

BABBLER



The Newsletter of -

BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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COMMITTEES

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NATIONAL OFFICE

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ACTIVITIES

NATIONAL BIRDING BIG DAY 25TH/26TH NOVEMBER

AIMS

1. To identify as many birds as possible in a continuous, 24 hour period within an area with a radius of 50 km;
2. To raise money by sponsorship for your local Branch.
3. To have fun – enjoy ourselves – and increase awareness of our wonderful bird life.

RULES

1. Maximum 4 in a team. Team members must stay together as a unit and may not split into groups. At least 2 people in a team must be members of BirdLife Zimbabwe.
2. Each bird must be seen or heard by at least 2 members of each team.
3. Only free flying, wild or feral birds may count.
4. Complete either a field card or an old “Atlas” card with your species count and send it as soon as possible to your local Branch.

Entry forms and sponsorship forms can be obtained from Julia Dupree (dalia@netconnect.co.zw) or Jennifer Carter (garter@mweb.co.zw). Do join in, have fun and raise money for your Branch.

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Please contact a committee member if you need transport to any of our outings. We want to see you!

Regular outings

Sundays October 1st, November 5th, December 3rd: Mukuvisi Woodlands, 06:30 a.m.

ANNUAL BREAKFAST WILL BE AT Mukuvisi ON SUNDAY 5TH NOVEMBER.

BACON & EGG ROLLS \$500 per roll + tea. Contact Jennifer Carter (phone & email above) to order by Tuesday 31st October. Only 30 available so book early. Bring your own plates, cutlery, mugs and chairs. Guaranteed 100+ species on the walks.

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 chairs and refreshments and cash for the guard who will be on hand to unlock the gate to let cars in and out.

Sundays October 8th, November 12th, December 10th: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary, 06:30 Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West at 6:30 a.m. Bring chairs and refreshments. Beginners are most welcome and spare binoculars will be available.

Sundays October 15th, November 19th, December 16th: Monavale Vlei Walk 7:00 a.m.

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

Sunday, October 22nd: Mbizi Lodge 6:30 a.m. Meet at BLZ office, 35 Clyde Road, at 6:30 a.m.; vehicles can be safely left and transport shared. Bring chairs and refreshments or lunches are available at the Lodge.

Sunday November 26th: McDonalds' Farm at Bromley. 6:30 a.m. Meet at BLZ offices at 6:30 a.m. where vehicles can be safely left and transport shared. Bring chairs and refreshments.

No outing in December.

NOTE: EVENINGS CHANGED TO 3rd FRIDAY because of scheduled power cuts

Friday October 20th: Bird and Wildlife slides by Pat Kelly. Pat has some fantastic photographs from all over Africa to share with us. Don't miss this!

Friday, November 17th: Presentation of Activities by BLZ Education Staff during 2006. These are the people who are doing so much to promote birds and conservation around Zimbabwe. They do a fantastic job. Come and show your appreciation.

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 (12th/26th October, 9th/23rd November/14th December) 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

Saturday, October 7th: Visit to Richard Emmett's farm, adjacent to Tshabalala. Meet at 14:00 at the Churchill Arms. Early evening sundowners and braai. Ring Penny 237777.

Saturday, October 14th: World Bird Watch Opening day for our Museum display. "Tribute to the Birds of Zimbabwe", at the Natural History Museum in Bulawayo. Static displays, video shows, painting competition. Ring Penny or Julia.

Sunday, November 19th: Day outing to Quiet Waters at the invitation of WEZ. Braai lunch. Ring Margie.

Saturday, November 25th: National Birding Big Day. Organised by Matabeleland Branch. Fund-raising event, branches to retain funds they raise. To coincide with the RSA event. Entry and sponsorship forms available now. Contact Julia 246269.

Saturday, December 9th: Christmas Dinner at Brooks Best Bulawayo Bistro. 6.00 pm. Limited seating, ticket holders only. Details to be advised. Ring Penny 237777, Sue 240278, Jeanette 240093.

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 29 October: Burma Valley

Sunday 26 November: Bird race around Mutare

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

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**

CAN YOU HELP?

We would like to build a **holding pen** at the office for injured or sick birds that are brought in by members of the public. Kuimba Shiri will take sick/injured birds but it is quite a distance for people to travel especially in view of the fuel situation. Gary Stafford can collect from the offices but we do need something to keep birds in whilst we are finding suitable homes. We will require certain building materials and if members can help please contact the office. **Bird cages** of all sizes would also be welcomed especially for transporting birds. As I write this I have a **Southern White-faced Scops-owl** in a cardboard box in my office. It has an injured wing but the vet who examined it is confident that it may heal and the bird can then be released back into the wild.

EDUCATION

This year has seen a greater emphasis on World Commemoration days and our first World Migratory Bird Day was held on the 9th April at Imbwa Sewage Ponds. Both Chitungwiza and Chiota schools and pupils made up the bulk of the audience.

The Education Manager has worked closely with the Ministry of Environment and Tourism to combine the world Biodiversity, Environment and Combat Desertification days which was celebrated on the 16th June at Insiza – Matabeleland North. The theme was "Conserve biodiversity of Dry-lands". Articles were written for the Daily Mirror supplement but the writer jumbled up the wording in "for Birds and people". The report on Monavale Vlei compiled by Dorothy Wakeling appeared in the paper unaltered.

School work has consisted of a workshop for Harare teachers, setting up of herb gardens at Makumbi Visitation High and Nyavi schools. Two newsletters have been compiled.

The Manager has arranged a busy schedule for workshops in Honde and Aberfoyle and visit to Nyanga schools for the end of July. The management of Eastern Highlands Tea Estates are concerned with the use of catapults by young and old which is on the increase with more birds being killed. We will look into this problem on our visit and in turn have asked managers to check on disturbance of the Anchieta's Tchagra in Wamba Vlei.

An awareness programme centred on threats to the Blue Swallow has been undertaken by the education sector at Nyanga and Juliasdale and Sanyatwe districts.

Leslee Maasdorp, Education Programme Manager

CONSERVATION

Osiman Mabhachi, BLZ Conservation Officer at National Office has been awarded the Ramsar Crane Bank Award. Osiman graduated from the University of Zimbabwe with a BSc in Agricultural Engineering and has been working for BirdLife in the field of conservation for 3 years.

The following was extracted from the International Crane Foundation Report –

“For the past two years, Osiman has worked on a crane and wetland project in the Driefontein Grasslands of Zimbabwe. This work has given him a firm understanding of the cranes inhabiting this region. The progress that has been made under Osiman’s leadership has been phenomenal.

Ground and aerial surveys were conducted to obtain an estimate of crane numbers in the area and to assess and characterise the threats to cranes and wetlands. This work was supported by the Disney Wildlife Fund. The results of these surveys were communicated to the community members, community leaders, school children and other organisations in the area through workshops organised by BirdLife Zimbabwe and community gatherings to which Osiman was invited. These gatherings provided Osiman with the opportunity to learn more from attendees about the area and their experiences. Public presentations that highlighted the importance of wetlands, and practical wetland assessments conducted with community members, have served to increase the community’s awareness of wetlands. In turn, their wetland conservation activities and management techniques have improved.

Osiman relates the success of the project to good collaboration and cooperation between all organisations and the community in the area, many of who support sustainable environmental management and livelihood improvement.

Zimbabwe is one of 11 countries involved with the African Wattled Crane Programme (AWAC), a collaborative partnership between ICF, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, South Africa, and the African countries where Wattles Cranes were found, to promote the conservation of wetlands for future generations and to save the vulnerable Wattled Crane from extinction.

Mr Osiman Mabhachi will spend time with the Ugandan Wetlands Inspection Division, a leading authority for wetland conservation and management in Africa. This award will provide Osiman with a fantastic opportunity to share ideas and learn more about wetlands, which he can use in his work in Zimbabwe.”

IBA Monitoring Project Approved

BirdLife Zimbabwe, together with seven other countries, has been included in the project “Instituting effective monitoring of Protected Areas (Important Bird Areas) as a contribution to reducing the rate of biodiversity loss in Africa.” The project applied through the RSPB and BLI African Regional Secretariat in Nairobi aims to ensure that national systems are established to enable effective monitoring of IBAs in terms of the biodiversity they support, threats they face and the actions being taken to stem biodiversity loss. This project will promote increased involvement of the BLZ membership, government departments and communities living close to and within IBAs, NGOs and other stakeholders. Other countries involved are Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, Tunisia and Zambia.

BirdLife Zimbabwe Projects and the General Membership

BirdLife Zimbabwe has a lot of experience among its membership and this has immensely contributed to the ornithological information gathering in the last half century or so. The Secretariat will initiate more projects with the membership in the near future that will utilise the expertise at our disposal. The first such project will be the survey of the Swynnerton’s Robin in the Eastern Highlands. The member responsible for this will be Carl Beel. We are finalising the proposal and hope to start the work in mid-October. Eastern Highlands and other members will work through both the office and the Manicaland branch in the implementation of this project.

Staff changes

Mr Ngoni Chitemamuswe (aka Chiweshe) has resigned from BirdLife Zimbabwe after three years of service. Mr Chitemamuswe was a valuable member of staff whose service is greatly appreciated. We wish him the best in his new endeavours.

Dr. C. Chirara, Conservation Programme Manager

MASHONALAND BRANCH OBITUARY – KEITH BARROW

Keith Barrow, whose laughter and company so many of us enjoyed during a great many birding outings over the past decades, passed away suddenly on 28th August.

He was living – and watching birds – at the Athol Evans Home during the last two years or so. A Memorial Service was held in the chapel there on 4th September, attended by members of his family and by friends, some of whom knew Keith as a member of BirdLife Zimbabwe and Cleveland Pistol Club. It was a glorious and sunny winter day, full of birdsong.

Keith was born in England in 1926 in the very early hours of April 2nd. I remember him once telling me with his infectious smile that he timed the event well, missing April Fools day by a couple of hours. He joined the Royal Navy as a youngster during the later part of the war, and spent some time in Australia whilst in the Senior Service.

Starting his working life in the motor trade – a liking for fast motor bikes remained throughout his life – but soon switched over into the field of electrics and later electronics, in which he made his career – which only came to its end after he had reached an age well over 75. After working for a number of companies, he eventually joined Phillips in what was then Rhodesia, where he became a valued and respected senior staff member, spending time in Zambia and Malawi.

I once heard someone remark that Keith "dabbled in many things". In a world well served by specialists with tunnel vision, it would probably be more correct to say that he was a man of many parts, and a good one for all seasons to boot.

Having been a rather private person, it is not easy to piece all those parts together. Keith was well-travelled, broad-minded, an artist – he painted well – a sailor, a fisherman, a good amateur photographer, and, during the latter part of his life, an avid birdwatcher and keen shottist. He served on the Mashonaland Branch Committee of BLZ for a number of years, and was in evidence at many an evening lecture at the Old Hararians' Bowles Pavilion collecting entrance fees.

Keith was an enthusiastic 'birder' (definitely not a 'twitcher' as I once heard him called), and to be out with him in the field was a stimulating experience. He could be full of fun, and many will remember him as a good bush trip companion and an entertaining conversationist.

He diligently did his early morning exercises right into old age and, typical of the man, started doing Yoga after moving into Athol Evans. It must have been a good investment in time and effort, for his good health – excepting only lapses into forgetfulness – and his good looks stayed with him until the end.

So he remained the Keith Barrow many of us will remember and are glad to have been privileged to know. Farewell Keith. **Rolf Chenaux-Repond**

DOUBLE RO Ranch, Mount Hampden: Sunday 25th June, 2006 (QDS 1730D2)

Five members arrived at the Carters' house in Marlborough and we were joined later by 2 others at Double Ro Ranch on the Lomagundi road. The weather was kind to us for winter as it was fine and warm. The ranch was still under quarantine for foot and mouth disease so we stayed well away from the cattle. Unfortunately Robyn Gilmore was away on a birding holiday in Kenya so we were left to do our own thing.

We decided to follow the same route that we have taken on our most recent visits by walking from the parking area through the grazing paddocks to the river, then down the river, back through the paddocks, past cattle feeding pens and back to the cars, followed by a drive to the 2 dams near the crocodile production unit. Robyn has, however, indicated that there are still significant parts of the ranch that we have yet to visit. The grazing paddocks are dotted with well-treed anthills and the riverine vegetation contains a high proportion of *Acacia robustus* trees. After a good rainy season the grass cover was thick and rank and the rivers were still flowing.

Crowned Lapwing were plentiful on the open ground around the empty cattle feeding pens as 20 were counted and we also saw 3 Capped Wheatear here. The highlights in the grasslands included 5 Black-shouldered Kites, 3 Lizard Buzzards, a solitary Temminck's Courser flying overhead, 4 Yellow-throated

Longclaws, 10 Croaking Cisticolas and about 80 Pin-tailed Whydahs. In the trees we recorded 2 Meyer's Parrot, 2 Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters, 2 Chestnut-vented Tit-babblers, 2 Magpie Shrikes, 1 Copper Sunbird, 4 Green-winged Pytilias and 3 Cut-throat Finches.

After our 3 kilometre walk we took a refreshment break before driving to the dams. Near the top dam there used to be a vulture restaurant but this has been discontinued, presumably because of the foot and mouth outbreak, however we did identify 3 Hooded Vultures and one White-backed Vulture flying overhead. 30 Marabou Storks were on the ground near the disused crocodile unit where we also found 2 Cape Wagtails. Other highlights in this area included one African Pygmy-goose and 23 Three-banded Plovers.

Our final bird count was 89 species, which is good for a mid winter outing and we thank the Gilmore's for hosting us.

Richard Dennison

NGOMAKURIRA: Sunday 27th August 2006 (QDS: 1731C1)

Twelve members and 4 guests made the trip on a cool, sunny, breezy morning. We all clambered straight up the kopje from the car park. The path is very eroded and getting trickier to negotiate. Once on the first plateau, the group headed across and through the gully towards where the rock paintings can be seen. As we were in the gully, a falcon flew overhead, calling loudly, and perched on the edge of the cliff with the sun behind, deliberately, it seemed, to make identification difficult! We saw that the bird had a mouse in one foot and, as we watched, another bird flew to the perch and the food was exchanged. As the second bird flew off, it was established that they were Lanner Falcons. No other raptors were seen! At the paintings, Rock Martins were nesting in a cleft in the rock – about 20 were seen in all, and 2 Lesser Striped Swallows.

Of the specials for the area, we saw 2 Boulder Chats and 3 Familiar Chats, 10 Cape Buntings, 5 Cinnamon-breasted Buntings, 3 Speckled Pigeons and 1 White-necked Raven but Striped Pipits, which we have seen there before, were not seen.

Among the slightly disappointing count of 41 species seen or heard were Red-eyed Dove, Cape Turtle-dove and Emerald-spotted Wood-dove, African Grey Hornbill, Black-collared Barbet and Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, 10 Lazy Cisticolas and Yellow-throated Petronia. Robins were represented by White-browed Robin-chat and White-throated Robin-chat and White-browed Scrub-robin, shrikes by Common Fiscal, Black-backed Puffback, Tropical Boubou, Brubru and Brown-crowned Tchagra and sunbirds by Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, White-bellied Sunbird and Amethyst Sunbird. As we called the list in the car park, a Yellow-bellied Greenbul flew by.

A drive further alongside the gomo failed to yield the Black Stork nest we hoped to see but added Southern Black Flycatcher and Jameson's Firefinch to the list.

Jennifer Carter

Birds and Philately by Innes Louw, Friday, 21st July 2006

There was a good turn-out for Innes's interesting talk about stamps and birds on stamps on a cold July Friday night. Innes had brought a number of his albums and also set up some displays for us. He told us something of the history of stamps and how his interest developed. Selling stamps, and particularly First Day Covers, is now an important source of income for many small countries. Innes decided to combine his interest in stamps with his interest in birds and concentrate on collecting stamps with birds on them. He has an amazing collection from all over the world.

After his talk, Innes produced a list of questions about the stamps in his collection. This was a brilliant idea because, to answer them, we had to delve into the albums and really look at the stamps. This proved really fascinating. Particularly interesting was seeing how similar species occur all over the world. The kingfishers were a particular example. It was sometimes surprising to find that a bird was from the Bahamas or Panama or West Africa and not southern Africa.

Everyone had a thoroughly interesting time and it was a disappointment when Innes had to collect his albums and leave. Thanks, Innes, for a very entertaining evening. **Jennifer Carter**

Talk by Petrus Erasmus on Butterflies and Birds That Eat Them – Friday 18th August 2006

Unfortunately Dr Alan Gardiner was unavailable, but Petrus Erasmus came along to talk to us and brought a few colourful specimens to look at. Petrus is an amateur lepidopterist (butterfly and moth collector) who has been interested in this subject for about 16 years – since he was at high school.

He told the well attended meeting that the main differences between butterflies and moths is that the antennae of a butterfly has a clubbed tip and moths tend to be feathery or fern-like. Also most butterflies are diurnal and moths nocturnal, but there are always exceptions – for example the Evening Brown and Night Fighter butterflies, some species of which are attracted to lights in the Bvumba area and the beautiful green Lunar Moth, which has long tails on the back wings. For every species of butterfly there are about 7 species of moth. Generally hairy caterpillars are moths and smooth ones are butterflies.

A butterfly life span depends on the size and species, with the largest – the Emperor Swallowtail – living about a year and the smallest, the Gaika Blue, about a week. There can be seasonal variations, with the Gaudy Commodore for instance having a different shape and colour in the winter and summer forms and for some time they were thought to be separate species. Distribution is restricted by their food plants so climate change and plant transference (mainly by people) has enabled some species like the striking Green Banded Swallowtail (the male is black with a green-blue band above) being seen at Kariba and the White Barred Charaxes to spread from the Eastern Highlands. This Charaxes apparently is very fast and difficult to catch but is most partial to a concoction of rotten banana and brown sugar that has been left to ferment in the sun for a few days! An example of species loss from habitat destruction is the White Banded Swallowtail which has declined from the Honde since 2000. Butterflies and moths can migrate (the army worm is actually a moth) and one of those is the African Leopard butterfly which travels from east to west, taking 3-4 months and feeding mainly on lantana at “pit stops” on the way.

Birds are the biggest predator and are mainly bee-eaters and Forked tailed Drongo. Birds tell which are edible usually by the colour – the brightest are generally inedible. Approximately 30% of butterflies mimic the non-edible ones. Their palatability also depends on the type of food plant – for example birds do not like the African Monarch because it feeds on milk weed plants.

Someone mentioned that “butterflies can also save birds”, citing a threatened forest in Kenya that is now being conserved for butterfly farming.

Many thanks to Petrus for a very interesting talk.

Carolyn Dennison

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Waterfowl Counts

July was hectic with waterfowl counts throughout the month. Two teams went to Hwange; we also covered Aisleby, returned to Fort Rixon after an interval of 3 years, and added new sites at the SAST sewage works and dam at Khami ruins.

Hwange produced a total of 349 birds of 45 species; Fort Rixon 816 and 17 species; Khami and SAST combined 702 and 25; and Aisleby was tops as usual with 3147 birds and 37 species! Very rewarding viewing was at SAST which seemed to be the local nursery – a hive of activity with ducklings and chicks all over the place!

We look forward in due course to the national Co-ordinator’s report of the nationwide results.

Disaster struck at Fort Rixon a few days after our visit. The wonderful old thatched clubhouse, said to date back to the twenties, burned to the ground, taking most of the contents with it – believed to be as a result of arson. This is particularly tragic for the Community Environmental Awareness and Development Trust that recently moved into the premises and was making excellent progress with a programme to promote community participation in the management of their environment. Our members have already come forward to assist in salvaging and restoring furniture and equipment where possible, so hopefully all is not lost.

Visit by Chip Chirara

August saw an unusual and very enjoyable afternoon function. Chip Chirara made a special journey to Bulawayo to talk to us about the relationship of BirdLife and the RSPB, the plan for the IBAs for which he has now acquired funding, and advice on how to cope with life when someone moves your cheese – not that many of us actually have any cheese these days, but if we did we certainly wouldn’t want it moved by others.

We found Chip to be a very interesting, professional and informed speaker, and not only did we learn a lot, we enjoyed listening to him. His audience (mostly female on this occasion) was attentive and well-behaved – until Chip's PowerPoint show moved onto superb shots of our countryside accompanied by the emotional "You raise me up" by Josh Groben. Well, that was it – Chip's coup de grace – just about everyone lost their composure and out came the hankies and sniffles! A dramatic climax to an excellent presentation! We have been looking forward to having a chance to get to know Chip better, and we very much appreciate his effort in coming down. Thank you Chip.

Thanks also to Elspeth for providing such a lovely venue and to Gill and Dave Vernon for their kindness in running an efficient parking and gate service.

Tuli Camp

Very sadly we had to cancel, at the last minute, our camp planned for 12-15 August, due to the unusual road circumstances prevailing at that time. However, we were more than adequately compensated by Cecilia and Dudley Hubbard's generous offer to stay at Inungu Lodge and do some Verreaux's Eagle work instead. We had a thoroughly good time, were made to work pretty hard, ate and drank like kings (and queens), and saw lots of eaglets.

Black Eagle Weekend at Maleme Rest Camp MATOPOS, 2nd – 3rd September.

Our annual Verreaux's Eagle weekends are always eagerly anticipated. They provide the opportunity for survey members to visit the successful nests of the season, to compare notes on sightings and to socialize on a comparatively grand scale. This year's gathering was as good as ever. Our local members were joined by two raptor enthusiasts; Jonathan Stacey, from BirdLife International, who is based in Cambridge, and Paul Tubb who now lives in Johannesburg but who became involved in the survey as a schoolboy and is still very keen to help out where possible. In fact he would be quite happy to spend the rest of his life in the Matopos Hills! Jonathan, who is an expert on birds of prey and whose work takes him all over the world, also soon fell under the spell of the Hills and found it difficult to tear himself away from certain of the places we visited.

On Saturday we viewed several occupied Verreaux's Eagle nests. Some of the eaglets were publicity shy – although they had been seen on previous occasions, this time they were lying low and it was a frustrating business trying to locate any movement on the nests. However other eaglets were standing prominently on their nests and looked ready to fledge within the next few weeks. Some of us were fortunate enough to watch certain youngsters being fed by their parents. One eaglet was seen on the nest in the morning – by the afternoon it was perched on a ledge several metres below – and this on a sheer cliff face. Did it jump or did it fly?

After a convivial braai on the Saturday evening we woke on Sunday to the cries of African Fish-eagles in the Maleme Gorge. Their nest contained two chicks but unfortunately there was no sign of the African Crowned Eagles that we normally see in the valley. Other raptor sightings during the weekend included African harrier-hawk, Black Kite (Yellow-billed Kite), African Goshawk, Wahlberg's Eagle, African Hawk-eagle and Brown Snake-eagles.

Sunday brought wonderful close views of eaglets and adult birds at two nest sites, the second eaglet making 'chirping' noises as it was fed by its parent. During the day we saw a total of eleven white rhinos and one black rhino. A bonus on the way home was the sight of two Southern Ground-hornbills foraging on the roadside. What a privilege it is to have such a beautiful wild place on our doorstep!

Penny Feather

EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

BURMA VALLEY, Sunday 30 April 2006 (QDS: 1932B2)

A very fine morning only enjoyed by few. The first stop was on the slope into Burma Valley. Some cackling Green Wood-hoopoes and Square-tailed Drongo were the first to announce themselves. Orioles were especially noisy and conspicuous; apart from the usual Black-headed Orioles, there was a gathering of at least five African Golden Orioles. A small bird hopping nearby in the same tree was a stunning Green-backed Honeybird. It stayed around and with the sun behind gave us picture perfect views.

This was the start of an impressive miombo bird list. Birds appeared and reappeared and ensured good views by keeping the sun behind us. Not in order of appearance we saw White-breasted Cuckooshrike,

Chin-spot Batis, Cardinal Woodpecker, Southern Black Tit, African Yellow White-eye, Green-capped Eremomela, Red-faced Crombec, Fork-tailed Drongo, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Southern Hyliota, Whyte's Barbet and Crested Barbet.

More cherries were added to an already impressive cake: a Green-backed Woodpecker showed itself at close range while foraging in the branches of a low tree. It kept us company for the rest of our stay. Nearby some moving piece of bark turned itself into a Spotted Creeper. And still our list kept growing: Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Kurrichane Thrush, White-crested Helmet-shrike, Retz's Helmet-shrike, Black-backed Puffback and Stierling's Wren-warbler. The latter found a place in the sun and stayed there with its wings slightly opened to soak up the rays.

Conspicuously absent were sunbirds, which was a pity in these perfect viewing conditions. It also dashed our hopes of finding Violet-backed Sunbird, which has been seen here before. But we were not complaining; the list so far could already make some people green with envy.

Finally we moved on and descended into the valley. We stopped for second looks at a Cinnamon-breasted Bunting and found a widowfinch singing in a tree. We waited long and listened hard for imitations of the host, but nothing clear was heard. Despite the sun a greenish gloss could not be seen and with African Firefinch flitting around nearby we finally agreed this was most likely a Black Widowfinch.

We continued towards the dam and stopped in an open area to look at Zitting Cisticolas. The sight of a distant widowfinch got us out of the car to walk over for a closer look. As we set off, several other cisticolas made their presence known: from the tops of several clumps of trees Short-winged Cisticolas were singing, Red-faced Cisticolas made their angry calls from tall grass with some shrubs and Croaking Cisticola called from low in the open grass field.

When we reached the widowfinch tree, the bird was no longer there. An African Fish-eagle was turning rounds in the sky, so we decided to continue to the dam wall. We found some Little Bee-eaters and more Short-winged Cisticolas on the way.

While we climbed the dam wall we heard a Green-backed Heron but once on top, the dam was fairly empty, of birds that is. There were lots of fishermen (and women) all around the edge. Some were standing in the water unimpressed by a large crocodile sun-basking on a rock nearby. A flock of Cattle Egrets sat in some dead trees and an invisible White-faced Duck called. Grey-rumped Swallow and Eastern Saw-wing flew over the water.

On the way back to the car the widowfinch finally put in an appearance; a Steel-blue Widowfinch. High in the sky some white specks appeared. As they flew passed they became African Spoonbills! We headed further into Burma Valley. The occasional stop produced more Short-winged Cisticolas and near a bridge, the see-saw of a Red-capped Robin-chat. It was becoming hot for birding so we decided to conclude the trip with a round trip of Burma Valley, going up the Vumba. **Carl Beel**

LA ROCHELLE, Sunday 25 June 2006 (QDS: 1832D3)

The chilly morning was tormenting me at the EDBC's rendezvous, Mutare Museum, and I could not hide my expression of relief when Messrs Dixon and Beel finally arrived. We set off to La Rochelle with high hopes of good sightings in the aloe gardens only to discover that we were a week early as blooming was still in its early stage. Soon upon reaching La Rochelle's car park, we managed to see an Olive Sunbird, Red-capped Robin-Chat and a Red-winged Starling. We decided to follow a path crossing the football pitch and then on uphill. Our trio discovered a different La Rochelle of dense Brachystegia dominated woodland. We received by White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Black Cuckooshrike, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Amethyst Sunbird, Sombre Greenbul and Cape Batis. The temperature was rising abruptly and jerseys descended around the waist. On our return to the aloe gardens we heard and saw a pair of African Crowned Eagles in the sky above. Back near the entrance a Square-tailed Drongo was imitating African Goshawk and a relaxed African Dusky Flycatcher was sitting nearby. We went back into the gardens in search of sunbirds but with few flowers there were nearly none about. A calling Scaly-throated Honeyguide and a Golden-tailed Woodpecker came as a consolation. We called it a day at half past eleven and headed for Mutare with a nice total of 50. Many thanks to Mr. Dixon for coming all the way from Harare and Mr. Beel for driving.

Peter Gwidibira

OSBORNE Dam on Sunday 30 July 2006 (QDS: 1832C4)

July is one of the two waterfowl counting months across Africa. Therefore the EDBC went to Osborne Dam. Waterfowl counting does not really reflect the experience of the day; waterfowl searching gives a better idea of what needed to be done.

On the way to Osborne Dam the Odzani River Bridge usually provides the first birds. The water and the rocks near the bridge were strangely empty. A Hamerkop flew into some trees carrying sticks, probably working on a massive nest. Wire-tailed Swallows were giving close-up views sitting on the bridge. A Giant Kingfisher followed the river while giving its loud call. It was obvious that further waiting was not going to add much.

Osborne Dam is a large body of water with good birding all around but few birds actually on the water. On arrival some quail-like birds were flushed from the grass while walking to the shore. These were Kurrichane Buttonquails. Some more were flushed later on giving a total of 7 birds. Once they cottoned on to the idea that people were trying to see them, no more were seen. The vast expanse of water was scanned with a telescope several times over. It held a grand total of 1 African Darter. Unseen, a pair of African Fish-eagles was calling somewhere overhead.

National Parks had opened up a whole network of roads for game viewing. Slowly driving along these roads yielded some more birds (but no waterbirds off course). Star birds were a confiding pair of Violet-eared Waxbills. An attempt was made to enlarge the waterbird list from the main dam wall. As always there were some Familiar Chats, African Pipits and Grey-rumped Swallows. There were also 2 Reed Cormorants!

It was getting hot in the mean time and water was running out, so the count was closed and we headed back to Mutare. **Carl Beel**

TAIL FEATHERS

CORRECTION

Babbler Issue 71, reporting about the Amur Falcon roost on the Harare-Marondera Road, gave the impression that the roost was at Marondera, some 80 km from Harare. This is incorrect. The roost was before Ruwa near Tafara, only about 15kms from Harare. **Apologies, Ed.**

Strange Egyptian Goose Behaviour?

If I had been aware of the nesting behaviour of Egyptian Geese (*Alopochen aegyptiacus*) as described in the book: "a guide to the NESTS & EGGS of Southern African Birds" by Warwick Tarboton, I would have certainly taken greater note of what I saw on my last houseboat trip to Kariba. The book states: "Pairs breed solitary along wide, shallow rivers (at intervals of about 1-2 km), and on most other types of wetlands (lakes, dams, pans, etc.)."

On an island in Kariba, what I witnessed certainly bears no resemblance to this type of behaviour at all! I saw lots of two or three nests, on the ground under bushes, within one metre of each other, closest two nests having no more than 12 centimetres of dirt separating them!

If anybody is going on a houseboat in Kariba, check this out! And don't forget to ask the crew as they are quite knowledgeable in many things. It is worthwhile gathering this type of information for the *Honeyguide* mag. I'm sending a contribution and would appreciate a few more to show just how prevalent the strange behaviour is at Kariba and anywhere else.

Tony Alegria

Notes from Around MUTARE

Enjoying a short vac. from university in South Africa, and with the ever-willing company of my family, I have of late taken advantage of the ornithologically rich areas around Mutare. Our first visit was to the miombo woodland on the top of Cecil Kop Game Reserve where we found Striped Pipit, Mocking Cliff-chat, Yellow-bellied Waxbills and Cabanis's Bunting in amongst the rock-strewn grassland. A few days later, our binos drew us to the lower section of the same reserve. Seated by a well-grassed pan with healthy woodland encircling, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Bearded Woodpecker, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Whyte's Barbet and Red-throated Twinspots entertained us in an energetic bird party. While

the condition of the roads at Cecil Kop is at times harrowing, the fact that we have such a wealth of birdlife within 5 minutes of the town should not be passed off.

No birdwatching around Mutare is complete without a trip to the VUMBA Mountains. Our early morning here began at Manchester Gardens (just before Leopard Rock) which, although florally less colourful now, are still a worthwhile picnic spot. The Gardens attract seedeaters and sunbirds galore, even in the winter chill. We came across plentiful Yellow-bellied Waxbills, mannikins and Olive Sunbird, Bronzy Sunbird, Amethyst Sunbird and Malachite Sunbirds feeding on the abundant aloes and tea bushes. The afternoon brought us to our cottage crouching beneath Castle Beacon – the highest point in the Bvumba – which neighbours lush montane forest. In spite of the intensifying afternoon heat, we managed to find Chirinda Apalis, Roberts's Warbler and Yellow-throated Woodland-warblers, Golden-rumped Tinkerbird and Stripe-cheeked Greenbul flicking through the canopy. Even luckier, discreet rustling in the ground leaf litter brought attention to our little "forest jewels" White-starred Robin and Swynnerton's Robins. Roberts' notes that White-starred Robins are altitudinal migrants that moves from lowland evergreen forest to montane forest only between September and February, making our sighting a very early record.

Without serious input or effort, we have been blessed with some incredible birdwatching. It should remind us that while some things are in constant flux and oscillation, we still have a land home to birds both scarce and beautiful.

Emma Holland

Something to Think About

Klaas's Cuckoo calling in a HARARE Strathaven Garden on 30 July. Right time, wrong place?

Why are there so many Brimstone Canary singing in Africa Unity Square and the First Street Mall? August +. Also Streaky-headed Seedeaters?

Just how widespread has the Marico Sunbird become in Mashonaland and what has happened to all the Scarlet-chested sunbirds?

Alex Masterson (Let me have your responses, Ed.)

NOTICEBOARD

Vumba Birding Cottages

Two cottages, quite ordinary, available over November-December period. 8 beds and 4 beds. Bring your own bedding and food. Close to Leopard Rock, its golf course and prime montane forest with Silvery-cheeked Hornbills, Gorgeous Bush-shrike, Narina Trogon, Swynnerton's Robin, Buff-spotted Flufftail and many other specials.

Phone 792160 or email: rosalex@zol.co.zw

HIPPO POOLS, UMFURUDZI

THIS IS A VERY SPECIAL BIRDING AREA WHICH WILL BE LOST TO US IF IT IS NOT SUPPORTED. A recent visitor saw Pel's Fishing-owl, Verreaux's Eagle-owl, Narina Trogon, Racquet-tailed Roller and Trumpeter Hornbill – to name just a few. Also seen regularly are White-backed Night-heron, Livingstone's Flycatcher and Dickinson's Kestrel. See also the report of Mashonaland Branch visit in Nov/Dec 2005 *Babbler*.

The accommodation is very basic and you can use the chalets or camp. You will have to take all your own supplies, food, drink and gas for fridges, deep freezers and stoves. Two meals a day are available and are very reasonable in price – the food is simple but wholesome – being brunch at 10.00 a.m. and dinner at 7.00 p.m.

Contact on: wildernessafrica@zol.co.zw

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