

BABBLER

The Newsletter of -

BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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	Mashonaland		Matabeleland	
Chairman:	Dave Rockingham-Gill	882412	Julia Duprée	246269
Members:	Richard Dennison	747567	Penny Feather	237777
	Ian Riddell	339716	Eddie Cross	240093
	Ken Wilson	745231	Dudley Hubbard	240127
	Jennifer Carter	300082	Margie Pearce	247009

NATIONAL OFFICE

Director: Clare Davies

Education Programme Manager: Leslee Maasdorp

Conservation Programme Manager: Dr. Chip Chirara **Conservation Officer:** Ngoni Chiweshe

Crane Conservation Officer: Osiman Mabhachi **Administration Officer:** Alice Chamunorwa

Address: PO Box RV 100, Runiville
35 Clyde Road, Eastlea, Harare

Telephones: 490208 / 481496

Web site: <http://site.mweb.co.zw/birdlife>

Office E-mail: birds@zol.co.zw

Babbler Editor: Jennifer Carter 300082
PO Box A1619 Avondale
Harare

Email: gcarter@mweb.co.zw

IMPORTANT NOTICE

BirdLife Zimbabwe apologises to those members who have not received recent *Babblers*. We pledge to ensure that in future all members receive the *Babbler*. However, we ask your assistance in minimising distribution costs. You can help most by accepting *Babbler* by email. If you are unable or reluctant to do that, a donation towards printing and delivery costs would be gratefully accepted.

Also to cut costs, the Calendar insert is being discontinued.

To assist us in updating our membership records, please contact BirdLife office or your local Branch with the following details:

name,

physical and postal addresses,

phone numbers,

email address

PAYMENT OF MEMBERSHIP FEES

Membership for 2006 costs US\$7 or the equivalent in Z\$ at the time of payment – in April, \$800 000. If you don't want to send a cheque, contact the office about paying direct into BirdLife account

OR

deposit at any CABS branch into Mashonaland Branch Account No. 9012703755, asking the teller to enter your name as depositor. Then contact me with details.

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 fund are always welcome.

ACTIVITIES

NATIONAL AGM – 27TH MAY 2006, BULAWAYO

The National AGM will be held in Bulawayo on Saturday, 27th May 2006, at 10:00 a.m. The venue is still being finalised. Please contact Caroline Dennison on 04-747567 / e-mail: rolly@zol.co.zw or Alice at the office as soon as possible if you want to attend.

Matabeleland members are kindly offering accommodation to those who require it – first come, first-served! – and are planning some interesting outings for the weekend.

The Agenda and a proposed Constitutional Amendment are on pages 13 and 14 of *Babbler*. Please cut them out and take them with you to the meeting.

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Regular outings

NOTE CHANGE OF TIME FOR Mukuvisi & Chivero - 07:00 May/June/July/August

Sundays April 2nd, May 7th & June 4th: Mukuvisi Woodlands. 6:30 a.m. April,

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 April 9th, May 13th, June 11th: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary. 6:30 a.m. April

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.

NEW REGULAR OUTING

Sundays April 16th, May 20th, June 18th: Monavale Vlei Walk 7:00 a.m.

Third Sunday of every month. Meet on Fenella Drive, (BS Leon side) for a walk with members of the Monavale Vlei Residents Association.

Sunday, April 23rd: A visit to a farm at Stapleford 6:30 a.m. Meet at 2, Helena Rd at 6:30 a.m. so vehicles can be safely left and transport shared. Bring chairs and refreshments.

Sunday May 28th : Christon Bank Botanic Reserve. 7:00 a.m. Meet at 2, Helena Rd at 7:00 a.m. so vehicles can be safely left and transport shared. Bring chairs and refreshments.

Sunday June 25th: Double Ro Ranch, 40 km peg Lomagundi Rd. 7:00 a.m. Meet at 2, Helena Rd at 7:00 a.m. so vehicles can be safely left and transport shared. Bring chairs and refreshments.

Thursday evening meetings

April 20th: Video. An interesting video on birds will be shown.

May 18th: Presentation on Conservation by Neil Deacon. This presentation will be given to the International Raptor Conference in Argentina later in the year.

June 15th: Clare Douie, an artist, will talk about bird art.

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 (13th/27th April, 11th/25th May, 8th/22nd June) 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.

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Monthly Outings

April 13th – 23rd Verreaux’s Eagle Survey working camp Inungu Farm, Matopos. Ring Dudley. Contact Julia for a detailed write-up via email.

Sunday May 14th: Day visit to Inge Boye’s farm near Marula, leaving town at 8:30 a.m. Take tea, lunch and tea. Ring Margie or Julia.

Saturday, May 27th: NATIONAL AGM – see details elsewhere in this *Babbler*.

Saturday June 10th: Video afternoon, “Life of Birds”. At Duprées, 12 Ilanda Gardens, 3.00 p.m., followed by bring-and-share tea. Ring Margie

Friday 30th June – Monday 3rd July: Shashe Camp, Tuli, together with the Aloe Society. Limited places. Cost is Z\$60,000 per person per night plus share of Z\$1,500,000 camp fee and staff gratuity. Ring Margie or Julia.

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 April 30th: Burma Valley 07:00 a.m. Carl Beel 023 416249

Sunday May 28th: Valley Lodge 07:00 a.m. Carl Beel 023 416249

Sunday June 25th: La Rochelle 07:00 a.m. 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

Karoi Bird Club

It is with great sadness that I announce the demise of the Karoi Bird club as co-ordinator Merle Mitchell has moved to Harare.

On behalf of BirdLife Zimbabwe, I wish to thank Merle for her contribution to our national knowledge of birds and her wonderful reports from Karoi and anecdotes for Tail Feathers. They were a highlight of my editorial day and I hope to still receive the latter. We hope to see Merle at Mashonaland outings.

Jennifer Carter, Ed.

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**

Wattled Crane survey in the DRIEFONTEIN Grasslands, Gutu (18-26/11/05)

A ground survey of Wattled Cranes *Bugeranus carunculatus* (and Grey Crowned Cranes *Balearica regulorum*) was undertaken in the Chivhu, FELIXBURG and MVUMA areas (19° 00'00" S & 19° 37'50"S, and 30° 25'00"E & 30° 00'00"E) by the author during the above-mentioned period. This survey was a follow-up on the aerial survey that had just been undertaken by N. Chiweshe, C. Davies and O. Mabhachi on 1st November 2005. Both surveys were undertaken so that we could come up with a 'near' population figure of Wattled Cranes for this national prime Wattled Crane breeding area. The most recent surveys came up with the following figures –

- a) October 2000 = 123 birds (16 pairs, 7 young and 65 floaters)
- b) September/October 2004 = 138 birds (128 adults, 11 sub adults, a single juvenile and four clutches).

Results

A total of 108 sites (both known and potential) were searched for Wattled Crane breeding pairs (Table 1). Only 31 of these sites were occupied by cranes.

1. **The total number of Wattled Cranes recorded during the survey came up to 87 birds**, 78 of which were adults and nine immature. This is a very big drop when compared with the total number recorded during the 2004 season of 138 birds (128 adults, 11 sub adults and a single juvenile). All known nest sites were also visited but none of them had been refurbished in preparation for breeding. 77.4% of the occupied territories were in resettled farming properties, with the remainder (22.6%) being in undesignated (commercial/single-owned) farmlands.

Table 1b. Summary of Table 1 & 2, plus group composition of Grey Crowned Cranes recorded during the survey (18– 26/11/05).

Species/group size	Incubating /chicks	1	2	3	4	5	6	Flocks (7+)	Totals
Wattled Crane	0	0	26	2	0	1	0	2 = (11+13)	87
Grey Crowned Crane	0	1	13	10	6	6	3	5 = 8+8+11+16+52)	224
Totals (WC)	0	0	52	6	0	5	0	24	
(CC)	0	1	26	30	24	30	18	95	

N. Chiweshe (BLZ, Field conservation Officer)

[Note: full reports of both articles are available on request at BLZ offices)

Blue Swallow *Hirundo atrocaerulea* survey in the NYANGA area of the Eastern Highlands, Zimbabwe (2005/2006 season)

The aim of this project was to have an update on the population of the Blue Swallow in the whole of Nyanga area. Childes (1988) estimated the population in the Nyanga National Park alone to be around 200-400 birds. The most recent national survey of the species was carried out during the 2000/2001 breeding season (Childes 2001), which came up with a total of 129 birds. Another survey carried out in 1996 in and around Nyanga National Park came up with 261 birds. Childes (2001) went on to say that given that the present habitat has been reduced since the earlier surveys, a reasonable estimate for Nyanga area was about 200-250 birds. A lot of negative environmental activities have since taken place in the preferred Blue Swallow habitats since the last survey in this area during the 2000/2001 breeding season. The expansion of agro-forests and the effects of the Government's Land Reform Programme in the area are a few examples. Looking at all these facts and figures, it clearly shows that a fresh survey was indeed necessary so as to come up with a new population estimate for this globally threatened species for the whole of Nyanga mist belt.

Results: December 2005 survey

A total of 155 birds were counted in December 2005. Ten of these birds were not sexed nor aged. Of those aged, males and females were proportionally equal, 61 birds each.

Since the breeding period of Blue Swallows is so short (15-39 days – incubation to fledgling. Both sexes feed the nestlings up to fledgling), most of the birds may already have finished breeding by the time this survey was carried out. A good number of young birds (15% of those counted) were already flying around with their parents. This means that most of the birds started breeding soon after their arrival in late October/early November. As has always been the case, 51% of the birds were sighted within the Nyanga National Park (Table 2). The Private Land (commercial Farms) had 39%, while the communal and resettled farmlands had only 10% of the total birds seen.

The results of this survey clearly show that the birds are threatened throughout their range, both inside and outside the Nyanga National Park. The threats include transformation of grasslands to commercial timber production and other agricultural activities; suburban (Nyanga/Troutbeck) and rural/resettled population growth; spread of alien invasive plants (especially wattle, pine and *Lantana camara*); uncontrolled veld fires; misuse of agrochemicals and pesticides; and the decline in Antbear/Aardvark-dug holes (preferred nesting sites) mainly due to the over-hunting of the animals by the continuously growing human population in both rural and resettled farming areas.

Disney is gratefully thanked for funding the whole project. The Senior Warden at Nyanga National Park is also thanked for providing us with a good guide (Tawanda Mupeyiwa) who showed us all the areas we wanted to get to inside the National Park.

March 2006 survey

A total of 252 birds were counted during this survey. A third (33%) of these birds was neither sexed nor aged. Of the males and females that were aged and sexed, males were 17.5% more than females (74 and 52 respectively). In actual fact, males out-numbered females in all the three land-use areas surveyed. If we exclude the 83 un-aged nor sexed birds from the total birds recorded, we find that **25.4% (# 43) of the birds were first-year juvenile birds.**

The national park had the highest number of birds recorded (44%) when compared to the other two land-use areas. The private lands (commercial farms) had 41%, while the communal and resettled farmlands had only 15% of the total birds recorded.

Most of the bird sightings (31 of 37 sightings) were in flocks of over three birds, five of which had more than ten birds each. The **largest flock size was of 29 birds** (7 males, 6 females, 7 immature, 9 unaged), seen foraging, some perched on twigs at an isolated 2-3 ha depression wetland next to a compound at Barwon Downs Estate, at 09:10 hours, on 2nd March. It is not quite known how early the birds get into such small units/flocks, remain or expand these flocks to a maximum of how many birds before they eventually head north in late March -early April.

The data gathered during this survey continue to indicate that the **major threats to Blue Swallows in the national park were the encroachment of exotic residual and invasive alien plants like wattle and pine.** Our discussion with the Senior Warden (Nyanga National Park) revealed that **there is a sound plan in place for the eradication of the alien plants in the national park but there is no funding** for the project. Many researchers and conservationists have talked about this problem for many years now and national parks seem to be turning a deaf ear on this very important conservation measure. It is high time that this problem is given priority among other projects that are going on at this national park. We feel it is high time all key stakeholders (the Wattle Company of Zimbabwe, Forestry Commission, Timber producers Federation and many others) put their heads together with the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Authority with the aim to come up with a manageable plan aimed at solving this escalating problem.

The results of this survey clearly show that all conservation bodies, including BirdLife Zimbabwe, must now work as a team, alongside the various government departments, corporations and communities, seeking new ways of protecting biodiversity, and lobbying for international treaties and paper commitments to be turned into positive action.

Acknowledgements

The surveys were carried out with the assistance of B. Mudereri (December 2005) and O. Musemburi (March 2006), both of whom I am grateful to. Disney is gratefully thanked for funding the whole project. ZIPWA is thanked for providing accommodation during the March 2006 survey period.

Tawanda Mupeyiwa (Nyanga National Park) is thanked for guiding us during both surveys inside the national park.

N. Chiweshe (BLZ, Field conservation Officer)

MASHONALAND BRANCH

MARLBOROUGH Vlei Walk: Saturday/ Sunday 21st /22nd January 2006 (QDS 1730D4)

Our January outing to Marlborough Vlei with Alex Masterson is always a treat. 20 people came, and our success is mostly due to the constant rain for 6 weeks prior to the outing, and an overcast day to begin with. As I write on Feb 25th, most of the central part of the country has had more than 600mm of rainfall, with most parts with more than 100% of normal rainfall, like Bulawayo Airport 156% and the extreme south east 75%.

Of the raptors we recorded African Marsh-harrier and about 10 Marsh Owls plus Long-crested Eagle, Gabar Goshawk, Black-shouldered Kite, Black-chested Snake-eagle and a Pallid Harrier.

The big biomass of birds were the Cattle Egrets who seemed to be in the air constantly, flying up and down in ones and twos, we saw maybe a 100. A Purple Heron and a Little Bittern were put up in reedbeds. 2 White-faced Duck seemed to be breeding, 5 Red-billed Teal flew up the Gwebi River line, probably to land at the Marlborough Sewage Ponds, a Spur-winged Goose was seen flying overhead, and so were two Egyptian Goose.

The inter tropical convergence zone must be right overhead this year, with no mid season drought, and it is an unusual Field Card that has 7 rallids on it. They were 8 African Rail, 1 Corn Crane, 4 African Crane, 6 Black Crane, 4 Red-chested Flufftail, 8 Streaky-breasted Flufftail and 12 Common Moorhen. And we thought we heard the Spotted Crane; it is not on the African Waterfowl Census Form.

I only saw 4 Black Coucals, but they each occupy a large hectare compared to smaller birds. There were say 20 Rosy-throated Longclaws and 2 Cape Longclaws. There were 4 warblers: 4 Sedge Warblers, 20 Lesser Swamp-warblers, 30 Little Rush-warbler and 1 Broad-tailed Warbler. Of the cisticolas, there were 2 Zitting Cisticolas, 8 Pale-crowned Cisticolas, 2 Red-faced Cisticolas, 24 Levaillant's Cisticolas and 4 Croaking Cisticolas.

We had 4 Thick-billed Weavers, 20 Southern Masked-weavers and 1 Golden Weaver, 4 Cuckoo Finch, c.50 Southern Red Bishop and a nest with clutch 3, 1 White-winged Widowbird, 20 Yellow-mantled Widowbird and 6 Red-collared Widowbirds.

There were 40 Common Waxbill and 60 Orange-breasted Waxbills, 3 Bronze Mannikin and two Magpie Mannikins. This last being seen more often in Harare now – it was described in 1980 as nomadic and sporadic by Irwin, is it now changing its status to resident and uncommon? Would someone like to answer, please?

Our field card was broadly similar to the 2005 African Waterfowl Count, when we recorded 25 species, and, this year, 31 waterbirds.

Please send in your count forms or filled in field cards, as soon as possible.

What happened after the earthquake of 21/2/2006? In Borrowdale the dogs started barking and just after it, all the Red-eyed Doves started calling. David Rockingham-Gill

Bluff Hill Vlei, Sunday 26th February 2006 (QDS: 1730D4)

Only 5 members set out from the Carters' residence at 2 Helena Road for this outing. Unfortunately a lot of the paperbark acacias on the western side have been invaded by housing development quite far into the vlei and it was disturbing to note just how much encroachment has taken place in the 13 months since Alex Masterson's vlei walk.

On the eastern side we had to access the vlei from between the houses and park in a street. Fortunately the Carters had brought one of their domestic workers to guard the cars. On this eastern side we were trying to access a patch of vlei acacias, *Acacia rhemaniana* and we had to walk a few hundred metres through soggy ground, puddles and thick grass to get to them. By this stage we had seen the spoor of bush pigs and a reedbuck and quite a few vlei birds. The bird highlights included 4 Black-shouldered Kites, 2 Gabar Goshawks, 4 Red-breasted Swallows, 2 Common House-martins, 3 Great Reed-warblers, 5 Croaking Cisticolas, 15 Yellow-mantled Widowbirds and 2 Thick-billed Weavers.

When we reached the vlei acacias, we found that the grass tended to be sparser which tended to create a more open environment. It was probably also quite heavily grazed by the resident zebra herd as their spoor was thick upon the ground. This herd numbers about 60 animals as far as I remember from our last visit 13 months ago, but we only saw about 4 of them in amongst some distant trees. Birds were

certainly different from what we saw in the open grassland but the only acacia special we encountered was 3 Chestnut-vented Tit-babblers. Other bird highlights included 2 Wahlberg's Eagles, 3 Diderick Cuckoos, 2 Senegal Coucals and 2 Copper Sunbirds. On our way out of these acacias and back into the grassland we heard a Streaky-breasted Flufftail and saw 4 Rufous-naped Larks and a Cape Crow. If I am not mistaken the Cape Crow was shot by someone with a 4-10 in the garden that it was near, as we heard the shot but only noticed that the bird had disappeared and did not see it fall.

A total of 52 bird species was counted which was quite satisfactory for a vlei environment. Future visits should probably be undertaken in spring when conditions are drier and may favour other acacia birds like Burnt-necked Eremomela. **Richard Dennison**

Craig Hall Farm and Wild Geese Lodge, Sunday 26th March 2006

Cool at first but superb blue sky with thin, fluttering cloud that made getting up in the dark immediately worthwhile. 10 of us gathered at Wingate Golf Club before proceeding to our venue.

Craig Hall Farm is only a dozen km north of town and consists of miombo and acacia woodland with scrub and grassland where trees have been cleared for cultivation in earlier days. The latter habitat is roamed by horses from a nearby stable. After a quick glance at the noisy colony of Village Weaver in the farm palm, we began with the msasa-covered hillside below the farmhouse, which held Whyte's Barbet, Southern Black Flycatcher, White-breasted Cuckooshrike and Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Long-billed Crombec and Willow Warbler. Then one of us detected a larger perched bird, a Barn Owl that sat seemingly unruffled as it was mobbed by smaller birds and marvelled at by ten pairs of human eyes. What fantastic views we had in the perfect light!

When the walk resumed we picked up Terrestrial Brownbul, White-throated Robin-chat, Lesser Honeyguide, White-bellied Sunbird and Miombo Double-collared Sunbird in the thicker vegetation in the river valley and put up 3 Yellow-throated Longclaw. In the more open country at the top of a hill, we saw our only raptors, a pair of Black-shouldered Kite, and one¹ Miombo Blue-eared Starling but plenty of Violet-backed Starlings. The Purple-crested Turaco called stridently and Black-crowned Tchagra sang while Cattle Egret and a couple of White-fronted Bee-eater flew over. Swainson's Spurfowl and Natal Spurfowl were also heard. We wandered down into scrub and acacia woodland which was alive with birds. Both Bearded Woodpecker and Cardinal Woodpecker appeared in the same tree along with Chin-spot Batis and Willow Warbler.

Then, as we descended a grassy track towards the bridge came the sighting of a lifetime for me; a Southern White-faced Scops-owl perched close to the trunk but very visibly in a small acacia, only 3m from the ground near the path. Roberts says of the bird "when disturbed, elongates body and 'ear tufts' and closes eyes to slits." It did this, making itself very narrow, which hid its white face making identification difficult until it opened its eyes. It proceeded to give wonderful views to all of us, even those who were far ahead and had to be called back for this delightful experience. Its orange eyes and tall, pointed ears made it appear very cat-like and we stood and watched for many minutes as it showed us all its diagnostic features.

Everything else for me was anticlimax; the African Black Duck on the river, the flock of Yellow-throated Petronia, Green-capped Eremomela, Fork-tailed Drongo and others in the huge msasas back at the farmhouse. Most of us missed the Southern Hyliota here, but it made Richard's day.

After a rest and cup of coffee for some, we drove back to Wild Geese Lodge. The small dam was quiet apart from noisy Southern Red Bishop and Pin-tailed Whydah and in tall grass we heard Croaking Cisticola and Zitting Cisticola. We wandered through some secondary miombo woods to the viewpoint overlooking the lovely upper Mazowe Valley. 2 Neddicky, identified by their alarm calls, were flushed from the understorey to a high open perch. The sight of diners gathering at the Lodge and the whiff of roasting meat reminded us all it was nearly lunchtime. We are grateful to Nigel Earle for inviting us and to DRG for arranging and leading the outing. **Ken Dixon**

Talk on Edmund Selous by Dr. Bob Challis, Thursday 16th February 2006

Edmund Selous was the younger brother of the more famous Frederick Courteney Selous though, from what we heard, they were not very close. They fell out because Edmund abhorred the indiscriminate slaughter of game carried out by FC and others during his visit, aged 26, to the then Rhodesia in 1883. On 13th August, his party arrived at Victoria Falls where they were attacked by lions. Edmund was astonished to meet other 'tourists' there.

¹ This was actually a flock of at least 5

Edmund was possibly the first modern ornithologist. In 1899, he wrote a study on bird-watching in the "Zoologist". His was a scientific approach and he took notes and studied the behaviour and habits of birds. The editor encouraged him to produce articles. His first book "Beautiful Birds" was published in 1901 and he wrote many subsequent books including, in 1927, "Realities of BirdLife", a compendium of articles which came to be considered a classic.

He didn't like interfering with nests and eggs or killing birds which alienated him from other ornithologists of the day. He pioneered the use of hides for bird-watching and spent his days in his hides, watching birds all the time. He wondered, as we all must have, how flocks of birds were able to fly in formation and turn direction at the same time and wrote "Thought Transference in Birds".

As well as many books for adults, he wrote a series of children's, starting with "Tommy Smith Talks to Animals" which had 23 editions.

Edmund Selous was the most important bird-watcher of his day and could be considered the Father of Modern Ornithology. Our thanks go to Dr. Challis for bringing him and his books to our attention.

Talk on Taita Falcons by Neil Deacon, Thursday 16th March 2006

Neil Deacon, a world-renowned and avid falconer, gave a wonderful presentation showing, first, the areas where Taita Falcons are thought to have been seen in Zimbabwe and, then, with comparative photographs, how to attempt to distinguish the bird from other raptors in the field.

Taita Falcon are thought to prefer living and breeding on very high cliffs and have been found all along the Rift Valley. They are shy, smallish birds and are crepuscular, hunting at dawn and dusk, which makes it difficult to definitely confirm a sighting since the diagnostic attribute is a red patch on the neck! However, after birds have been found on low cliffs of less than 15 metres, it might be that they occur in areas where they were not previously expected. Think of potential habitat in the Eastern Districts.

Although captive breeding is going on here and in the US, modern thinking is that it is better to preserve habitat than try to produce birds to reintroduce. The birds that are being bred will be monitored by satellite tracking to learn more about the behaviour of Taita Falcons.

Our thanks go to Neil for a fascinating and enjoyable evening. Come and listen to him on 18th May.

Jennifer Carter

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Matabeleland AGM – Saturday 4th February

Held in lovely surroundings, under spreading fig trees, on a perfect day, 49 plus members came along – I say 49 *plus* because that's who we could see, but there was a certain amount of to-ing and fro-ing going on behind the rocks that might have had something to do with later arrivals – or, on the other hand, it might not. Most stayed on to enjoy an excellent braai and picnic lunch complemented by several bottles of very superior, imported, absolutely delicious red wine kindly brought along by the Harare contingent. The meeting inspired our members, we have been told – it certainly inspired us as a Committee. The attendance figure has again exceeded anything that's gone before and we are extremely fortunate to have such a motivated and supportive membership.

Consider, for a moment, these statistics! We have 78 members in Matland Branch. Of these, 49 (*plus*) came to the AGM, 54 had already paid their subscriptions before the end of January (and some even tried to pay before the turn of the year, and before we knew what the amount would be!), and not a soul – not even *one* soul – has demurred at the essential increase in the rate.

We were very chuffed that Leslee Maasdorp, Clare Davies, David Dalziel and Ian Riddell accepted our longstanding invitation to come to Bulawayo, and it was particularly appropriate that they elected to do so for our AGM. Leslee's talk was very interesting, informative and well received – her work is quite remarkable. Clare brought us up to date with how things now run in the national office and very ably answered questions we'd had on our lips for months! We thoroughly enjoyed their presence – and hope this will become an annual attraction for any out-of-town members (out of *our* town, Bulawayo, we mean, not the other place!).

The 2006 Committee consists largely of the 2005 Committee (shuffled around a bit), but also includes two very welcome new faces – Adele Edwards is Secretary and Darryl Tiran an upcountry member.

Penny Feather, who has been on seat as Secretary on and off for longer than anyone can remember, now looks after Education.

Waterfowl Census – January 2006

Matland teams carried out waterfowl counts at HWANGE (three locations) and AISLEBY. Fuel coupons for 100 litres were kindly donated by Harare, but apart from this there was no national funding available. Darryl Tiran generously undertook the Sinamatella count at his own expense, Penny Feather, Jeanette Cross, Dudley Hubbard, Margie Pearce, Karl Schmahl and Bill and Helen Lewis made personal contributions to the cost of their surveys, and the Branch met the rest of the expenses totalling 8.5 million from funds we raised during Birding Big Day.

Whilst we don't normally, seriously, blow our own trumpet, you must forgive us for doing so in this case! We are indebted to our generous sponsors, grateful to our hardworking fundraising members, and proud of our achievement in funding a national project, probably a first, at least in recent times, by this or any other Branch. We feel that this assisted BirdLife Zimbabwe to make a meaningful contribution to the International Waterfowl Census.

A total of 5,615 waterbirds involving 66 species was counted by 7 teams. Detailed results – in no particular order (except Aisleby first, naturally!) – were Aisleby with 4,184 birds and 45 species; Sinamatella 420 and 40; TshebeTshebe/White Hills produced 639 and 35; Kennedy Loop 361 and 22. There was water everywhere making coverage very challenging – such that either the roads were impassable, or the birds were scattered and remained inaccessible, or simply remained comfortably invisible in the thick coverage of grass and reeds!

Here's our ever-roving reporter's eye-witness account (ridiculous phrase – she was also an ear-witness).

“Our team's stint to do the Hwange Waterfowl count down the Kennedy pans and vleis to Ngweshla, with other sundry side loops and tracks, was memorable. Firstly, by the lack of sleep – first night we had all wild life with 4 legs trumpeting, howling, barking, snorting and bellowing, then racing round our campsite like it was a Formula 1 track. Second night brought a storm of a force 10 magnitude and high winds. I had to hold onto my tent and hunker down as the elements crashed and flashed overhead. Quite spectacular even with my eyes tightly closed!

But we were there to count waterfowl. Most vlei areas were thick with sedge and reeds – could only see anything if it poked its head up to see us. The pans were full – what a blessed sight but that meant there were no sandy edges or sand bars, just reeds and thick grass down to water's edge.

We thought we would see flotillas of ducks paddling round happily but no such luck, though every little waterhole had its resident Comb Duck or Egyptian Goose pair. We did see lots of White Stork and Woolly-necked Storks both at Kennedy 1 (the Hide vlei) and at Nyamandhlovu Pan. All other waders and hide-away-in-reeds, crakes et al. were only spotted with persistence and pure luck.

The animals were a treat for sore eyes. There were lots of elephants with huge tusks, a few buffalo, many zebra, giraffe and wildebeest. Most herds had their share of oh-so-cute littlies. A highlight was spotting a solitary sable running gracefully with horns back through long grass – poetry in motion! Then there was our sighting of 3 gemsboks (a first for me). Unfortunately they ran off into a thicket and disappeared instantly. We did have our resident hippo at Ngweshla pan that put on a spectacular water aerobics display – even a finale of a barrel roll with 4 stubby legs thrashing in the air!

We also saw lots of raptors and even christened one tree the Yellow-billed Kite tree.

For all numbers and other scientific information contact our team leader, Penny Feather, whose amazing binos found some spectacular stuff”. **Jeanette Cross**

Southern Ground-hornbill Survey

We're going hammer and tongs with our Southern Ground-hornbill exercise on behalf of Leslee Maasdorp. Thanks largely to the enthusiastic and tireless efforts of Elspeth Parry, we have selectively distributed and so far received back 23 completed questionnaires from schools and homesteads around the Matopos. There are still a few to come, and plans are afoot to go further afield, fuel permitting. The news up to now is good – there seem to be lots of Ground-hornbills in the areas mentioned, which seem to be responsible for lots of broken windows (we're working on a way to solve this!); several intriguing legends, stories and theories about the birds are emerging, mostly positive. This is early days with a slow-moving exercise for which we have no funding, but we will keep you posted. All data will naturally be passed to Leslee.

A couple of afternoon events – 18 February and 4 March

These afternoon functions are popular with many of our members. You can have a chat, relax and watch a video or listen to a speaker, then have a cup of tea or two and a plate of eats or two – which are always 5-star and creative – then get home before dark and have no worry about more food till tomorrow.

A largish group of persons arrived at Penny's house to watch a couple of episodes of *The Life of Birds*. This is really a remarkable series but you'd think that some of the horrors they show would put you off birds for life. Look at the pelicans with their gentle serene faces. They push a couple of brothers off the nest, into the water and straight into the jaws of some predator, then take a deep breath, rearrange their serenity, sit back and wait to be fed. But we're coming up to some of the prettier episodes depicting bower birds and their decorated bowers, and other unusual looking species that either rush along a branch bowing and kowtowing, swing upside down by one leg, or bounce up and down wagging lots of feathers, all considered to be sexy. **Our next video date is 10 June.**

Then last Saturday, 4 March, we had a talk by Peter Rollason and the cyclone started, but not in that particular order. I must apologise to our participants before I go any further. This was the day when neither our buzzer nor our remote door-opener were working, nor did our other door-opener come to work – which meant a long wet wait for those outside wanting to come in, because of the long wet walk necessary to reach the remote door by those wishing to let them in.

Peter's talk was untitled, bird-related, really funny, interesting and informative. How, for instance, does an African Fish-eagle land when it has a fish in its talons? On the other leg. And why does a vulture have no feathers on its head and neck? Obvious when you know the answer, but so often we take things for granted and it never occurs to us to ask the question! And a riddle for you – did you know that one of our esteemed birding experts (naturally a member of Matland) spent his national service – or maybe it was the emergency? – in a *canoe*, in the *middle of Kariba*, keeping *watch*? What, do you suppose, could he *possibly* have been *keeping watch on* given that particular location? Answers on a postcard please.

Before the assembled gathering assembled, there had been a certain amount of discussion generated by an urgent phone call from BirdLife Botswana (actually, one member thereof) asking what is Zimbabwe's national bird – and Lesotho's, Zambia's, Mozambique's, Namibia's, Malawi's and everyone else's while you're at it? The reason for the question is that someone in Switzerland – a Swiss person – is minting coins. (I believe there's some purpose behind this – probably souvenirs for the forthcoming CAP meeting where, incidentally, we shall offer stiff competition with our new, two-design tee-shirts). Anyway, not knowing any answers, I consulted the ornithological oracle in Harare. He doesn't know either, but for Zim has two suggestions – the Bloody Crow and one that I can't particularise as we're apolitical – but it's the male of its species, sits on top of a tall building and crows in the mornings. Our oracle then got the bit between his teeth and went on to say that Mozambique should nominate the Peri-peri Chicken, provided it was very hot (the chicken, not Mozambique). Our own serious view, back in Zim, was that our national bird is our Great Zim bird – but we don't know whether it's a vulture, Fish Eagle, Bateleur or Black Eagle and, as always, there was no definitive answer.

AISLEBY

We took our Harare guests to Aisleby on Sunday morning, specifically to two of our special spots. The first locally referred to as The Muddy Puddle to look for crakes, which we didn't see other than Black Crake, and African Purple Swamphen and the like which we did, as well as a family of Egyptian Goose with tiny ducklings. Then over the river and up to Ibis Dam on which our hide is perched – though we observed the goings-on from the opposite bank. This is the first time for over three years that there has been water in the pan and the bird life is magnificent and prolific. We saw several ducks, two female Western Marsh-harriers, lots of African Purple Swamphen, masses of Squacco Herons, Great Egret, Little Egret and many Yellow-billed Egrets including one with a bright orange/red bill which apparently occurs in males when they're ready to breed (nothing like advertising to the world, as do ostriches whose thighs go either bright red or bright blue depending on which species you're talking about). What we didn't see, though, were Black Heron² and Little Bitterns, but no worries, we residents had seen them the week before and possibly also the week before that. We're relying on our Vic Falls member – not to mention our Harare data capture friend – to complete the checklist, as we were very, very busy ensuring

² 1 over main dam ICR

that everyone who wanted tea, coffee, chocolate or plain biscuits got tea, coffee, chocolate or plain biscuits.

Aisleby is awash and, at the moment, absolutely wonderful. But very frustrating as the road to our hide and up to the lands is impassable by anything except a tractor – which is probably what created the huge muddy sump, next to the bulls' field, around which there is currently no way.

EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

Thompson's Vlei MUTARE, Sunday 28 August 2005 (ODS: 1832D3)

I rushed out of the house to get to the Museum but immediately rushed back inside the house. It was cold outside!! The previous days had been incredible hot, but today was different.

Well dressed I found Ram and Peter at the Museum.

As we crested the hill near Mutare Boys', our attention was drawn by a raptor flying ahead. We jumped out of the car and tried to get a good look at it. At first, from above, it looked like a buzzard, but some barring was visible on the primaries. Below it looked like a typical hawk-eagle; it was an Ayres's Hawk-eagle! We continued watching trying to see the headlights as it came nearer. Suddenly a second raptor started attacking vigorously; Black Sparrowhawk! The trip hadn't even started.

We continued to the gate and went into Thompson's Vlei. After this amazing start things were definitely quieter during the rest of the trip. It was really cold and there was very little movement or sound.

Lesser Honeyguide was in its usual place near the viewing platform. 4 Tambourine Doves were showing well and there was a giraffe there as well. Red-capped Robin-chat (Natal Robin) was producing some noise in the undergrowth and we eventually managed to see it. Birding was slow. A final highlight of the trip came in the patch of miombo. We had White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Yellow-throated Petronia and, best of all, stunning close-up views of a pair of Cabanis's Bunting. **Carl Beel**

MUTARE Heights, Sunday 25th September 2005 (ODS: 1832D3)

Three of us joined for a relaxed walk on Mutare Heights. We decided to walk up first before going into miombo lower down. Several swallows were overhead. They were the usual Eastern Saw-wings and a flock of Lesser Striped Swallows, but also a few Common House-martins. Cape Bunting was briefly heard but did not show. We did see a Cape Batis. Yellow-billed Kite glided past and we spotted a single African Black Swift. There were quite a few Violet-backed Starlings about, males stunning as always. Sharp eyes spotted two klipspringers high on the rocks.

We headed into the woodland and explored a small patch of forest. It had a few forest birds, including Dark-backed Weaver. African Dusky Flycatcher seemed unusually common today and showed well in many places. Waxbills included Yellow-bellied Waxbills (East African Swee) and African Firefinch (Blue-billed). We also recorded the first Willow Warbler of the season.

By the time we entered real miombo temperatures had started soaring. We had good views of Green-capped Eremomela and Red-faced Crombecs were singing. While we added a few more miombo birds we started feeling dry. For some unknown reason we had left our drinking water safely in the car. After we hurried back it was not enough for all of us, so we decided to call it a day. **Carl Beel**

Eastern District Bird Club Bird Race, Sunday, 25th November 2005

At the usual time at the usual place five of us were ready to race. The weather seemed slightly overcast so it wouldn't get too hot. Our first bird was the Little Swifts in MUTARE town. Bart was hoping to pick up Green Twinspot, so we decided to start in Tiger Kloof.

The counter started running; Livingstone's Turaco! Klaas's Cuckoo! Gorgeous Bush-shrike! Dark-backed Weaver! Stripe-cheeked Greenbul! In no time the list grew over 40. Peter the recorder was scribbling away while others shouted out a confusion of names. Red-capped Robin! Natal Robin! Red-capped Robin-Chat! Blue-billed Firefinch! Brown-backed Firefinch! African Firefinch! But no Green Twinspot. We were watched over by the three elephants that reside in Cecil Kop and were feeding just meters away across the fence.

Water birds can boost any list, so we decided to go to the Zimunya sewage ponds. On the way we had a brief stop to look at a stunning Peregrine Falcon near the Fern Valley turnoff. Grey Heron, Little Grebe, Comb Duck, Hamerkop, Three-banded Plover and a few others joined the list. On the way back to town we turned into Fern Valley for a quick stroll around the dam which gave us some cuckoos and a number of miombo birds.

We started climbing the Vumba Road and stopped at some woodland near the Prince of Wales View. More miombo birds joined the list; we had views of Grey-headed Kingfisher, Retz's Helmet-shrike, and Brown-crowned Tchagra among others. The grand finale was provided by a male Pennant-winged Nightjar which we flushed a few times from the ground.

As we got to White Horse Inn, Bart was given renewed hope of Green Twinspot by Peter the guide. We added Chirinda Apalis, Grey Waxbill, Red-throated Twinspot, African Emerald Cuckoo and Narina Trogon, but no Green Twinspot.

We raced on and stopped at a forested lay-by to eat our lunch. In between sandwiches we spotted Black-fronted Bush-shrike and Olive Bush-shrikes, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher, Cape Robin-Chat and White-starred Robin. Picking up a few species as we drove on our next stop near Genaina. The forest resounded to the call of Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon (Delegorgue's). After Barratt's Warbler, Yellow-throated Woodland-warbler and Olive Thrush we actually managed to see this bird through a small opening between the leaves!

On to Ndundu, picking up Wailing Cisticola and Long-crested Eagle on the way. Bronzy Sunbird, Tambourine Dove, Roberts's Warbler and Yellow-bellied Waxbill. At Leopard Rock we picked up White-breasted Cormorant and Reed Cormorants.

Time was running out. We decided a drastic change of area was the only way to seriously impact the list. We headed for Chitakatira and Burma Valley.

At the school the Cape Crows refused to show but on the slope to Burma Valley the Green-backed Woodpecker gave a stunning performance. At the dam we found Cattle Egret, Helmeted Guineafowl, African Wattled Lapwing, African Fish-eagle, Little Egret and Striped Kingfisher. In fading light the last bird of the day was a White-breasted Cuckooshrike flying across the road. We had a list of 135, but some cleaning up of the list reduced it to 132. A thoroughly enjoyable day with new species for all participants. **Carl Beel**

OSBORNE Dam, Sunday 29th January 2006 (QDS:)

Birding started as soon as we climbed Christmas Pass. We stopped to have a closer look at a peculiar raptor circling close to Murahwa Hill; buzzard-sized, but not a buzzard. It soon became clear that this was a dark-phase Booted Eagle. Minutes later a Yellow-billed Kite flew past as the eagle disappeared. We continued towards Osborne Dam, but near Old MUTARE a large heronry could be seen in the gum trees. Most of these were Cattle Egrets with large young, but there were also a few Black-headed Herons and Grey Herons. Many nests were already empty, but about 75 Cattle Egret nests still seemed to be active. There were fewer than 10 Black-headed Heron nests and only 2 Grey Heron nests were spotted. However, it wasn't easy to see a lot of the nests. As is usual in such colonies some unlucky youngsters had dropped from the nest and were walking bewildered on the ground below.

Again we continued towards Osborne Dam. Some black pulli were seen on the dirt road. They rushed into the grass as the car ground to a halt. We were all puzzled what they were but they soon reappeared in front of the car. Eventually an adult bird also emerged from the grass and we knew what we were watching: an African Crake with 7 pulli. Judging from their size, these pulli were already a week or more old. They entertained us for about 10 minutes before vanishing into the grass for good.

At the Odzani Bridge we looked for black ducks but they could not be located. We did find a few Three-banded Plovers, a Yellow-throated Longclaw and a Red-backed Shrike. After a fairly unproductive stop a bit further on, we turned towards Mount Jenya. On a previous trip we had Verreaux's Eagles here, but today they remained elusive. Only a Common Buzzard and a Brown Snake-eagle appeared. As we descended towards the dam, a Wahlberg's Eagle shot across in front of the car. Two birds were around showing their archetypal silhouette in the blue sky. Finally we drove up to the edge of the dam.

Osborne Dam has lots of water but few water birds most of the time. Today was no different. A first scan only revealed an African Darter drying its wings. We set off along the shore and slowly started picking up a few more birds. Among the first was a pair of African Black Ducks sleeping on a tree. A few Common Sandpipers and a two Wood Sandpipers were flushed along the shore. We walked close to a pair of African Fish-eagles and could reconfirm that the bird shown on Eagle Beer is definitely not our African bird (it is the Bald Eagle from America). We recorded Egyptian Goose, Reed Cormorant, White-breasted Cormorant, Little Egret and Blacksmith Lapwing. Lesser Swamp-warbler was singing in the reeds. Before we left we also added Black-chested Snake-eagle and Augur Buzzard. With

temperatures slowly climbing to boiling point we just had one more short stop on Mount Kenya, adding a few miombo birds, and then rushed home to find shade and water. **Carl Beel**

BIRDLIFE ZIMBABWE

**NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
OF BIRDLIFE ZIMBABWE WILL BE HELD IN BULAWAYO
AT 10.00 A.M. ON SATURDAY 27 MAY 2006**

A G E N D A

1. Apologies
2. Confirmation of the Minutes of 24th AGM held on 14 May 2005
3. Matters Arising from the Minutes
4. President's Report
5. Director's Report
6. Treasurer's Report
7. Research & Conservation Report
8. Education & Extension Report
9. Publications Report
10. Branch Reports
 - 10.1 Mashonaland
 - 10.2 Matabeleland
 - 10.3 Eastern Districts Bird Club
 - 10.4 Midlands
11. Election of Officers
12. Changes to the Constitution -
To provide for a new class of membership called "Small Clubs"
(see below for details)
13. Any Other Business
14. Place and Date of Next Annual General Meeting

Please bring this agenda with you to the meeting.

NOTICE OF PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

Notice is hereby given that the Executive Committee of the Council will propose to the members at the Annual General Meeting to be held on 27 May 2006 that Clause 6 of the Constitution of BirdLife Zimbabwe be amended by providing for the admission, as members, of small clubs whose individual members cannot afford full membership fees, but to which clubs a copy of all newsletters and Honeyguide will be sent.

The specifics of this proposal follow:-

Paragraph (a) of Clause 6 of the Constitution is amended by the insertion after sub-paragraph (v), of a new class of membership called "Small Clubs" reading as follows:

“(vi) **Small Clubs**

Clubs with a written constitution, approved by the Council, providing for and having a membership of not less than 15 and not more than 40 members, who shall pay subscription fees to such clubs only. Such clubs shall pay a subscription fee fixed by the Council and shall be entitled to representation at general meetings of BirdLife Zimbabwe by two delegates, each of whom shall have a vote, upon recognition by the President or Chairman of such meeting as duly authorized representatives of such small club members.”

TAIL FEATHERS

Black-throated Wattle-eye – *Platysteira peltata* in HARARE

Pair seen on one occasion and a single on another near the house of 1 Wilmcote Lane off Harare Drive close to Piers Road by Adrian and Barbara Maasdorp. Through the garden runs an ephemeral stream almost concealed by thick riparian forest with patches of dense undergrowth. This forest of tall trees continues up this gully in neighbouring gardens. Date: End of February 2006

Amur Falcon or Eastern Red-footed Kestrel – *Falco amurensis*

Report by Ann Nason a birder from Salisbury in England. As they approached Marondera early about 6.30 a.m. on the 28th February 2006, she saw rows and rows of Amur Falcon. She estimated the numbers to be about 2000.

Ed: Recently, Ian Riddell and others went out to this roost³ late one afternoon after being asked by The Endangered Wildlife Trust for information about Amur Falcons in Zimbabwe. They counted between 25 000 and 30 000 birds as they came in to roost! If anyone else has information about Amur Falcons roosts, please contact Ian at gemsaf@mango.zw or the Ed. Read more about the Migrating Kestrel Project on www.kestreling.com

Blue Swallows *Hirundo atrocaerulea*

Ngoni Chiweshe saw about 28 Blue Swallows about 4km up the Troutbeck Road from the NYANGA Road on 2nd March 2006. Congregating together to fly north towards Lake Victoria area.

Leslee Maasdorp

Levaillant's Cuckoos

We live on the lower slope of Sentosa Hill, looking across the vleis to HARARE. The birds in our garden are a huge delight and we enjoy their songs and antics daily.

There's a story about most of them but our latest adventure was with Levaillant's Cuckoos, who visit the garden only occasionally: less than once a year on average in the 36 years we've lived here. There is a large and old msasa tree at the top of the garden, near the corner of the house, and on the terrace below is a huge *Acacia abyssinica* – the Nyanga flat-topped acacia, which we planted as a seedling.

In the last week of February we had 3 or 4 Levaillant's Cuckoos 'going nuts' in and out of the msasa and the acacia, trying, we decided, to lay an egg in an Arrow-marked Babbler's nest in a Queen Palm at the side of the house. It was the combined noise, a terrific racket! that took us out there quite early one morning. I say 3 or 4 cuckoos because they flew around in such frenzy none of them alighted long enough for us to count more than 3 birds at a time. They flew from every direction and there might have been 5 birds!

As we watched this frenzy, one of the cuckoos would try and raid the nest in the palm tree. In the end, the babblers managed to chase off the cuckoos – or the cuckoos got tired of trying.

A week or so later, we confirmed that babblers did have a nest in the palm when we saw the parents with food in their beaks feeding their young – though we never actually saw the babies who were tucked down in the nest among the palm bracts.

Is this frantic activity normal? We've had 1 or 2 Levaillant's Cuckoos before, and babblers hatched a rather large brown cuckoo (we never saw it fully grown so couldn't identify it) one year. That time we used to watch all the babbler aunts feeding the bigger youngster on the lawn.

Dorothy Popiel

NOTICEBOARD

Goods and Chattels from Matabeleland

Julia says 'We now have brilliant new T-shirts in 4 sizes, 4 gorgeous colours, superbly printed in 2 designs – Black Eagle and Ground Hornbill (we are very friendly with the top screen printer in town – if not in the country). As a special favour, we will allow these to be purchased by even those who are not members of Matland Branch or the Black Eagle and Ground Hornbill survey teams. The price is a mere snitch at \$900,000 each (1 million to non-members). There are also a few green (printed) and white (plain) bush hats – same prices. Speak to Alice in the office or Julia.'

³ Tafara roost was visited

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SHOP 5, PATRIC COURT, 113 NELSON MANDELA AVE, HARARE – TEL/FAX 733463