

BABBLER

The Newsletter of -

BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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COMMITTEES

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2005 Subscription

Membership subscriptions were due on 1 January 2005. Thank you to those of you who have already paid but to those of you who have not please would you do so as soon as possible.

Individuals and family membership	\$50 000.00
Senior citizens (over 65)	\$20 000.00
Students (17 and under or studying at a registered institution)	\$20 000.00
Corporations	\$1 million

Cheques made out to BirdLife Zimbabwe can be posted to PO Box RV 100, Runiville or delivered to 35 Clyde Road, Eastlea, Harare **or contact your nearest committee member to make arrangements for payment.**

**HARARE MEMBERS – BABBLER WILL NO LONGER BE POSTED TO
HARARE ADDRESSES. ONLY IN EXCEPTIONAL CASES WILL WE
DELIVER**

WE NEED YOUR HELP. PLEASE READ ABOUT DISTRIBUTION OF BABBLER AND ACT.

BABBLER CAN BE EMAILED TO YOU. Contact Alice at the office with your details.

YOU CAN COLLECT YOUR COPY from BLZ OFFICE or from a Branch of FOCAL POINT listed below: (Our grateful thanks to Focal Point.)

Avondale	Avondale Shopping Centre
Borrowdale	49 Sam Levy Village
Newlands	Mobil Service Station
Westgate	Westgate Shopping Centre
Town centre	Travel Plaza, cnr Mazowe/Josiah Chinamano
Groombridge	Shopping Centre, cnr The Chase / Teviotdale Road

UNDER EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, we will deliver.

Please contact Alice at BLZ Office to let her know how we can get Babbler to you.

NOTE: Babbler will be available for collection from 3rd of March, May, July, September and November and January copy from 27th December.

ACTIVITIES

SATURDAY, 14TH MAY 2005: NATIONAL AGM/braai at 10:00 at John Paxton Centre, Harare.

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Regular outings

Sundays March 6th & April 3rd: Mukuvisi Woodlands. 6:30 a.m.

Directions: Turn off Chiremba Road into Ford Rd. (opposite Queensdale Shops) and continue down to Blatherwick Rd (T Junction). Turn right and the gate is about 150 meters on the left. Bring cash for the guard who will be on hand to unlock the gate to let cars in and out and chairs and refreshments.

Sundays March 13th & April 10th: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary. Meet at 06.30 am at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West. Bring chairs and refreshments. Beginners are most welcome and spare binoculars will be available.

Sunday 27th March: Harare Botanic Garden. Meet in the car park off Fifth Street at 6:30 a.m. Bring chairs and refreshments.

Sunday 24th April: Chikupo Caves, Masembura, Domboshawa. Apart from Miombo woodland and granite kopjes, there is a cave with Mottled Swifts and rock paintings. Meet at 6:30 a.m. at Wingate Golf Club where cars can be left in secure parking and transport shared. Bring refreshments and chairs.

Thursday evening meeting

March 17th: A talk on Verreaux's Eagle & Pan African Ornithological Conference (PAOC) by Ngoni Chiweshe, BLZ Conservation Officer.

April 21st: a Visit to Chile. Dr. Philippa Marett will show us slides of her visit to the tip of South America. Those who were lucky enough to see her slides of Madagascar, Canada, Mozambique and Zimbabwe know what a superb photographer and raconteur she is and how fascinating this show will be.

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

2nd and 4th Thursdays (10th and 24th March and 14th & 28th April). Meet at 4:00 p.m. provided Ian Riddell is available. For confirmation contact Ian on 339716 or gemsaf@mango.zw. Bring cash to pay for security. Directions: drive to the end of Princess Margaret Rd, turn left, and continue to the new

houses. Parking is in a cul-de-sac with a small fenced off area at the end.

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Monthly Outings

Friday 18th March: Verreaux's Eagle Survey Team Briefing: at 5.15 pm at the Hubbards, 7 Hillside Road, Hillside. New team members and guests are welcome. Followed by bring-and-share supper and bring-your-own-booze. Tel: Dudley 76781-5 (w): 011-203238 (c): 240127 (h); Julia on 246269 or Penny on 237777.

Saturday 19th March: Field trip to Vreigezicht Farm, Figtree. Leave town 09.00 a.m. All day, take tea & lunch & tea. Please note – it is essential to confirm this outing nearer the time to ascertain favourable conditions. Phone Penny or Julia.

Saturday 16th April: Field trip to Worringham Vineyards, Worringham. All day, take tea, lunch & tea. Leave town at 09.00 a.m. Phone Jeanette (240093) or Penny.

Aisleby, March 26th and April 30th – morning.

Please contact Julia.

EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

Contacts: Carl Beel ☎ 023- 416249 Jane Clegg ☎ 020-65610

Sunday 27th March 2005: Tigers Kloof 06:00 a.m. C. Beel 63058

Sunday 24th April 2005: Africa University 06:00 a.m. C. Beel 63058

The Museum is the departure point and PROVIDED PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS ARE MADE binoculars may be arranged. It is essential to check with the organiser shortly before the event as all visits are subject to last minute changes due to weather or local conditions. Generally return will be in time for lunch. Please contact during the day or email: cbeel@zol.co.zw

Karoi Bird Club

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

ACTIVITIES

Rydings School Walks are conducted the first Saturday each month at 6.30 a.m. Please check whether there will be a walk on New Year's Day or Saturday 8th January.

MIDLANDS BRANCH

Gweru: Contact Jon Barry ☎ 055-20021

Masvingo: Contact Lynne Wilkins ☎ 039-63657

Outings first Saturday of the month. Please contact Jon Barry for details.

MASHONALAND SOUTH

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

Contact Margaret Parrock ☎ 068-22005 for details.

MESSAGE FROM THE BLZ PRESIDENT

Birdlife Zimbabwe has now been in existence as a full partner of Birdlife International for some five years and we must take a close look at ourselves. Our principal financiers, the RSPB, and BLI want us to do more work on protecting endangered species and on protecting important bird habitat areas. We have a contract with the RSPB to do work to these ends but reports filtering back from recent RSPB visits are to the effect that we are the least active BLI partner in Africa. The level of assistance that we get from overseas is not going to increase while BLI and RSPB think that we are not pulling our weight. We continue to build a good foundation, we are raising monies for bird work from other people and, in the present economic climate I believe that BLZ has done much better than we get credit for. But we

can and should be doing more and, most importantly, we should be getting more enjoyment out of our birding.

There has been a tendency in recent years for the BLZ office establishment to grow further and further apart from the BLZ membership base. My impression is that our members know a lot more about birds than the office staff do but the office knows a lot more about planning, co-ordinating and implementing the schemes or programmes that we need to put in place, start up and keep going to learn more about our birdlife and to do more for our birds. BLZ needs more out of its members but while there is a gap between the office and the members who know their birds, there is a great deal that is falling between the floorboards. Perhaps BLI/RSPB priorities, hopes and expectations are not necessarily the best way forward for Zimbabwe but somehow we must improve our general performance and show that we are addressing the priorities which we do face and can do something positive about.

To this end it is my belief that we should be using more of our funds away from the BLZ offices and out in the bird club branches. We should also be doing more to get our bird-wise/habitat sensitive birders out into the field and feeding more back to the office in Harare. BLZ has been trying to do all this from the office but our motor vehicle expenses from Harare this year have been horrific. We cannot send BLZ officials travelling all around Zimbabwe to do work which members living around Zimbabwe can do much closer to home. We also find ourselves paying salaries to people who cannot get out into the country to do the work that needs to be done.

At the same time, we are not going to pay our members to go birding. Birding is our hobby and we must all expect to spend quite a bit of our money on that anyway. Nevertheless BLZ can help to meet some of these expenses and we would like to be able to count on our members to visit Zimbabwe's Important Bird Areas [IBAs] and to report on their present environmental status. Bird lists for such areas need to be built up but we also need information now on the future prospects of the environmental security of these places.

These are matters that we want to talk about at our AGM. We are not going to have a long series of reports this year and we want to spend more time jointly discussing the way forward. There have been requests that the AGM be held away from Harare and the Harare people would like to get away from this centre but I regret that we cannot organize another venue at this late stage. BLZ is nevertheless prepared to make a contribution to the travelling expenses of a couple of vehicles of birders from the Matabeleland and Midlands area and another from Manicaland. Please make the effort to get representative groups to this AGM.

Please start thinking now about making more trips for your branch members to go to a few more out-of-the-way places including those upon which BLZ has to report to its sponsors. Such trips do not have to be made up of birders alone. What about joining up with your local Wildlife Society/WEZ or Environment Africa branch? What about getting the fishermen and the 4x4 fanatics involved even if you only end up with a minority of birders in the party? But let us make 2005 a more positive year. Soon the elections will be over and we will all have a better idea of where Zimbabwe is going. We can all go forward and it is my intention to ensure that BLZ does go forward. We cannot just slide backwards but we are not going to go anywhere while this gulf exists between the office and the people who want to enjoy their birding.

SO SEE YOU AT THE AGM ON 14TH MAY 2005 AT JOHN PAXTON CENTRE, HARARE.

ALEX MASTERSON

REPORTS

NATIONAL

EDUCATION NEWS

The Honde schools cluster has had more efforts focused on it than any other group of schools in the Bird Awareness Programme. Canadian funding over two years and a resident Education Officer Abasi Jana has contributed to promoting the conservation of birds and their habitats in this valley. Now this cluster is on its own. To maintain interest in the project, BirdLife trainers have recently toured the Honde visiting eight schools and holding a field event for another seven. We were given a big welcome and had useful discussions. Arrangements for distribution of newsletters by strategically placed schools were made.

A bird ringing demonstration was given by Dale Hanmer close to Wamba Dam at Aberfoyle. It was a pleasure to see the keen interest shown in this activity with children wincing when she pressed the pliers to close the ring on a Singing Cisticola's fragile leg. The young faces also lit up when they all got the identification of the Red Bishop correct in a picture quiz held in the bush. One Headmaster, seven teachers and forty-four children attended. Mr. Ken Dixon's help as a trainer was most welcome.

Much of the New Year has been taken up with funding proposal and letter writing. Fiona Mucchecheti a student attached to the Education Department worked hard on the first term's newsletter. Schools appreciate this publication and our sponsors NABU wrote last week as follows: "It is a pleasure to support your programme – your newsletter makes a fantastic contribution towards nature conservation". This newsletter is our only contact with most clusters of schools.

A bird festival is planned for the Harare cluster at Tynwald School on the 18th of March 2005. If anyone has a live bird to show off at the event it would make a difference to the event.

Two mornings a week, Mrs. Juliet Masama – Van Ongevalle works on our programme mainly on school projects.

By invitation four schools and one college attended the World Wetlands Day at Marlborough Vlei. Children gave three presentations in bird-posters, poems and a song.

Report on World Wetlands Day – 2nd February 2005

Marlborough Vlei was the focal point for this year's Wetland Day. It was well attended by one hundred and fifty people. Organisers for the event were BLZ, Mukuvisi Woodland and Environment Africa. The Ministry of Environment and Tourism and the Department of Natural Resources gave valuable support.

The day was cloudy and then sunny and the grassland lived up to its name of a wetland. Many people helped to make the event a success including BLZ staff and members. Most visitors enjoyed the walk with a BLZ guide. Talks centred around the theme, "Wealth in biological and cultural diversity of Wetlands". Baskets and mats made from wetland reeds, rushes and grasses were on display.

The guest of honour, The Honourable Francis Nhema, Minister of Environment and Tourism deplored the degradation of the wetland by cultivation. Haphazard and often abandoned plots are scattered about. He also suggested holding a fun day for local residents at the wetland. This good idea will be followed up later this year.

Those taking walks on this day and on the previous weekend must have been shocked by the devastation of the vlei during the present growing season. This degradation is threatening to rob the vlei of its role in providing services like purifying and holding water. Its rich biodiversity most visible of which are a suite of special birds that come to breed when the grassland is wet, is at risk.

This sorry picture has galvanized BLZ and Environment Africa to hold preliminary talks to establish a partnership to manage Marlborough Vlei. This would be in conjunction with the landowners, Marlborough residents, Harare Municipality and other stakeholders.

This significant outcome of having the vlei as the venue for wetlands day could lead to its restoration. Harare could have then an asset to be proud of. It could encompass more land that originally envisaged by BLZ as a nature reserve. With vision and hard work the sensitive vlei could also be protected under legal binding agreement with appropriate authorities.

Leslee Maasdorp
Education Manager

BLZ Library News

The Library is progressing very well with Abigail continuing to catalogue reprints and other materials. Grateful thanks go to those of you who have donated books, journals and videos. Abigail is also sorting duplicates of journals and books. Once this task has been completed we will be selling these to raise funds for the Library. The loan of videos to Members is proving very popular. The Library is well used by Staff - the main focus being on Wetland information.

Mukuvisi Bird Hide

A bird hide/photographic hide is being built at the dam near the gum trees just inside the fence of the game paddock. It will be situated a few metres from the waters edge and should be a good place to observe birds and nature close at hand. The dam is away from the general public and attracts interesting birds at various times. It is also used by some of the game animals particularly in the dry season.

I have seen Little Bitterns, various duck, kingfishers, cormorants, bee-eaters, bishops, weavers, African Sacred Ibis, African Spoonbill, heron, Common Moorhens etc at this dam although I seldom go there. As the dam is small and there is abundant plant life, the hide will provide a good setting for taking close up photographs. The intention is to set up the hide to facilitate good photography.

The structure will be a concrete block building 6 metres by 3 metres with asbestos roof and wooden shutters on three sides. Entrance will be gained through a door at the rear facing Glenara Avenue. The rear will be incorporated in the game fence. There will be permanently fixed benches and shelves.

Construction is due to start soon and we hope to have the hide complete in March. All the materials required for the construction have now been donated. We have received donations from Circle Cement, PG Timbers, GDI, IT & H, and UBM etc. We also have a building team on hand.

A small amount is required to pay labour and for contingencies. Although this money has been pledged, I feel it is important that BLZ makes a contribution towards the hide. We are after all amongst those most likely to use it. I would like to appeal to you therefore for a donation. Donations can be made at BLZ offices, where a receipt will be issued, or you can contact me or a member of Mashonaland committee.

Some members have already made cash or corporate donations and their contributions have been gratefully accepted. I hope you will take this appeal seriously!

Geoff Lowe

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Saturday 5th February: DAVID WHITEHEAD Ponds CHEGUTU / Mupfure River (QDS: 1830A1)

A small group of 4 Harare birders, joined Margie and Russell on their Mash South, January monthly outing. Despite the many surreptitious murmurings about the relatively early start at 5.15am, we were rewarded with a high-flying Bat Hawk, leaving its Sheraton hunting grounds either to return to its roost in the show-grounds, or possibly to hunt swallows/swifts in the semi-overcast weather. The morning was to be one filled with waders, aquatics and other 'middle-veld specials'. Another great start was had with the 3 Marico Sunbird males displaying in a tree, near perfect lighting conditions and visibility of their iridescent colours, conducting the daily territorial ritual songs. Nesting Lesser Masked-weavers and White-browed Sparrow-weavers had also just been seen. The short walk to the ponds from the car park, through very small agricultural plots, and alongside the textile factory, gave us striking sightings of Red-backed Shrike, and breeding displays of the White-winged Widowbird, and Southern Red Bishop on top form. There were many other finch, canary and waxbill species, plus Rufous-naped Lark calls. The ponds offered a 'drastic' habitat change, with massive swathes of long rank sodden grass that we ploughed through, circuiting many of the ponds that cover an area estimated at 40 acres. This "wader spectacle" was well worth the visit; the sheer number of birds and behavioural study opportunities of each species was inspirational. Flocks and individuals of Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Three-banded Plover, Kittlitz's Plover, African Sacred Ibis, Glossy Ibis, Collared Pratincole, Black-winged Stilt, and Pied Avocet were very visible. Little Stint was present, but also were a few putative Sanderling/Great Sand Plover – these to be confirmed with a follow up visit with scopes. Waterfowl were poorly represented on this visit, due to the season's and previous days' good rainfall providing ideal feeding and foraging areas in flooded grasslands and pans. Cape Teal, Red-billed Teal, Hottentot Teal and White-faced Duck were on the ponds. Frequently both species of

flamingo, Little Grebe by the thousands, and an occasional Black-necked Grebe have been recorded on the ponds.

After a quick and much needed refreshment break, we visited Margie's family on the Mupfure River, where riverine and typical miombo species were seen, including an attempted kill – unfortunately though – not by a raptor. An ambitious Rhombic Night-adder chased down and latched onto a very large toad. After several attempts, the small adder had the toad held by its snout, and we assumed that this was now the final moments for the fated toad. After 2 minutes being gripped, the toad shook himself free of the biting adder and cautiously hopped away. The adder gave up at this point and slithered off into the bushes, giving us a final arrogant display of admonishing hissing and side winding. The toad, quite amazingly, seemed to suffer no side effects from the envenomation and proceeded to take cover under a nearby grass tuft.

Just before midday, birding became rather quiet. On the way back to the cars, we had views of a mixed thermal of White-backed Vulture, Yellow-billed Kite and Wahlberg's Eagle. The morning total yielded 113 species seen in the Chegutu area. On the road back to Harare, we called in to view the LAKE CHIVERO dam wall and Manyame River, also secretly hoping to get a pot of tea with a plate of hot buttered jam scones (wrong era...) The booming sounds of rap and other similar 'artists' welcomed us, drowning out all bird calls, shattering the tranquillity of the delightful surrounds. However, we bravely persevered and did eventually somehow manage to hear a very indistinct African Yellow White-eye calling in the tree, only about 1m, directly above us. Good close lateral, under and upper side views of a variety of swallows, martins and swifts were had on the grassy slopes of the wall, and nice to see the lake from a different perspective, despite the alarming background sounds. Several raptors were airborne including Booted Eagle & Wahlberg's Eagles, plus a good look at a very vocal African Cuckoo Hawk perched in a tree near the road. We managed to get another 33 species on the road (and diversions) putting the days total at 146. Our thanks go to Margie and Russell for organising a great morning amidst the ever spectacular Chegutu and environs bird-rich diverse middle-veld.

DAVID WHITEHEAD CHEGUTU Ponds – Revisited

The following weekend a second group of Harare wader-specialists suitably armed with high powered scopes travelled back to the ponds to confirm the putative Sanderling / Great Sand Plover / Strange Wader sighting. Unfortunately (though quite normal in birding circumstances) the bird in question was not to be found. A very enjoyable morning was had viewing the wonderful wader spectacle literally in their thousands. However a bit further along the track, bird ID skills were about to be tested once more – yet another BIG QUESTION was thrown at us: in a fresh water pond was a scattered flock of Comb Duck, with several Red-billed Teal and White-faced Duck. Happily ensconced in this lot, was also a single, pure white waterfowl. In general looks and behaviour, all very similar to a female Comb Duck, however without the usual dark back and neck colouration. The stance, size, swimming silhouette and relaxed behaviour amongst the large group of Comb Duck, plus its flight jizz, most certainly had the appearance of a leucistic / albino form of the species. The eyes and legs were dark in colour – so not a true albino. I would be very interested to hear of any other similar reports and sightings of this very distinctive 'white' waterfowl, as it does not appear to be captive bred hybridised bird, or an aviary escapee? **Darryl Tiran**

MATABELELAND BRANCH

WE CAN HELP YOU PAY YOUR SUBS!

Don't forget that if you wish to pay your subs with the maximum of ease and the minimum of effort, ring up one of the Committee – details on the front of this *Babbler* – and we'll make a convenient arrangement between us. We would like to say thank-you to everyone who has already paid – most of our Matland members, in fact.

MATLAND MUSINGS

We've had two important clan gatherings in the last couple of months, both of which were well attended by our growing membership. We have also undertaken a full programme of waterfowl counts, the results of which we are sure will be included in a national report by Chip Chirara in due course.

Open Day – Lawley Road: 20th January

The first was our office Open Day to which around 40 people came and, thanks to the restraint of the dubious-looking weather, everyone managed to fit themselves into or outside our tiny premises and its

verandah. On view were a pictorial record of our doings through the year, and the lovely limited edition print of Purple-crested Turaco by Ken Newman, given to us by Margaret and Ronnie Stuttaford and meticulously mounted in a beautiful frame by Harry Erwee.

This event was by way of a thank-you to our increasingly enthusiastic members who contribute to the Branch in so many ways. They support our committee and our functions; donate posters, magazines, books and calendars for our library and schools programme; offer their assistance right, left and centre; and offer the committee members morale-boosting encouragement when they most need it.

Everyone seemed to like our little office and its environment, and there were many compliments to be heard. We had wine to drink, a feast of brought-and-shared goodies to eat, and continuous chatter till long past closing hours. The last to leave included several of our “double-hatted” members, whose other (more senior) hat should have been seen at a rival (wildlife) function! This is high praise indeed.

Branch AGM: 6th February

We took ourselves out of town and held our AGM at Marwell Trust’s Dambari Field Station. This research organisation works with duikers, cheetah, rhino, people and sometimes, when appropriate, a combination of all these.

The venue was Dambari’s conference room in converted rhino stables, beautifully adapted, thatched and laid out – a really super setting for our meeting. We filled the conference room with 31 plus members – the best attendance in living memory. The proceedings were started by Verity Bowman, Marwell’s Director, with a very interesting presentation of Marwell’s origins, activities and functions.

The AGM produced good ideas and interesting questions from members of an attentive audience – until election time approached when they became noticeably quieter, and disappeared altogether (to a private place) if in danger of being nominated. (Worry not; we have powers of co-option if necessary!) So it came to pass that the same old committee, reduced by one, was elected en bloc. (“*Could this be the smallest band in the land?*” I ask myself.)

Business over, we repaired to the verandah overlooking lovely acacia bush, back to its original state having been cleared by Marwell of all unsightly fences and structures. Lunch was another of our famous delicious bring-and-share affairs with bring-and-drink beverages. Then the large, and by this time well-fed, population was divided into two groups to tour some of the duiker pens with Nicky who supplied a very well informed and interesting commentary.

What a lovely place. We offer grateful thanks to our hosts whose warm welcome resulted in a relaxed and happy AGM as well as a very enjoyable day out.

The Dambari occupants are also avid and knowledgeable bird watchers who have produced an extensive bird list. But just in case they’ve missed anything, we have volunteered our spotting services, which will, of course, necessitate another visit to their premises without too much delay!

Julia Duprée

Field trip to AISLEBY with NUST students: 11th February

Professor Peter Mundy has instituted an Ornithology Course at the National University of Science and Technology, and Julia and I assisted him on a field visit to Aisleby Farm with seventeen of his students.

These were keen but novice birders and Aisleby is always a rewarding venue for beginners. As Peter told his pupils, it is best to start with water-birds as they live out in the open and, with a little bit of luck, they don’t rush out of sight! We spent a good deal of time quietly observing one holding pond where shallow water and surrounding mudflats had attracted a plethora of waterfowl and waders.

The students were first taught to recognize four types of black-and-white birds - the unmistakable African Sacred Ibis, numerous Blacksmith Lapwings, some elegant Black-winged Stilts and a small group of Pied Avocets. The black and white theme continued with a Black-headed Heron and both White Stork and Abdim’s Storks that flew over our heads. We then branched out into browner birds, with several African Wattled Lapwings, a large contingent of Ruffs and small groups of Red-billed Teal and Hottentot Teal. Of great interest were six Common Ringed Plovers and the same number of Black-winged Pratincoles. At one point a small eagle flew overhead and spooked all the water birds. After much consultation we agreed it was most likely to be an immature Ayres's Hawk-eagle.

We rounded off the morning with refreshments beside the Upper UMGUSA Dam, whilst watching rafts of Southern Pochard and viewing a pair of Saddle-billed Storks through the telescope. We found the students to be a lively and observant group and wish them well in their further bird studies.

Penny Feather

AISLEBY FARM – AN OVERVIEW

(This is the first of a series of informative and interesting articles by Harry Erwee on Aisleby Farm).

Sandy McAdam and I have been conducting monthly 10-12 hour bird counts at this venue (both species and numbers) since January 1998 and the information gathered over the past six years will form the subject of a future project which we are in the process of compiling. What follows are some comments and some of the birds recorded over the past three months as well as other general matters pertaining to Aisleby Farm, which I still consider to be the most rewarding bird-watching location in Matabeleland, if not in Zimbabwe, especially for waterfowl and waders, etc.

Ibis Dam: During our visits we have always recorded the birds sighted at Ibis Dam separately, although it is an integral part of Aisleby Farm. Large numbers of Cattle Egrets and African Sacred Ibises came to roost at this venue when we commenced our censuses. Up to 7,145 Cattle Egrets were recorded in January 2000 coming to roost between 16h30-18h30. Regrettably this holding dam dried up on several occasions over the past three years with the result that it is not utilised any more as a roosting site by Cattle Egrets. Apart from the water problem, the situation was further aggravated by the spread of the invasive bulrushes, which at one stage covered nearly 80% of the dam's surface. Manual removal or control of this plant is not feasible. Fortunately, as a result of the drought over the past two years the bulrushes suffered from the lack of water and withered and dried. With the co-operation of the Farm Manager the partially dry vegetation was set alight and although this will not solve the problem permanently it will considerably retard the growth of the bulrushes. It is anticipated that the pumping equipment used to supply this dam with treated effluent will be in operation soon. At present it is a sad sight to behold the magnificent observation platform that we erected standing derelict and deserted!

Bird Dam. Here, as at Ibis Dam, the bulrushes have covered most of the water's surface. The best time to observe birds at this venue is towards late afternoon when species such as the African Purple Swamphen, Black Crakes and Common Moorhen emerge from the rushes to feed on the open grass verges and water furrows. Greater Painted-snipe can often be seen where the main water furrow enters the dam.

During December the water level in the Upper Umgusa Dam dropped considerably and waterfowl and waders of various species flocked to the exposed mud flats on the upper reaches of the dam. Comb Duck, White-faced Duck, Red-billed Teal, Egyptian Goose, Red-knobbed Coots, etc. were present in large numbers and we were hard pressed to conduct an accurate count. After the rains in December 2004 the Comb Duck, like the Little Grebe, dispersed and disappeared from the dam no doubt to breed in the smaller pans in the area. Little Grebe usually reappear just as mysteriously as they disappear, accompanied by their offspring.

The departure of Grey Crowned Cranes from the farm is still a mystery and formed the subject of an article in an earlier publication (2001, *Honeyguide*, 47(1): 85-91). This is surely an ideal project for the Crane Working Group to get involved in. Change of habitat and food availability have been put forward as contributing towards the drastic decline in number, but I cannot accept this as farming methods – i.e. maize crop in summer, winter wheat during winter, pastures irrigated and well stocked with cattle – have not been changed over the past decade.

One of the two holding dams on the southern boundary of the farm is providing excellent bird-watching opportunities at present, including Black-winged Pratincoles, Hottentot Teal, Common Ringed Plovers, large numbers of Ruffs and other waders. Although the other holding dam is only a stone's throw away, hardly any birds use this dam and it is the quality and quantity of water that makes the difference between the two.

As a matter of interest, the number of species we record during our monthly visits varies between 100 to 150. But the sighting of Cape Longclaws is always the icing on the cake for me!

Our first major task for 2005 will be to determine the status of (a) Cattle Egrets and (b) African Sacred Ibises from the data we have collected over the past six years

MIDLANDS BRANCH

SEBAKWE POORT: Saturday 5th February 2005 (QDS: 1829D3)

Only five birders (Mr and Mrs Beekes, Mr and Mrs Forder and Jon Barry) went to Sebakwe Poort (just outside KWEKWE) to check the feasibility of entry and to assess the Black Stork population. The party then returned to Long Valley (Hunters Road) which had had three inches of rain the previous Friday and all the ponds were overflowing.

Jon Barry spent three hours in the gorge (Poort) with binoculars and camera, but only one Black Stork parent was in attendance to two fully-fledged young, who were being encouraged to fly. Two photos were taken with a digital camera and will soon be downloaded.

No Lanner Falcons were visible at this time. A birder in the Shurugwe area reports that she has not seen any visiting Collared Flycatchers, either.

Should Mashonaland members also wish to visit a particularly pretty area, which sadly lacked species on this occasion, we would be delighted to guide them.

Long Valley: Two African Crowned Eagles (141) have spent the last four days perching on a power line pole and feeding from the vlei on Long Valley. There is considerable duck activity at the moment. A lone Bateleur flies high above this area. These raptors were more common ten years ago.

Jon Barry – Midlands's representative BLZ.

KAROI BIRD CLUB

Waterfowl Count at Marshlands Farm: Saturday 22nd January 2005 (QDS 1629D3)

There were 5 of us for this count. One of our stalwart members, Danny van den Berg, has left for the Cape after many years in Karoi but was back tying up lends so joined us for the last time. We will miss his chatting and humour on our walks. So too, Andriesa Hartman, supporting the club for many years, is moving to Zambia and, of course, Kevin, moving to Harare. What can we say? So in future it will probably only be "ek en hom"! Nevertheless, we will continue and hope to encourage some juniors. To get back to the count – the dam was low, no mud banks and the marshy area dry. But the first little pond was at its usual fullness and we found 2 White-back Ducks there, a juvenile Common Moorhen, African Jacana, Pied Kingfisher and 2 Squacco Herons. In the dryish marshy area, in the short grass were 2 young Collared Pratincoles and we flushed a snipe. A harrier, broad white bank on the rump, was scouting low over the area, scattering Swainson's Spurfowl, a Yellow-mantled Widowbird was on the fence and Amur Falcons were flying low hunting or perched on dead trees, staring into the short grass. Continuing to the water in the dam, around 150 Cattle Egrets were around the cattle and on the trees. At the dam we found 30 Comb Ducks, 3 White-breasted Cormorants and 4 Reed Cormorants, 6 White-faced Ducks, 2 Red-billed Teal and 2 Egyptian Goose, 8 unidentified and unapproachable small waders and, on some protruding rocks, 2 Grey Herons. Lapwings were 12 Blacksmith Lapwings and 18 African Wattled Lapwings. Black Crake were heard and seen and 2 Great Egrets and a Hamerkop made the sum total of the water birds – a far cry from January 2004.

Woodland birds totalled 45, among which we found Spotted Flycatcher, Chin-spot Batis, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and White-bellied Sunbirds, Levaillant's Cuckoo, Black Cuckooshrike and Striped Kingfisher. In the grass, Rattling Cisticola, Croaking Cisticola and Zitting Cisticola, Black Coucal, many Pin-tailed Whydahs, African Stonechat, Southern Red Bishop, Yellow-throated Longclaw and Orange-breasted Waxbill. What was interesting were the hundred and hundreds, if not thousands, of Barn Swallows feeding over the large tobacco land, on goodness knows what, but they were very active. And so, back to the Landrover for some much-needed samboes and coffee and the usual setting-the-world-straight chat! This was interrupted by Danny, binoes to eyes, and the excited announcement of grey storks yonder! Well, for a moment, we paused...*Grey Storks?*...no such thing...they were Secretarybirds...no...they turned out to be *White Storks*!!

Merle Mitchell

TAIL FEATHERS

Recent Sightings

An excellent viewing of a Livingstone's Flycatcher was seen at HIPPO POOLS in the UMFURUDZI Nat. Park, calling and gleaning the tangled creepers outside the lodges at approximately 5.30 a.m., Dec 18th. Narina Trogons were there in full force with about 8 individual birds calling and displaying in a 200m stretch of riverine forest. Hippo Pools is an excellent bird-watching venue, with many diverse habitats, and an exciting/unusual species listing, just an easy few hours drive from Harare.

Recently in Arcturus, a light ashy-grey Retz's Helmet-shrike was seen associating with 3 other "normal" black coloured Retz's Helmet-shrike. Is this a colour variation, or juvenile plumage? The bird was noted to be slightly submissive to its 3 normal coloured counterparts?? Any info? Please call 011 610 222 or ecolynx@zol.co.zw **Darryl Tiran**

Successful Relocation

Valmai Lewis and hubby noticed in January that a pair of Bronze Mannikins had built a nest in the corner of the rolled-up blind on the balcony of their HARARE Avenues home. They had a dilemma when the rains came and the blind had to be lowered to keep out the deluge, made worse when they found two tiny fluffy chicks in the nest. The nest had to be moved – to an empty flowerpot, stuffed with newspaper and wedged in a corner of the balcony. Knowing that parent birds often abandoned their family in such circumstances, Val sought advice. Came feeding time and a feast of a damp mixture of ProNutro and brown bread was ready to be proffered when there was a chirp from above and.... down came Mother, followed shortly by another chirp, from Father! The family was successfully fledged and continue to do well!

A resident in a garden complex off 2nd Street Ext. HARARE has acquired a lodger – a Spectacled Weaver, who insists on entering her flat whenever he finds an open window! Apart from crumbs from in and around the toaster in the kitchen, it has not been established what the attraction is. His first entry resulted in the breakage of 3 liqueur glasses. Fine to welcome birds into one's life but it can get a bit out of hand! It is hoped that a few strategically placed crusts will prove an irresistible OUTSIDE attraction in weeks to come. Has anyone else experienced a similar, determined intrusion?

Rita Mills

NOTICEBOARD

FIELD OBSERVATIONS FOR HONEYGUIDE

Colin Baker is getting quite a lot of useful info from Field Cards, but would like contributors to please RECORD ACTUAL NUMBERS SEEN. Please also remember to include notes on any exceptional sightings. Also, please send contributions for Field Obs to Colin at bakerc@msasa.co.zw and not to the email address that currently appears in *Honeyguide*.

BABBLER REPORTS AND OBSERVATIONS

Would those submitting reports and observations on bird sightings to *Babbler*, PLEASE TRY TO INCLUDE THE QDS (see the Karoi reports) or enough information (road, mile peg etc.) so that we can work it out. Thanks, Ed.

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FOR SALE: There are various bird books available to buy at BLZ offices. Please contact Alice.

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