NGO, with interests in common, can provide significant benefits for both organisations, as well as the wider community. One of the key objectives of the joint-venture programme is to improve knowledge and interest in birds throughout Rio Tinto's operations and their adjacent communities.

As part of the programme an annual Birdwatch event is held and for this year seventeen people attended, eight were Rio Tinto staff, seven were BirdLife Zimbabwe members, and 2 Greystone Park residents.

We split into two groups and our aim was to beat Rio Tinto's previous year's total number of species identified. This we did with a total of 66 which was not only pleasing for the staff but also was a good count for a hot October afternoon.

The stream was just trickling along its course and Roger Fairlie, Chairman of the Preserve committee, explained how previously there had been three dams on the property but that during heavy rains two of them had breached and in fact one of the dam walls had subsequently been rebuilt only to have been destroyed in floods yet again. Therefore, there remained only one dam which did not have much to offer bird wise as there were no duck but it was quite a sight to see dozens of Village Weaver at their nests built in the fringing reeds.

Highlights for the afternoon's "watch" were: Purple Heron and Squacco Herons, Gabar Goshawk, 12 Speckled Mousebird, Giant Kingfisher, Golden-tailed Woodpecker, Eastern Saw-wing, White-browed Scrub-robin, Brubru, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Violet-backed Starling, Greater Blue-eared Starling and Miombo Blue-eared Starlings and Thick-billed Weaver. It was a very pleasant outing. **Di**

Rushforth

12 Welston Road, GLEN FOREST — Saturday 16 November 2002

Only 4 of us attended this outing on a fine and hot afternoon. Birding is usually more difficult in the afternoon than in the morning, especially when the weather is hot, and this day was no exception.

The good rains that ended about 9 days before resulted in the vegetation looking fresh and green with shrubs coming into flower and many butterflies seen.

Bird highlights included 2 Wahlberg's Eagles and 1 Long-crested Eagle, 2 Broad-billed Rollers, 1 Brown-backed Honeybird, 4 Grey Penduline-tits and 1 Purple-banded Sunbird. The total species count was 44. **Richard Dennison**

Quiz Evening — Thursday, 21 November 2002

With Jacko Williams being unable provide another excellent quiz this year we resorted to computers and games on the Roberts CD. Graham Carter brought 2 computers in and Ken Wilson and Geoff Lowe lent their CDs. Five teams of 4 competed, the Fish Eagles, Chirpers, Babblers, Buzzards and Codgers. The games consist of 8 pictures of birds being shown, with name and sound or sound only and the team is required to click on the correct bird with the mouse. For each incorrect answer 1 of 8 points is lost.

Unfortunately, being *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa*, a number of questions were on coastal birds, resulting in some wild guesses.

Each team answered 15 questions at a time and had their scores noted. Two sessions showed *Roberts'* drawings with name and round, one session was drawings with sound only and one was photographs with names and sounds. All teams did well with the "Babblers", Di and Basil Rushforth, Ian Riddell and Tony Alegria, coming out winners. Everyone had a lot of fun and all learned something!

EWANRIGG BOTANIC GARDENS — Sunday 26 November 2002

Five of us met at BirdLife offices and headed out to Ewanrigg where we were joined by 4 others. We stopped on the road before the gardens as we were early and saw 2 Yellow-throated Longclaws, a Copper Sunbird, and a White-browed Scrub-robin. We were hoping for Magpie Mannikins and Red-backed Mannikins, often seen here, but not that day. Ewanrigg is also noted for its sunbirds of which we saw 7 different species including, the high-light, a Western Violet-backed Sunbird. Others were Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, Variable Sunbird and White-bellied Sunbird, Amethyst Sunbird and Scarlet-chested Sunbird as well as 3 more Copper Sunbirds. Fifteen African Paradise-flycatchers were seen but only 3 raptors, a Wahlberg's Eagle, an African Hawk-eagle and 2 Black-shouldered Kites. One each of Red-chested Cuckoo, Black Cuckoo, Klaas's Cuckoo and Diderick Cuckoos were heard. It was a very pleasant morning at only \$20 each (!). A total of 88 species were recorded. **Jennifer**

Carter

MATABELELAND

From the Chairman

After a good start to the rainy season, with just over 60 mm's of rain in a week for our BULAWAYO Hillside garden, drought-like conditions have since prevailed. Avian life commenced the new season with a flurry of activity and our pair of White-browed Robin-chats now has at least one surviving youngster still pursuing his parents about the garden, presumably more rain will trigger a further attempt to breed. Cuckoos have returned but with the onset of rain, only a few seem to be vocal, Diderick Cuckoo and Levillant's Cuckoo have both passed noisily through the garden, whilst Red-chested Cuckoo and Black Cuckoo appear to be either absent or quieter.

Out in the MATOPOS, survey work for the year has now been completed with a tally of 14 fledged Verreaux's Eagle offspring for the season, up by a little on last year's statistics. Breeding success is still lower than recorded in the '70s and it was disturbing to note that no Communal Land pairs bred successfully, perhaps a sign of human pressure on the prey base. Next year will be the fortieth year of survey work in its current guise and as always we value your support in this vital project, please do continue to participate. **Martin Smith**

Outings Feedback

AISLEBY Sunday 27th October

Only two of us visited the property and found plenty of interest. The rains had yet to arrive, so flood irrigation acted as focal points of interest for waders. We began with the night storage dams, which had been cleaned out leaving bare sides. A limited number of waders were present and we had good views of Marsh Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stint. We moved onto the solid waste disposal area and its assault on the senses, surprisingly we failed to find any Yellow-billed Kites, which were always a feature of the area in the past. At the Upper UMGUSA Dam water had been released down the watercourse and the level had dropped to about 50%, exposing a muddy shoreline and giving us clear views of all that was on the water. Much was to be seen with a large numbers of ducks asleep on the far shore, observation with the telescope revealed that most were Red-billed Teal, Southern Pochard and White-faced Duck. On the water, in the centre of the dam, a flotilla of ducks caught our attention and careful study allowed us to pick out 84 Cape Teal, the highest total recorded for the property to date. Perhaps dry conditions to the west in Botswana had caused this influx. Other species of note were 24 Maccoa Duck and 82 Pied Avocet, feeding in the shallows at the head of the dam.

Leaving the water behind, we moved on to the lands and here, it was a case of what was absent. No storks or coursers were to be seen and the only raptors were a lone Rock Kestrel and an immature Brown Snake-eagle perched on the same pylon. Plenty of cattle were present in the pastures and we found a number of corpses so it was disappointing not to see any attendant vultures. The butchery to the north of the property was at work and had attracted 29 Marabou Stork, which we were able to watch gliding down to breakfast.

Overall, waterbirds were excellent, but raptors and passerine migrants still sparse. Our part of the World is still awaiting the onset of the rains.

Sunday 24th November

A little rain had fallen and plenty of migrants were to be seen with good numbers of Ruff, Wood Sandpiper and Little Stint. A number of very pale Yellow Wagtails were to be seen at the delightful solid waste disposal area and a Banded Martin floating lazily overhead. At the Upper Dam, 5 Greater Flamingo, 20 plus Cape Teal and two Chestnut-banded Plover were specials amongst a good range of water birds. In the lands, there were plenty of Red-capped Lark and Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark, a small number of Lesser Kestrel hawked insects and a lone male Pallid Harrier was seen amidst the heat haze, the first Harrier of the current rainy season.

Malalangwe Lodge, Marula, Sunday 17th November

This was a well supported outing to a beautiful property on the south eastern fringe of the Matopos. Grass filled vleis were surrounded by granite kopjies cloaked in a diverse range of vegetation. After a relaxed start, we missed the dawn chorus by five hours; however the arrival of the rains meant that plenty of migrants were to be seen. Shortly before Marula, a large flock of dark bodied swifts were seen feeding, passing low over the road and surrounding bush, shape, colour and size suggested that they were Common Swift. At Marula four Yellow-billed Kites circled and flew lazily over the road. Given the low numbers at Aisleby, these were a pleasing addition to the list.

On arrival at Malalangwe, we proceeded to walk around the large kopjie close to the Lodge and added a number of species to the checklist. Yellow-throated Petronia was calling vigorously and allowed us all to look for the elusive yellow spot. A Red-chested Cuckoo heralded the arrival of the rains and a Croaking Cisticola, called from the vlei, with its diagnostic "ZEEEP". The dam held a limited number of species, the largest being a female Saddle-billed Stork. The only wader present was a lone Common Greenshank, which was actively feeding allowing us all to observe bill shape and size. Chin-spot Batis was heard moving through the vegetation beside the dam wall and Pearl-spotted Owlet impersonations caused a male Miombo Double-collared Sunbird to fly straight at us. Further along the track we were able to view a Wahlberg's Eagle nest, and lack of an occupant led to discussion on sun-based incubation. We then moved on to the Bush Camp, where Richard Peek outlined the development of the property, since its acquisition in 1989.

His main aim was to restore the veldt to a natural stable condition supporting game, and management practices were geared towards this. He had been carefully monitoring species changes and was collecting data on nesting birds, with 20 nests being watched at the time of our visit. Some particularly interesting changes that had taken place were a decline in the number of game birds and doves, presumably as a result of a shift towards more stable vegetation. He had also found a very high failure rate for nesting birds with the Verreaux's Eagle pair only raising a chick successfully twice over the past ten years. All this posed plenty of interesting questions and really underlined the fragile nature of granite soils and the ease with which they can become denuded.

After lunch, hot conditions with the temperature in the low thirties meant that most avian life was sensibly resting and hard to find, although we were all able to view a nine day old Shikra chick.

Our grateful thanks and appreciation to Richard for making us so welcome on his wonderful area of Zimbabwe bush. **Martin Smith**

EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

Wiermouth, MUTARE — Sunday 24 November 2002

I suppose the weather had to change one day and why not on a Sunday. We certainly needed the rain. I should have realised the signs weren't too good when I jumped out of my vehicle at the museum and noticed to my embarrassment that I was wearing two odd trainers (tackies, is it?) slipped on in the semidarkness so as not to disturb my slumbering wife.

Unfortunately Jane and Bill had to cancel at the last minute, but there were still 7 of us when we assembled at Tukusa Shops. Stanislus already had quite a list compiled while waiting for us and as usual there were birds calling on all sides. Nothing rare or unexpected but a good selection to impress the beginners. Over Hobhouse we saw Black-shouldered Kite and Yellow-billed Kite competing with one another. Rufous-naped Lark called continuously and from visible vantage points. Then a Walberg's Eagle came from the direction of the mountains and drew our attention to the gathering storm clouds. But we persisted and distanced ourselves as far as possible from the car so that the return run in the pouring rain would be long enough to make sure we were thoroughly soaked.

Before the rain came we had a list of about 40 including Red-faced Cisticola and many Rattling Cisticola, Pin-tailed Whydah, Red-collared Widowbird and Yellow Bishop in almost complete breeding dress, a fine male Red-backed Shrike and lots of Barn Swallows who must have come from the UK because they weren't at all surprised or worried by the rain. We were disappointed to have to curtail our visit but had already had a good 2 hours birding and lots of good memories.

Thanks to Stanislus for leading us and to the 6 lads who came so far to join us. **Ken Dixon.**

TAIL FEATHERS

The Year of the Helmet-shrike

Many thanks to the 76 members who responded to my helmet-shrike questionnaire. This report covers only White-crested Helmet-shrikes as the increase in the numbers of these raised a lot of comment around the country, particularly in Harare, and there were too few responses about Retz's Helmet-shrikes to allow analysis.

A total of 45 responses came from HARARE. Michael Irwin's "The Birds of Zimbabwe" acknowledges that these birds do come into urban areas in the winter months but as Michael himself says "This year it was an invasion." There were reports from all around town, save for the high-density townships and the industrial areas to the south and southwest. Mt. Pleasant, Sherwood and Chapman golf courses seemed to have semi-resident flocks and Dandaro had a resident flock of 5 birds from May to September. Otherwise there were flocks of up to 12 or more birds in most of the residential suburbs on the northwestern and south-eastern sides of town. The invasion began in April and was in full swing in May. It tailed off in September when the birds would be expected to go into breeding mode and look for some suitable woodland.

My subjective impression is that we had ten or more flocks in the suburbs of Harare. Most responses showed that this was regarded as unusual and many were 'first ever' records. Rolf Chenaux-Repond had them at Gulliver's depot at Willowvale and John Shaw reported them back at MUKUVISI WOODLANDS for the first time in many years. Those who had kept records dated the last big influx back to the 1992 drought.

Of the 4 returns from BULAWAYO, 2 said there had been an increase, 2 said no increase. Harry Erwee and Sandy McAdam produced a table of returns from AISLEBY, showing increased observations between June and August, corresponding to even higher observations May-September 1998 when there had also been a drought there. Stephen Long at Milibizi noticed no real change and nor did Clive Stockil in the Save Conservancy but Bill Derby thought there were more around CHIREDDI and Joe Scott says flocks in Gonarezhou were bigger. From the Midlands, few returns reflect an increase.

There were reports of increased sightings from 8 urban and rural places from CHIPINGE to NYANGA with contributions from Peter Magosvongwe, Nyaradzi Mapara and Murambiwa Bulwesi. Returns from the farming areas of Mashonaland, MARONDERA, Bindura, MVURWI, RAFFINGORA and MHANGURA all reported increased sightings, particularly in gardens. Figures from I Howland and Stan Fourie clearly show increased recordings during drought years (1992 and 2002), particularly during winter months. Apart from Harare, perhaps the most obvious increase in sightings, both in the size and number of flocks, came from the ZAMBEZI Valley, KARIBA to MANA POOLS. There are a couple of reports of flocks of around 30 and I too saw large flocks on the fringes of the Mana floodplain in July. Tendai Kenneth Sadomba commented on the way flocks joined up in the communal areas of Nyanga North. This also occurred at Mana and large numbers foraged together with no discord and moved on together — perhaps to split up later. Rob Truscott and Doug Parham came across a gathering of over 100 at Elephant Point though, after quizzing Rob on this, I believe they were being conservative. The birds were in Mopani scrub and the snapping of their beaks was clearly audible at some distance.

For comparison, reported flock sizes on field cards, kindly extracted by Stuart Forbes, averaged 9:

11 flocks x 3 birds each, 11x4, 19x5, 17x6, 23x7, 30x8, 10x9, 31x10, 4x11, 10x12 and up to 15 five times. So what do we have?

It seems that in the winters of drought years, White-crested Helmet-shrikes 'go to town' and become a lot more mobile and noticeable, even foraging in very open areas like paprika fields. Territorial behaviour breaks down, flock sizes increase and flock fragmentation occur with several records of single birds. I saw a singleton in the big fig tree on the First Street Mall and another was rescued after failing to fly across the Ume River at KARIBA.

I do not think increased occupation of rural woodland by new settlers has caused this movement, as suggested by some. The 2001/01 rainy season was good so breeding conditions in miombo woodlands in Sep/Oct 2001 were probably good resulting in bigger broods. The good rains in late 2001 with better food supplies may have improved the fledgling survival rate, followed by the collapse of the rains in early 2002. An increased population had to go out to work for their food and we saw the results. That is my speculation!

Collared Pratincole [*Glareola pratincola*]

On 45 October 2002, 6 of these birds were seen on the ground and flying overhead northeast of Dassie Island at LAKE CHIVERO (Ref: QDS 1730D4 TR668209). The area concerned is normally inundated with water. The behaviour of the birds indicated that they were possibly breeding but no success was had in locating any nests.

On 5 October, after a concerted effort, one 'nest' containing two eggs was located at 10:00 hrs. One could hardly call it a 'nest'. There wasn't even a scrape in the ground. The area concerned, which covered several hectares, had large areas of dead and dying water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) and the eggs had been laid on some dead and flattened leaves in the middle of the same material.

The birds and 2 eggs were monitored on and off during the following two weeks and on 19th October it was ascertained that there were 4 breeding pairs and one non-breeding pair. A second 'nest' was located 15 metres away from the first one. This also contained 2 eggs and the materials involved were the same. The eggs were black and khaki in colour with black predominating.

On 22 October, the eggs were checked in anticipation of hatching. There was no sign of that but all the birds were extremely agitated, landing within 6 metres of me and keeping their wings spread, flapping them slowly.

Similar happenings took place on 23 October but all the eggs were still intact. At 08:05 on 24 October, one egg in the first nest had just hatched. The chick, which was dark, almost black in colour, was damp and shiny from egg moisture, as was the interior of the half egg shell recovered. The eggs in the second nest were intact.

On 25th October at 07:50, the chick was like a small, fluffy ball, black and grey, with its head partially under a dried hyacinth leaf: The eyes were open. The remaining egg was cracked in the centre and it was obvious that hatching was imminent. The eggs in the second nest were still intact.

At the same time the next morning, the first nest was empty and the second unchanged.

A visit at 07:30 on 27th to nest number two showed a fluffy chick with eyes open and head under a dried hyacinth leaf and the remaining egg cracked in the middle.

On 28th October, the second nest was also empty, with all the adults flying, landing and taking off again and extremely agitated at my presence. On the non-breeding pair mentioned earlier, I can only guess that, if they had bred, the eggs were predated or removed or tramped on by local co-op fishermen, as at times there were up to 15 of them in the area concerned.

Roberts' 6th Edition No 304 Page 266 gives the incubation period as being 17-18 days. In this instance, the time that lapsed from my locating the first nest with 2 eggs to the hatching of the first egg was 18 days 22 hours. I must have been very lucky if I found the nest on the day that the second egg was laid. So ended a fascinating and interesting 3 weeks, watching and hearing some birds which are irregular visitors to Lake Chivero. **Mike Marriott**

Rarities April 2002

The first Great Knot for southern Africa, which was originally located in March in the West Coast National Park, was still present into April and was reported on the 1st. The bird remained throughout the month and additional sightings were also reported on the 2nd, 20th, 21st, 22nd and 28th of the month. Also in the West Coast National Park sightings were had of both Greater Sand Plover and Lesser Sand Plovers and a report had also been received on the 1st of at least one Red-necked Phalarope being present at Veidrif with two being seen at Mile 4 Salt Works in Swakopmund. The bird also stayed right into April and was subsequently reported on the 6th, 14th and 21st.

On the 3rd it was noted that the two American Golden Plover were still present at De Mond Nature Reserve. The birds were also independently reported on the 7th, 21st and 23rd of the month with one of them apparently attaining full breeding plumage. This species was also present at the Kromme River mouth. A Eurasian Oystercatcher was present at the mouth of the Gamtoos River with another 2 seen at the Walvis Bay Pump Station. A Long-legged Buzzard was seen in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park on two occasions in April. A European Honey-buzzard was reported on the Gouwsberge Ridge north west of Witbank and the same species was seen at Heerelogenment. Black-tailed Godwits as well as Hudsonian Godwits have been reported from Walvis Bay Lagoon. 2 Broad-billed Sandpipers were located at Sandwich Harbour. A Little Blue Heron was present at the mouth of the Olifants River.

A Cape pelagic trip turned up a South Polar Skua as well as 3 Leach's Storm-petrel which were also seen on a boat trip out of Jeffery's Bay later in the month. History was made when southern Africa's first Western Reef Heron was located at Buffel's Bay in the Cape Peninsula National Park. The bird was present for two days but then disappeared and was relocated at Olifantsbos a few days later. Western Reef Herons normally range from Mauritania to about as far south as Gabon on the west coast of Africa.

A Black Coucal was present at Groutville in Kwazulu Natal.

Another bird that caused a lot of excitement was a Snowy Egret. It was briefly glimpsed at Zandvlei and later photographed and was confirmed as southern Africa's first Snowy Egret. This is a bird that normally migrates between North and South America so it is well out of its normal range. It is also the third new bird for southern Africa in a space of 45 days! Extract from www.birdlife.org.za

Half the world's songbirds call Australia home

From the beautiful song of the nightingale to the raspy caw of the crow, the songlines reach back to Australia where half the world's birds evolved, says a Melbourne scientist. Songbirds, which include most of the well-known bird species, were thought to have merged in the northern hemisphere before spreading south. But Museum Victoria's head of sciences, Los Christidis, says he has proved the opposite.

"Actually Australia was the cradle," Dr Christidis says. With help from Swedish scientists, Dr Christidis climbed backwards down the evolutionary branches by studying the DNA sequences of modern songbirds all over the world, and found they had common ancestors in Australian songbirds "The branching pattern shows the oldest of the songbirds is actually the lyrebird," he says.

Songbirds – also known as passerines – then spread to the rest of the world about 60 to 80 million years ago, around the time the massive super-continent Gondwanaland was breaking up into Australasia, South America, Africa, Antarctica and India.

The ancestors of songbirds were isolated as Australia. They have since evolved into some of the world's most beautiful and beloved bird species, including nightingales, canaries and birds of paradise. They inhabit every corner of the globe.

Another vital piece of evidence was the discovery that three small, plain-looking species of New Zealand wrens, which were similarly isolated early on, had very similar DNA sequences to Australian songbirds.

Australia has about 300 species of songbirds — which are characterised by the complex musculature in their voice box — and the rest of the world has about 3000 species.

“Apart from pigeons, parrots, birds of prey, most birds are songbirds,” Dr Christidis says.

His research will be published in the February edition of a prestigious British natural history journal, *The Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*.

However, it might never have seen the light of day had Dr Christidis not gone into partnership with scientists from the Swedish Museum of Natural History and the University of Stockholm, which provided the funding.

“It’s easier to get funding through them to do work on the evolution of Australian birds than it is here,” he says.

Dr Christidis has battled to have his theory taken seriously since 1988, when he first floated the idea. Now, a US team has found similar evidence and will publish simultaneously in the same publication. Despite being the only first-world country in a “biodiversity hotspot”, Australia was ignoring funding for natural history research. Dr Christidis says, “There are more people working on Australian birds in American universities than there are here — by about 20-fold. It’s amazing.” Taken from **The Age**, 5 February 2002

Return of the Manakin

Cambridge, England, 29 May 2002 — a bird which had been thought to be possibly extinct has been rediscovered by Brazilian scientists in the Amazon rainforest.

The Golden-crowned Manakin has been found by bird researchers forty-five years after it was last seen and first discovered. However, the finders fear that its survival could be threatened by continued destruction of the rainforest for timber extraction, creation of pasture and road development. Found again in the Pará region of Brazil, the bird is considered to be one of the most enigmatic species of South American bird-life. It was first discovered by German scientist Helmut Sick in 1957, and officially recognised as a species in 1959. Several unsuccessful attempts have since been made to find the bird. Fábio Olmos who, together with José Fernando Pacheco, re-discovered the species said: “We were thrilled to find the lost manakin – quite distinctive from other manakins.” He added: “The local economy is based on logging and cattle-ranching on cleared land. The Brazilian government is encouraging colonisation but has no way of controlling loggers, squatters, colonists and gold miners once access is created. Forest destruction will remain a major threat to the long-term survival of this beautiful bird and other wildlife of the area.”

Alison Stattersfield who leads on BirdLife’s globally threatened species monitoring said: “This is tremendous news – this bird hasn’t been recorded for 45 years – but there are genuine concerns that its habitat is under threat from the continued destruction of the fantastic Amazonian rainforest. It is vital that this wonderful natural resource is saved from further destruction and that the Brazilian environmental authorities implement an effective system of protected areas for the region’s biodiversity?”

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New members

We welcome the following new members:

M Bradbury, K Chaparadza, Kudakwashe Gombera, Sharone Mujuru., T Mvurayapenya, R W Sargent and Darryl Tiran.

National Sponsored Birdwatch

The results of the 2002 National Birdwatch are as follows:

Editor

Being a glutton for punishment, I have taken over from Di as editor of *Babbler*. I hope you will continue to give me the support that you have given Di over the years. Bear with me. She's a hard act to follow!

Jennifer Carter

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