

BABBLER

The Newsletter of -

BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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OBITUARY – KEN NEWMAN

Ken Newman, the author and painter who sold a million books on the birds of Southern Africa, has died in Johannesburg at the age of 82. He had been ill for some time and died at his home in Craighall Park in October 2006.

Along with the Roberts field guide, Newman's Birds of Southern Africa became a bible for countless birders throughout the region. The first edition of Newman's was published in 1983 and it was reprinted and updated several times.

In a tribute, Birdlife South Africa said Newman had played a pivotal role in popularising bird-watching in South Africa through the publication of his numerous books which had sold about a million copies. "His ability to capture the jizz of a bird in his illustrations have made his field guides an essential companion for so many birders. His abilities extended to painting and lecturing and his commitment to ornithology and conservation was reflected through his presidency of the SA Ornithological Society and Birdlife South Africa.

"He was still serving as president of BirdLife's Sandton branch when he died. He was also the first non-scientist recipient of the prestigious Gill Memorial Medal and in May this year his life-long

contributions to birding and conservation were recognised when he received the Birdlife SA "Owl Award". His contribution to birding will live on especially through his field guide, and one can expect to hear "Don't forget your Newman's" for many years to come."

Friend and colleague Malcolm Drummond said: "He was quite quiet, but a real gentleman. He was a gentle, splendid person."

He leaves two daughters, Vanessa and Pamela, and a son, Nicholas

BIRDLIFE ZIMBABWE – RECENT SENIOR APPOINTMENTS

DIRECTOR-DESIGNATE: BirdLife Zimbabwe is pleased to announce the appointment of **Dr Chipangura Chirara** as Director-designate with effect from 1 November 2006.

Chip, as he is known, joined BirdLife Zimbabwe 5 years ago as Conservation and Development Officer, having completed his PhD in Biological Sciences with Utrecht University in the Netherlands. His thesis work was on tree invasion in a semi-arid savannah ecosystem in south-western Zimbabwe. He graduated from the University of Zimbabwe with a BSc Honours Degree in Biological Sciences in 1992 and was attached to Matopos Research Station while being on a University of Utrecht/University of Zimbabwe Higher Degrees Fellowship Program.

Chip was born in Charter in Chivhu in Zimbabwe and grew up on his father's small-scale commercial farm and has interests in biodiversity conservation.

Chip has represented BLZ at several international meetings and has gained experience and training through the BirdLife International network. He has been responsible for projects at BLZ, some of which are the Wattled Crane project in Driefontein, the Database Project, the Monavale project and the Eastern Highlands project. He attributes success in these projects to excellent team work at BLZ and support from colleagues and members.

Chip is happily married to Grace and they have twin sons, Craig and Carel, aged eight. He enjoys watching soccer and cricket and has strong family values.

FINANCE/ADMINISTRATION MANAGER: BirdLife Zimbabwe has recently appointed **Hazel Hatton** to the position of full time Finance/admin manager. She has a professionally strong financial background and is an enthusiastic birder.

She has a keen interest in wildlife in general and in her spare time is currently the chairperson of the Mashonaland branch of the Wildlife and Environment Zimbabwe society (WEZ) and national treasurer. Hazel has been a dedicated cyclist for many years, representing Zimbabwe at the 1986 World Cycling Championships and recently she has started growing and collecting African orchids.

The Council of BirdLife Zimbabwe is confident that Chip and Hazel, together with their staff, the dedicated education department and members, will rejuvenate an interest in birds which will also inspire the next generation.

ACTIVITIES

Make a New Year resolution to attend at least 1 outing each month and enjoy the unique experiences our country has to offer.

MASHONALAND BRANCH

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

Regular outings

Sundays January 7th, February 4th, March 4th: Mukuvisi Woodlands, 06:30 a.m.

In December, 120 species in total were identified, including a rarely seen Ovambo Sparrowhawk. Spotted Creeper and White-breasted Cuckooshrike are seen regularly.

Sundays January 14th, February 11th, March 11th: 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.

In December, 110 species were identified, including Osprey and Great White Pelican.

Sundays January 21st, February 18th, March 18th: 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. Corn Crakes have been seen there as well as other special vlei birds!

Saturday and Sunday, January 13th & 14th: Alex Masterson's Vlei Walks 6:30 a.m.

Directions: drive to the end of Princess Margaret Rd, turn left, continue to the new houses. Parking is in a cul-de-sac with a small fenced off area at the end. Bring some cash for the guard.

Sunday February 25th: Jenny Faasen's 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.

Sunday, March 25th: Crane Centre at Cannon kopje, Mutorashanga, 6:30 a.m. at Mr. Hangartner's invitation. Meet at the Carter's, 2 Helena Rd, Marlborough at 6:30 where vehicles can be safely left and transport shared. The distance is 120 km, 5 km on farm roads, and the rest on tarmac.

NOTE: EVENINGS CHANGED BACK TO 3RD THURSDAY – at least in summer while there seems to be electricity!

Thursday, 18th January 2006: Mashonaland Branch AGM. Pies are available and salads will be provided by your committee. Please bring a plate and cutlery.

Thursday, 15th February 2006: Climate Change and how it affects Birds by Professor Chris Magadza. Professor Magadza's reputation as a knowledgeable and excellent speaker goes before him so we know that this will be a riveting and entertaining talk. Don't miss it!

Thursday, 15th March 2006: Special Birds in Mashonaland by Alex Masterson. We have all enjoyed Alex's educational and entertaining talks before so we know we are in for a treat. See you there!

**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 (11th/25th January, 8th/22nd February & March) : 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

January: National Waterfowl Census throughout the month. Volunteers invited! Ring Julia 246269.

Saturday, February 10th: Matabeleland AGM at the Crosses' home, 58 Northway, Burnside. 10.30 am followed by braai and bring-and-share salads. Bring all your own eating and drinking gear, (including the drink!), deck chairs and tables. Ring Adele 882242 (eve) or 091-388123 or Penny 237777 or Jeanette on 240093.

Saturday, February 24th: Outing to Greyville, Burnside. Ring Penny on 237777.

Friday – Sunday, March 2nd – 4th Ngamo Pan – provisional. At the kind invitation of Matupula Safaris. Details and basic costs to be confirmed.

Saturday – Sunday, March 17th – 18th Verreaux's Eagle Survey briefing. Inungu Lodge, Matopos. 9.00 a.m. Those who wish to stay overnight may camp in the garden or sleep on the verandah. Self-catering. Ring Julia or Dudley on 76781-4 (o), 240127 (h), 011-203238 (c). Anyone interested in joining the Black Eagle and Dassie Survey team please ring Julia or Dudley, or just come along.

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

Outings around the Mutare area on the last Sunday of every month. Contact Carl Beel.

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

EDUCATION

The Rio Tinto Birdwatch Event 2006 at Murowa Diamond Mine: 10th-12th November 2006

Richard Dennison, Ian Riddell and I had the privilege of taking part in the Zimbabwe version of this annual international event which takes place in 13 countries in which Rio Tinto has representation ranging from Australia to Madagascar. The aim is to inspire school children, local community members and Rio Tinto employees and enrich their appreciation of the environments in which they live and work. In the case of Murowa this aim seemed to be successfully fulfilled; the day was full of interest, activity and fun and everyone's knowledge of their surroundings was increased.

Our weekend began on Friday with the long but interesting 470km journey south via Kwekwe, Gweru, Shurugwi and Zvishavane to Murowa Mine, near Buchwa, which we finally reached in the late afternoon. Though we were all tired and in need of a shower, we had first to undergo rigid scrutiny of our persons and possessions before we could finally receive our passes and activate the turnstile to enter the campus of the 'village' where we were to stay. Having freshened ourselves up, we strolled down to the Gazebo to meet the management team who had organised the Birdwatch event. Their interest and enthusiasm was infectious and the following day's activities were outlined to us. We discovered that not only young children but also employees' families and local officials were to be involved.

Next morning, the mine mini-buses shuttled to and fro bringing participants to the entry point. On arrival, the schoolchildren were treated to a hearty breakfast. Although there was some confusion, the atmosphere was always positive and expectant. Eventually, at about 0830, we split into two groups for the Birdwatch. Ian, Richard and I were naturally a bit anxious that such a late start would restrict the number of species to be found. And, of course the size of the groups, about 20 in each with only four or five pairs of binoculars and field guides per group was an added difficulty. However, there was such enthusiasm and the activity was so new to most that this did not pose a problem.

One group was dropped off at the weir and the other carried on to the river and Tailings Dam where the water used in the mining process is allowed to deposit its residue of sand before being re-used.

Richard's group had a very productive walk along the weir, river and into woodland. The leader either heard or saw 36 species including a Bateleur which was large enough for everyone to identify. Birds were all around but tended not to stay in the company of the noisy crowd of watchers. Our experience was similar; we were surrounded by Violet-backed Starling, Rattling Cisticola and Rufous-naped Lark in particular but how many were seen by how many was not immediately evident. The raptors, Yellow-billed Kite, Black-chested Snake-eagle and African Harrier-hawk made for easy viewing. When we climbed up to the dam, the situation was better as the Egyptian Goose at least did not take flight on seeing us and neither did the Hadeda Ibis sitting on its nest. Somehow or other all the participants I'm sure managed to see and appreciate a few species at least.

By 10:30 it was very hot and there was precious little shade available for such large groups so we returned to the mine vehicles and gradually regrouped at the Gazebo. Members of the management and the organising committee made brief speeches of welcome and appreciation and the Managing Director who had taken part in the company of his wife and children stressed his commitment to various community projects but particularly the protection of the environment. Prizes were distributed to pupils of all five schools participating whose essays were considered to be the best. It was good to see the

Southern Ground-hornbill Project get some publicity when the BLZ tee-shirts were donned by the winners. An excellent lunch followed.

Soon after lunch most of us went off to Murowa Primary School to take part in the annual tree-planting ceremony. Managers, local dignitaries and the BLZ delegation each placed an indigenous sapling in the prepared hole and supervised its first watering. Finally, we returned to base, the festivities over until the evening when we were called to the functions room for a delicious celebratory dinner.

During the late afternoon the BLZ team did a more detailed survey of the village campus and increased the list with Marico Sunbird and Marico Flycatcher, Yellow-mantled Widowbird, Grey Penduline-tit, Jacobin Cuckoo and many others.

Additional species were added after a very early morning walk on Sunday amassing a final total of 101 for the weekend. The mine is fortunate in having a variety of habitats, sand-veldt, kopjes, riverine bush and woodland and scrub. No doubt the list will grow over the years as local birders become more proficient and the protected area offers shelter to new species.

Although we had not actually seen a diamond or even been very close to the super-secure area of the mine, our departure had to be preceded by a careful, serious search of our bags and bodies; having assembled at 07:00 we could not leave until 08:30.

We wish to thank warmly our hosts for their generous hospitality and keen interest in the environment and we look forward to joining the Rio Tinto Birdwatch again next year.

Ken Dixon

CONSERVATION

Wattled Crane ground surveys in the Driefontein Grasslands IBA

Two ground surveys were undertaken during the 2006 dry season. The first survey, undertaken during the third week of September was aimed at assessing the population status of the cranes at all known sites in the IBA. The second survey, carried out during the last week of November, was aimed at determining the breeding success of pairs that were nesting during the first survey.

A total of 67 Wattled Cranes were counted during the September survey. This included 15 pairs, 4 pairs with juveniles, two flocks of 12 and 13 birds. Six pairs were nesting and two of the juveniles were hatchlings from the 2006 breeding season. Of the six pairs that were nesting in September, only one pair was observed with a chick during the November survey. The other five pairs seemed to have been disturbed.

The Conservation Officer had the opportunity to talk to four people residing within the vicinity of breeding sites who have apparently assumed new status of site custodians. They provided invaluable information about behaviour of and threats to the breeding pairs based on their observations.

Overall, the survey results showed that 3 pairs successfully raised chicks during the 2006 breeding season. Field assessment of the breeding sites showed that human disturbance and the unavailability of adequate water in marshes and dams were contributing factors for the low breeding success.

Ninety-eight Grey Crowned Cranes were also observed during the survey, with the large flock seen at the Driefontein Farm accounting for 80% of the total seen.

Progress in the Eastern Highlands

It is now almost a year since the Eastern Highlands project was initiated. Most activities that were scheduled for the first year were successfully undertaken. These included Blue Swallow surveys in the Sanyatwe area, leadership training for Site Support Group leaders, monitoring of Blue Swallow sites, awareness workshops on fire management and community based natural resource management, and the initiation of livelihood projects for the community.

The Project Field Assistant, Mr. Tendai Nyagope has been instrumental in arranging meetings and workshops with the locals. Blue Swallow breeding and foraging sites identified by Bester Mudereri (Bindura University Student) were monitored during the year. Fire fighting teams were formed at village level and the Mutigwa and Matubirwa teams successfully mobilised the villagers to contain fires

started by hunters on three occasions during the course of the fire season. Only two Blue Swallow sites were affected by fires.

The Field Assistant reported the arrival of Blue Swallows at two sites at the end of October. Plans are underway to arrange for the involvement of community members in Blue Swallow surveys in December and January.

Osiman Mabhachi, Conservation Officer

MASHONALAND BRANCH

EWANRIGG BOTANICAL GARDEN, Goromonzi District: Sunday, 23rd July 2006 (QDS: 1731C2)

14 members visited the EWANRIGG Aloe Gardens and immediate surrounds on 23rd July 2006. As expected it was a Sunbird Day, we saw 7 species, and missed only the little Purple-banded Sunbird, which may have not yet been recorded there yet, but is possible.

An African Fish-eagle was seen flying overhead, obviously from a nearby dam (Mt Lothian Farm). Another waterbird seen overhead was a Sacred Ibis. 20 Speckled Mousebird were counted, this bird is now much commoner in Mashonaland Gardens, and has almost replaced the Red-faced Mousebird, which was not seen. Two Whyte's Barbets were found breeding. This is the district in which this barbet was first discovered at Fort Enterprise. It was once named after a man named Sowerby, who as trooper in the British South Africa Police, collected the first specimen, which was illustrated in *Ibis* at the turn of the last century, when illustrations were hand painted. Sowerby, I recall, had an obituary in *Outpost*, (The BSAP regimental magazine) many years ago now, and all I can remember was that he died in Canada at about the age of 90.

One African Golden Oriole and about 10 Black-headed Orioles were seen and 2 Pied Crows, now numerous in the country districts, where they were not seen before. Six Terrestrial Brownbuls and Green-capped Eremomela were heard. An African Pipit was on mown grassland beyond the picnic site. Up near the warden's house is a huge Kenya Coffee Shade Tree, newly in flower, that was food for many birds. We saw 10 Miombo Double-collared Sunbirds, 10 Variable Sunbirds, 6 White-bellied Sunbirds, 4 Scarlet-chested Sunbirds, 20 Amethyst Sunbirds and 4 Copper Sunbirds and close at hand but in a drier part of the garden, we found the Western Violet-backed Sunbird. The activity in the tree was unquantifiable, with the wind in the branches and constant movement of the sunbirds, plus 50 Miombo Blue-eared Starlings, many bulbuls etc.

While up near the herb garden we found 20 Bronze Mannikins with about 10 Red-backed Mannikins, 2 Steel-blue Widowfinches and 2 Streaky-headed Seedeaters.

Among the animals seen were Vervet Monkeys, Bush Squirrel and as we left the Christian Road, where it joins the Mutoko Road, a beautiful Sable Antelope bull.

Dave Rockingham-Gill

Ngezi Recreational Park: Friday – Monday, 22nd - 25th September 2006 (QDS 1830C2)

Many members had fond, if distant, memories of this attractive park consisting of miombo woodland, grassy vleis and granite outcrops, as well as the large dam and river below it, situated only 160km from Harare and now easily accessible by the new road to Ngezi Platinum Mine. Today, it is little changed but also rarely visited; the 25 fishing campsites are still there but abandoned and some of the accommodation is rather dilapidated. Our A-frame received more visits from monkeys, squirrels, rats and bees than humans these days, and the rats were still in residence. More worrying was the sight of dogs obviously hunting, and fishing nets in many of the bays of the dam. However, for most of us, not Dave Dalziel, this did not detract unduly from the enjoyment of the weekend – 13 BLZ members identified a combined total of 165 species of bird and a wide variety of mammals and reptiles including sable, waterbuck and lots of huge crocodile. One significant species for which Ngezi is well known though, was missing – the elusive African Finfoot.

Accommodation was in National Parks lodges for the majority, while a few camped. The gardens of the lodges furnished many of the species on the list – Boulder Chat and Mocking Cliff-chat and Arrow-marked Babblers, Yellow-throated Petronia and Woodpeckers galore, and provided excellent braai sites for the evening get-togethers.

Our first walk took in the caravan park, the dyke and dam wall and one of the camp sites. Throughout the weekend the caravan park was alive with calls and frenetic activity. Both Black-headed Oriole and African Golden Oriole were ever-present, Bennett's Woodpecker, Cardinal Woodpecker, Golden-tailed Woodpecker and Bearded Woodpecker, a Shikra, Grey-headed Bush-shrike and Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, White-breasted Cuckooshrike and Black Cuckooshrike and nesting White-crested Helmet-shrike. Many of us saw our first Willow Warbler of the summer, too. On the dam there was the full range of Egrets, the first of many Purple Heron, Black-winged Stilts, African Spoonbill and over-flying Wire-tailed Swallow. The star of our tour of the peninsula was undoubtedly the Half-collared Kingfisher clinging precariously to a large rock in the water and far from the rushing river where it should have been but we also found Water Thick-knee.

Next morning, it was decided we should follow the Ngezi River below the dam wall. But even before that, near the lodges, we had excellent views of the African Barred Owlet, seen and heard the previous day. The riverbank walk was an excellent idea, since this excursion produced all manner of interesting and exciting sightings, provided you were willing to rock-jump and crawl through the creepers. We came upon many secret spots, perfect habitat for the African Finfoot but not discovered by the bird itself. An exciting find was a Barn Owl elongating itself near the trunk, high in a large tree. Soon after, on a sandy patch on the bank, was the complete imprint of a large female croc and even an egg to indicate that it was a nesting site. Geoff returned to the location later just in time to see her sliding into the river. It was also Geoff that heard the Grey Tit-flycatcher. Then Ian pointed out a Night-heron's nest on the opposite bank. African Paradise-flycatcher, for some the first of the season, White-browed Scrub-robin, Terrestrial Brownbul, an African Green-pigeon and Weavers were all observed and then Neddicky near the Hydrological Station where we regrouped and rested. In the last section which was on the edge of a grass land, the most notable sighting was Arnot's Chat.

After the strenuous morning walk, a leisurely drive along the western shore of the dam was considered in order for the hot afternoon. A few stops were made to scour the shoreline and water but the only new bird was a Saddle-billed Stork. We all alighted at a distant fishing camp determined to surprise a Finfoot in the slow-moving river, but to no avail. There were though, 8 breeding crocodile on a lazy bend. At this point, one truck returned to camp while the other explored further along the river. This proved more fruitful as, in a patch of Mopane woodland, new species like Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill, European Bee-eater, Meyer's Parrot and another Arnot's Chat were spotted.

Obviously, we'd been getting off too lightly up to then, as early on Sunday, Gauleiter Dennison led us all off on an extended route march to the Sacred Hill 6km away. A few members, including the Discovery team, soon dropped from the main party and poor Geoff never managed to catch up with the leaders all morning, but saw a large group of African Pygmy-goose and some good waders and African Quailfinch as recompense. The most memorable tick on the way out was a superb banded cobra, disturbed, no doubt, by the ground-shaking marchers. At the foot of the Sacred Hill, we drew breath and added several species to the list – Spur-winged Goose, more waders, Wahlberg's Eagle and on the rocky slope, 2 very confiding Buffy Pipit. Ian appeared at this juncture with news of Racquet-tailed Roller, African Harrier-hawk and African Quailfinch. He, knowing Richard's energy, had taken a more direct and leisurely route with the help of his GPS. I joined him for the return and was rewarded by the impressive display of 5 Rollers and then, close to home, a Marsh Sandpiper and a Common Greenshank in close proximity. At one point we came across Jane sitting on a huge rock still quite a way from home refusing to go any further despite Dave's coaxing.

On Sunday afternoon we split into small groups and took more relaxing walks nearer the camp, in the course of which a few new species were detected although activity was limited. Dark Chanting-goshawk and Wood Pipit were the most notable of these.

Our final sortie on Monday morning was more or less a repeat of the first walk to the dam wall but by now there was a Saddle-billed Stork and a Hamerkop in the muddy depression beside the caravan park. Richard tried to lead an alternative foray to the border fence but surprisingly there were no takers. An African Palm-swift finally appeared and the usual array of egrets and cormorants. A small group of us decided, providentially, to take a short walk along the river immediately below the exit tunnel through the wall. This turned out to be an excellent idea as within a few metres we had Malachite Kingfisher and 2 Giant Kingfisher and a lone African Black Duck, a Gabar Goshawk and an African Cuckoo Hawk.

In the riverine bush we heard, then saw, a White-throated Robin-chat and Jameson's Firefinch. Others came back with reports of Pearl-breasted Swallow and, at last, 2 Blue Waxbill. But still no Mannikins. Doves, apart from Emerald-spotted Wood-dove, were almost never heard or seen and neither were there any bishops or widowbirds or whydah. Taking this into account our total of 165 is impressive. All that remained was to make the final count and decamp.

Our thanks go to Jennifer for organizing the excursion, to Richard for 'leading' the walks and Graham for being "Master Braaier". **Ken Dixon**

Talk on "Bird Art" by Clare Douie, Friday 22nd September 2006

After a long wait, as Clare was originally scheduled to give her talk on bird art in June, the BirdLife members present on this Friday were in for a treat.

Clare started off with the history of birds in art, starting with Neolithic Man, then the Egyptians through to the nineteenth century with artists such as Edward Lear and James Audubon. Many splendid works from Canada's contemporary bird artist, Don Eckelberry, were also shown.

Clare then took great pains to explain the difference between illustrations and pictures; illustrations being the exact portrayal of the subject, a detailed study, in fact, whereas bird pictures are allowed a degree of artistic licence and some freedom of expression.

Many of Clare's art were also displayed, including a White-browed Robin-chat (Heuglin's), Wattled Cranes and Green-backed Heron. Although little known in Zimbabwean circles, Clare is scheduled to exhibit works in Manhattan, New York, next year.

Thanks, Clare, for a first class presentation and an interesting and illuminating evening.

Steve Alpe

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Farm Outing: Saturday, 7th October 2006

Richie Emmett laid on a most welcoming picnic area for us on his extensive farm adjacent to Tshabalala. The vegetation was mainly acacia, attractive to a large number of species, but unfortunately this particular day was hot, dry and dusty. However, we had wonderful prolonged views of busy Violet-eared Waxbills, a Bateleur floated above and several weavers, sparrows and canaries made themselves visible – reluctantly. This was a very enjoyable venue, with a completely different atmosphere to our usual jaunts and Richie made us very welcome. Hopefully we may be invited back after the rains.

Julia Duprée

Schools Trip to Aisleby: Sunday, 19th November 2006

Three of us took 12 students and two teachers on a trip to Aisleby. Evelyn Girls High and Cowdray Park Secondary were two of the winners of our competition last year and this was their prize. A different event is planned for the third winner, Silozwe, in the Matopos at the start of the Verreaux's Eagle breeding season!

Our guests displayed great enthusiasm and aptitude and we were stopping and off-loading at very frequent intervals to examine birds that had been spotted by the keen eyes of the young, each of whom had been lent a pair of the Branch's binoculars.

Two sightings totally intrigued us. Two monitor lizards were swimming across the dam in different directions, each accompanied by a flotilla of 30 plus Little Grebe (Dabchicks) which were fanned out behind in a long train. The monitors were continuously harassed by the braver birds diving and resurfacing close to their faces, causing them to turn their heads from side to side in defence. These processions crossed paths with other waterfowl, but none showed any interest whatsoever in either the monitors or their followers.

Julia Duprée

World Birdwatch – Museum Display – October to December

By the time we'd finished our preparations for our Tribute to the Birds of Zimbabwe, we found that we'd managed to fill all the attractive display boards around the courtyard of the Natural History Museum with our home-grown, original visual material! Pioneer (Curator) and Furai (Technician) from the Department of Ornithology kindly undertook most of the hard work putting up our various posters

and artworks, and then monitoring them throughout the period. During the opening day, we ran video shows and a Painters' Corner. On that particular day, the exhibition was visited by 53 students and a platoon of cadets from SS Matabele, who had marched up from their headquarters, plus a number of tourists. The Painters' Corner produced 64 portraits of birds in various guises and disguises, some of which we shall publish, all of which are charming and imaginative! We are awaiting details from the Museum as to which and how many schools visited the exhibition throughout its duration.

Julia Duprée

How Mine Swallow Roost

Our competitive bid for funding by VBN was successful and with the full approval of Metallon Gold's management, work has already started on a project to better protect this important roost and improve visibility for spectators. The relocated viewpoint parking area has been prepared, signboards have been made and are now with the screen-printer. They will be put in place in the next four weeks. A draft illustrated leaflet has been produced featuring Barn Swallows, their cousin-brothers Bulawayo's swifts and martins, everyone's predators, as well as migration in general.

A write-up of our project is the lead story in the 10th BirdLife Africa e-bulletin *News from the Network*, together with one of Penny Feather's lovely paintings produced specially for the Swallow Roost media.

Julia Duprée

Birding Big Day: Saturday – Sunday, 25th – 26th November 2006

Despite a disappointing turnout nationally, we in Matland had a very enjoyable time and our teams attracted very generous funding. We set off with different strategies in different directions and despite negative weather everyone produced some interesting sightings. We've thought up some innovative ideas for next year's Matland counts - these we'll be happy to share at the appropriate time for a small consideration! A composite Zimbabwe list will be put together and sent down to South Africa.

Full results are:

- 1st - 181 spp. *Harry's Pupils* – Matabeleland
Cecilia & Dudley Hubbard, Sandy McAdam
- 2nd - 139 spp. *Bulawayo Boobibirds* – Matabeleland
Penny Feather, Julia Duprée, Betty v.d. Merwe, Eileen Milton
- 3rd - 135 spp. *Committee Creepers* – Mashonaland
Richard Dennison, Ian Riddell, Graham & Jennifer Carter
- 4th - 125 spp. *Old Toppies* – Mashonaland
Di Rushforth, Pat & John Saunders
- 5th - 53 spp. *Falcon Foursome*: - Matabeleland
Adele Edwards, Colin Gillies, Jen & John Brebner

Footnote: Menzie Sibanda, a very supportive Matland member, has just sent in his team's result and they pipped us all – 182 spp. But they were in the Delta so could not be included in our territory. Next year, however, if we can possibly organise it, he will be in Vic Falls, Matabeleland – so look to your laurels!

Julia Duprée

Christmas Dinner – 9 December

Tickets were sold out and there was a waiting list for this thoroughly enjoyable evening hosted by Sue Brooks and Eddie and Jeanette Cross. Guests were treated to a superb candlelit dinner in romantic bistro style surroundings. We were delighted to be joined by two of our longest-standing members, Tim English (57 years a member) and Eileen Milton (33) – it was wonderful to have them with us. Warm thanks go to all those who slaved away to provide the 5-star menu (and at rock bottom cost, I have to say!).

Julia Duprée

EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

Thomson's Vlei: 27th August 2006 (QDS: 1832D3)

The weather was fair. Upon realising that most likely no other member was going to arrive at the museum, the three of us, Peter, Enock and myself, left for Thomson's Vlei on foot. Going into the

reserve on foot requires the presence of a guard, which would have doubled the ticket price. Therefore we birded from the side. We followed a dirt road that is bordered by the reserve fence on both sides and at the same time divides the Tiger Kloof section from the Thomson's Vlei section of Cecil Kop Nature Reserve. We saw and heard various species, which included some Eastern Highland specials such as Livingstone's Turaco, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill and White-eared Barbet. We also noted Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird and Southern Black Tit. It was getting warmer; we followed the fence of the reserve towards the main entrance. Good birds were still showing, including lovely specials such as Cape Robin-chat, Gorgeous Bush-shrike, and Dark-backed Weaver. We walked on towards Marymount and Cross Kopjie to try to see some chats. None were showing but some raptors were making up for that: African Goshawk and Lizard Buzzard. By 10.30 we walked back to town past Mutare Junior School with a total list of 55. **Peter Gwidibira**

Vultures in Danger from *The Observer*, July 2006.

South Africa's national lottery is claiming an unlikely victim: vultures. Local people – convinced these birds' superb eyesight gives them the gift to see the future – are eating vulture meat to acquire the power of clairvoyance.

And they are not alone. In neighbouring Zimbabwe, voters fearful of supporting the losing side in recent elections ate vulture meat, mainly heads, talons, eyes and hearts, believing this would enable them to pick the winning party. Then there has been the rise of traditional medicines, for which vulture parts are highly valued, as well as soaring cases of poisoning and shootings by starving farmers in East and West Africa.

In addition, in south Asia over the past five years, the use of the painkiller diclofenac in cattle has wiped out three species of vulture and reduced the remaining two species to a few dozen pairs of breeding birds. The drug, it was discovered recently, destroys the birds' kidneys. In short, the vulture – the ultimate scavenger, for ever associated with pitiless opportunism – has been sent spiralling towards extinction, say ornithologists. 'Something very, very bad is happening to the vulture,' said Guy Rondeau, of Afrique Nature International. 'There has been an almost total collapse in numbers in many parts of the world.'

The consequence of this dramatic decline is not merely an issue that should concern wildlife enthusiasts, add scientists. Vultures' ability to pinpoint corpses as they circle hundreds of feet in the air, combined with their power to strip carcasses clean of their flesh in minutes, mean they are vital in limiting the spread of diseases in livestock. With vultures around, corpses don't get a chance to rot and act as reservoirs for disease.

This problem has reached the level of a major ecological issue in Asia, as ornithologist Mark Anderson, based in South Africa, points out. 'In India the cow is sacred and cannot be eaten. So it was traditionally left to vultures to eat their corpses. Without vultures, packs of feral dogs have taken over.' These packs are 'destroying livestock and wildlife, harassing people and sometimes spreading rabies and other diseases,' added Chris Bowden, a vulture expert with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

In addition, the Parsees of India, who leave their dead on 'towers of silence' to be picked clean by vultures, have had to develop alternatives. In Mumbai, one group bought six 'solar concentrators' – mirrors – to cremate corpses using sun power. 'It is only in the West that we look at the vulture with revulsion,' said Rondeau. 'In many countries they are venerated.' The ancient Egyptians worshipped the vulture, while shamans in hunter-gatherer tribes attributed the powers of clairvoyance to them. Many countries, including Mali, have vultures as their national emblem, although the bird has all but disappeared from its skies. 'Vultures have completely deserted the colonies on the cliffs around our village,' said Diomande, a hunter from the Bafing region of south-west Mali. 'We don't see any today. We think they are angry at the way we treat the land.'

A measure of this loss is provided by recent surveys which indicate that vulture numbers have dropped by 95 per cent in West Africa. 'It also appears there has been a similar, drastic reduction in East Africa,' added Anderson. 'The situation is catastrophic,' said Francis Lauginie, of Afrique Nature International. 'Conservation efforts have to be urgently introduced. This could have irreversible consequences for regional ecosystems and communities.'

The exact causes of the disappearance of the vulture in Africa are unclear. 'In Asia, diclofenac was responsible,' said Rondeau. 'But that is not the case in Africa. It is hardly used there. There seems to be a number of causes. The need for vulture flesh to satisfy markets for traditional medicines, their links with clairvoyance, hunting, and deliberate poisoning are probably all involved.' The result has been plummeting numbers of a species that may look unpleasant but which has some heart-warming qualities: vultures mate for life while mothers and fathers share nest duties. 'They are phenomenal parents,' says South African wildlife expert Kerry Wolter, in an article in the journal *Science*.

There is one encouraging piece of news. Vultures have started to prosper in Europe. Conservation programmes in Spain and France have been so successful that wild vultures have been spotted even in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. The vulture may be dying out in Asia and Africa, but it could soon appear in Britain, it seems.

Although ungainly on the ground, vultures can soar with astonishing grace and to remarkable heights. One jet collided with a vulture at 10,000m (six miles). The Beatles were originally to play the four vultures in Walt Disney's *Jungle Book* but had to drop out because of schedule difficulties. Other actors took over and the vultures were portrayed as homage to the Beatles.

One of the most unlikely uses of the species' name was by John McEnroe, who denounced Wimbledon umpires for being 'the pits of the world – vultures!' Prometheus was punished for stealing fire from the gods by having a vulture eat his liver for eternity.

TAIL FEATHERS

Status of the Cape Penduline-tit *Anthoscopus minutus*

There will be a comment in the *Honeyguide* about these birds, which were recorded regularly in Tshabalala Game Sanctuary outside Bulawayo up to 1992 but were not seen for 3 years afterwards.

I saw 2 birds on 26 May, near the hide. Perhaps Bulawayo members could comment on any records from their area to bring this question up to date, this being a bird about which very little is ever said!

Any records to Colin Baker please.

Ian Riddell

Responses to Alex Masterson's *Something to Think About* in last *Babbler*

I have also heard a Klaas's Cuckoo calling at Sentosa in July/ August; however I did not note the dates. Klaas's Cuckoo has been heard here previously at the same time of the year, but never for more than a few days.

I have no idea what has happened to the Scarlet-throated Sunbirds which used to be common here. I have not recorded one in our Sentosa garden for many years, perhaps decades.

Rolf Cheraux-Repond

We occasionally see Scarlet-chested Sunbird in our Marlborough garden but they are not around all the time. Most months they are seen on the CHIVERO outing. There has been a nest at the entrance to Harare Safari Lodge for years.

We have heard Klaas's Cuckoo only a couple of times in the 9 years we have been here.

Jennifer Carter

We would like to hear from our members. Are you seeing more or fewer Scarlet-chested Sunbirds?

NOTICEBOARD

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