

BABBLER

The Newsletter of -

BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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	Mashonaland	☎	Matabeleland	☎
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Congratulations to Dr. Chip Chirara on his confirmation as Director of BirdLife Zimbabwe. The appointment was ratified at the National AGM.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

At the AGM, members approved a 'top-up' subscription of \$50 000 a quarter or \$150 000 to 31 March 2008 as the annual subscription of \$20 000 agreed at the beginning of the year has proved unrealistic in our hyper-inflationary environment.

Payments can be made at or sent to the office, paid to your Branch or brought to a meeting or outing. Pay in instalments if you cannot afford the full \$150 000 in one payment. Payment can be made into Mashonaland Branch CABS Account at any CABS Branch but PLEASE ensure your name is on the deposit and ALSO email jcarter@cabs.co.zw OR gcarter@mweb.co.zw with details - name, date and place. Office number 490208 doesn't work during power cuts so please use 481496 if there is no reply from 490208.

ACTIVITIES

NATIONAL

National Blue Swallow Survey 2007 - volunteers for Chimanimani & Honde Valley

This year BirdLife Zimbabwe intends to carry out a national survey of the Blue Swallows in the whole of the Eastern Highlands. We would like to thank those members who have expressed willingness to join the survey. A number of members would like to participate after the first week of October for a variety of reasons. The final dates will be communicated to participating members. The Nyanga area now has enough teams. We are now looking for teams willing to do the Chimanimani area and Honde Valley.

All expenses for the survey including fuel will be covered. Those interested, please contact the office.

Dr C. Chirara, Director

MASHONALAND BRANCH

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

Annual Weekend – Hippo Pools, Friday 14th – Monday 17th September

The rate is US\$5 per night in local currency when booking is made. Ten beds in two self-catering lodges have been booked and paid for at \$1 million per person per night for the 3 nights. Four places have been booked so far. Transport will be shared as much as possible. Please contact Jennifer Carter if you are interested in going. Details of what to take will be confirmed closer to the time.

Regular outings NOTE CHANGE OF TIME: AUGUST 07:00, SEPTEMBER 6:30.

Sundays August 5th 07:00 & September 2nd 6:30: Mukuvisi Woodlands

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 August 12th 07:00, September 9th 6:30: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary, Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West. Bring chairs and refreshments. Beginners are most welcome and spare binoculars will be available.

BOTH Mukuvisi AND Chivero Bird Sanctuary ARE PARTICULARLY LOVELY IN SEPTEMBER WHEN THE MSASA ARE GETTING NEW LEAVES.

Sundays August 19th & September 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. Corn Crakes have been seen there as well as other special vlei birds!

Saturday Morning, August 18th: Mukuvisi Hide 07:00 a.m.

Meet in the MAIN car park, where the public entrance is off Glenara Avenue at 7:00 a.m. The walk will take you to the hide overlooking the pond and to the Long-crested Eagle nest.

Saturday Morning, September 15th: No outing because of away-weekend - resumed in October

Sunday August 26th 6:30 a.m. The Kirks's farm, "Marirangwe" near Carolina. Meet at 6:30 a.m. at Agrifoods in Remembrance Drive where vehicles can be safely left and transport shared. Bring hats, bins, chairs and refreshments.

Sunday, September 23rd Haka Park, 06:30 a.m.: Meet in the car park near the Cleveland Dam wall before going into Haka Park. There is an entrance fee per person and vehicle for Haka Park but cars can be left at the gate without charge. Bring chairs and refreshments.

Thursday Evening Meetings on FRIDAY

FRIDAY, August 17th: Ben Vermuelen on Snakes: Ben is a well-known herpetologist of vast local experience. Come and hear how many snakes avoid us on our bird walks!

FRIDAY September 21st: Ant Clarke will talk on Parrot Beak and Feather disease

Ant is a long time member and former chairman of the Federation of Bird Societies.

**Venue: Bowls Pavilion, Old Hararians Association, Drummond Chaplin Street, Milton Park.
Time: 6.00 for 6.30 p.m. A cash bar will be available. Security is provided and, if necessary, POWER BY GENERATOR.**

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Monthly Outings

24th - 26th August, Verreaux's Eagle Survey Weekend: Based at Gordon Park in the company of Harare members! Self catering, camping. Hot bath and showers, wood cooking range and braai fires available. This is a beautiful venue with an eye-level view of a Verreaux's Eagle nest. Cost currently being calculated, but it will be very modest. Ring Julia on 246269.

8 September, Hillside Dams: The Hillside Dams Conservation Trust has invited BLZ to submit proposals as to how the area could be developed to promote birds and birding. Meet at the upper dam at 14:30 for a walk through the 'wilderness area' to do a bird census and consider options. Ring Adele on 882242 / 0912 388 123

1st December, Christmas Bistro: Advance notice, details will follow! Make a note!

Aisleby: Visits to Aisleby in future will be arranged on a flexible basis and on demand. Ring Julia on 246269.

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

REPORT ON THE NATIONAL AGM HELD IN HARARE ON 30 JUNE 2007

This year's AGM was held on a chilly day in the garden at the BirdLife Zimbabwe national office at Clyde Road in Harare. It was attended by 37 members which was very gratifying, as similar organisations have had very poor attendance at their AGM's – so thank you all who turned out and stayed on for a social braai afterwards, especially those members from Matabeleland!

The president Ken Wilson, in his report, reviewed personnel changes in the organisation since the last AGM – Oscar Mitumbili resigned as honorary treasurer due to pressure of work, Dr Chip Chirara was appointed director-designate and subsequently endorsed as director at this AGM, Hazel Hatton was engaged as the finance and admin manager, Leslee Maasdrorp remained as the education manager, Osiman Mabhachi was appointed conservation officer for the EU-funded IBA project and Onesimo Ndowa continues as messenger and caretaker. There has certainly been an improvement and all staff were complimented and thanked for their achievements, especially Chip who has proved to be a rock of stability. Ngoni Chiweshe and Alice Chamunorwa have left the organisation. BLZ will appoint a research and conservation officer in due course to assist Chip, but the immediate need is for an administrative assistant for the reception area – preferably with some knowledge of birds - and we are therefore appealing to our members, as we feel sure the right person is out there. This is a varied and interesting position, so please spread the word.

We would like our membership to be more active and, for example, need more help as committee members, leaders at bird outings, to become bird ringers and to assist the office in their work for RSPB, projects and BLZ activities. Ken urged the national office to become more effective and professional and the members to become more understanding of how the office functions and pointed out that members and the national office need each other – BLZ on its own does not have sufficient income from its members to support projects and the vital publications *Honeyguide* and *Babbler*. Without the members there is no club and without a club there is no need for an office and without a club or office there will be minimal support from donors. However funding is very often not purely for ornithological

projects, but includes education and community development. The RSPB and BirdLife International have agreed to continue to support BLZ with core funding in the foreseeable future - due in some measure to the high standard of work accomplished by members and staff – for example the saving of Monavale Vlei and its designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the Wattled Crane and Blue Swallow surveys and habitat protection at Driefontein and the Eastern Highlands, the Barn Swallow roost, Verreaux's Eagle and Southern Ground-hornbill surveys in Matabeleland, the IBA monitoring exercise and Murowa Mine education project.

Chip Chirara reported that although BLZ has faced enormous challenges in the past year, a lot has been achieved by members and the secretariat. Conservation in Zimbabwe is a complex balancing act that requires concentration, focus, innovation and collaboration with numerous other diverse groups and he believes that together we can make a difference.

Chip also detailed conservation projects and mentioned the population of Wattled Cranes in the Driefontein grasslands has remained relatively stable over the past 7 years due largely to community awareness and education about the importance of wetlands; the conservation of Blue Swallow habitat (members will have a chance to participate in this survey later in the year); the Global Avian Influenza Network Surveillance project funded by the Fitzpatrick Institute at the University of Cape Town, which has employed Fadzai Matsvimbo as technical assistant for the Lake Chivero and Manyame sites - she also works as a conservation officer for BLZ; the Murowa Diamonds education project which has funded Togarasei Fakarayi as project officer; a research project on Swynnerton's Robin that is funded by RSPB; the EU- funded 4-year IBA monitoring project; bird ringing projects will be promoted to increase the number of ringers amongst members; and funding is being sought for the Red Data Book project, which will require information from members and will be led by Anthony Cizek with a small co-ordination sub-committee in Zimbabwe which includes Michael Irwin. BLZ is in the final stage of purchasing Monavale Vlei with funds from the Jensen Foundation and E. Africa and COSMO (Conservation Society of Monavale) will work with BLZ to manage and protect this important wetland.

Hazel Hatton presented the audited accounts and stated that BLZ is in a stable and strong financial position, partly due to our partnership with BirdLife International. Staff and Council have worked hard to turn around past mistakes and move forward. She was congratulated for her valuable part in this exercise.

Leslee Maasdorp reported that improving the conservation of wild birds and their habitats forms the backbone of the Bird Awareness Programme in schools and presently involves 180 schools and over 9000 children. Some of the areas where education is carried out are at the tea estates and the eastern highlands -where children can identify special birds such as the Palm-nut Vulture and Anchieta's Tchagra - Monavale vlei, Murowa Diamond mine, Norton area and Matabeleland, where the near-threatened Southern Ground-hornbill is being researched. NABU continues to support the newsletter which is a very valuable tool and much appreciated, especially in remote schools. Leslee and her team were commended for their significant contribution to education.

Dorothy Wakeling voiced her concerns regarding the library, which is a valuable resource, but has no budget and urgently requires a new computer to enable the large quantity of sophisticated data to be entered and stored and the collection of valuable publications to be properly looked after.

Michael Irwin resigned as editor of *Honeyguide* after nearly 25 years and accepted the position of Editor Emeritus in recognition of his outstanding accomplishment and Dr Brian Marshall agreed to take on the post of editor from his office in Uganda. Julia Duprée continues to be in charge of design and production of this journal and Jennifer Carter edits the *Babbler* – all of which is time consuming and their hard work is very much appreciated. For these publications to survive copy is needed and everyone is urged to send in articles and sightings, which are edited, so one does not need to be very eloquent – it's the information that is important! Michael Irwin told the meeting that 2007 is the 50th anniversary of the first *Checklist of Birds of Southern Rhodesia* and that the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* has many references from *Honeyguide*, which shows how important a part we play for worldwide institutions. He recommended that a major objective for the BLZ membership and secretariat should be

to rewrite and update the *Birds of Zimbabwe*, modelled on the *Birds of Malawi* and as a follow up to the new *Birds of Zambia*. As Zimbabwe shares a common border he feels it is a great opportunity with these key reference sources and all the information held by BirdLife Zimbabwe to undertake this project, for which funding would have to be sourced.

The Mashonaland branch report summarised their regular activities – there is something happening nearly every week – and the chairman Dave Dalziel urged members to support these functions, details of which are in the *Babbler*. He recommended that members also visit the bird hide built at the Mukuvisi Woodland, which is easily accessible in these times of fuel shortage.

Matabeleland branch is very active and has 106 members. They are busy with surveys of the Verreaux's Eagle, Dassies, raptors, Southern Ground-hornbills (interestingly they found 9 nest sites out of 7 are on granite because of the lack of big trees and that the birds tend to fly into windows and break the glass, which does not endear them to the local population), the Barn Swallow roost at How Mine and the branch also organises an annual display with the Natural History Museum, as well as their regular outings and functions. They have also set up an Injured Bird Unit.

There was no report from the Eastern Districts as Carl Beel is away but they are involved with the Swynnerton's Robin and Blue Swallow projects.

The Council have to represent the members (the “shareholders”) who elect them, and guide the work of the office for the benefit of both the members and donors and the president thanked Council for their support and especially Dorothy Wakeling and Carolyn Dennison, who have given so much of their time and worked so hard, but he appealed to members to inject “new blood”. Ken Fisher was nominated and approved as honorary treasurer, John Saunders declined re-election and as there were no other nominations, the 2007/8 Council are:

President	Ken Wilson
Vice President	Dorothy Wakeling
Honorary Treasurer	Ken Fisher
Honorary Secretary	Carolyn Dennison
Ordinary Members	Ferdie Couto and Geoff Lowe
Education representative	Ken Dixon
Mashonaland “	Dave Dalziel
Matabeleland “	Dudley Hubbard and Eddie Cross
Eastern Districts “	Carl Beel

We look forward to more member participation in the coming year and would especially welcome younger people and thank the many individuals, companies and donors who support BirdLife Zimbabwe and trust they will continue to do so.

Anyone wanting a copy of the minutes and/or the various reports in detail please contact Carolyn Dennison on e-mail at rolly@zol.co.zw or phone 747567.

DIRECTOR'S REPORTS

IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

BirdLife International's Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme is a global initiative aimed at identifying and protecting a network of critical sites for the world's birds. The sites are selected according to agreed global criteria. In Zimbabwe we have 20 IBAs. In this issue we focus on two IBAs, the Nyanga Lowlands/Honde Valley and Stapleford Forest.

Nyanga Lowlands/ Honde Valley (IBA Code ZW002)

The Nyanga lowlands/ Honde Valley IBA is located in the Eastern Highlands. The site encompasses montane forests on the slopes of Mount Nyangani down to the lowland rainforests in the Honde Valley. The largest block of rainforest in Zimbabwe is situated in this IBA. The key species are the Blue Swallow, a breeding summer visitor, and the Plain-backed Sunbird. Other species that have been recorded in the area include the African Broadbill, Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo, African Pitta (formerly Angola Pitta), among others. The BLZ Education Department worked in the Honde Valley for a number of years and continues to maintain contact with the schools and tea estates in the area. The tea estate

continues to monitor and help conserve a small population of the Anchieta's Tchagra. The forest area is threatened by the need to clear more land for coffee plantations. There is also cutting down of trees for curios and carvings. Riparian forests along the forest have been lost through clearing land for stream bank cultivation. Part of this IBA has been settled on by communities under the land reform programme and the new settlers have cleared parts of the forest for building settlements and cultivation. Honde Valley is accessible to visitors and there are a number of lodges that offer accommodation and meals.

Stapleford Forest (IBA Code ZW003)

Stapleford Forest is another IBA located in the Eastern Highlands. The main land use is commercial forests managed by the Forestry Commission. The key species in this area are Blue Swallow and Swynnerton's Robin. A pair of Wattled Cranes was recorded in the early 1980s during an aerial survey. Stapleford is accorded a fair level of protection as it is run by the Forestry Commission. Habitats for birds are lost through increased afforestation of non-indigenous tree species, cultivation and cattle grazing, invasion of alien tree species, stream bank and accelerated soil erosion in following the felling of plantations. This area is accessible but one might need to get permission for a visit from the Forestry Commission. **Dr. Chip Chirara**

EDUCATION

Murowa project progress

The first phase for establishing a nutrition garden has been undertaken by Schools and colleges permaculture facilitator Shepherd Chihwehwe on the 19 and 20th of June. The two day event organised by BLZ trainers L. Maasdorp and T. Fakarayi at Gundekunde Primary School. Attendance was good with a herdsman two ARES officers, parents, the headmaster teachers and pupils attending. Practical work included double digging a demonstration plot and making a swale. The second phase will be completed early next term when the fencing is in place and planting can be undertaken. The new ideas and thinking behind this kind of land use with its sustainable practices takes time and skill to assimilate and apply to a garden plot.

Harare and its surrounding school cluster Festivals.

The following festivals were organised by the Education officer with assistance from T. Fakarayi, Jimmy Muropa and Innocent Magunje;

Harare cluster festival on the 8th June was hosted by the Head and BAP teacher at Hallingbury Primary. The Southerton Club maintained its excellent standards and came first followed by Marlborough then the host school. Eight schools and Belvedere Technical Teachers College Club attended as well as a Ministry official.

Chitungwiza cluster festival on the 22nd June 2007 was held at St Aidans Primary whose headmaster opened the event while the EO Mr Mupfute encouraged all school clubs to challenge the winners who were Seke 7 Primary, Tamuka Primary and Zengeza 3 High. All schools gave excellent presentations which entertained and impressed the big crowd.

The Norton Chivero Cluster Festival on the 6th July 2007 saw eight schools taking part at Kintyre Primary School and the standard and keenness in the competitions was very high and encouraging for the manager E. Officer and other facilitators from BLZ.

These children are the custodians of the future for the Robert McIlwaine Recreational Park Important Bird Area and their strong participation in the Bird Awareness Programme bodes well for the future conservation of this IBA. The fine club at Norton 1 won the event followed by Kintyre and Kumboyedza Primary, a small Parks school near the BLZ sanctuary at Chivero. Other clubs were close behind.

The EO Juliet Masama is to be commended for planning and running the three festivals so very well.

Donations

We could not undertake all our education events without donations from members who provide books, binoculars, calendars and caps which are used as prizes for competitions

Our programme appreciated being given glossy bird books and field guides by Rolf Chenaux-Repond and Colin Baker and a pair of binoculars from Rolf. Thanks to Patrick Smet for giving us caps.

Leslee Maasdorp, Manager of Education Programmes

Bird Awareness Programme

Chiota Cluster News (June 2007)

Bird awareness coordinator for Chiota Cluster, **Elisha Chipendo**, and brother, **Zacharia Chipendo**, a teacher at Furamera and UNESCO programme coordinator, expanded the permaculture programme establishing more herbal gardens in schools and community. Three more schools joined the programme two in Chitungwiza; Chinembiri and Zengeza 4 Primary Schools, and St Nicholas Musemburi Primary at Mahusekwa Growth Point Chiota. Approximately fourteen community herbal gardens eleven in Chiota, three in Chitungwiza have been established and preparations to launch community herbal gardens are at an advanced stage.

Chiota Bird Club is appealing for environmental literature and second hand binoculars. We only have two pairs of binoculars donated by BirdLife Zimbabwe in 2002. About three bird watching events have been held since January 2007. One at Nyamagaya pan another at Nyatsime River and the third one was a garden birds of Chiota survey which was held early May 2007. *Enjoy Birds of Zimbabwe* books and teachers' resource books are also needed to distribute to new schools and community environmental clubs.

Chiota Bird Club managed to buy a mailbox and a cell phone to ease communication problems. The new box is Chihota Bird Club, P.O. Box CZA 221, Chitungwiza. Cell No 0912 759 958

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Mukuvisi Fair Jane Rautenbach would like to thank all the people who gave up their time to help at the BLZ stand at the Mukuvisi Fair on the 23rd and 24th June 2007. Everyone's help was very much appreciated. We recruited more members and our new T-Shirts were a great success.

Sunday, May 27th 2007: 12 Welston Road and Sun Valley Dam, (ODS: 1731C1)

We had a good turnout of about 13 people for this outing which took place on a fine and warm day. Our hosts at 12 Welston Road, Sue and John Hollaway, were away but very kindly arranged for their caretaker to let us onto the property. Although there had been some burning the miombo woodland, cover was generally in good condition with not much tree cutting and more firebreak development than on previous visits. Early on in the walk there was a piping call which most of us had heard before but could not place until Ian Riddell reminded us that it was an African Goshawk. Initially this bird flew from one tree to another but later treated us to overhead circling and calling so that we could confirm it. In the vicinity of the stream we saw an immature Lesser Honeyguide and counted 2 altogether between the 2 properties. Although we don't usually get high species counts here we do get the odd unusual sightings and this time we managed to find 4 Grey Penduline-tits, 6 Pale Flycatchers and 5 Wood Pipits. Ashy Flycatchers were also numerous as a total of 10 were recorded between the 2 properties.

After Welston Road we proceeded to Sun Valley Dam where the water level was not as high as on our previous visit but still only about a metre below full. Ducks were not as numerous as last time as we only had one Red-billed Teal but we did see 2 African Fish-eagles. Other raptors included a Black-shouldered Kite and a Lizard Buzzard. We went further upstream along the shore than last time where we found quite a large paddock with grassland, various acacias and exotic invaders such as lantana and Syringa. In this paddock there about 20 Red-faced Mousebirds, Whyte's Barbets (a total of 7 between the 2 properties), Terrestrial Brownbuls (a total of 12 between the 2 properties), 8 Violet-backed Starlings and 6 Thick-billed Weavers. In the vicinity of the dam and below the dam wall our highlights included 3 African Rails heard, 6 White-fronted Bee-eaters, about 40 Grey-rumped Swallows and about 20 Eastern Saw-wings.

Our total bird species count was 83 and we decided that we need to devote a full morning to Sun Valley Dam in future as there is quite a large area to explore there. Thanks to our hosts at both properties for their hospitality.

Richard Dennison

Sunday June 24th 2007, EWANRIGG BOTANICAL GARDENS

A good crowd of 18, with some welcome new faces, collected at Ewanrigg on a crisp but bright winter morning. Our timing for the visit was not good this year as the aloes had nearly finished flowering and

the enormous Kenya Coffee had not quite started. But it was lovely to be there. Dave Rockingham-Gill gave the group of new members a potted history of the gardens as we walked.

Six of the 7 hoped-for Sunbirds were seen, Variable Sunbird, White-bellied Sunbird, Amethyst Sunbird, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird AND, by a lucky few, Western Violet-backed Sunbird. Only the Copper Sunbird was missing.

At the end of the walk, another Ewanrigg special, Red-backed Mannikins were seen in a large flock of the more common Bronze Mannikin but Magpie Mannikin were missing.

A respectable list of 66 species was ticked. **Jennifer Carter**

The Saturday morning walks, having started with 24, then 16, have settled down to 8 members.

Perhaps we will see more members when the mornings start to warm up. Those who braved the cold June and July mornings had very good birding. Leader Dave Dalziel was pleasantly surprised on what was his first visit to Greystone Park Nature Reserve, where 57 species were ticked, and is keen to go back. The reserve has a small dam, an interesting walk below the dam and has gardens on both sides, all of which yield good sightings.

Marlborough in the sun gave exciting birding: 2 African Purple Swamphens, several African Snipes, flying and drumming, an African Harrier-hawk, a young Greater Kestrel, two Marsh Owls and no less than 6 Black-chested Snake-eagles. A Capped Wheatear was seen going down a hole with grass in its beak. Once we saw one, we saw them everywhere. Richard's dog put up a large Wild Boar, shaped like a mini Bison, which she caught up with despite its speed. But she soon decided to leave it alone. Only 41 species in all but a very successful and enjoyable morning. **Jennifer Carter**

Evening Talks In April, Dave Rockingham-Gill spoke on the proposed Red Data Book and discussed how other RDBs have been handled over the years. This project is slowly getting underway.

In May, Michael Stuart Irwin entertained us with anecdotes from his early life in England and introduction to birds and raised questions about the distribution of Cape Buntings in Zimbabwe which has two distinct groups, one in the West and one in the southeast. DNA research has found that those found around Harare are linked to the strain from the west although physically closer to the southeast group.

Carl Beel described some wonderful birding opportunities in Mozambique in June. There are resorts on the coast and Gorongosa, once renowned for its large populations of elephant, buffaloes and lions is being redeveloped and animals reintroduced. The birding here can be very exciting. Mount Gorongosa - not in the park - is also to be protected. It is here that where there are abundant Swynnerton's Robins, the object of a survey being undertaken by Carl and his team.

In July, Tony Alegria gave a fascinating presentation on astronomy, stars, planets, galaxies, comets, constellations - what they are and where they are and where to find out more about them. He gave us all printouts of the constellations of the southern skies so we can identify them. I know I learnt a lot and I am sure everyone did. ZESA co-operated and the stand-by generator wasn't needed.

Thanks to all our speakers for giving up their time to come and educate and entertain us, which they surely did!

Jennifer Carter

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Verreux's Eagle Breeding Survey, Matobo – First Report for 2007

This year the organisers of the Verreux's Eagle Survey believed it would be in the best interest of the Survey if ALL nests within the Matobo National Park and its immediate surrounds be checked for occupancy. A number of territories and nest sites had not been checked for a significant period of time, due mainly to manpower shortages. Five new teams were added to the existing teams from previous years.

A total of 104 nest sites in 75 territories situated within the Matobo National Park, and its immediate boundary were allocated to the 14 volunteer teams. The teams have been incredibly enthusiastic, as 135 report forms were received. All teams have at least one nest within their allocated territories where there is active incubation. Some are lucky enough to have three.

As of the 31st May 2007, 63 nests within 51 territories had been checked for occupancy. Of the 51 territories, 29 are occupied.

We continue to be busy as usual, and it looks as though for the rest of 2007, the Eagles will make sure we stay that way. **Cecilia Hubbard**

Aisleby

For many years members of BLZ Matabeleland (primarily Sandy McAdam & the late Harry Erwee) have been undertaking regular census of the birds at Aisleby Farm & Sewerage Works. Data is now available covering nearly 10 years – from January 1998 to current, with a break of only 13 non consecutive months in 2005 & 2006. While it is intended to begin a thorough analysis of this data Sandy & I each recently picked 2 of our favourite species and looked at the data for these.

Sandy's choices were Grey Crowned Crane and African Darter – the populations of both these species have shown dramatic fluctuations over the years:

Grey Crowned Cranes: In the early years of the survey these were recorded regularly – 143 birds (over 5 months) in 1998 and 212 birds (over 6 months) in 1999. The maximum sighting was of 98 birds in May of 1998. After that there was a dramatic drop in number with 30, 6, 4, 2, & 2 being recorded over the years 2000 to 2004. Since January 2004 there have been no further sightings

African Darters: The number of darters recorded built up steadily in the early years of the survey from 6 in January 1998 (the only sighting that year), to 23 in 1999 (over 4 months), 56 in 2000 (over 10 months), and a peak of 78 (over 8 months) in 2001. In 2002 the number dropped back to 2, recorded in January. There have been no further sightings of darters since then

Wood Sandpipers: I picked this species because on my one trip with Sandy we counted them all the time, every where, and next trip there were none. After reading up on them I now know this is to be expected as they are palaeartic migrants, which return to breed in northern Eurasia, leaving Zimbabwe in early May and returning in late August. Averaging the Aisleby data for 9 years confirms this with most birds being records in the months December to March, and nil to few birds in May to July – maximum average being 48 birds in January, and maximum actual being 160 birds in January 2005.

African Sacred Ibis: My reason for choosing this species was because on our last trip Julia said 'look out for red armpits'! Again I had to do a bit of reading up to learn that the African Sacred Ibis has a strip of naked skin on the under-wing which turns bright red in the breeding season. It is a breeding resident, breeding in February – March, and August – September. Michael S Irwin, in his book *Birds of Zimbabwe*, says that the Sacred Ibis was not known to breed in Zimbabwe initially, and that the first record of extensive nesting was at Aisleby in 1978. The birds are seen regularly in large numbers at Aisleby, with no obvious seasonal variations. The highest number recorded was 4,393 in 2001, with the highest monthly average being 313 in January, and the highest actual sighting being 674 birds recorded in January 2003. **Adele Edwards**

Waterfowl Census

Throughout the month of July the Branch will be involved with waterfowl census. At the time of going to print only one census had been complete, at Cowdray Park Sewerage Ponds, on 16 July. Further census will be done at SAST Sewerage Ponds, Khami Road (22 July), Aisleby Farm & Sewerage Works (29 July) and Hwange National Park. These trips will be reported in the next issue of *Babbler*.

Cowdray Park Sewerage Ponds: 9 June 2007

One day sometime last year, A Someone was flying from somewhere to somewhere else, when he looked down and saw something – a few something's actually. We discussed this sighting, and then pondered upon it. It turned out to be a series of sewage cleansing ponds – well, they don't cleanse the sewage as such; they concentrate on the water - in the middle of very attractive bush. Furthering pondering and investigation revealed that these ponds were situated just outside a suburb called Cowdray Park.

To cut a long story short, The Someone obtained the City Engineer's formal permission to visit these ponds and see what was what. They are in fact administered by Aisleby Sewage Works, our second

birding home, and the Supervisor kindly organised for the gate to be unlocked and we to be admitted come the day of the formal visit.

The Someone credited with spotting them from the air, his wife (hereinafter called 'The Wife') and I then went on a recce to ensure that we could find the place on the ground and that all was well before taking along an exploratory group. Initially all was not well, the gate was locked and there was not a soul to be seen. *Unphased*, I think would be the right word, The Wife set off to the sewage receiving hut, unhesitatingly lowered herself into the concrete moat, and crawled on her stomach under the fence, through the sewage flotsam and jetsam and gained access to within. I had an obligation to follow but The Someone felt he didn't as his duty was to look after the vehicle.

What we found was marvellous. The first pond received the unadulterated sewage so was full of sludge and full of birds. The other top pond was dry and within were about eight Hamerkops in a clump, most of them lying down – quite unusual for Hamerkops who usually stand looking gloomy on the ground or on top of each other. Next were a long pond, full of waterfowl, and the last three ponds revealed more of the same, but less of them, if you know what I mean, as the water became cleaner and cleaner.

Here we met a startled guard who had been tending his vegetables down afar. When we explained what was going on, he nodded his head knowingly and pointed to the right-hand corner of the fence indicating that of course that's how we'd got in. *Wrong* – now we know there are three ways in, one of which is through the gate.

We returned as a group at the weekend and recorded in excess of 381 waterfowl and other birds of 26 species. Water birds included 160 Little Grebes, 54 Three-banded Plovers and 19 Kittlitz's Plovers, about 48 African Sacred Ibis and, treat of all treats, 25 Cape Shoveler. Also floating or perched around the place were White-faced Duck, Red-billed Teal, Southern Pochard, Black Crake, Common Moorhen, Red-knobbed Coot, Black-winged Stilt, Black-headed Herons and Grey Herons and African Jacana. Also-rans were a Pearl-spotted Owlet, seven Wire-tailed Swallows, six African Grey Hornbill, several Cape Turtle-doves and two Namaqua Doves, a Brown Snake-eagle, five Grey Go-away-birds, a Senegal Coucal but only three of the aforementioned Hamerkop. We saw two Hamerkop nests - will have to find out where the other four live.

Cowdray Park has been added to our list for the African Waterfowl Census. It's a water body well worth regular monitoring and deeper investigation, particularly down the riverine section in migrant season. **Julia Duprée**

'Birds in Rock Art'

On Saturday 14 July Paul Hubbard, an archaeologist and son of long standing BLZ member Dudley & Cecilia, gave a very interesting presentation on Birds in the Rock Art of Zimbabwe. The presentation included many photographs and sketches of rock art illustrating the various points discussed, including:

- Many of the winged creatures seen in rock art are believed to have been drawn by medicine men, and symbolize the spirit leaving the body when the medicine man entered a state of trance
- The bird appearing most frequently in rock art is the ostrich, which was of special economic importance to the community, with the eggs, feathers, meat, and even the birds behaviour, all being significant

An article written by Paul on the topic will be appearing soon in *Honeyguide*, so you will have the opportunity to read more on the subject. **Adele Edwards**

TOPSHOP

We have a selection of stunning goodies for sale – at half price, of course, as is the fashion. These consist of tee-shirts and golf shirts, in eight different colours, with Southern Ground-hornbill, Verreaux's Eagle and Barn Swallow designs, in a variety of sizes. We also have a couple of new items – handmade, wooden jigsaw puzzles, unique with no two the same, for adults and children - for Christmas. These items are sold not for gain but for our project funding – please buy generously. Limited stocks are available in the National Office, but if you would like an emailed full colour, comprehensive, catalogue, please either email or phone me – details on front cover of *Babbler*. **Julia Duprée**

TAIL FEATHERS

Robot birdwatcher joins hunt for elusive woodpecker

Ornithologists seeking the elusive ivory-billed woodpecker have been given a much needed boost: the world's first fully automated, robotic birdwatcher. Believed extinct for more than half a century, the iconic woodpecker, with its distinctive plumage, appeared to stage a miraculous return in April 2005, when ornithologists claimed to have spotted the bird in a nature reserve in Arkansas, US.

However, other experts quickly questioned the findings, sparking a renewed search for concrete proof of the woodpecker's existence.

Enter robo-birdwatcher. Not only does the device digitally photograph every bird that flies overhead, it stands watch in an inhospitable snake and mosquito-infested swamp for months on end. If the ivory-billed woodpecker is out there, the tireless robot should snap it.

The system has two video cameras that photograph the sky at 22 frames per second. This stream of images is rapidly screened for birds flying overhead using computer vision algorithms. The software automatically discards other images, keeping about one in every 20,000, and saving only those in which the sky is suddenly interrupted by a passing object. The device sometimes mistakes a falling leaf or another flying object - like a helicopter - for a bird. But it has also captured images of passing hawks, geese and a blue heron during the first three months of operation, says Ken Goldberg at the University of California in Berkeley, US, who designed the robot with Dezheng Song at Texas A&M University, US.

In a bid to discourage hunters in boats from using the robot for target practice, Goldberg ingeniously fixed a large "radiation hazard" warning sticker on it, which he hopes will be more effective than bullet-proofing. So far, he says, it seems to have worked. Look it up on the internet

<http://www.newscientisttech.com/article/dn11211-robot-birdwatcher-joins-hunt-for-elusive-woodpecker.html>

July birding in Zimbabwe

I often find it hard to get up to go birding in winter but this July I have had 4 excellent outings, Mukuvisi, Chivero, Marlborough vlei and Stapleford Farm on 4 glorious, crisp sunny July mornings - warming up quickly but not getting too hot. In the month, I must have personally seen 70 or 80 species. Come on. Get out of bed and into the bush in the coming months. That is what this country is about. **Jennifer Carter**

NOTICEBOARD

Honeyguides

If members have any back copies of *Honeyguide* they no longer require please could you let National Office have them? In particular, we need copies of September 2005 Vol. 51(2) - it has the photograph of Gurney's Sugarbird on the front cover.

Items for Sale at National Office - contact the office

T-Shirts, various sizes: motifs White-fronted Bee-eaters, Bateleur, Ground Hornbill, Black Eagle and Barn Swallow. Good bush colours. The artwork is by Sue Bell and Penny Feather.

Golf shirts with motifs on the pocket and arm, good colours, nice shirts.

Bush hats and caps with the BirdLife logo embroidered on them.

Ceramic bird feeder and water bath, hand painted and unique (if you wish you can have the birds of your choice painted), an **ideal Christmas present** for the person who already has everything or for an elderly person living in a home which prohibits pets but they can keep birds.

Window Mobile – to stop birds flying into large windows.

Jigsaw puzzles for adults and children.

National Office wish list

The National Office is situated in the most "birdless" garden I have ever known! Despite my attempts at trying to tempt the little creatures into the garden with water baths and a seed/fruit tray, the only ones to take up the offer so far are the crows. So I am going to try and attract them using plants and would be most grateful if any member can help with indigenous/water wise plants that you may have in your gardens and can let us have some cuttings/offshoots. Please do not give us any invasive alien plants. Suitable plants such as aloes, clivias, agapanthus, any succulents will be most welcome.

Hazel Hatton

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