

# BABBLER

The Newsletter of -

## BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

### ISSUE # 82 – JUNE/JULY 2008

	Mashonaland	☎	Matabeleland	☎
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### APRIL 2008 to MARCH 2009 SUBSCRIPTIONS – due 1<sup>st</sup> April

Ordinary (Individual and family) members and schools	ZW\$50 million
Senior Citizens and students	ZW\$25 million
Corporate members	ZW\$150 million
Members outside Zimbabwe	Africa US\$20/Other US\$30

**Many of you have already paid. Thank you. We don't want to lose members so if you will find payment difficult, please contact Dave Dalziel, Julia Duprée or a committee member named above. But if you can, please make an additional donation.**

**Additional subscriptions might be necessary later as they were in 2007/2008.**

#### PAYMENT

- By cash or cheque at BirdLife offices, Clyde Road; OR DEPOSIT INTO
- BirdLife Zimbabwe Barclays Bank a/c 0647523 at Borrowdale Branch, Branch Code 2147; OR
- BirdLife Mash CABS a/c 9012703755 at ANY CABS Branch. **If (b) OR (c) you MUST fax or email details to BirdLife (see above addresses).** If depositing into CABS, please give your name as DEPOSITOR and email [jcarter@cabs.co.zw](mailto:jcarter@cabs.co.zw) and/or [gcarter@mweb.co.zw](mailto:gcarter@mweb.co.zw) with details as well as BLZ.
- Matabeleland members contact Julia.

## ACTIVITIES

### **BIRDLIFE ZIMBABWE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**SATURDAY, 31<sup>st</sup> MAY 2008**

**at THE EDUCATION CENTRE, Mukuvisi Woodlands, at 10.00 a.m.**

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Please bring a copy of the Agenda which you should have already received. Bring cash for your membership if you haven't already paid.

The meeting will be followed by a short tribute by Alex Masterson to Michael Irwin for his outstanding achievements in ornithology and contribution to BirdLife Zimbabwe.

Bring your lunch and chairs – braai facilities will be available – and catch up with old friends and meet new ones. A bird walk into the Mukuvisi Woodland will be offered at 3.p.m. so don't forget your binos!

Please bring ANY magazines, old field guides, books, and unused binoculars etc. for Education Department. The teachers in rural areas are grateful for anything like this that they can use in the Bird Clubs or just in the classroom. They need all the help they can get. Also the Library needs a Map Book of Zimbabwe, telephone directories for Zimbabwe and a dictionary if anyone can help.

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### **Pan-African Ornithological Congress, Worcester South Africa, 7-12 September 2008**

The 12<sup>th</sup> Pan-African Ornithological Congress will take place at Goudini Spa (near Worcester) from 7-12 September 2008. The last time this congress was held in South Africa was back in 1969, at Pretoriousskop, Kruger National Park (this was the third congress!). The congress takes place every four years.

The theme of the 12<sup>th</sup> congress is 'Birds and People: Interaction, Utilisation and Conservation' and will cover many different topics from climate change issues and volunteers & biodiversity conservation to breeding strategies and migration studies (see [http://paoc12.adu.org.za/sciprogram\\_symposia.htm](http://paoc12.adu.org.za/sciprogram_symposia.htm) for the full list). Although the congress is primarily scientific there is scope for amateur ornithologists and general birders to attend and participate in the congress, from attending talks on the various themes, browsing posters detailing findings from ornithological research around Africa, to participating in round-table discussions on various issues (e.g. ethno-ornithology, bird trade issues, raptor conservation, etc.).

So, if you think that this may interest you and you would like to find out more about current bird research and conservation in Africa, and mingle with leading African and European ornithologists then please consider registering as a congress delegate. The next time this congress will be hosted in South Africa will probably only be in another 20 or so years time!

The registration fee includes accommodation, all meals (inc. congress dinner) and a congress bag. There are also mid-congress excursions and pre- and post congress tours but these will need to be paid for separately. Early morning bird ringing demonstrations and the chance to relax and unwind in the hot-water pools of the spa are also on offer.

All the costs and accommodation options are on the PAOC 12 website - <http://paoc12.adu.org.za> (Click on the registration link)

Queries: re registration Congress Secretariat: [Glaudin Kruger kruger@kruger-associates.com](mailto:Glaudin.Kruger@kruger-associates.com).  
Queries regarding the scientific programme can be addressed to [Doug.harebottle@uct.ac.za](mailto:Doug.harebottle@uct.ac.za)  
The PAOC12 Local Organising Committee looks forward to seeing you at Goudini.

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## **MASHONALAND BRANCH**

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

**Regular outings**      **NOTE CHANGE OF TIME: MAY TO AUGUST 07:00 a.m.**

### **Sundays 1<sup>st</sup> June and 6<sup>th</sup> July 07:00 a.m.: 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 chairs and refreshments. Also a reasonable tip for the guard who will be on hand to unlock the gate to let cars in and out, remembering the price of a loaf of bread and the value of your vehicle.

### **Sundays 8<sup>th</sup> June and 13<sup>th</sup> July 07:00 a.m.: 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.

### **Sundays 15<sup>th</sup> June and 20<sup>th</sup> July: 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. Remember your gumboots if the rains have been good.

### **Saturday Morning, 21<sup>st</sup> June: Haka Park 07:00 a.m.**

Turn left into Cleveland Dam entrance off Mutare Road just past Jagers and then left again to Haka Park just before the house on the left. There is an entrance fee. Vehicles will be left with security at the entrance and the group will walk through the lovely msasa woodlands, where Spotted Creepers are often spotted (sorry!), and down to the dam for the water birds.

**Saturday Morning, 19<sup>th</sup> July, Marlborough Vlei 07:00 a.m.** This was a really good walk last July. Several raptors were seen including SIX Black-chested Snake-eagles and there were a number of Capped Wheatears. Directions: drive to the end of Princess Margaret Rd, turn left, continue to the short cul-de-sac on the vlei side with a small fenced off area at the end. Bring some cash for the guard.

*On Saturdays, bring chairs and refreshments for a cuppa while you tick the list – Dave still aims to get you away by 9:00 a.m. for shopping!*

**Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> June Tobacco Research Station, Kutsaga (behind Harare Airport) 07:00 a.m.:** Meet at BLZ offices, 35 Clyde Road, Eastlea, where vehicles can be left and transport shared. Bring chairs and plenty of refreshments. This is a pleasant venue with a dam and mature miombo woodland.

### **Sunday, 20<sup>th</sup> July, Double Ro Ranch (Gilmour/Carswell Butchery), Lomagundi Road, 07:00 a.m.**

Meet at the Carters', 2 Helena Road where vehicles can be left and transport shared. Bring chairs and refreshments.

### **Evening Meetings**

**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, we hope, POWER BY GENERATOR if necessary.

**Friday, 20<sup>th</sup> June: Blue Swallow Survey – Dr. Chip Chirara, BLZ director** will report on the results of Blue Swallow survey held in October last year. This is one of the flagship projects for BirdLife Zimbabwe.

**Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> July, “A Brief History of Astronomy for Beginners”, Tony Alegria.** This is a really interesting talk going as far back as Galileo, who was excommunicated when he said the earth was round.

### **ANNUAL WEEKEND – HIPPO POOLS – Friday 26<sup>th</sup> – Monday 29<sup>th</sup> September**

There are lodges or camping at this excellent birding site. Livingstone's Flycatcher, White-backed Night-heron, Narina Trogon and Red-throated Twinspot can be seen without leaving camp and Pel's Fishing-owl just a stroll away. Cabanis's Bunting was confirmed for the first time last year and Dickinson's Kestrel is usually found.

If you are interested, please contact a committee member. Bookings will only be made when there is a commitment as all places booked – and paid for – were not taken up last year.

## **MATABELELAND BRANCH**

### **Monthly Outings**

**Sunday, 8<sup>th</sup> June: to be confirmed: the Martin's farm** 20km out of town on the Turk Mine Road. Leave town at 9:00 a.m. Bring lunch, chairs etc.

**July, whole month:** Waterfowl counts. Dates and venues will be confirmed in Matland Musings after consultation with the national co-ordinator but we hope to cover the areas we have done for the last few years including Aisleby SAST, Fort Rixon, Cowdray Park and Hwange National Park.

**August, 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>, Camp at Shashe** The camp has been booked for 4 nights. Facilities are limited (2 dormitories with beds and mattresses, ablutions, braai area). Participants will have to bring all their own requirements. Contact Julia or Judy for more details. Start saving your fuel now!

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

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## **MASHONALAND SOUTH**

**KADOMA :** Outings will be held at 7.00 a.m. on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of each month.  
Contact Margaret Parrock ☎ 068-22005 or her daughter, Coralee, ☎ 068-23644 for details.

Margaret says the birding is superb around that area and that there are African Finfoot on Claw Dam and 3-4 Black-chested Snake-eagles and a pair of African Harrier-hawks in town around the golf course area and the Barn Owls are breeding quite well – especially in the butchery building!

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## **REPORTS**

### **NATIONAL**

#### **Important Bird Areas (IBAs) Monitoring Project Report**

The Important Bird Areas monitoring project is in year two of its implementation. The project is generally progressing well. The training of Important Bird Areas (IBA) monitoring personnel targeted Stapleford Forest and Robert McIlwaine Recreational Park during the month of April and May respectively. More than twenty people were trained in IBA monitoring for both sites. The objective is to build an effective biodiversity monitoring system in IBAs that delivers information on site condition and biodiversity trends to stimulate conservation action. Training has covered five IBAs so far. Monitoring has started in those IBAs. The coordination and reporting structures have been developed at the sites. The target is to train personnel in remaining six IBAs by end of July.

The IBA posters produced are designed for stakeholders' awareness of the IBA monitoring project. Copies will be displayed at BLZ office and main stakeholders, i.e. National Parks, Forestry Commission and Allied Timber Holdings (Pvt.) Ltd. Brochures have also been developed and will be made available to all BLZ members and other stakeholders in due course.

**Kanisios Mukwashi, IBA National Project Manager**

#### **National Fire Week**

Uncontrolled veld fires are a threat to humans, birds and biodiversity. The fires are mainly caused by humans who misuse fire and other flammable substances. They pose very negative impacts to the environment such as destruction of habitats, loss of life, disrupting functioning of the ecosystem and destroying property. The uncontrolled fires are a problem to biodiversity especially during the winter season and need an urgent national response. It is against this background that the Ministry of the Environment and Tourism invited various environmental stakeholders to a press conference for the National Fire Week: 11-17 May 2008. This was held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2008 at the Ministry's Main Offices in Harare. The participants for this event include BirdLife Zimbabwe, Environment Africa, Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, Forest Commission, Environmental Management Agency, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, Timber Producers Federation just to name a few. BirdLife Zimbabwe was represented by Mr Togarasei Fakarayi.

The acting Minister of Environment and Tourism Mrs. F. Buka was the guest of Honour. She urged all stakeholders to raise public awareness on the proper handling of fire and other flammable substances to avoid uncontrolled veld fires during this winter season. The ministry has called for a zero tolerance to veld fires. It is everyone's responsibility to prevent, control and put out veld fires. Stakeholders were encouraged to take a lead and work together with the ministry and various communities in a holistic manner on preventing uncontrolled fires so as to save our biodiversity and the environment as a whole. Environmental organizations and stakeholders were also urged to come together and commemorate other national environmental events ahead as this will help to share ideas, experiences and spread information to all corners of the country.

**Togarasei Fakarayi (Conservation)**

### **World migratory Bird Day**

World Migratory Bird Day was initiated in 2006 and is a global awareness-raising campaign highlighting the need for the protection of migratory birds and their habitats. On the second weekend in May, people around the world will take action and organise public events such as bird festivals, education programmes or bird watching excursions to celebrate WMBD.

This year the celebrations were held between 10 and 11 May in the whole world. BLZ took the task and organised for the celebrations which were done at Marlborough Sewage ponds in the city of Harare on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May. The event was attended by children from three different schools and their teachers, BLZ staff and members. The schools which attended are Marlborough Primary School, Southerton Primary and Hallingbury Primary school. A speech on the importance of migratory birds and the theme for this year "Migratory Birds – Ambassadors for Biodiversity" was given by Mr. C. Beel who came all the way from Mutare for the celebrations. The celebrations were very successful and presented a good platform for the education of school children and other interested parties about migratory birds.

A short bird watching event was done after the speech and children had the opportunity of watching the birds with binoculars and a telescope albeit the small number of birds that were present at the ponds.

On behalf of BLZ, I would want to thank all who attended the celebrations and also want to thank all those who made the event a success.

**Admire (Student – Conservation)**

### **Climatic Change: Global Warming**

Climate change is any long-term significant change in the "average weather" that a given region experiences. Average weather may include average temperature, precipitation and wind patterns. It involves changes in the variability or average state of the atmosphere ranging from decades to millions of years. These changes can be caused by dynamic process on Earth, external forces including variations in sunlight intensity, and more recently by human activities.

Global warming is considered as a threat to biodiversity life. The earth's climate is warming up and this is happening at an alarming rate! The following is an example of one of the effects of global warming on bird population.

As temperatures fall, the rate at which heat is lost from the body to the environment increases. The energetic cost to the individual of maintaining a constant body temperature is therefore greater at lower temperatures, which may have unfavourable consequences for body condition and survival. Heavy rainfall may further increase rates of heat loss in birds, as their plumage provides less effective insulation when wet. The survival rates of a wide variety of bird species decrease under severe weather conditions during the winter period, particularly as winters become colder and wetter. Climatic conditions may also directly influence breeding success.

One way of combating climatic change is to **Plant a tree**.

Trees help clean the air from air pollution and, in particular, carbon dioxide – a gas that contributes to global warming. In the developing world, trees provide vital food, income and jobs.

**Dylas Gudoshava, Attached Student (BLZ Library)**

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## **MASHONALAND BRANCH**

### **Gosho Park, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2008: (QDS: 1831B1)**

8 hardy members gathered at the entrance to the BLZ headquarters by 6 a.m. on a cold morning only to find that the gate was locked and we could not rouse anyone to let us in. Clearly we will have to ensure that our office staff warns the security guard next time we use this as our meeting place. Accordingly we had to leave surplus cars at the Mukuvisi Woodlands. We were met outside Gosho Park at about 7:15 a.m. by Basil Riddell one of our Marondera members who later told us that we need not have left Harare so early because the birds do not get active until about 8:30 a.m. once the cold weather has arrived! Later still Jacko Williams, also from Marondera, told us that they had already had frost reported on 3 occasions and that it had been known to occur as early as 6<sup>th</sup> April in this area.

Basil led us west along the green route from the main picnic site and it soon became evident that the birds were quiet and not very active. The dams were full, the vegetation cover was in good condition and there was not much evidence of wood poaching. Mammals seen included Kudu, Sable, Impala, Duiker and Bush Squirrel but ticks were plentiful and we were told that they have developed resistance to the synthetic pyrethroids used in the Duncan Applicator tick control apparatuses. We were struck by the absence of water birds on 4 out of the 5 dams we visited even although these dams were apparently free of exotic weed infestation. At the western end of our walk is a stream that runs below a line of granite outcrops where we have seen Boulder Chat on previous visits but we could not find them this time. However, we did manage to find some of the miombo specials in this area in the form of Miombo Rock-thrush, Southern Hyliota, Lazy Cisticola, Wood Pipit and Striped Pipit. Already some of our newer members were starting to pick up lifers!

At this point we got split up into 2 groups for the eastern leg of our circular route so I cannot comment much on what the group that I was not in saw and heard. Later at the call-over we found that we had probably seen more than them. We did notice that as the day warmed up bird parties started to form up so that by 9:30 a.m. we had added White-breasted Cuckooshrike and Boulder Chat to our list of miombo specials. The tea and call-over took place at about 10 a.m. and during it a couple of enterprising members even set up a skottel for a cooked breakfast. At this stage our number of species was looking a bit thin at a total of 56 so Jacko Williams recommended that those that were not leaving should drive to a vlei where he had previously seen good numbers of birds, including warblers, of which we had none.

Halfway to our destination we discovered a bird party crossing the road in an area of mixed Uapaca (Muzhanje) woodland. This was a good sign as in these conditions Tits could be expected to be seen. Miombo Tit and then Rufous-bellied Tit followed shortly afterwards by our first 2 species of woodpecker and Red-faced Crombec were seen. A couple of these birds were lifers for members who had been with us for 10 or more years so we spent over half an hour following this bird party which was moving quite quickly. Eventually we added another 6 species to our list from this party including Grey Penduline-tit. Later at Jacko's vlei we added a Mocking Cliff-chat from a nearby granite outcrop but the warblers and other vlei birds were not apparent. Our final tally was 63 species which included all of the specials that I at least had hoped for at this time of the year. Thank you, Basil and Jacko, for guiding us.

**Richard Dennison**

### **Rifa, ZHA Education Camp, 21<sup>st</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> March (QDS: )**

A small group of 8 members of BLZ Mash, Leslee Maasdorp, Richard Dennison, Ian Riddell, Geoff Lowe, Innes and Riana Louw and the Carters, met up at Rifa Camp, 6 km west of Chirundu on the Zambezi, for some Easter birding. We were lucky with the weather which was not as hot as it can be in the valley though quite warm enough, thank you! Having arrived at midday, we spent the early afternoon settling in and set off later along the dry water course towards the great river. Everywhere we went we were accompanied, as required by ZHA, by armed protection in the form of Derrison a former National Parks ranger, now the Education Officer at Rifa. Derrison knows a lot about Rifa birds and is learning more all the time. Lions were known to be in the area and, although the heavy rains earlier in the season had dispersed the buffalo and elephants, you never know when one will be lurking in the adrenalin grass! We were undisturbed by dangerous wildlife however as we made our way to the edge of the Zambezi, always an exciting sight, wherever you meet up with it. Among around 60 species

identified during our walk were the specials, Collared Pratincole, Mosque Swallows, Bohm's Spinetail and the beautiful Woodland Kingfisher.

Early next morning we set off for the great Cathedral Mopane forest on the Mana side of Main road, about 15 km towards Harare, having obtained written permission from Nat Parks at Marongora when we paid for entrance to Rifa the previous day. We wanted to see what was on the big, temporary pans that develop in the woodlands when there are good rains – not seen in 10 years or so. It took a while to get there as there was a lot to be seen on the way. Hardly had we left camp when Ian saw a pair of Red-necked Falcons high in the kopjie. A little further along was a Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. Light (fortunately) overnight rain had made the road 'interesting' as even the Discovery slid through the dongas. In January, the road was impassable. As we left Chirundu, a brown eagle was perched on a tree alongside the road. The narrow leggings indicated a Lesser Spotted Eagle. We turned off into the magnificent mopane forest. Some of these huge trees must be hundreds of years old. We noticed broken branches and damaged trees and thought immediately of tree poaching. Then we realised it must be storm damage. Some of the trees had had their tops twisted right off, presumably by a small tornado, leaving a frayed stump 20 metres or more above the ground. It must have been some storm.

A few hundred metres from the tar, we came to the first 'duck factory' as these large, shallow pans are known. It was lovely in the morning light, with water-lilies and grasses and huge trees all around. This one lived up to the name as there were at least 50 immature Comb Ducks. There were 5 adult females but no adult males. They were off fishing somewhere for the holiday, leaving the women-folk baby-sitting! A pair of African Pygmy-goose led their 9 black-and-white goslings into the grasses for protection. The first of about 50 Lilian's Lovebirds were seen and a Lesser Moorhen played hide-and-seek in the reeds. After walking around the pan, we moved on to the next one, seeing a number of Arnot's Chats along the way.

Fertility Pan, Nyachuru, also a temporary pan, was only a few hundred further on. A Lesser Moorhen with 4 chicks was seen immediately and Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters flew around. A Little Grebe, also with chicks lurked in the reeds and an African Openbill elongated the tall, dead mopani trunk he stood on. A rare female Striped Crake caused great excitement. Graham managed to get a couple of really good photos among the couple of dozen he took of this secretive bird. (Thank heaven for digital cameras!). Everyone had a good look at the Lesser Moorhen as well. We moved on to a permanent pan ... It was at this pan that, a few years ago, some birders watched an Impala escape from a Wild Dog into the water, only to be taken by a large crocodile! Here were a single Southern Carmine Bee-eater in amongst dozens of Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters, several Little Egrets, a Great Egret and a Green-backed Heron, fishing from a tree stump.

The afternoon walk onto the sand flats below the heights of Chirundu was disappointing with little being seen. Overnight African Scops-owl and African Barred Owlets were heard. Roberts Birds CD on the laptop was used to call up the Scops the next morning. It was in the huge fig in the middle of the camp but it took a long time to find. It was much lower in the tree than the sound suggested and easily seen on a twig close to a main branch or trunk as these delightful little birds always are when they roost. It was in the same place the next day.

The morning walk took us to the bee-eater nesting cliffs. We heard but did not see the Eastern Nicator but some did manage to see the African Emerald Cuckoo that called from a large Baobab nearby. We drove on to Long Pan where a pair of Lesser Spotted Eagles and a pair of African Hawk-eagles flew over. Several Allen's Gallinules roamed among the weed and single Saddle-billed Stork and Spur-wing Goose stood near about 20 White-faced Ducks.

We didn't take much notice when Derrison called us 'brave' as we set out on the last morning to walk thru the thick riverine vegetation below the cliffs. However, as we were about to enter the thick stuff, a warning growl was heard and 2 lionesses ran across the path 10 metres ahead, followed soon by a third. After a brief discussion, Derrison lead us straight up the cliffs and out of hungry lioness's way! We arrived back at camp with a list of 182 species for the 3 days, just over the target of 180. Geoff Lowe stayed on after the rest left at midday and saw a Dwarf Bittern with chick at Mopani Pan – the first breeding record of this species at Rifa!

**Jennifer Carter**

## **Hwange Birds by Ian Riddell, Friday 16<sup>th</sup> May**

Ian gave, not a show of pretty pictures of species found in Hwange, though there were those as well as heart-tugging views of the Park for those of us who love the place, but an interesting look at marginal species. These are species which might be prolific across the border in Botswana but are only occasionally recorded in Hwange.

He mentioned Red-billed Spurfowl, Namaqua Sandgrouse, African Red-eyed Bulbul which has been recorded as far into the park as Shumba Pan, and the Kalahari Scrub-robin, among others.

Ian said that the uncontrolled expansion of elephants in the Park is causing habitat destruction that is driving out not only many mammals but also birds. Although it has not been possible to do any meaningful counts, Tawny Eagle and other eagle numbers are dropping due to loss of trees for breeding. It was a fascinating and enlightening talk, looking at birds in the Park from a new angle, enjoyed by the 20 or so members who attended. Thanks, Ian, for the time and thought you gave to this interesting talk.

**Jennifer Carter**

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## **MATABELELAND BRANCH**

### **The Birds & the Bees at Thaba Moyo – 15 March**

Judy Ross has a delightful home on the outskirts of Bulawayo where, amongst other things, she keeps bees. It's no exaggeration to describe the property as a bee's take away – we'd seen a dozen European Bee-eaters swooping through the garden before we'd walked from the back door to her gate! For the next couple of hours we strolled through the surrounding veldt (mostly scrubby acacia) and picked up 28 species. We spent some time sitting at a small dam where the birds we saw included: Little Grebe (Dabchick) with young, a solitary Wood Sandpiper, Violet-eared Waxbill, Black-faced Waxbill and Blue Waxbills, Pin-tailed Whydah, Southern Red Bishop and Yellow-mantled Widowbird – flashes of colour in every direction. Wending our way back below the dam wall we stopped to try and identify a small bird flitting through the undergrowth – only to realize that we were being stared at by a Spotted Eagle-owl! The return trip was also enlivened by the sighting of both Cardinal Woodpecker and Bearded Woodpeckers. We returned to Judy's home to enjoy a leisurely lunch, and saw an African Hoopoe, Kurrichane Thrush and Spotted Flycatcher in the garden. After lunch Judy gave us a most interesting talk about bees and bee keeping and showed us around her setup. Several of us bought honey to take away with us – what a treat, it's not often you find something that tastes delicious AND is good for you. But Judy warned us that too much heat will destroy the enzymes which are the 'goodness' in honey. So if you're going to cheer yourself with a hot toddy this winter, don't pour boiling water onto the honey – make your hot drink and add the honey afterwards.

**Adele Edwards**

### **Hillside Dams Bird Count – 6 April**

Having been asked by the Hillside Dams Conservancy to conduct a bird count at the dams, twelve members of the Matabeleland Branch of BirdLife Zimbabwe met in the car park at the bottom dam at around about nine o'clock on this sunny morning. First to be sighted were two quarrelsome Pied Crows digging through the rubbish at one of the picnic spots, and a couple of chatty African Pied Wagtails, while much chirping and babbling went on from the water. Closer inspection revealed several Little Grebes, two Reed Cormorants, a pair of Red-billed Teal, a Common Moorhen or two, a lady Pied Kingfisher, attempting to catch a late breakfast, a hunch-backed Grey Heron in one of the trees, three elusive White-backed Duck which insisted on ducking below the water as soon as any of the spotters tried to identify them, and two Hamerkops near the wall, one of which had a beak full of nesting material by the looks of it while the other had its head down, hammer up and appeared to be displaying. A little later on five Hamerkops were seen together, two of which were showing off, attempting a two man pyramid while the others gazed on disinterestedly. While attempting to find a perched Lizard Buzzard, we saw a lady Giant Kingfisher swoop in, chasing the poor Pied Kingfisher and we think she was successful in robbing the hard worker of her catch. As some of the party missed the action, the Giant Kingfisher very kindly gave us a spectacular fly-past, landing briefly on the retaining wall in front of us.

The party set off across the wall, stopping to binocular the reeds, weeds and flowers below the dam wall trying to find a secretive but noisy White-browed Robin-chat who was serenading in fine voice. He/she



was eventually spotted along with some firefinches and a Tawny-flanked Prinia. Several other species were seen on the round trip, including an amazing number of trilling Crested Barbets.

By the time the lower dam had been circumnavigated, it was time for tea and a chat in the shade. Another of the birders pitched up and, as she settled down to her tea, some of the party set off for a walk to the top dam. First to be spotted was a very cheeky Steel-blue Widowfinch who was feeding on the ground amongst some Long-tailed Paradise-whydah ladies and kept chasing them off. Skulking in the undergrowth near the steps up to the top dam wall we came across an African Goshawk and, once on the wall, we were treated to another fly-past, this time by a male Giant Kingfisher who obligingly perched for some time on a tree close by.

There were more birds to be seen and identified but as it was getting decidedly hot by noon, it was noted that 39 species had been seen and everyone wandered off home. Thanks to all those who participated.

**Jenny Brebner**

### **Weekend At Cawston Ranch – 25-27 April**

Wot a weekend. The "haaa" in the air early in the mornings, the light crystal clear, food wonderful and company varied and interesting. Birds – who said birds?? Yes there were birds of both varieties some more raucous than others, i.e. the lesser and greater breasted mattress scratchers (very raucous) and the Ashy Flycatchers (Blue-grey) (very subdued). In true birding fashion, trips of 1 or 2 km would take up to an hour to complete with much arguing and thumbing through "bird bibles". Have we made 30 species yet? Well... yes with the addition of a puffadder, several giraffe and a warhog or two. Anyone good at calling up Kori Bustards? Hummmmm.....wot's its call? Back at the camp Helen was besieged by "wot does ....sound like"? Computers are amazing creatures and a program with calls and a video track of the said bird was of enormous value. Did you hear the nightjars last night? And the owls? Sorry too much fresh air and good food – full tummy pulls eyelids down. Much was learned, much disputed, much laughed about and much more of the same asked for.

**Judy Ross**

..... a few words about what birds we saw and what we should have seen but didn't. Between us all we saw or heard (or both) 132 species. This despite the fact that we were pretty thin on warblers and larks and pipits (on which we shall particularly concentrate next time) and saw only one migrant, the others having departed. Vultures appeared in a mixed flock on all three outings – White-backed Vulture, Lappet-faced Vulture (including an immature), White-headed Vulture and Hooded Vulture were all reported; we saw little families of Kori Bustards, Southern Ground-hornbills and Striped Kingfishers; there was a Black-shouldered Kite and eagles were represented by Tawny Eagle, Wahlberg's Eagle, Brown Snake-eagle, Black-chested Snake-eagle and Bateleur, and smaller raptors by Little Sparrowhawk, Shikra, Gabar Goshawk and Dark Chanting-goshawks (the latter hunting fruitlessly) and Rock Kestrel. From out of the grass erupted Harlequin Quail and Kurrichane Buttonquail, and in the same area an inquisitive Pearl-spotted Owlet flew right past our noses, landed in a nearby acacia and turned its head this way and that, to the extent we weren't sure which was front and which back, while it's mate called from another nearby acacia. African Golden Oriole, Bearded Scrub-robin and Double-banded Sandgrouse represented the not-your-everyday group and there is an unanswered question about a possible Sabota Lark with a thin bill – could this be the 'small-billed eastern form', or something else? What a wide range of species we recorded – in almost every group.

We very much look forward to a return visit. Our grateful thanks go to Peter and Carole Johnstone for their kind invitation to visit Cawston and to Brian and Eileen Deacon and their staff for looking after us so well. And to Jean Cranston who organised the superb catering for which she has been awarded the maximum brownie points, and the special privilege of being chosen to do the job again next time. This was a five-star trip.

**Julia Duprée**

### **Centenary Park – 10 May**

8:15 on Saturday morning saw 3 of us meet for a walk through Centenary Park. (Yes, I said three of us. Where were the rest of you? Was it the day/time, venue, or 'team leader'? At the risk of hurting my feelings you'd better let us know so we don't repeat the mistake). As it was several years since any of us had been to the Park we set off at random and by a lucky chance the first area we went to proved the most productive of the morning – a long open stretch of recently cut grass bordered by a fence on which

bougainvillea and indigenous bushes and creepers grew in profusion. Loud chattering soon drew our attention to a flock of Green Wood-hoopoe poking around in the bark of some tall acacia, followed shortly after by the plaintive whistle of Magpie Shrikes moving into the same trees. We came to an abrupt halt when 3 spurfowls exploded from the bush at our feet – we all got such a fright no one thought to look for any distinguishing features but we thought they were Swainson's Spurfowl. There was so much activity in the hedge we didn't know what to look at first: Crested Barbet, Fork-tailed Drongo, Dark-capped Bulbul, lots of Blue Waxbills, and a Tawny-flanked Prinia which kept just allowing us tantalising glimpses. From there we went across the centre of the Park, which produced disappointingly few birds but was still an interesting walk down memory lane. On the far side we reached the enclosed pond where some domesticated ducks and geese are kept. Although the pond was only half full, we were pleased to find these birds apparently well fed and looking in good condition. Sharing the enclosure we found White-browed Robin-chat, Tropical Boubou, Arrow-marked Babbler, House Sparrow and a Grey Heron standing like a statue in the centre of the pond, allowing us to get our books and determine once and for all the differences between the Grey and the Black-headed Heron. Noticing a lot of activity in a nearby eucalyptus we found ourselves watching a flock of Bronze Mannikins busy at a nest which appeared to be made mostly from the feathery tops of pampas grass growing close by. According to Roberts (fifth edition) Bronze Mannikins breed in Zimbabwe between August and May, however they also 'roost communally in nests at night, sometimes building special roosting nests in winter', which is what our gang were presumably doing. While we saw nothing uncommon (18 species) it was still a very enjoyable stroll through the park – you should have joined us!

**Adele Edwards**

### **Barn Swallows At How Mine**

They've gone – the Barn Swallows left How Mine on 2 April (avoiding April Fools' Day you will see!) We have noted with some concern an apparent reduction in their numbers from early this year, although we still get millions arriving at the roost. And not only that, they now roost away from the water, in the trees near the mine gate. We wonder if this has anything to do with the fact that the Mine management had to remove three large trees from the centre of the original roost which were considered to be dangerous and which left the eucalyptus stand rather thin. Or is that the good rains this year have created alternative sites for the birds, whose preference is to roost in reedbeds next to water? Three of the signs will be taken in and refurbished over winter, and we should be up and running again in about September when it will be interesting to see how many birds return to How Mine. We'll let you know as soon as there's an inkling of their arrival.

**Julia Duprée**

### **Swallows dying by the thousands (News24 2008-4-9 21:04)**

Tens of thousands of swallows [Barn Swallow?] have died in Limpopo province a week before they were due to migrate to Europe, said BirdLife SA. Executive director Gerhard Verdoorn said the vast climate changes during March, from the extremely hot to the bitterly cold, played a major role in the death of the swallows.

About three weeks ago, cold air from Angola passed over Namibia and Botswana and entered the South African Lowveld. Temperatures plummeted from 21° to 9°. "Because of this, the birds could not feed properly as it was too wet and too rainy for them to get the food. They became hypothermic (low body temperatures) and hypoglycaemic (low blood-sugar levels)," said Verdoorn.

Farmers and people in the area became alarmed as they thought the birds were being poisoned. "The tens of thousands of birds were falling down everywhere and just dying," he said. The birds were supposed to migrate on March 23, the day of the equinox, but disaster struck around March 17 when temperatures dropped rapidly. "The bulk of birds that did manage to survive started their migration on March 28," said Verdoorn.

The mass death of birds started in about 2000 in the Bushveld and Free State. "Over the past couple of years it has become a more-frequent occurrence and it is not only the swallows that are being affected but several other species of birds." Verdoorn said there were no short-term solutions to the problem as no one could change the weather. "The weather changes occurring are vast. February was regarded as being the wet month and March the drier one, but now the situation has changed. "A long-term solution

to the problem would be to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, by using less energy, burning less petrol thereby reducing carbon-dioxide emissions which can have changes on climate change," said Verdoorn

(Ed: Later responses to this report, distributed by SA Birdnet, queried how the numbers were estimated and whether the birds were checked for rings.)

### **Aisleby Notes**

Monthly monitoring at Aisleby continues. Observers were of the opinion that fewer Ruffs and White Storks had been seen recently. A quick analysis of the data collected over the last 10 years (1988 – 2007) produced some interesting figures:

**RUFFS:** Average number recorded = 422; in 6 years more than 360 birds were recorded; the largest number of Ruffs recorded was 1,040 in 2005; the lowest number of Ruffs was recorded in the following two years, 135 in 2006 and 91 in 2007; in 2008 to date we have recorded 84 birds.

**WHITE STORKS:** Average number recorded = 180; highest number recorded was 443 in 2003; lowest number recorded was 16 in 1998 and 21 in 2007; in 2008 to date we have recorded 25 birds.

Sightings of special interest have included:

- One Black Heron recorded in March 2008. The last time one of these birds was recorded was in March 2001
- 102 Kittlitz's Plovers recorded in March. The birds were a mixture of adults and juveniles. They were seen in two adjacent fields on either side of the road. Initially only a few birds were observed but on closer inspection it appeared that every cow pat had a Kittlitz's attached to it, and the total just grew and grew! In April, in more or less the same area, 32 birds were recorded.
- One Yellow Wagtail. Yellow Wagtails are not unusual at Aisleby but this was the *thunbergi* race and it is the first time this race has been observed during our Aisleby counts. (For those of you who like me did not know you got a choice, according to Roberts (fifth edition) there are 4 subspecies and several subspecies may occur together in one flock. The *thunbergi* subspecies has a black face.

**Sandy McAdam & Adele Edwards**

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## **TAIL FEATHERS**

### **Forests under threat**

I am working on a dissertation on the effects of human disturbances on the composition and distribution of miombo bird species at Catholic University in Zimbabwe Woodland and Mukuvisi Woodlands. However, it is sad to note that for the past weeks, there have been increases in the cutting down of trees at Catholic University in Zimbabwe Woodland. The saddening part is that the mature *Brachystegia* trees are being targeted. It takes a good 50 years for miombo trees to grow to maturity, but only a few hours, or maybe minutes to destroy them. One just needs to go a few kilometres outside Harare to see the extent of the destruction, which is being exacerbated by the electricity cuts. I wonder what will be left of the forests if the electricity problems persist. Something just needs to be done to stop this. Firewood poaching is a real threat to our natural forests. Even though the authorities try to put a halt to the scalping, there are fears that it is a losing battle as people become desperate to keep warm during winter. Give it another two years and most of this forest will be gone not to mention the birds!

**Everness Shava, Student – BLZ Education**

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### **African Bird Club Subscriptions**

Members of African Bird Club are reminded that subscriptions are due. Subscriptions are \$100 million and are payable at BLZ offices. Take it with you to the AGM.

If you wish to join the African Bird Club which regularly sends out an excellent journal reporting from all over Africa, please contact the office.

**BLZ WishList:** BLZ are hoping to acquire the following items. If you have any of them to sell or donate, please contact Hazel at the BLZ offices: digital camera, 3 x GPS, generator, 2 vehicles, gas bottle, lamp and stove, flipchart holder, PowerPoint projector, photocopier, steel office cabinet, office chairs & cabinets, vacuum cleaner, hosepipe, borehole pump, notice board, office blinds.

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