

BABBLER

The Newsletter of -

BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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Mashonaland Committee ☎

Chairperson: David Dalziel 883823
Secretary: Ken Dixon 793063
Members: Richard Dennison 747567
Ian Riddell 883287
David Rockingham-Gill 882412
Ken Wilson 745231

Matabeleland Committee ☎ ?

Julia Duprée 246269
Adele Edwards 882242
Penny Feather 230414
Eddie Cross 240093
Judy Ross 246522
Bill Lewis 242285

Babbler Editor: Carolyn Dennison e-mail: rolly@zol.co.zw Tel: 747567/0912-210240

National Office:

35 Clyde Road, Eastlea, Harare. P O Box RVL 100, Runiville, Harare. Zimbabwe
Telephone: 481496/490208 (fax) e-mail: birds@zol.co.zw
Web site: <http://site.mweb.co.zw/birdlife>

Director:	Dr. Chip Chirara
Education Programme Manager:	Leslee Maasdorp
Finance/Administration Manager:	Hazel Hatton
IBA National Project Manager:	Kanisios Mukwashi
Conservation Officer: Fadzai Matsvimbo	Projects Officer: Togarasei Fakarayi
Education: Juliet Masama-van Ongevalle	Murowa Project: Rueben Njolomole
Administration Officer: Sabina Mapika	Messenger: Vengai Dengu

Festive Season Office Hours:

The national office will closed at the end of day on 19 December and skeleton staff will be in the office on these dates: 23 December, 24 December (until 1300hrs), 29 and 30 December and will re-open on 5 January 2009. On any other dates please 'phone first.

**** BIRDLIFE ZIMBABWE COUNCIL and STAFF WISH YOU ALL A PEACEFUL HOLIDAY SEASON AND ENJOYABLE BIRDING IN THE COMING YEAR ****

BABBLER EDITOR

Jennifer Carter, who joined the Mashonaland Branch committee in 1999 and has been the *Babbler* editor for the last 5 years, is unfortunately (for BLZ!) leaving the country shortly with her husband Graham. They joined BLZ (then OAZ) in January 1998 having been trying to 'bird' on their own for several years in U.K. and realised how much quicker it is to learn from more experienced birders. One of their most memorable birding days was Christmas Day at Aberfoyle in 2003, when they got 4 'lifers' - firstly 4 Narina Trogon right

outside the main entrance and a few minutes later, a Green-backed Woodpecker (Lesser Spotted). They found Anchieta's Tchagra (Marsh) on a drive to the river and shortly after that had superb views of a Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo. The latter was a real coup for the Carters, as apparently very few people have seen this bird in Zimbabwe. Other special trips were to Tanganda Tea Estates in September 2003 and Hippo Pools, which they find is always a super birding destination. Jennifer and Graham thank the members of BLZ for some wonderful times with a lot of really good people and Jennifer has very much enjoyed doing the *Babbler*. They will take many memories back to UK and wish everyone the very best for the future.

BirdLife Zimbabwe members would like to thank you, Jennifer, for your time and effort in editing the *Babbler* so well and both of you, for everything you have done for the organisation and the Mashonaland committee over the years. It has been very much appreciated and you will be greatly missed – not only for your generosity and contribution but also you as people! We hope to see you back one September for a 'real' bird watch and to warm your bones – so it is not 'goodbye' but good luck and keep in touch!

Your new editor is Carolyn Dennison. My contact details are above – please send me any bits of 'birdy' information and observations and any comments or suggestions you may have. Remember this is YOUR newsletter and a way of keeping in touch with other enthusiasts and birding events.

ACTIVITIES

BIG BIRDING DAY 2008

Unfortunately we will have to wait until the next issue of *Babbler* for the results, to see if the rest of the country took up Matland's challenge!

JANUARY WATERFOWL CENSUS

BirdLife Zimbabwe participates in the Southern Africa Waterfowl Census twice a year, in January and July. Chip Chirara is therefore encouraging members to count waterfowl in any water body they might be visiting during the month of January. Forms for the counts can be obtained from the national office or electronic copies from birds@zol.co.zw. Completed forms can be returned to Fadzai Matsvimbo at fadzai@blz.co.zw, who will collate the results.

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Please contact a committee member if you need transport to any of our outings. It helps ease our current stress levels to get away for a few hours and look at beautiful things.

Sunday 7 December and 4 January: Mukuvisi Woodlands 6:30 a.m.

See Dave Dalziel's account of recent visits further on in this newsletter.

Directions: Turn off Chiremba Road into Ford Road (opposite Queensdale shops) and continue down to Blatherwick Road (T-junction). Turn right and the gate is about 150 metres on the left. Bring chairs and refreshments and a reasonable tip, in cash or kind, for the guard who will be on hand to unlock the gate to let cars in and out – taking into account the price of a loaf of bread and the value of your vehicle!

Sunday 14 December and 11 January: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary 6.30 a.m.

You may see Osprey, Lesser Jacana and Moorhen, European Honey-buzzard and Golden-backed Pytilia in addition to the more common water and woodland birds. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West.

Sunday 21 December and 18 January: 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.

Sunday 28th December: No Outing**Sunday 25 January: Bluff Hill Vlei Walk with Alex Masterson 7:00 a.m.**

As there was a much reduced turn out on both days last year we will have only one day this year, which will be at the Bluff Hill vlei downstream from the old drive-in cinema – now Bluff Hill Business Park. Directions: Enter Lorraine Drive from the southern end off Harare Drive and head north towards Westgate. At the big gum trees on the left as you go up out of the open vlei, turn left into a broad tar road, then head west out of town with the hill on your right and new houses on both sides. At the T-junction at end of this road turn left and go down to end of that road. Alex's vlei walks are always interesting, so please come along, but bring good gum boots or be ready to get WET FEET, as even early morning dew will make things wet!

Saturday 20 December and 17 January: Botanical Gardens 7:00 a.m.

Meet in the car park. Bring chairs and refreshments – Dave aims to get you away in time for shopping! Beginners are most welcome.

Evening Meetings – 3rd Thursday of each month 6:00 for 6:30 p.m.

Remember we are back to THURSDAY at the new venue for evening meetings, which is **Avondale Bowling Club** on Brighton Road between 2nd Street Extension and Upper East Road. There are security guards and a cash bar. Please come along to these meetings – we try to have interesting topics and it's a chance to hobnob with old and new members. We are always looking for ideas – please contact a committee member if you have suggestions.

Please note – there will be no Thursday meeting in December.

Thursday 15 January 2009 – Mashonaland Branch AGM 6:00 for 6:30 p.m.

The Annual General Meeting will be held at the Avondale Sports Club. Members please make an effort to attend and take an interest in your branch affairs. We want to see you!

MATABELELAND BRANCH**Saturday 6 December – Evening Bistro**

An evening bistro will be hosted by Cecilia Hubbard at 20 Eglesfield Road, Fortune's Gate – 6.00 for 6.30 pm. Cordon Bleu menu and raffle, for which we have received a very generous prize. Tickets available at R40 per head, limited places, first come (and paid) first served. Ring Julia on 246269 or Cecilia on 287692 (w), 240127 (h).

January 2009

Waterfowl counts in Matabeleland throughout the month. Dates to be discussed with surveyors. Ring Julia on 246269.

Saturday 21 February – Matabeleland Branch AGM 10.00 am for prompt 10.30 start

The Annual General Meeting will be held at 23 Fleming Drive, Burnside, courtesy of Russell and Chantelle Edwards, followed by a braai/picnic lunch. Bring your own morning tea, lunch, chairs, tables (and booze if required). Ring Julia on 246269.

Aisleby:

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

COUNTRY DISTRICTS**Mashonaland South – Kadoma**

Contact Margaret Parrock 068-22005 or her daughter, Coralee on 068-23644 for details of any outings, which are on the 3rd Saturday of each month by arrangement. Margaret says the birding is superb around that area.

Other Areas

Those members in the other areas who go out birding – please send me a ‘write-up’ (it doesn’t have to be very long!) with what you have seen and where – we all want to know what’s happening in the rest of Zimbabwe! *Ed.*

REPORTS**National**

As most of you might know, we are now into the second half of a very difficult year. The determination by BirdLife Zimbabwe members and staff to continue with work is very humbling. Our membership continues to rise after that serious decline of 2002, mainly caused by emigration. Staff numbers are now at their highest level since 2003 – almost 9 full-time staff are employed. However, BLZ is not insulated from the plummeting value of the Zimbabwe dollar and the serious economic challenges the country faces. Fund-raising remains a challenge for the organisation as we cannot work in all the areas that we would have wanted to. BirdLife Zimbabwe is grateful to its partners, especially the RSPB for continued support.

In the past two months BLZ has been involved in major international meetings. Mrs Maasdoorp and I attended the BirdLife International World Conference in Argentina from 20-28 September, 2008. I presented the BLI Africa Regional Achievements from 2003-2008 in plenary and another talk on “Working with SSGs (Site Support Groups) to resolve conflicts between agriculture and conservation at the Nyanga Highlands, Zimbabwe.” Mrs Maasdoorp gave a presentation on “Corporate society and environmental accountability.”

I also chaired two side events, the launch of the IBA Toolkit and the CAP meeting. The new CAP chair is Professor Emmanuel Obot, Executive Director of the Nigeria Conservation Foundation.

The IUCN World Conference was held in Barcelona, Spain, from 5-14 October 2008.

I attended the meeting together with directors of other Zimbabwe-based NGOs that are members of IUCN. This was an important event for networking. BLI successfully campaigned for the election of Dr Simon Stuart as the chairman of the Species Survival Commission. In addition, I attended two training courses. One was on *Business basics in a fast changing global environment* and the other on *Safeguarding biodiversity and livelihoods from biological invasion: global sharing of experience and information as a key step to effective management at local level*. The latter was particularly interesting as participants practised using tools to find out information on invasive species of interest to them.

Two of our staff members, Fadzai Matsvimbo and Innocent Magunje attended a bird ringing course in Zambia from 28 October – 7 November 2008. We hope to encourage the two to work with the registered ringers we have in Zimbabwe, so that they can have as much exposure as possible.

The Blue Swallow survey was carried out in the Eastern Highlands between 13 and 21 November. Members of BLZ participated in the survey and we hope to continue with this project if funding permits. We have also been getting assistance from members of BLZ

and other members. We did a census of waterbirds in the Lowveld with the assistance of Clive Stockil and his group in the Lowveld, some of whom are already members of BLZ. The office will continue to work with Manicaland members to complete the project on Swynnerton's Robin. The Matabeleland Branch 'owns' Matobo and Hwange National Park and have always provided useful information on these IBAs. The Mashonaland Branch continues to monitor Lake Chivero monthly and provide very useful data on this IBA. Overall, BirdLife Zimbabwe is very active despite the harsh economic environment.

Christmas is around the corner and I suggest the best Christmas present you can buy your friends is BLZ membership for one year. I wish all our staff and members a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Dr. Chip Chirara – Director

Leslee Maasdorp, BLZ Education Manager, was invited to **The BirdLife World Conservation Conference – Argentina – 22 to 27 September 2008**

When we arrived in Buenos Aires the Sunday before, it was wet and cold but by afternoon the sun came out. I took a bus tour before registration at the conference to view the celebration of Spring Day, 21st September. Thousands of families were picnicking or braaing in the many parks, while thousands of others were running in a marathon. The Jacaranda-lined main avenue, the broadest in the world, was filled with cars and buses. We passed by two grand polo grounds, a nymph-like statue of Evita – still adored by many and pompous, ornate state and church buildings, into an old suburb with humble but colourful dwellings and cobbled streets and Bocca Junior Club with its tourist cafés selling football and tango dancing memorabilia. Wherever one walks there is the smell of good coffee and braaing steaks to tempt one. Everywhere on sale were leather and sheepskin and llama jackets, leatherwear and boots.

After two hours touring, I arranged to be dropped at a more familiar venue, the Sheraton Conference Centre. At registration I greeted old friends and met new participants. Organising a meeting of over 500 representatives from hundred-odd countries is no mean feat and was wonderfully well done by BLI and Aves Argentinas. There were three daily sessions each with five to six alternative workshops.

On Tuesday 23rd September the workshops theme was "A celebration of birds, biodiversity and people" and I spoke at the "Birds and human well-being" workshop. There is a growing link between experiencing wild nature and improved physical and mental health. Also impressive is the huge growth in publishing about birds and much more support from the corporate world in support of BirdLife partners' work. In this connection CEMEX (a company supplying cement and concrete) funded a brilliantly illustrated and written book which was launched. Written by Nigel Collar *et al.* under the title "Birds and People: Bonds in a timeless journey", it is aimed at all age groups and weighs 8lbs. My copy has already been read by six local members!

The Partnership Fair and Painting Exhibition was a vibrant celebration event funded by Rio Tinto. Everyone I met with sympathised with our country's collapse and many donated small items like pens, pencils and face paints to our project. It was exciting for me to meet Her Royal Highness Princess Takamado, Honorary President of BirdLife International. She mentioned how upset she was by our country's demise and she wished our projects success. The Fair had a strict deadline for being dismantled to make way for the next group and the Iceland stand was trashed as it did not meet this requirement.

Buenos Aires is built along the River Plate and has an urban nature reserve near the hotel. This was formally declared an IBA by the Princess. The first bird I saw was the national oven-bird, the Rufous Hornero, sitting on top of its oven.

I had a couple of hours at another reserve adjoining the riverside boulevard that is paved for fifteen kilometres. Habitat reconstruction of water, woods and grassland held many birds that were tame. Dogs are banned, but two big dogs whose owners are squatters

living under black plastic sheets, ran past. My only regret on this trip is that I did not arrange for a post-conference tour of the pampas.

Early Saturday morning flocks of yachts, up to a hundred per club, sailed out on to the river, the widest in the world. The city itself, like others, is rather run down in parts but repair of roads is under way. Its northern hemisphere influences can be seen in its lay-out and buildings, its “Battle Paris” suburb, and London-style boroughs. The street cafés and flower stalls give it a Mediterranean feel. Many of the flowers are beautiful and very large like *delphiniums* two metres high.

We left the hotel and helpful staff for home at 4 a.m. to face chaotic queues at the airport. At Sao Paulo our plane bolted for home across the Atlantic, knocking nearly two hours off its outward-bound leg.

Leslee Maasdorp

Important Bird Areas (IBA) Monitoring Project Report

Four Important Bird Areas in the Eastern Highlands were visited in October as a follow-up to the IBA monitoring process. These are Nyanga Mountains, Stapleford Forest, Chimanimani Mountains and Chirinda Forest. IBA monitoring forms have been completed for those areas and the data will be analyzed for the production of national status reports by May 2009. The IBA monitoring teams have demonstrated some commitment to the data gathering process. However, there is need to enhance skills on bird identification and population estimation. Members of BLZ will be requested to assist the site monitoring teams with bird identification in the near future. Scoring the state of IBAs is accomplished through habitat data and/or species data. The list of key species for each IBA will be made available. The training of BLZ members in IBA monitoring is now scheduled for early next year. The regional IBA monitoring Project Manager, Ms Thandiwe Chikomo, who is based in Kenya, visited BirdLife Zimbabwe to assess progress in the implementation of the project. She also met stakeholders such as National Parks and the European Commission representative in Zimbabwe and acknowledged their support and funding. Later she visited Robert Mcllwaine Recreational Park where the site monitoring team demonstrated their level of collaboration in the project. More than 22 species of water birds were sighted at the Lake and these included White-breasted Cormorants, Reed Cormorants, Little Grebe, Red-billed Teals, Southern Pochard, Little Egrets, Purple Heron, African Jacana, Goliath Heron, Saddle-billed Stork, White-faced Ducks and others. Key deliverables on the project were also discussed and finalized. BLZ is grateful to Thandiwe Chikomo for her visit and her comments on the implementation of the project.

A draft Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been submitted to the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority for their considerations. This initiative will strengthen the alliance and collaboration between BLZ and National Parks. There has been a good informal partnership with National Parks over the years. National Parks’ members of staff in the ornithology section have participated in this year’s Wattled Crane survey in Driefontein Grasslands and Blue Swallow survey in Stapleford Forest and Chimanimani Mountains.

The first draft of the review of biodiversity monitoring systems in Zimbabwe has been produced by a consultant. The final draft will be printed as soon as possible.

Kanisios Mukwashi – IBA National Project Manager

Waterbirds at Gonarezhou

In September I had the pleasure of visiting Gonarezhou National Park with Jack Amonie, through a grant provided by Wetlands International. The purpose of the trip was to carry out a snap survey of waterbirds and sites in the Lowveld. The target species were Lesser Flamingo, Chestnut-banded Plover, African Skimmer and Black Stork. The trip lasted 10

days stretching from 17 to 26 September. Areas earmarked for the survey were also Important Bird Areas (IBAs): the Save- Runde Junction on the northern side of the park and Limpopo-Mwenezi floodplains and pans on the southern part of the park. The first two nights were spent at Chipinda Pools, where the main Parks offices are located. A workshop to train IBA monitoring teams from National Parks was held at Chipinda Pools. At the end of the workshop two field guides and a rain gauge were donated and given to the care of the ecologist, Patience Zisadza, who is based at Chipinda Pools. On the same day we met up with members of the South East Bird Atlas Project (SEBLAP) with their chairman, Mr Clive Stockil. On 19 September we made the arduous journey to the Save-Runde junction. The road was a trial and not accessible to those without 4 X 4 vehicles. We surveyed Lower and Upper Tamboharta and Macheeniwa, the pans close to the junction. Yellow-billed Storks, African Openbill Storks, Woolly-necked Storks, Ruff, Greenshank and Spoonbills are some of the species that were recorded at Tamboharta. One interesting record was that of a juvenile Greater Flamingo – no adults were sighted. During the time spent at the pan, the young Flamingo kept close to the Yellow-billed Storks and flew off with the flock when it moved away. At Macheeniwa a lot of ducks were present, mainly White-faced Ducks, Egyptian Goose, Comb Ducks and Spur-winged Goose. In the southern part of the park we visited a number of pans, but the most memorable one was Manjinji Pan (this is outside the National park) where we recorded 278 birds of 18 different species. Most of the species were storks and ducks. Though we did not find a lot of the species we were looking for, we were happy when we came across a pair of Black Storks at Rossi Pool, on the Mwenezi River.

I am grateful to people who made this trip possible; Wetlands International for the grant which came through the BirdLife African Partnership Secretariat and Mr Stockil and his team, without whom it would have been quite a trial to get to Save-Runde Junction. Last but not least, thanks go to Mr Jack Amonie for making himself available for the long trip.

Fadzai Matsvimbo – Conservation Officer

Mbazhe Ecotourism Project

BirdLife Zimbabwe has engaged the local communities around Mbazhe Pan Bird Sanctuary in promoting the conservation of bird species at this pan. The water level at the pan was below average. This might be due to unsustainable use by the local communities. Bird species that were recorded recently at Mbazhe Pan include the Grey Crowned Crane, Egyptian Goose, Hamerkop and African Openbill Stork. The initiative by BLZ seeks to rehabilitate this sanctuary through working with the local communities and develop it for ecotourism purposes. Since September 2008, several meetings were held with the local communities to try and get buy-in from all community members, especially those living close to the pan. In September and October, informal meetings with the local community were held to try and raise public awareness on bird and wetland conservation. Most community members showed that they are aware of the importance of birds in the environment. A training workshop on bird identification, data capture and record keeping was held on 9 November with one of the local communities. A total of 24 community members from Sibangilizwe village attended the workshop. It was a participatory workshop where people learnt about birds and shared local knowledge on the traditional importance of birds and the environment. Plans are underway to train interested youths from the local communities as bird guides, establish birdlife clubs in schools, and set up facilities for ecotourism.

Togarasei Fakarayi – Projects Officer

Murowa World Bird Watch Event Postponed

The Murowa Diamonds Mine and BirdLife Zimbabwe Education Department made great strides in preparing for this day, but it came as a shock to hear that the event had been

postponed due to a cholera outbreak in areas close to the mine. Most of the Murowa Diamonds staff and the Murowa Schools were looking forward to this event and BLZ Education Manager and Professor Brian Marshall had given preliminary talks on birds to the mine staff at the headquarters. We look forward to the new dates of this event and hope that it will carry the same message. Many thanks to the following BLZ members for offering to join the Murowa Bird Watch and lead bird watch groups: Ken Dixon, Richard Dennison, Tony Wood, Jimmy Muropa and Prof Brian Marshall. We wish to continue working with all who are interested in the Murowa Project.

Rueben Njolomole – Murowa Project Officer

What's happening in the Library?

We welcome our latest attachment library student from NUST, Busie Sibanda, who will be with us until end of July 2009.

The *Handbook of Birds of the World* Volume 13 is expected any time now. We have received numerous books from people leaving to boost our collection. Donations to the library are always well received.

A list of current journals received by the library can be sent by email to interested members or a hard copy can be printed. Journals may be referred to in the library but cannot be loaned other than *Africa Birds and Birding*. Reference queries are welcomed.

The following are a few web sites that may be of interest to browse through over the holiday season:

African Bird Club	www.africanbirdclub.org
Bird Conservation International: Official Journal of BLI	www.bci.birdlife.org
Earth Watch	www.earthwatch.org
Fact sheets for world's 10,000 bird species	www.birdlife.org/datazone/species/index/html
Globally Threatened Birds Forum	www.birdlifeforums.org
IBAs of South Africa	www.birdlife.org.za
World bird's populations distributions and threats	www.birdlife.org/datazone/

Dorothy Wakeling – Librarian

Mashonaland

The **Mukuvisi Woodlands** are looking great. There is very little tree cutting and the fires have been well controlled so far this year. Even the Mukuvisi River was clean in November! (Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the little stream – Chiraura River – that joins the Mukuvisi at the cement bridge). As soon as the water clears, the water birds improve. The African Black Duck and Red-billed Teal were in the pool below the flat rocks and we are hopeful that Three-banded Plover and Green Sandpiper will be present in December.

The river with its different habitats is always excellent for birds. There are large water-berry trees, reeds, flowing water, rocks and open areas so there are usually plenty of birds in evidence. Many birds are now moulting into their breeding colours so identification becomes so much easier. Over the next few months Southern Red Bishop, Red-collared Widowbird, Yellow Bishop and Pin-tailed Whydahs will be joining the colonies of Weavers and dozens of Little Bee-eaters in a colourful display. The raptors have been good through the early summer. The Long-crested Eagle nest is active and the Wahlberg's Eagles have been sitting. Black Sparrowhawks are often seen and have possibly got a new nest site at a different *Eucalyptus* plantation. Small raptors are often in evidence with African Goshawk and Gabar Goshawks often spotted and Ovambo Sparrowhawk, African Cuckoo Hawk and Little Sparrowhawks are to be found.

The woodland has recovered well from the extensive wood chopping of ten years ago and the 'football field' is now well treed. It is hard to believe that we are so close to major roads as we wander through this protected gem. The birds are often difficult to find as we walk through the 'dead centre' of the woodland, but in December we could find the magnificent Pennant-winged Nightjar, the migratory European Nightjar and the more common Fiery-necked Nightjar. Red-backed Shrike, Grey-headed Kingfisher, Eurasian Hobby and Amur Falcon could well be striking additions to our check list.

If you have not been on a Mukuvisi walk make a point of joining us in December and January. There will be a man looking after the cars so please bring something to reward him for his trouble. Remember the value of a car! The combined checklist is usually around 120 species at this time of year. Many of the miombo specials are frequently seen. We are usually lucky with Spotted Creeper, White-breasted Cuckooshrike and Miombo Tits. Somewhere there are Miombo Rock-thrushes – help us find them! The rains will have encouraged the plants to grow and the bush will be full of new life and hopefully, lots of keen birders.

Dave Dalziel

Mashonaland Annual Long Weekend – Hippo Pools 26 - 29 September 2008

In the end, 12 members were present for most of the weekend at this popular, well-loved venue – 4 of us took a lodge and the rest camped. It was warm and dry throughout – warm enough to encourage avian activity yet cool enough to make walking the clearly marked paths pleasant and easy.

As usual, our first stop was at the old Amm's mine to search for Black Stork nests in the shafts. Two young awaited us but their parents had gone off in search of lunch for the family and did not reappear before we left and neither did the Lanner Falcon. After settling in, a welcome lunch and a couple of hours rest, we set off on the eagerly anticipated riverside ramble. Some of the specials like Livingstone's Flycatcher and Black-throated Wattle-eye had already put in an appearance near the lodges but not all had seen them. Very soon we were enthralled by the woodland and its trees, plants, spoor and droppings, not to mention the birds. One of the first of these was the Pel's Fishing-owl which flew out from above us and settled again in our view, not immediately easy to find as some discovered, but eventually directions became so sophisticated we could all see it. Ground level scrub was alive with the piping calls of Red-throated Twinspot and the purring of Jameson's Firefinch, while high in the trees we heard Golden-tailed Woodpecker and Cardinal Woodpecker. White-bellied Sunbird and Scarlet-chested Sunbird were the dominant Sunbirds.

At dusk we were back at camp to see the flypast by the White-backed Night-heron, which then bathed and preened showing their white back. Water Thick-knee (Dikkop) struck up along with Fiery-necked Nightjar and African Wood-owl. Later in the night the insomniacs also recorded Mozambique Nightjar and Freckled Nightjar and African Scops-owl.

Next morning at six we repeated the previous days walk but added a few more kilometres to take in the Umfurudzi river-bed. Bearded Scrub-Robin sang from two points in the camp site and the African Goshawk pair sat in a tree above the entrance keeping an eye on their nest. Lizard Buzzard and African Hawk-eagle flew over and Trumpeter Hornbill, Village Weaver and Green-backed Heron were seen along the river. There were few waders in the pools on the Umfurudzi except for a Green Sandpiper and Three-banded Plover.

We then had the brunch and rest period before a drive to inspect the nesting sites of some of the raptors in the survey. The African Crowned Eagle's nest had a chick sitting close by and an adult with a bulging crop and prey flew in. Retz's Helmet-shrike and White-crested Helmet-shrike and Mocking Cliff-chat were seen in the rocky outcrops along the path, but the stars were an African Barred Owlet and a Spotted Eagle-owl. Another small group set off to inspect a Wahlberg's Eagle and 3 Hamerkop nests noted on the comprehensive list made by the local patrolling guards. For this it was necessary to wade across the Mazowe River

among the families of the gold panners. That night Barn Owl and the Pel's Fishing-owl joined the hooters and screechers.

Sunday morning found one group repeating the African Crowned Eagle walk, not seeing that bird but having good views of an African Hawk-eagle, Yellow-bellied Eremomela and 4 Boulder Chat. Another group was driven to the famous baobab and walked back from there through the forest. After lunch, almost nothing being heard of Narina Trogons until then, a lone female specimen was found sitting motionless in the creepers on the ancient riverside trees near the suspension bridge. Although it moved a couple of times, those nearby were able to get good views of its back. Another new arrival was the European Bee-eater.

More sorties were made in search of raptors in the afternoon but with limited success – only the Crowned Eagle, an unidentified falcon and the African Hawk-eagle were seen. However later from the camp, we watched the White-backed Night-heron leave its nest and fly down river while the flock of Reed Cormorant, Giant Kingfisher and Green-backed Heron took the opposite direction.

Our final walk was along the river bank downstream to the weir. The path ran too close to the river for that aggressive female responsible for most of the hippo problems experienced over the years. She swam threateningly towards the bank bellowing madly a few times before the path led us to a higher, safer route. Red-throated Twinspots were again seen and Green-winged Pytilia and Honeyguides. Passing the dried-up dam on the way back a couple of us were fortunate enough to observe two Racquet-tailed Rollers, the final speciality of the venue.

Once again, Hippo Pools proved to be a more than adequate substitute for RIFA and we recorded a respectable 150 species (*not yet matching the 162 species seen in 2005 – Ed*). We must thank Jennifer and Graham for organizing the event – sadly their swansong as they leave for the UK and its permanent rainy season at the end of the year. Generous as ever with her time and effort, Carolyn Dennison has stepped up to take on editorship of the *Babbler*, in which this should be one of the first reports.

Ken Dixon

The Umfurudzi Safari Area is very interesting with a wide variety of habitats and well worth a visit. It is in the Shamva District and is approximately 760 km² in extent. Access to the area takes about 1½ hours from Harare and the road is tarred to Madziwa Mine, from where the Hippo Pools Camp is signposted. The area naturally splits into five, one of which is the Granite Rockies – very rugged scenic country bordered by the Mazowe, the Ruanga and the Umfurudzi rivers. Hippo Pools is in the southeast corner of this area and most eagles' nests are found in this area. Birding is really good and not far from the city. Basic chalet and camping facilities are available – contact 747929 for details. Ed.

NGOMAKURIRA – Sunday 26 October 2008

The 'Mountain of Drums' is better known for its rock paintings than its birds but it attracted a group of around 20 birders and friends (and Honey, Carla's dog) this cool, breezy morning. Not that we all arrived together or on time, nor did we walk in one cohesive group. However, I'm sure everyone enjoyed the exercise whether they reached the beacon or, wimpishly, remained in the valley. What is more, we saw a total of 51 species thanks to so many sharp eyes.

The classic route begins with a stiff but shortish climb through thin woodland to the flat rocky plateau. Ian arrived first and by the time the rest of our group reached his perch, had already located a group of Cape Bunting, a White-throated Robin-chat and an Augur Buzzard sitting on a protruding rock. A Mocking Cliff-chat then made its presence known, a Rock Martin whooshed past and Red-winged Starling and Brown-crowned Tchagra were heard. Rock or Lazy Cisticola called loudly from various vantage points and a group of 3

Jameson's Firefinch rose up just in front of us. Small groups dispersed in different directions, some at high speed, others at a more leisurely pace – some off to the summit, others to the valley bottom. In fact, the latter, bird-wise, seemed at the count to be the more profitable choice.

No falcons or other raptors were found by scouring the cliff face and only Barn Swallows and Grey-rumped Swallows were seen there and Black-chested Snake-eagle. In the sparse trees Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, Dark-capped Bulbuls, Black-backed Puffback, Familiar Chat and Bar-throated Apalis flitted around. The cool morning encouraged most of us to head for the beacon but we saw little en route, not that that took anything away from the achievement and the superb 360 degree view.

It was only when we finally reassembled under the Mobola Plum for refreshment that we realized how big the group was and, more to the point, how many birds had been seen. Individuals had spotted Brown-backed Honeybird, Grey Heron, African Paradise-flycatcher, Striped Pipit and White-browed Scrub-robin. And, thanks to Geoff Lowe's amazing energy, we were assured that both sets of rock-paintings were still in fair condition. As a bonus he had been rewarded with the sighting of 2 Boulder Chat near the lower set.

Ken Dixon

Monavale Vlei Walk – Sunday 16 November 2008

At last, on Saturday evening it finally condescended to rain, exactly as forecast. Hence we were assured a good morning's birding providing the sun shone – and it did. There were only eight of us at 7a.m. but an ideally-sized group. As we arrived so did the Abdim's Storks – 8 of them – which settled near the golf course. We'd all seen one or two before, as early as the 26 October, but they had dispersed again. A raptor resembling a Pel's was spied nearby in a gum and was identified as a Steppe Buzzard. The bird at the end of the same branch turned out to be a melanistic Goshawk. That was promising enough and indeed there were birds everywhere. The next good sighting was a Cuckoo Finch which sat tight for many minutes as we approached closer and closer. The reeds along the Avondale stream buzzed with activity; lots of bishops and widows, some almost in breeding dress – Yellow-mantled Widowbirds, Red-collared Widowbirds, Southern Red Bishop, Rattling Cisticola and Red-faced Cisticola called continuously and flocks of Orange-breasted Waxbill zoomed past us. The Southern Masked-weaver swizzled away and were no doubt the lure for the Diderick Cuckoos. Not many hirundines, only Grey-rumped Swallow and African Palm-swifts. On low trees were Senegal Coucal and 3 Black-shouldered Kite. At the confluence of the two streams we found a newly-arrived Red-backed Shrike and could hear Lesser Swamp-warbler, Little Rush-warbler and African Reed-warbler. On the stroll along the stream bank towards the road we saw a large flock of European Bee-eater and heard the Spectacled Weaver. A nondescript brown bird on the reeds identified itself as a Yellow Bishop by slowly revealing its broad yellow rump. There is always a small group of this species at one particular point, whereas elsewhere it is the Yellow-mantled Widowbird which dominates. Then we spotted Crowned Plover and Swainson's Spurfowl. As we listed the species seen we were able to add the usuals from the gardens along the road – Lesser Honeyguide, Southern Black Flycatcher, Fork-tailed Drongo and White-bellied Sunbird. In all we listed 60 species. It may have been only 40 without the previous evening's rain. Thanks to Jimmy and Dorothy for sharing their knowledge of the Vlei with us.

Ken Dixon

Monavale Vlei

The Conservation Society of Monavale (COSMO) wrote a project proposal to UNDP Global Environment Facility for funding site management of the Biodiversity Project. We have just heard that the proposal has been accepted. (*Well done for all the hard work put in to this project – Ed*). For the next two years we will be working with removal of targeted alien plant species, putting biodiversity awareness into the community through

workshops, indigenous tree nurseries (not for planting on the Vlei!!), brochures and signage. A vermiculture composting training and implementation programme will reach all 60 households, which will address waste disposal as well as food and livelihood issues.

A Monavale Calendar for 2009 has been published for fundraising. It is a useful and lovely A2 single sheet calendar selling for US\$2 or donations above that! We also have car stickers with the Striped Crake as our logo for US\$1 or donations. Contact Dorothy Wakeling on piumosso@zol.co.zw, Tel: 304298 or 0912-376506 or Steve Davies on 308382 or 011-636458 or Jimmy Muropa on 0912-772771. Anyone wishing for a walk beyond the 3rd Sunday of the month regular outing please phone Jimmy.

Dorothy Wakeling

Presentation by Dr Chip Chirara – Thursday 16 October 2008

Eighteen members were present to listen to our busy director give members a whirlwind Power-Point presentation on his recent trips around the world.

Dave Rockingham-Gill also talked about his experiences at the Pan-African Ornithological Conference and his exciting excursion to the 'succulent Karoo', where he saw Karoo Chat, Karoo Lark and Karoo Scrub-robin, but unluckily no Korhaan, although he did add Rufous-eared Warbler to the list. He was delighted to be offered this unscheduled jaunt, as other participants had gone on fishing trawlers for a Palaeartic tour and spent a lot of the time suffering from nausea!

Neil Deacon attended this conference as well and mentioned that it was a very useful networking experience and that he was very pleased that the Taita Falcon had been upgraded to Category 1.

(I hope to have more detailed write-ups for the next Babbler issue – Ed)

Carolyn Dennison

Talk by Dr Neil Deacon: Monitoring Raptors in Zimbabwe. Thursday 20 November '08

Twenty-seven members were privileged to listen to Dr. Neil Deacon talk about monitoring raptors in Zimbabwe. Neil is a long-time member of the Zimbabwe Falconers' Club and works closely with international raptor groups. He is known around the world for the captive breeding of, in particular, Taita Falcons. His third best girl (after wife and daughter) is a beautiful African Hawk-eagle which he uses to hunt for food for the various eagles, hawks and falcons that he is breeding, flying or rehabilitating.

Neil answered the question 'What is monitoring?' as a description of the population of a species in order to be able to quantify changes. The data can then be used to prioritize conservation efforts. It is important to establish a base line of a population so that changes can be identified.

'Why raptors?' – Because they comprise 50% of species, the other 50% categorised by Neil as raptor food! (Don't be fooled. In indulging his passion for raptors, he has learned a great deal about all birds. In the field, he can spot a raptor almost before it starts flying and, apparently, when it is sitting behind leaves on the other side of a tree!). Also, because raptors are most often at the top of the food chain, they are good indicators of environmental health – no doves = no falcons! They are very sensitive to the degradation and contamination of the environment. The wide-spread use of DDT resulted in an African Goshawk being found with 273 ppm (parts per milligram) in the period 1988 – 1991, resulting in egg shell thinning and failure to breed. Many nests were abandoned and many raptor species, including African Fish-eagles were affected. With the use of DDT stopped, they recovered quickly and in 2003 a bird had only 2 ppm. Recently, excessive levels of mercury have been found in African Fish-eagles and PCB in Ovambo Sparrowhawks. The population of the Oriental White-backed Vulture is estimated to have declined by 99% in India with the treatment of cattle with diclofenac, (a not very effective anti-inflammatory) although only 1 in 250 carcasses were contaminated. Numbers were previously

uncountable but now there are only 30 pairs left. Fortunately, the Indian government recently banned the use of diclofenac. Unfortunately, its use is spreading in Africa.

'How?' Any method is at best an estimate. With raptors, individuals and nests are counted. Monitoring nests gives an indication of density and productivity; how many eggs were laid, how many young fledged. Prey remains around the nest allow researchers to identify the prey species of the bird. Birds can be ringed on the nest with different coloured configurations to enable them to be identified later.

Umfurudzi Project – Neil mentioned that climate change is upon us, if there is no base data species may be lost, which is very scary and that there is very little information on raptors in miombo woodland. He is working with Dave Rockingham-Gill on a BLZ project to monitor raptors in Umfurudzi National Park, a large protected area of miombo woodland surrounded by farmland. So far, 24 different species, including four pairs of African Crowned Eagles and a number of nests have been found. The Hippo Pools resort, on the Mazowe River in Umfurudzi, is about 150km from Harare and provides excellent birding and a base from which to venture out into the pretty rugged – and beautiful – mountains to find raptors. Dickinson's Kestrel is a special of the area. (You can also see Livingstone's Flycatcher and Black-throated Wattle-eye, Narina Trogon and White-backed Night-heron in the camp as well as several species of sunbird and numerous other species.) Members are encouraged to visit this lovely place and report their sightings of raptors in the area. Funding has been raised for the project and members will soon be invited to take part, with fuel and accommodation costs paid by BLZ.

Neil finished his illustrated talk with a superb picture of his daughter watching a Taita Falcon standing on her chair. Thanks, Neil, for giving up your valuable time to prepare and present an educational and interesting talk for us.

Jennifer Carter

Matabeleland

Visit to Ntabazinduna Airstrip – 25 October 2008

A small band of us spent the morning buffeted by an inhospitable wind for most of the morning. It was here that I learned there is always a strong wind on airstrips, which apparently prove very helpful in getting lift-off with a heavy load. In future we will plan to visit these sorts of areas in the afternoon when the wind is usually tamer. Anyway, after peeping through the cracks in the door into the enormous hanger (which revealed very little), we simply took to the trees on each side of the airstrip where we noted with horror the devastation caused by tree-felling – most of the victims appeared to be *Peltophorum africanum* which apparently is used for carving and makes good fuel, so that probably explains that. This beautiful area is dominated by the historic N'tabazinduna Hill. There are many stories attached to this hill, most of which are not factual, but more of that anon when we turn to historical writings. Back to the trees – there were White-bellied Sunbirds, a couple or three Dark-capped Bulbuls, White-bellied Sunbirds and on around the corner White-bellied Sunbirds. They were everywhere, noisy, flitty and lording it over us from the top of nearly every tree. Out on the airstrip we heard a Rufous-naped Lark and saw an African Pipit dashing head down through the grass and watched a Barn Swallow coping admirably with the gusts. Some of us walked the entire length of the strip, the rest of us crossed over to the trees fringing the far side – this proved to be productive. As we approached, a couple of Yellow-bellied Greenbuls shot past us and then we heard and saw Chin-spot Batis very close, confiding and low down in the trees. In the distance – they're always in the distance – an Orange-breasted Bush-shrike and Black-crowned Tchagra called. Close by were the trill of Crested Barbets and nasal poop-poop-poop (no, this is describing nothing other than the sound of a bicycle pump) of an Acacia Pied Barbet. Moving back towards the hanger, a shape dived into the trees ahead of us and proceeded to sing from

different directions. After much perseverance we found it – predictably a White-browed Scrub-robin.

Time for tea, but en route to the Flying Club we had to pass the hanger again and really badly wanted to see what was inside and – lo and behold – there was a glass window. As we approached, a clever-clog – who shall remain nameless – advised that none of us would be able to reach as we were all too short even on tiptoe. Can you imagine how we felt when the same clever-clogs managed a perfect view and proceeded to give us a running commentary of what was within? Again we heard a Rufous-naped Lark very close and had a lovely sight of this beautiful bird – unfortunately it was camera shy and dashed off into the far yonder. And then a Kurrichane Thrush flew to the base of nearby shrubs where obligingly it potted around for ages. We sat on the verandah of the charming Flying Club to drink tea and enjoy delicious eats produced by the gifted cooks amongst us – well we can't all be good at everything. We had the pleasure of watching a little duiker tearing off down the airstrip into the Terminalia bush and beyond – what a miracle it has so far survived. We watched several African Pipits in front of us, most still dashing head down hither and thither on the airstrip, two Red-faced Mousebirds flew into the tree near us and instantly became invisible, up above flew an African Hawk-eagle where earlier there had been a Yellow-billed Kite, and a Laughing Dove made a brave dash for shelter.

All told the six of us saw a good variety totalling 19 species, which considering the conditions we were pleased with. It was a really enjoyable outing and thank you to Judy for making the plans.

Julia Duprée

Southern Ground-hornbill Survey in Rural Matopos – Update

Bruce McDonald, a member of this survey team, spent his Saturday morning setting up the venue at the Academy of Music for his Saturday afternoon presentation to us which was followed by tea in the garden. I think we numbered about 18 members and friends. Elspeth Parry's PowerPoint presentation for the South African Mabula Working Group opened the proceedings, which then spontaneously turned into a fascinating question-and-answer session and general discussion on all aspects of the survey and the Ground-hornbills themselves. This is a unique and valuable survey whose report will, for the first time, document the fact that Southern Ground-hornbills nest and roost in granite as an alternative to trees. It has also been demonstrated that this area provides a safe haven where the species appears to be thriving and is revered and unharmed by the community. A preliminary report of the findings will be produced at the end of this year, indicating how many Hornbills have been sighted forming how many groups, where nest and roost sites have been found, and hopefully breeding details.

Thank you to Bruce for organising such an entertaining afternoon and to Evans for his participation. We look forward to a further update sometime during 2009.

As a PS – the survey team have put out an appeal for boxes, plastic containers, paper, second-hand clothes, books, magazines, etc. for the schools. Conservation club members in 28 of these schools are acting as observers for the survey and more are expected to be drawn in next year. Ring Elspeth on 231202 to arrange collection and/or delivery. Your assistance will be invaluable and much appreciated.

TAIL FEATHERS

Birds Dew-Bathing

Some Early Birders have probably witnessed birds leaf-bathing, wetted from the morning dew. However grass/ lawn dew-bathing was the first observation for us recently. This rarely observed behaviour was twice seen in winter performed by Tawny-flanked Prinia and in summer by Purple-banded Sunbirds.

Has anyone experienced such behaviour in the past?

F.M and J.T. Couto

NOTICEBOARD

SECRETARY

The Council is looking for an honorary secretary with immediate effect. This person is also a full Council member so can take part in resolutions made at this level. He/she will be required to take minutes at monthly meetings and have access to their own computer, e-mail and printer and be fairly easily contactable. This is an interesting role and I am sure there is somebody out there who would enjoy it and wants to help. Some knowledge of birds is preferable! Please contact Ken Wilson on 334186, Dorothy Wakeling on 304298 / 0912-376506 or Carolyn Dennison on 747567/0912-210240.

OLYMPUS CAMERA EQUIPMENT FOR SALE

Available for sale on behalf of a BLZ member, is a large range of Olympus camera equipment. Anyone wishing to see the quality of photographs taken with this equipment can visit <http://www.agpix.com/darrelplowes>. If interested, please contact Hazel at the BLZ national office.

FIELD CHECK LISTS

A reminder that an updated Field Card with the changed bird names is now available by e-mail on request from birds@zol.co.zw or in printed form from the BLZ office or Carolyn Dennison at rolly@zol.co.zw. A list of Southern African birds with the old and new names is also available for those who have the older field guides.

Recording bird sightings is interesting and enjoyable. BLZ would like to know about your observations, so please send completed cards, with QDS or identifiable area, by e-mail to chip.chirara@blz.co.zw or hard copy to BLZ, 35 Clyde Road, Eastlea, Harare. Also, please look out for the species mentioned as endangered, threatened or special and notify Chip and Ian Riddell (gemsaf@mango.zw) if you see them, indicating the date, number and place.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Ordinary (Individual and Family) members and Schools	ZW\$ equivalent of/or US\$10
Senior Citizens, Students & Juniors	ZW\$ equivalent of/or US\$ 5
Corporate members	ZW\$ equivalent of/or US\$30
Members outside Zimbabwe	Africa US\$20 - Other US\$30

The inter-bank rate on the day of payment will be used to calculate the amount to be paid. The BLZ office will obtain the rate.

The membership year runs from April to March. Some of you have still not paid your subs. As we do not want to lose members, if you are having difficulties renewing, please contact a branch committee member for assistance. **Please make sure you renew your membership by the end of December or you may lose it.**

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Shop 5, Patrick Court, 113 Nelson Mandela Avenue, Harare
Tel/Fax: 733463