

# BABBLER

The Newsletter of -

## BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

ISSUE # 70 – January-March 2006

### COMMITTEES

	Mashonaland	☎	Matabeleland	☎
<b>Chairman:</b>	Dave Rockingham-Gill	882412	Julia Duprée	246269
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	Ken Wilson	745231	Dudley Hubbard	240127
	Jennifer Carter	300082	Margie Pearce	247009

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**BEST WISHES TO YOU ALL FOR THE NEW YEAR – GOOD BIRDING!**

### MEMBERSHIP FEES FOR 2006

The new BirdLife membership fees from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2006 will be the ZW\$ equivalent of US\$ 7.00, charged at the official bank rate at the time of paying (currently \$500000 for the year). We need to take this measure in order to partially inflation-proof BLZ.

We realise this is a ten-fold increase on last year's subscription fee, but please remember that this fee barely covers production and postage of *Babbler*, and does not cover any costs of the production of *Honeyguide*, which is also received as a membership benefit.

No Invoices will be sent. Please remit to BirdLife offices or contact your local branch.

The ASSISTED MEMBERSHIP FUND is available to those, including current members, who cannot afford the increase. Contact BirdLife or your Branch to be a beneficiary. Contributions to the funds are always welcome.

### BABBLER 2006

In order to minimise costs, it has been decided to produce *Babbler* quarterly from 2006. This issue covers outings planned in January, February and March. The next issue will be out by the last week of March, the 3<sup>rd</sup> at the end of June and the 4<sup>th</sup> at the end of September.

This means we all have to plan further ahead for outings and other information that we want in *Babbler* and might not be reminded twice about some outings. Details of the National AGM will be in the next issue.

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **MASHONALAND BRANCH**

#### **Regular outings**

Sundays January 1<sup>st</sup>, February and March 5<sup>th</sup>: 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 January 8<sup>th</sup>, February and March 12<sup>th</sup>: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary. 6.30 a.m. Meet at 06.30 a.m. at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West. Bring chairs and refreshments. Beginners are most welcome and spare binoculars will be available.

Saturday/Sunday January 21<sup>st</sup>/22<sup>nd</sup>: Alex Masterson's Vlei Walks 6:30 a.m. Meet at Marlborough vlei at 6:30 a.m. See below for directions. We hope the vlei will be nice and wet this year.

Sunday February 26<sup>th</sup>: Bluff Bill Acacias and vlei 6:30 a.m. Meet at 2 Helena Road. The vlei is behind Westgate shopping centre and security will be provided.

Sunday March 26<sup>th</sup>: Wild Geese Lodge 6:30 a.m. Meet at Wingate Golf Club.

#### **Thursday evening meetings**

January 19<sup>th</sup>, Mashonaland Branch AGM with annual reports on Mukuvisi and Chivero. Salads will be provided to go with the pies and cash bar.

February 16<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Bob Challis, PhD. on Edmund Selous, brother of F.C., an ornithologist 100 years ahead of his time, and other ornithologists of the same era. It should be a fascinating evening.

March 16<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Neil Deacon, an experienced and avid falconer who has just bred a Taita Falcon will give an illustrated talk on Taita Falcons, how to identify them in comparison to similar raptors, and where to find them in Zimbabwe.

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

2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Thursdays (12<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> January, 9<sup>th</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup> February & March). Meet at 4:00 p.m. provided Ian Riddell is available. For confirmation contact Ian on 339716 or [gemsaf@mango.zw](mailto:gemsaf@mango.zw) Bring cash to pay for security.

### **MATABELELAND BRANCH**

#### Monthly Outings

January: Waterfowl counts throughout the month: Aisleby, Ngamo, Hwange pans, Mbazhe Pan, Fort Rixon Dam, if conditions and funding permit. Tel: Julia 246269.

January 18<sup>th</sup>, Visit to How Mine to view the swallow roost. Leave town at 4.30 p.m., share transport and bring refreshments. Tel: Penny on 237777.

February 4<sup>th</sup>, Matabeleland AGM at Crosses' home, 58 Northway, Burnside. 10.30 am followed by braai. Bring-and-share lunch. Braai fire available. Bring deck chairs and tables. Tel: Penny, or Jeanette on 240093.

February 18<sup>th</sup>, Video afternoon; "Life of Birds" 3.00 p.m. at the Feathers, 6 Qalisa Retirement Village, Suburbs, followed by bring-and-share tea. Tel Penny 237777.

March 4<sup>th</sup>, Talk (speaker to be confirmed). 3.00 p.m. at the Duprees, 12 Ilanda Gardens, Ilanda, followed by bring-and-share tea. Tel Julia.

March 19<sup>th</sup>, Outing to a farm in Figtree (to be confirmed). All day, leaving town at 8.30 a.m. Share transport. Take tea, lunch and tea. Tel Penny or Julia.

April 8<sup>th</sup>, Outing to Umgusa Nature Reserve, Vic Falls Road. Leave town at 7.30 am., share transport, morning trip, small entry fee. Ring Penny.

Aisleby: last Saturday or Sunday of every month. Contact Julia for details.

### **EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB**

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

Sunday January 29th: Osborne Dam 07:00 a.m. Carl Beel 023 416249

Sunday February 26th: Mature Heights 07:00 a.m. Carl Beel 023 416249

Sunday March 26th: Africa University 07:00 am. Carl Beel 023 416249

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](mailto:cbeel@zol.co.zw)

### **Karoi Bird Club**

Co-ordinator Merle Mitchell PO Box 398 Karoi ☎ 064-6436

### **ACTIVITIES**

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

### **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.

### **REPORTS**

#### **NATIONAL**

#### **CONSERVATION**

Funding for conservation work

A proposal for the project "Aerial surveys and institutional capacity development for improved conservation of the Wattled Crane in the Driefontein Grasslands, Central Zimbabwe" was submitted to the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund. This proposal was approved and work has already started.

Another project on "Developing local institutional capacity for community-based IBA conservation and livelihood enhancement In the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe" was submitted to DGIS-TMF/BirdLife

for funding and was approved. Work on this project has already commenced in the Sanyatwe Communal Lands in the Eastern highlands.

The Jensen Foundation finally approved the funding for the purchase of Monavale Vlei. BLZ will work to finish the formalities of the project by the middle of January 2006. Meanwhile, the Monavale Environmental Action Group has done fantastic work to conserve the vlei using their own resources. Special gratitude goes to Dorothy Wakeling and her team.

The Netherlands Embassy has approved funds to continue with the Database Project until July 2006. The work will mainly involve the computerisation of the Nest Record Cards and the Field Cards that are at the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo. BLZ has been granted permission by the Director of the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, Dr. Mahachi, to borrow cards from the museum, in Bulawayo for computerisation. This is a result of excellent groundwork by Professor Peter Frost and equally good follow-up by The Director, Ms Clare Davies.

BirdLife Zimbabwe managed to purchase two used vehicles for field work through funding sourced by the Conservation Department. This comes as a huge relief to the Department as the shortage of vehicles was our major problem in 2005.

#### IBA Monitoring

IBA audit work is continuing. The aim of the audit process is to establish the current state of the IBA with a view to developing a long-term conservation programme for these areas. After the audit the IBAs will be monitored by members and identified collaborators from government institutions and Site Support Groups.

#### Eastern Highlands Project Launch

The project "Developing local institutional capacity for community-based IBA conservation and livelihood enhancement in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe" has been launched in Sanyatwe Communal Lands. The project aims to train locals in livelihood enhancement projects and IBA conservation. A student from Bindura, Bester Mudereri, will study the Blue Swallow population in the area with help from BLZ staff.

#### **DR. C. CHIRARA, BLZ Conservation Programme Manager**

Congratulations to Chip on his successful project proposals and continuing good work. Ed.

#### WATTLED CRANE CONSERVATION

##### **Training and exchange visit to South Africa**

I undertook a two-week tour of South African crane and wetland conservation projects during the period 22 August – 3 September. The tour was aimed at developing my technical capacity to implement activities under the project "Wattled Crane Conservation in the Driefontein Grasslands" funded by Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund. I managed to consult and share experiences with experts in the fields of crane conservation, environmental education and wetland management from the Endangered Wildlife Trust, KZN Ezemvelo Wildlife, WESSA and Mondi Wetlands Project. I learnt new techniques that are applicable in our crane programme, namely crane monitoring, wetland assessment, wetland rehabilitation, stakeholder lobbying, designing education and awareness materials, carrying out aerial surveys, crop depredation control and poison control.

##### **SAWAG Symposium, Nylstroom, Limpopo Province**

I was invited to present a paper on the Driefontein Crane and Wetland Conservation project at the South African Wetland Action Group symposium in October. The invitation was a direct outcome of the interaction I had with officers from the Mondi Wetlands Project and the Ministry of Economic Development, Environment and Tourism during my training and exchange trip in August 2005. My presentation was entitled "Managing wetlands for people and cranes in the Driefontein Grasslands". The presentation covered history of crane conservation, factors considered in the conceptualisation of the conservation project, step-by-step implementation procedure, key lessons and future project plans.

### **Aerial survey of Wattled Cranes in the DRIEFONTEIN Grasslands**

An aerial census of Wattled Cranes was conducted on 1 November in the Driefontein Grasslands. The survey covered all known and potential breeding and foraging sites in the IBA and a total of 44 Wattled Cranes and 45 Grey Crowned Cranes were counted.  
OSIMAN MABHACHI (Conservation Officer)

### EDUCATION

#### **Campaigning for the Southern Ground-hornbill**

This campaign has enabled the education sector to reach new districts and spread the message of conserving birds over more of the country. Responses received from rural farmers and schools reveal there are both positive and negative attitudes towards this well-known species. In this department efforts will be made to highlight cultural beliefs that may lead to the conservation of this hornbill using indigenous knowledge as a useful tool.

The organisers of the 4th International Conference support both myself and Ngoni Chiweshe enabling us to attend this event at Bela Bela, Limpopo Province, South Africa in November. We presented papers at this stimulating event and would like to share the information in our papers and our experiences with the Mashonaland branch at an evening meeting later on in 2006.

#### **The conservation of Marlborough and Monavale Vlei**

It has been impressive to follow the work being done to protect Monavale Vlei which has been spearheaded by a dedicated BLZ member and supporting committees.

Schools have been drawn into the urban wetlands awareness campaign. Marlborough primary school took a dry season walk which they enjoyed; Belvedere primary schoolchildren numbering over 110 also visited the vlei in November. They were fascinated by the guided tours they participated in and learnt something about the rich biodiversity of the vlei. Besides birds the wild pig was seen and droppings of duiker and reedbuck. Leading the four groups of learners were Dorothy Wakeling (Chairperson of Monavale Environmental Action Group), Juliet M Van Ongevalle (part time education educator at BLZ), Jimmy Muropa (Environmental Scout for Monavale) and Rueben Njolomole (a student on attachment).

Further schools that requested a walk will have to wait until next year as the term abruptly ended a week early.

Marlborough vlei is not blossoming under a similar scheme and with the rains is becoming more of a 'wreck' than ever. Recently BLZ Conservation Officer has made contact with the owners – Gulliver and an agreement is being reached on conservation measures to be taken. This will give a start-off point for Marlborough and other Harare residents with BLZ members and stakeholders to begin the processes needed to save the vlei. One of the first moves may be to produce a flyer to inform all residents on plans for Marlborough using the Wetlands Day as a kick-off point.

Leslee Maasdorp, Education Programme Manager

### Mukuvisi Woodland News

#### Use of the hide

The new hide is now open and may be visited by members of Birdlife. If you wish to use the hide please arrange at the Mukuvisi Woodlands Office to collect the keys. You will be required to sign in and please return the keys. There will be no additional charge besides the general entry fee payable by visitors to the woodlands.

Finishing touches are still being made to the hide and surrounds and this is likely to be an ongoing exercise.

The Mukuvisi Woodlands Association wishes to thank those persons who contributed towards this project

#### Woodcutting

Illegal woodcutting continues to be a problem in the Public Walking Area and Game Paddock. The electric perimeter fence erected a few years ago has done a lot to contain the problem; however people still manage to enter.

Entry is mostly at night and the culprits are often security guards coming off duty! A more serious problem is posed by commercial wood sellers. An alarm may be set off when entry is made through the fence and the security staff at the woodlands is then alerted. Co-operation is also sometimes received from neighbours in the suburbs who sometimes phone in.

The problem of illegal woodcutting is likely to be an ongoing one and will worsen as the areas surrounding Harare become more denuded of trees and whilst paraffin remains unobtainable! At present the problem is being contained and this is largely due to the commitment of the security staff at the woodlands who have shown a remarkable dedication to duty at all hours!

Fines for offenders are quite small although equipment may be confiscated and scotch-carts are impounded. There is a need to improve the security network by providing a better radio network, improved back-up from security personnel for the security staff and improvement of the alarm system of the fence. Are you able to assist or do you have any ideas or know of anyone who might be able to assist? Please contact the Mukuvisi Woodlands Office tel. 747111.

Geoff Lowe

## **MASHONALAND BRANCH**

### GOSHO PARK, Marondera, Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2005. (QDS 1831B1)

Despite the continuing fuel shortage, 15 of us enjoyed a splendid morning's birding at this attractive venue. Thanks to good security, there had not been the bush fires which seem to have affected the rest of the country; all the miombo woodland was in leaf and looking fresh and inviting. On our arrival, we were met by Basil Riddell, now resident in the area, who was to lead our walk around the park and, coincidentally, a flock of European Bee-eaters. Although our final count was 78 species, individual totals varied greatly due to the frequent fragmentation of the group. Also, the cloud and cool breeze were not really conducive to avian activity which may explain the relatively low count and the fact that I hoped for specials like Rufous-bellied Tit did not appear. However, all of us had sightings and experiences to savour. 3 of us had the rare privilege of watching 2 African Yellow White-eyes feeding a young Brown-backed Honeybird among the canopy leaves. Another group came across a singing male Miombo Rock-thrush, a bird that seems to be missing from Mukuvisi in recent years.

We left the main camp by a meandering path into the Masasa and soon came across miombo specials like Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Whyte's Barbet, Ashy Tit [Miombo Tit?] and Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird. The first of many African Paradise-flycatcher and Violet-backed Starling were also easily identified. On one of the many rocky kopjies, we saw both male and female Mocking Cliff-chat and Kurrichane Thrush were everywhere. We did hear and see Golden-breasted Bunting but, Cabanis's Bunting could not be found.

On emerging into the vleis we were met by a small flock of Orange-breasted Waxbill, African Stonechat and Variable Sunbird. There were many vleis and dams but virtually all were completely dry, hence the small number of waterbirds – 1 Hamerkop, 1 African Wattled Lapwing, 1 Grey Heron and an African Fish-eagle, but that was probably not in the park. The raptor count was also rather disappointing; a Walberg's Eagle, an African Harrier-hawk, 2 Steppe Buzzard, a Little Sparrowhawk and an African Goshawk.

Back in the woodland, we came across Brimstone Canary, Southern Black Flycatcher and Fork-tailed Drongo, any number of African Yellow White-eye and Black-backed Puffback, noisy Chin-spot Batis and flitting Willow Warbler, a few Red-headed Weavers and Yellow-throated Petronia. Black-headed Orioles were constantly calling and African Golden Oriole was also seen. Among the smaller birds, difficult to find in the healthy leaf growth but quite vocal were Green-capped Eremomela, Bar-throated Apalis, Grey Penduline-tit and the delightful Southern Hylia.

We eventually reached the dry river course and dam at the foot of the huge granite rocks, usually a good spot for specials. Indeed, although not calling loudly, the Boulder Chat was there and seen by all. In fact, this area produced lots of birds for all of us and caused a splintering of the group as knots of birders stopped to observe different species. By now, coffee and snacks were needed so we made our way back to the camp to share our sightings and experiences. Thanks are due to Basil for guiding us and, presumably to Peterhouse for allowing us to visit free of charge their superb game park.

Mentioning game, in the course of our wanderings, a fair variety was seen; 7 sable, 3 giraffe, 1 duiker, 1 klipspringer, 3 Vervet monkeys, 7 zebra, 20 impala, 2 squirrel, 3 wildebeest, a Rhombic Night Adder and an indisputably late Scrub Hare.  
Ken Dixon

Big Birding Day, 26<sup>th</sup> November, CLEVELAND DAM, HAKA PARK and LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY.

Our first site was Cleveland Dam and Haka Park. Always nice to see were 10 African Pygmy-goose and 4 White-backed Duck. Four White-throated Swallow were sitting on the fence on the dam wall and probably breeding under the walkway nearby. In the upper reaches of the dam, in Haka Park, we came across 4 African Snipe. There is a solitary tree on the waters edge and it had about 50 European Bee-eaters enjoying themselves perch-hunting.

The tree also had an African Golden Oriole in it that was drinking in flight like a Barn Swallow, and it did this several times from a perch in the tree. Has anyone else noted this behaviour? My 1996 edition of Roberts, says that the Eurasian Golden Oriole bathes by plunge diving from a perch, but is silent on how they drink.

We stopped for tea among the rocks and found both the Freckled Nightjar and the Fiery-necked Nightjars and several African Green-pigeons. The woodland was low on birds when we got there at midday, but we got some Miombo Tits, a Levillant's Cuckoo and Lizard Buzzard. Meanwhile in the air a couple of raptors were unidentified but we did get Steppe Buzzard and Black-chested Snake-eagle.

On our way to Lake Chivero we saw Rock Dove, Red-winged Starling as well as 47 Marabou Storks at the abattoir opposite the Snake Park. We were excited to see 3 Oribi near the railway line.

There was a bonanza of waterbirds at the Bird Sanctuary including 7 Pied Avocets, maybe showing that Lake Chivero is now quite salty. We did not see any pelicans but there were 50 Grey-headed Gull sitting on a sandbank, 4 Black-winged Stilt nearby, a couple of Southern Pochard, Red-billed Teal, Great Egret on a nest, Yellow-billed Egret and Little Egrets, Green Sandpipers and several hundred Ruffs. About 50 Glossy Ibis and 30 African Sacred Ibis and a couple of African Spoonbills were there too. The water level is low and there were plenty of Squacco Herons on the Water Hyacinth. A pair of Egyptian Goose with 9 youngsters paddled on the lake with numerous Little Grebes, being watched by several nearby crocs. Getting late we walked back to the car seeing Greater Blue-eared Starling, 6 impala and found a porcupine quill. The Bird Sanctuary had the best waterbirds I had ever seen there, and our final count for the 12 hours was 149 species.

David Rockingham-Gill (team 'Committee Creepers' with Richard Dennison & Jennifer Carter)

Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> November. Presentation on Birds and Fish by Dr. Brian Marshall.

This was another excellent evening that made 27 of us think about things that maybe we hadn't thought about before; Dr. Marshall has worked with Kit Hustler and others over many years studying birds and fish at Lake Kariba and Chivero and told us that we have 43 species of birds that are dependant on fish, along with others that eat fish as part of their diet. The world over, fishermen have feared the effect that birds will have on fish stocks. Dr. Marshall showed us statistics that proved that these fears totally unfounded. Even the numerous cormorants that breed at Chivero have a minimal effect especially compared with the tonnage removed by fishermen!

However, we were told that the number of fishing-eating birds can be a very good indicator of the availability of fish and diminishing bird numbers can be a warning when an area is being over-fished. Dr. Marshall went on to discuss a project that studied how three of our most common waterbirds that congregate together in the dams manage to deal with competition for food. The study, conducted by Kit Hustler, showed that White-breasted Cormorant and Reed Cormorants and African Darters have dealt with the problem by feeding at different depths. Strangely enough, the large Darter feeds in the shallowest water; down to about a couple metres. The Reed Cormorant, that is a tenth of the size of the White-breasted Cormorant, feeds at 5 to 10 metres and the White-breasted even deeper.

Dr. Marshall explained that the biggest threat to local fish species is not fish-eating birds but the introduction by sports fishermen some years ago of the wide-mouthed bass. This voracious species has been known to eat Little Grebes and probably the young of other waders as well as indigenous fish. It could be a great threat to species such as Common Moorhens and African Jacana.

Thank you, Dr. Marshall, for an absorbing and enjoyable evening. Jennifer Carter

## MATABELELAND BRANCH

### Shashe Wilderness Camp, TULI, 4-7 November 2005 (QDS 2129C3-2229A1)

I think we were ten in the end — we were certainly ten in the beginning but there was a certain amount of boxing and coxing along the line which tended to cause confusion.

How long to get there? Door to door? Everyone who's anyone and who's been doing it for years says four and a half hours no matter how fast or slow you go, no matter whether you stop in Gwanda or not. But there's always one, isn't there, who's different. This particular one arrived with the outrageous – nay, audacious – claim that he had done it in three. Naturally not a soul believed him, despite the fact he had two female witnesses, and anyway he's a comparatively new member of BLZ so doesn't yet have the right to smash records.

We all had a pretty good journey — our group travelled in a Landrover on a lovely scenic unspoiled route through the Matopos and (reluctantly) joined the Gwanda road somewhere above Mbalabala. Not a lot of birding was done on the way, though after we hit the gravel we did see a White-necked Raven gasping in the heat on its exposed nest right at the top of a baobab.

Shashe camp is situated right next to the river (no water in it this time) in an incredibly historic area. One afternoon Harry took us along the old pioneer ox-wagon route which comes from somewhere up beyond the old airstrip, runs down the ridge towards the Parks compound (where there are three old graves), along the river's edge, round behind the camp and onwards round the end of another ridge, up through a cutting lawn in the rock and thence down to the river to cross – exactly where the crossing actually was is not known. How on earth did they manoeuvre their enormous spans over and through such hostile rocky terrain? It's all fascinating.

Anyway, back to the camp. On arrival we were greeted by the glorious sounds of African Green-pigeons – masses of them – an African Mourning Dove, White-browed Robin-chat, squeaking squirrels and the inglorious sound but beautiful sight of Meves's Starlings. Someone filled the birdbath and immediately there appeared Red-billed Firefinches and Jameson's Firefinches and an African Paradise-flycatcher. Over by the pump, apart from Vervets, were more Meves's Starlings, a Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Blue Waxbill, Collared Sunbird and Terrestrial Brownbul.

In the middle of the river, quite far away, was a largish puddle of water in which was a Tawny Eagle. Around the edge pattered White-fronted Plovers and Kittlitz's Plovers, along with posturing Blacksmith Lapwings and aggressive Three-banded Plovers. And into the water out of the dusk appeared a posse of Bush Pigs. Over the days, this puddle attracted a whole host of species including kudu, African Hawk-eagle, Wahlberg's Eagle and Martial Eagles, impala, Barn Swallows and Sand Martins. Later appeared single Abdim's Stork and Saddle-billed Storks. But the most popular visitors were several small squadrons of Namaqua Sandgrouse, lovely things that appeared every day. A walk upstream along the river bank produced Swainson's Spurfowl and Natal Spurfowl, a dead – very dead and partly dismembered – Verreaux's Eagle-owl on the sand under a fig tree. Could it have eaten poisoned rats from the settlement up the hill? And someone saw a couple of nightjars lying in the river, probably Freckled Nightjars that were later heard calling.

That night there was a howling gale that cooled everyone off a bit. Next morning the tent dwellers (yes, you've guessed it, the same who did it in three) claimed they'd heard the crashing and chomping of branches by a group of elephants passing close. No-one else heard a thing except an African Scops-owl. *But* next morning's sortie revealed several sets of elephant footprints ranging from those of tiny wees (everything's relative) to giants, and the local news was that a herd of about 15 had in fact gone through and along the river bank.

Saturday morning we set off (quite) early for Sentinel Ranch and the dinosaur. The trip to SENTINEL was fascinating and right at the start we saw Yellow-billed Oxpecker and Red-billed Oxpeckers and later on a group of 3 adult Southern Ground-hornbills. The amazing vegetation and the absolute barrenness of the landscape has to be seen to be believed. We arrived at the homestead gate in a cloud of dust and noted a pair of Verreaux's Eagles flying overhead and a couple of signs informing us that 'lions roam free' and 'foot-and-mouth free buffalo' live within. So we let Harry out to open the gate without touching the electric fence or falling into the elephant-sized cattle grid – all of which he achieved. After briefly meeting up with our



host, Digby Bristow, and taking note of the roaming lions, we headed out again (through Harry's gate) and off to the dinosaur dig – now protected from the elements by a little roofed boma.

Awe-inspiring – absolutely awe-inspiring. A real live ancient, really ancient, dinosaur. Quite a small little thing, head down in the rock not yet excavated, so what we were looking at was its hips, back legs, long tail and a bit of a front knuckle. Now I'm going to spoil it all – because I can't remember much at all of the wealth of information imparted by Cecilia who is incredibly knowledgeable about this little dinosaur – so I'll keep you all in suspense till I can ask her again. But I do remember that it's millions of years old and thought to be a female. We couldn't take our eyes off it, and several of us came away not really believing that we'd been looking at the real thing!

Back to Digby's home for a snack lunch and a very interesting and enjoyable chat in his lovely garden on the edge of the river, where we sat on teak chairs, and spied African Mourning Doves, African Green-pigeons and Speckled Mousebirds to name but a few.

Following a snooze in camp, a quiet potter that evening through the riverine vegetation produced Spotted Flycatcher, a duiker, another Swainson's Spurfowl, more African Green-pigeon, Black-backed Puffback, Southern Grey-headed Sparrows and Yellow-throated Petronias, Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler, a senile goat, African Paradise-flycatcher & Ashy Flycatcher hawking from the same bush, an African Harrier-hawk and Bearded Woodpecker. John and Jenny took a long walk up river and reported several interesting sightings, notably of Eurasian Golden Oriole – three, no less – another dead Verreaux's Eagle-owl not far from the first and a Broad-billed Roller. The night was warm and it rained just a bit – and all night we heard an African Scops-owl pip-ping and a doleful Verreaux's Eagle-owl, possibly mourning the loss of its family?

Up early next morning. One third of the party drove across the river to explore Fort Tuli and the circle. A second third headed up to the old airstrip where, despite a cold wind, we saw Temminck's Courser, a couple more Namaqua Sandgrouse, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Long-billed Crombec, Golden-breasted Bunting, no Kori Bustard, Crowned Lapwing and lots of little singing and dancing Sabota Larks. And the third cannot be accounted for as we don't know what they got up to.

After a quick bite and small pause to regroup, off we drove again through part of the same fascinating, arid countryside to an irrigation dam where erstwhile African Openbills used to occur in goodly numbers. However, there was considerably less water than last year, and a certain amount of human disturbance in the form of young fisher-people and their dogs. We saw Common Sandpiper, Grey Heron, had a wonderful view of a Green-backed Heron's front, Black-winged Stilt, Common Greenshank, Hamerkop and a couple of Cattle Egrets tucking into a very dead cow. We raised a sandgrouse and watched carefully as it landed behind a nearby rock and evaporated, never to be seen again.

Monday morning revealed that some hefty downpours had occurred in the night but though we found the gravel road slippery and slushy it was no major challenge to anyone.

Our total count was 130 covering a broad variety of species including a Grey Tit-flycatcher and Kori Bustard both worthy of note. Just sitting in camp and without really trying we also heard four cuckoos, four doves, two francolin, several squirrels and three woodpeckers.

As a matter of interest, records kept by Harry Erwee of sightings between 1989 and 2002 indicate a low of 56 in 1991 to a high of 154 in 1997. Of particular note was a Collared Sunbird in 1989 for which a rarity report was submitted and in 1990 the first reported sighting of Namaqua Sandgrouse. The following year a Grey Tit-flycatcher was seen occupying a nest abandoned by a barbet in a Schotia tree next to the kitchen. In 1995, heavy rain over the new year period filled a small pan near the camp which became a bird paradise and the 152 species noted included superb sightings and photo opportunities of Little Bittern and Dwarf Bittern, African Spoonbill, four species of duck, White Stork, Saddle-billed Stork and Yellow-billed Stork, Hadedda Ibis, White-breasted Cormorant and Little Grebe.

This was our second trip to Tuli. Thank you to Cecilia & Dudley Hubbard and Harry Erwee for their super organisation, for passing on their deep knowledge of this historical area (gained from their long association with Shashe camp), and for attending to our every whim – and all this despite the fact that Dudley was suffering from a seriously infected foot.

### World Birdwatch October-November

Our contribution towards October's World Birdwatch was a display in the courtyard of the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo entitled "A tribute to the Birds of Zimbabwe". As it turned out the Museum had just set up an exhibition of World Heritage sites, namely Victoria Falls, Matopos, Great Zimbabwe and Khami Ruins, so we arranged our displays to appropriately complement and fill out the sections for each of these sites.

We also put together a special feature on Southern Ground-hornbills in Matabeleland, for which we had prepared posters from our own photographs, and included a questionnaire based on that prepared by Leslee Maasdorp.

Throughout our Tribute, we ran a quiz, the answers to which were found in the displays. Every correct sheet qualified for a prize consisting of a lovely annotated poster of the Birds of Matopos, painted by Penny Feather.

On launch day we talked to school groups about the various displays, and undertook a public walk in Centenary Park, all of which proved popular and informative.

Something in excess of 101 schools passed through the exhibition, we received 130 entries for the quiz from those who had the opportunity to linger of which 54 were correct. Seven ground-hornbill questionnaires were completed on the spot and we await the return in due course of others distributed further afield. This is an ongoing exercise on behalf of Leslee.

At the request of the Museum we extended our exhibition until the end of November — indeed they would have liked it till the end of the year! And there's more, as they say! We have been invited to make this an annual event — probably with variations on a theme — and have already been slotted into the Museum's 2006 calendar!

### Big Birding Day, 26-27 November

Entries are still coming in for this year's event from those further afield. As far we know the number of teams entered was 7. Results will be sent to all as soon as these are ready. As before, a composite checklist will be prepared and sent to the Harare office for submission to the South African event. A full report will be included in the April-June *Babbler*

### Festive Lunch at Mabukuwene, 3 December

Despite heavy competition from other functions and continuous drizzling rain, a smallish group and their dog came to this lovely venue for this year's festive lunch. The shared catering was up to its usual Matland, five-star standard, and wine of various colours flowed freely, continuously and endlessly. Entertainment was provided by a green table leg that lashed out at every passing person it could reach, and we all enjoyed the peaceful venue, mellow atmosphere and friendly company. We did not enjoy, however, the ill-timed cloudburst just as we were packing up to leave. However, I'm informed that whilst we're allowed to not enjoy rain, traditionally, in Matabeleland, we may not complain about it. Julia Dupree

### VICTORIA FALLS Birding Report, November 2005 (QDS: 1725D4)

Having only recently arrived in the Vic Falls area, and with much building and refurbishing going on at the lodge, it was with great trepidation that I awaited the advent of the Harare birding contingent who had decided to visit the area to see the many usual and a few unusual birds amidst the most breathtaking of sceneries in Africa. Then, also to compete as a team, known collectively as the 'Rocking Pratts', in the Big Birding Day, the participants being Ian Riddell, Dave Dalziel, Tony Alegria & myself.

The walking trails along the upper Zambezi River, the view over the gorge, hotel grounds, golf course, parks lodges, rainforest, suburbs and drives thru the national parks were all scrutinised. In fact, we were so very determined to leave no stones unturned, that the settling ponds at the local sewage works were checked for vagrant Ruddy Turnstone! Judging by the profusion of certain bird species, it could be noted that a higher calorific diet is had by the local inhabitants.

A few highlights of the trip were the visit to the peaceful Gorges Lodge and lush Imbabala Lodge, both offering superb hospitality, and really great birding venues. During the short stay, we managed to clock up a total of 245 species after a few days. The rather wet conditions did not help, as there was rapid bird dispersal into the newly leafing trees that provided new feeding grounds for many. Often mentioned on

the trip was, 'if only you had been here a few weeks back', as many birds were then seeking refuge and food in the green leafy suburbs.

During the 24 hour bird count the Rocking Pratts clocked 183 species, with many usual garden birds deciding to remain silent and invisible over this crucial time, causing much excitement & annoyance!

Notable trip inclusions were Black-crowned Night-heron, both subspecies of Little Bittern, low-perched highly-visible Bat Hawk, pair of recently fledged Peregrine Falcon, being tentatively guarded and fed by the parents, Dickinson's Kestrel, Kori Bustard, Lesser Jacana, African Snipe, Collared Pratincole and Rock Pratincole (it would have been rather embarrassing if we had failed to find the Teams namesake...) and as there are only a few random pairs left feeding late chicks, we were quite lucky to get in good sightings. Long-toed Lapwing, breeding plumage Whiskered Tern, African Skimmer, African Mourning Dove, excellent and unparalleled views of Schalow's Turaco, African Emerald Cuckoo – heard but not seen, Coppery-tailed Coucal, spectacular aerial and calling displays by colonies of African Black Swift, Hartlaub's Babbler, Capped Wheatear, Collared Palm-thrush, Bearded Scrub-Robin, Great Reed-warbler just in, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Plain-backed Pipit, Northern Grey-headed Sparrow and Southern Grey-headed Sparrow. Unfortunately, the highly sought Taita Falcon & Brown Firefinch remained as elusive as ever.

The Vic Falls area remains a favourite Zim birding hotspot, where many diverse habitats are found including rocky gorges, dry savanna, miombo woodland, teak / Baikiaea woodland, rainforest, riverine, suburban, swampy floodplains, papyrus islands and jesse bush. All are easily accessible, and with Hwange, Kazuma, Livingstone and Chobe all easily reachable, making great birding possibilities very real. Our most grateful thanks go to Julia and the Byo BLZ Team for organizing yet another countrywide Big Birding Day, great fun and a great success. Well done Matland!!

Darryl Tiran

### **EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB**

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2003: Valley Lodge Hotel and surrounds, MUTARE (QDS 1932B1)

It was cool and breezy when we arrived at this property in the Munene Valley. As is normal these days, we were only 4 but all keen to explore the very dry, basically miombo area, characterized by deep gullies with some vegetation and sparsely wooded hills. Throughout the morning we were aware of large numbers of White-necked Raven and Pied Crows, occasionally joined by other raptors such as Yellow-billed Kite, Steppe Buzzard and Augur Buzzard and Wahlberg's Eagle. Later we saw 3 Marabou Storks and an Abdim's Stork.

On our way through the gardens we met our first of many African Paradise-flycatchers, Willow Warbler, Violet-backed Starling plus many common residents. Sombre Greenbul and Yellow-bellied Greenbul called incessantly. Along the gully we came across a good party of miombo birds including 2 Rufous-bellied Tits, Miombo Tits and Southern Black Tit, Green-capped Eremomela and Southern Black Flycatcher. Then our attention was diverted to 2 quiet Diderick Cuckoo busily searching for nests, I assume, at ground level and very confiding. A Lazy Cisticola called noisily from the nearby scrub and we identified Amethyst Sunbird, Variable Sunbird and Miombo Double-collared Sunbird as well as Golden-tailed Woodpecker and Cardinal Woodpecker.

On slopes of the highest hill in the grounds we heard and then saw a much sought after miombo special, Cabanis's Bunting but, apart from that, it was a hard climb with little reward. There were though, Lesser Striped Swallow, Grey-rumped Swallow and Barn Swallow, abundant African Palm-swift with now and again a Little Swift. We heard Red-chested Cuckoo and Klaas's Cuckoo and saw Ashy Flycatcher but birds were scarce in the secondary miombo and rank grass we traversed and it was getting hot so we made our way back to the vehicle with a tally of 64.

Ken Dixon

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