

BABBLER

The Newsletter of -



BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL – 2009/10

BirdLife Zimbabwe membership year runs from April to March, so please make sure you renew your membership as soon as possible. As we do not want to lose members, if you are having difficulty with payment please contact a branch committee member.

Ordinary (Individual and Family) members and Schools	10 units per annum
Senior Citizens, Students & Juniors	5 units
Corporate members	30 units
Members outside Zimbabwe	Africa US\$20 Other US\$30

Country district members can deposit units directly into BLZ – please contact Hazel for details.

I am in chilly England at the moment and am compiling the *Babbler* from here, using my zol address (which I have not been able to access for the last few days, hence the lateness of the *Babbler*!) the internet and that most wonderful of inventions – broadband! The next *Babbler* will be delayed as I would like to include the AGM proceedings and inform members who the next office bearers will be. Thanks to you all for your much-appreciated and enjoyable contributions – please keep them coming! Ed

National Annual General Meeting

The next national AGM is provisionally set for 30 May 2009 and BLZ members will need to vote in a new Council at that meeting. Therefore please start thinking about who you would like to represent you, the members, on Council. The President has served his 3-year term and must constitutionally stand down and he has recommended we appoint new blood with new ideas to take the Association forward. Council will discuss the remaining posts at their next meeting in April and members will be informed of other vacancies.

Report on Zimbabwe's Commemoration of World Wetlands Day on Monavale Vlei, Harare –

2 February 2009

World Wetlands Day marks the date of the signing of the Convention on Wetlands on 2 February 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Each year world-wide, government agencies, non-governmental organisations and groups of citizens at all levels of the community undertake actions aimed at raising public awareness of wetland values and benefits and the Ramsar Convention. From 1997, the Convention's website has posted reports of WWD activities of all sizes and shapes from more than 95 countries.

Part of **Dorothy Wakeling's** contribution from Zimbabwe to the website

http://www.ramsar.org/wwd/9/wwd2009_reports.htm follows:

MONAVALÉ VLEI, a unique, 35-hectare, seasonally-inundated urban wetland within 4 kilometres of Harare's CBD, contains a wide biodiversity and has long been known to local and international birdwatchers, who visit the Vlei in the summer months to search one of the few remaining breeding habitats in Southern Africa for the elusive Striped Crake and Streaky-breasted Flufftail. Some 210 other bird species have been recorded, as well as bullfrogs, freshwater crabs, clawless otter, water mongoose, Serval cats, bushpig, duiker and several more species which are to be found in this habitat of pools, marshes, and seasonally-inundated short grassland, which is studded with anthills and occasional trees. It is a relatively undisturbed remnant of the once intact vlei systems, rich in wild flowers and indigenous grasses, which followed river courses in the area, but which are now largely lost to urban development and informal cultivation. The preservation of Monavale Vlei is due principally to the efforts of the local community, working together as the Conservation Society of Monavale, with the assistance of BirdLife Zimbabwe and Environment Africa, The City of Harare, the Ministry of Environment and others. Legal protection has been secured and COSMO manages it under a licence from the Ministry of Environment.

The Conservation Society of Monavale (COSMO) had the privilege of hosting Zimbabwe's national commemoration of World Wetlands Day on Monavale Vlei, the theme this year being "Upstream-downstream: Wetlands Connect Us All". Much concentrated effort had been put into the planning of this successful day, with weeks of meetings with the Ministry of Environment and various other government departments and environmental organizations. The weather turned out to be perfect – not pouring with rain – the tents were in place, displays set up and the visitors arrived in crowds (250+ attended). The Vlei scout's shelter/lookout tower had been completed the day before and its structural safety checked the previous evening by our MP (an engineer, unbeknown to the Community!) The Honourable Minister of Environment opened the structure and he, the Harare Mayor and the MP climbed up and were shown the panoramic view of this remarkable intact wetland / grassland. They were very impressed! It was an uplifting, happy occasion, which had even been announced on American TV! A huge crowd of Government officials, Parks and Wildlife Management Authority personnel, Town Councillors, students, school children and dedicated local homeowners arrived to celebrate the occasion. All were housed in tents arrayed with wetlands posters and photographs and environmental information to catch the attention and educate. A well developed programme included speeches of high interest by both the Minister of Environment, city Mayor and Member of Parliament, as well as a delightful offering of song and drama by school children and students. All contributed to a wonderful event to celebrate Zimbabwe's World Wetland Day and reinforce the message that we should all do what we can to "Love Our Wetlands" and preserve this precious heritage.

Congratulations to all concerned for convening this impressive occasion and for all their hard work. It was indeed a cheerful and educational morning in a most enthusiastic atmosphere. I am SO glad I was part of it!

Southern Ground-hornbills at Lake Chivero

At 8 a.m. on Sunday 8 February 2009, members attending the monthly outing at LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY were amazed to see 3 Southern Ground-hornbills. The members were split up into a few small groups and the first group put them to flight. They flew for about 200 metres in a semi-circle, landed within the sanctuary again and were picked up by a second group, who identified 2 adults and a juvenile. It must be about 50 years since I last saw ground-hornbills within 70 kilometres of Harare, so where did they come from? When I was a teenager we used to see a family of these birds near where Pamuzinda is now, on the Bulawayo road.

Richard Dennison

African Fish-eagles have been wing-tagged in South Africa in an attempt to find out where juveniles go. Anyone seeing such a bird can help by noting the date, time and place and what the bird was doing, plus of course, the tag colour and code if you can read it. The latter might prove difficult but all the other information will be useful. GPS co-ordinates would help if you have one. Please notify: Adam Welz of the Breede River Fish-eagle project at wetclaws@yahoo.com and/or Andre Botha of the Endangered Wildlife Trust at andreb@ewt.org.za

Ian Riddell

Global warming changing birds' habits

Washington (Feb. 10, 2009) – When it comes to global warming, the canary in the coal mine isn't a canary at all. It's a Purple Finch. As the temperature across the U.S. has gotten warmer, the Purple Finch has been spending its winters more than 400 miles farther north than it used to – and it's not alone. A recent Audubon Society study found that more than half of 305 bird species in North America, a hodgepodge that includes robins, gulls, chickadees and owls, are spending the winter about 35 miles farther north than they did 40 years ago (...) Over the 40 years covered by the study, the average January temperature in the United States climbed by about 5 degrees F. That warming was most pronounced in northern states, which have already recorded an influx of more southern species and could see some northern species retreat into Canada as ranges shift. "This is as close as science at this scale gets to proof," said Greg Butcher, the lead scientist on the study and the director of bird conservation at the Audubon Society. "It is not what each of these individual birds did. It is the wide diversity of birds that suggests it has something to do with temperature, rather than ecology." <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29104238/>

Dorothy Wakeling

ACTIVITIES

Please diarise these events now, as it is easy to forget later on. Those members who have not signed an indemnity form please remember to do so at any outing, where a committee member will have these with them.

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Please contact a committee member if you need transport to any of our outings. Beginners are most welcome – it is most rewarding to be able to put names to birds seen often but never really looked at closely! Don't worry if you do not have a pair of binos – there is usually an extra pair at most outings. Note change of time from 6.30 a.m. to 7.00 a.m. from May.

Evening Meetings – 3rd Thursday of each month 5:30 for 6:00 p.m. *Please remember change of time:* The venue is the Avondale Bowling Club on Brighton Road between 2nd Street Extension and Upper East Road. There is a cash bar and hopefully a security guard!

Thursday 16 April

A 'Panel of Experts' will answer all your questions on birds and birding. Bring questions! All you've ever wanted to know but been too afraid to ask!

Thursday 21 May: Owls of Zimbabwe

Tony Alegria will give us a Power-point presentation about these fascinating nocturnal birds.

Saturday 18 April – 6.30 a.m.: Mukuvisi Woodland

Blatherwick Road entrance – 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 for the guard.

Saturday 16 May – 7.00 a.m.: Greystone Park

It is possible to see Tambourine Doves, Red-throated Twinspot and Purple-banded Sunbird here. Bring chairs and refreshments – you should still be able to get some shopping done after these Saturday outings.

Sunday 5 April (6.30 a.m.) and 3 May (7.00 a.m.): Mukuvisi Woodland

Always worth a visit – 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 12 April (Easter Day) 6.30 a.m. and 10 May (7.00 a.m.): LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY

Members saw 20 African Fish-eagles at one scan of the binos on the Bushman Point side in March – 6 adults and 14 immatures. As well as the more usual birds, Cuckoo Hawk, Grey-headed Bush-shrike and around 40 Helmeted Guineafowl were also seen but the congregatory Fish-eagles were the big news as were the visiting Southern Ground-hornbills the month before. Do something different this Easter – it's a lovely spot. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West. Anyone wanting a lift please contact a Committee member.

Sunday 19 April (6.30 a.m.) and 17 May (7:00 a.m.): Monavale Vlei Walk

Meet on Fenella Drive, (BS Leon side) for a walk with members of the Monavale Vlei Residents Association. Remember your gumboots as conditions are likely to be squelchy if there has been a lot of rain!

Sunday 26 April – 6:30 a.m.: Kutsaga

There are small patches of miombo at this venue, a little acacia, dams and grassland. All 3 Longclaws may be seen, as well as Chestnut-backed Sparrowlark and Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters. Meet at the BLZ office at 35 Clyde Road, Eastlea, where you can leave your vehicle and share transport.

Sunday 24 May – 7.00 a.m.: Bushman's Rock Estate

This is a new venue for BirdLife and is out Goromonzi way. We may see Boulder Chat and Mocking Cliff-chat, Southern Hylia and Spotted Creeper. For those who would like to make a day of it, there will be an area set up to braai, but we are asked to provide the charcoal/wood. There is also a canoe available for use on the lake and should anyone be interested in bringing out a fishing rod, please feel free. There will be a scout on hand to show us around Bushman's Rock, as although the animals are not considered dangerous, they do have a fairly boisterous tame giraffe who may feel it is fun to join in! Meet at the BLZ office at 7.00 a.m.

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Saturday 25 April: Day Outing to Cranston's Farm

Plot 529 Thompson Avenue, Kensington. Leave town at 9.00 a.m. Take morning tea, lunch (braai fires available), chairs, tables and all utensils.

Weekend 2-3 May: Raptor Identification Course

Part 1 of a 3-part course to be conducted by Peter Mundy. Lecture on Saturday afternoon at the Lewis' home at 6 Betsi Gordon Close, Burnside. Field day on Sunday, heading down the Kezi Road. Part 2 on 15/16 August, Part 3 on 7/8 November. Ring Helen 242285(h).

Sunday 10 May: Day Outing to Jerrard's Farm

Woollandale. Details will be circulated later. Ring Judy 242943(h) or 67085(w)

23-25 May: Hyrax (Dassie) Survey

(Travel to Inungu Guest House evening of 22nd). Camping at Inungu Guest House, self catering, external ablutions and showers. Full details will be advised later. Ring Cecilia 287692(w), 240127(h).

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

COUNTRY DISTRICTS

Mashonaland South (Kadoma) – Contact Margaret Parrock on 068-22005 or her daughter, Coralee on 068-23644 for details of any outings, which are by arrangement.

Other Areas – Those members in the other areas who go birding – please let me know of any outings you organise – there may be members in your area at the time who would like to join you. Please send me ‘write-ups’ (they don’t have to be very long!) with what you have seen and where. Ed



REPORTS

I thought you would be interested in what **Jennifer Carter** (who you will remember was the last *Babbler* editor and who is now in England) and her husband Graham have been doing birding-wise since they got there. Ed.

Our birding experiences since we arrived have been very different to Zim – we have joined RSPB and did the annual garden survey for an hour one weekend and got 16 species, but were not allowed to include birds flying over. We have seen probably 5 or so more species than that in our garden! Graham looked it up the other day – there are 31 recorded species where we live! After the count we went to a nearby RSPB reserve which was very muddy woodland and although we have bought water-proof walking boots, it wasn't fun, but we did see Nuthatches and a Goldcrest. Exciting for us in the garden are Fieldfares and Redwings, new ticks for me. In mid-February we drove south to Hungerford (of massacre fame) via Lambourne, where there is a lot of race-horse training and 'gallops' (from Dick Francis books!). It is lovely country, rolling hills – mostly gallops or cultivated, but we were surprised at the amount of snow. We went to an RSPB wetlands site called Greylakes, which is in a lovely, quite low area almost below sea-level and with the rain and the snow-melt there was a lot of water. Greylakes is very civilised with boardwalks and a hide but it was bitter when we got there. Luckily there were some birders with spotting scopes and one of them picked up a Hen Harrier. We were able to see it with the binos but it didn't come very close. It was a lifer for us both – we have decided that we must get a good scope when funds allow! There was also a Peregrine – resident – and a couple of Steppe Buzzards. The water birds were Teals, Mallards and Wigeons and there were plenty of Lapwings and one Little Egret. Most of the small stuff had gapped it from the water apparently. It was sunny and the wind had dropped as we left so it was more pleasant. We saw Grey Partridges, Red Kites and several Grey Herons. We have seen Red Kites over Wantage almost every day and a Kestrel spends a lot of time across the road from the house where there is sheep pasture. On the first day of March we went birding with the Oxford Ornithological Society – it was very overcast and got gloomier as we approached the meeting place and I couldn't help thinking of the Mukuvisi outing that had taken place earlier the same day. I'm sure conditions were much better and you got 3 times as many species, but we enjoyed it! There were 20 of us – a nice bunch and we were pleased to have gone. We did a 4-mile circular walk, across fields, through very muddy woods. The waterproof walking boots came into their own as we had mud over our shoe laces but didn't get our feet wet! We ended up with a list of 39 species including Skylark, Red Kite, Buzzard and Grey Heron plus a little muntjack (a species of deer) and I got a new tick – a Yellowhammer. We see Red Kites and Buzzards every time we go out. Red Kites were introduced in the mid-90s and have done amazingly well. Buzzards are apparently no longer persecuted by game keepers and are doing much better. Also, of course, rats are doing very well – as in Zimbabwe – because of how people pollute their environment, so there is plenty of food. We only used to see Buzzards very occasionally when we were here before.

On warmer days we walk near the Thames (which is within 10 miles) where we have seen a Siskin (a new tick) and a Eurasian Curlew and Graham saw a flash of blue flying off and said it was a Kingfisher. We plan to walk the length of the Thames from the source to the barrier in the summer.

We have been to Otmoor, an RSPB-developed wetland just north of Oxford, where we were told there is a Eurasian Bittern and Golden Plover too, but we didn't see either. Although the book said Common Redshanks don't occur there we thought we may have seen them, which would be a new tick for us! But we did see a Marsh Harrier which is apparently not common.

We are seeing a lot of Long-tailed Tits now – which are so cute! Oh yes, and we saw Lesser Redpoll which was another new tick for both of us.

Graham and I have signed up for the local Atlas – very different from the SA one. We just have to do one or two hours at the beginning and end of the breeding season and early and late in winter, over an area two kilometres square. We have signed up for 3 adjoining squares and will visit them regularly to get to know them before we do the count in May. We have been to a talk about Bitterns, which have been the subject of an RSPB and EU project to restore reedbeds and which have recovered pretty well. We have also been to a couple of talks with the Wantage Field, History and something else group about hedgehogs and moles and another about Romans in the area – Wantage was a Roman town! People are very nice.

In April we hope to go to Bedfordshire.

National

Chip Chirara reports – our new website www.birdlifezimbabwe.co.zw is now up and running. If anyone knows exactly when BLZ was formed please let me know and this can be updated. I have been informed around 1950 by some older members and this is what appears on this site. The documents I inherited from John Paxton say 1951. We need information/write-ups from Branches for the site, which will be updated monthly and all information for the site should be sent to the Director chip.chirara@blz.co.zw. Please send me any comments about how we can improve. Happy browsing.

Recent Events at RIFA Education Camp, Middle Zambezi IBA

The children of rangers from Mcllwaine and Marongora Primary schools were invited to attend a camp sponsored by the Zimbabwe Hunters Association's donors. I was invited to lead and report on the proceedings. It was held in the last week of November 2008 and the first rains had fallen 10 days earlier to turn the desert into green woodlands and lilies, gardenia and Bushman's arrow poison were in full bloom. The Mcllwaine School was stranded at home as Parks had no working truck in the province – their place was taken up by a Chirundu school.

The weekly vulture watch, although provided with meagre impala scraps, nevertheless attracted 43 vultures, 40 of which were White-backed Vulture. Jonathan Stacey from Rio Tinto/BLI was impressed with the speed with which they came, ate and departed. The pupils enjoyed seeing other big birds like Goliath Heron and Saddle-billed Storks and the colourful Southern Carmine Bee-eaters, this year nesting on the Zambezi cliffs. On 19-21 January, myself and a small party of 3 BLZ members namely Ken Dixon, Ian Riddell and Geoff Lowe, went to count water birds. The heavens were providing water to fill the grassy wetland pans of Nyachuru and Long Pan and duck factories should be in full production between March & April. Despite a wet and overcast 36 hours we managed to count 135 species, including Goliath Heron fishing successfully below camp in the fast growing stream. The trip in and out of the camp on the muddy track was exciting and nerve-wracking.

Reported by Leslee Maasdorp

The Rio Tinto Murowa Bird Watch Event

Murowa Mine is to be congratulated on persevering and putting together a great event on 27 and 28 November 2009. To successfully give lodging to 160 people and feed another 60 takes expert management which the mine and BLZ project staff provided. It was a very enjoyable weekend. Ninety-one bird species were recorded within the mine properties and four bird clubs from schools were persuaded to attend though schools had not officially opened.

Leslee Maasdorp (Manager Bird Project)

Murowa Mine Bird Watch

The day began early with TW seeing a Familiar Chat at 0430. Then a hearty breakfast was enjoyed by all the guests. As our groups had been organised the previous evening we met at the bus at 0600 for the short ride to the Silt Dam and the Tailings Dam. I was allotted about 20 Murowa employees with spouses and

children among whom I shared half a dozen pairs of binoculars. How lucky I was to have a keen knowledgeable group and the pick of the venues. Prince was an excellent choice of recorder and neither missed nor misspelt anything. The Silt Dams are ideal for beginners as most of the birds present are sitting or swimming, giving opportunity for many to locate birds with the unfamiliar binoculars. There was a Grey Heron, an Egyptian Goose, Cape Turtle-doves and Red-eyed Doves and a Common Sandpiper all easily visible and undisturbed by our chatter. The Malachite Kingfisher was seen by fewer of us as were the Violet-backed Starling. The White-necked Raven wheeled around us and a Southern Grey-headed Sparrow had its nest in a fence post, the same fence the African Pied Wagtails chose to land on. In our number, we were lucky to have a Headman and an employee who knew some of the Shona names to help those who were struggling a little. A tree full of Southern Masked-weaver nests gave me a good chance to talk about these fascinating birds. A number of the birds on the list were only identified by me by as they were either very distant or just flew by. Among these were White-crested Helmet-shrike, Barn Swallow and Wire-tailed Swallow and Zitting Cisticola. After an hour and a half at the dams we set off for our meeting place at the weir. On the way, a White-faced Duck flew over and many people saw and recognized the Black-shouldered Kite. An interesting sighting was the Yellow-mantled Widowbird well south of its range although the Yellow Bishops we saw could have been expected. Naturally, all by now were familiar with the Blue Waxbill and Dark-capped Bulbul who accompanied us along the road. Just before the weir, an observant member of the group asked what the large nest was in the fork of a tree. This afforded the opportunity to talk about the Hamerkop and to hear all the myths about its one eye and link with death. A little later we were lucky enough to see 5 of this species on the weir wall. Although the Runde River in flood did not attract many birds, we were entertained by a local farmer and his donkeys, which finally completed a very nervous crossing of the wall. In the trees nearby we saw Yellow-fronted Canary, Spotted Flycatcher and a Lesser Honeyguide. It was only in the course of the debrief in the Gazebo that my group realised how lucky we had been to see over 40 species while others had managed only about 30. I hope this enthusiasm is maintained until our next big event at the mine.

Ken Dixon

Leading Kids at the Murowa Bird Watch Event

I helped to lead a group of children around the mine village rooms on the bird watch. The group took a lot of time examining a bird species and describing it until the bird was finally identified. When the kids had ended their walk, I asked them to colour-in some bird pictures using what they had seen during the walk and also by using their own imagination. The idea was to see if the kids had grasped descriptions of some bird species identified. This revealed what they think a bird looks like – children's imaginations are marvellous! Prior to the bird watch day, kids in the evening talk had all sorts of questions that included one girl asking "how many teeth a grown up bird has". Good artists on this activity were able to give the right colours of common birds like the Southern Red Bishop (*Euplectes orix*). The group identified a total of 28 bird species with water birds like the Reed Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax africanus*) and the Common Sandpiper (*Tringa hypoleucos*) featuring.

Report by Rueben Njolomole

Important Bird Areas (IBA) Monitoring Project Report

The Annual Planning and Review Meeting (APRM) planned for the first week of March was a success. I made the long trip to Tunisia, in North Africa via South Africa and France. The changes in the weather conditions from warm to cool temperatures as you move from Southern Africa to North Africa forced me to buy a jacket at the South African airport. If I had known that the weather was going to be fine in Tunisia, I could have saved my few dollars! On arrival at the airport in Tunisia I was received by a staff member from the BirdLife Partner in Tunisia who accompanied me to Belvedere Hotel in Tunis where the proceedings of the APRM were undertaken for two days. The mid-term evaluation of the project was also conducted concurrently with the meeting. The consultants for the evaluation were Drs Bob Humphry Ogwang and Phil Shaw.

Day One was marked by National Project Managers' presentations on reviewing the outcomes and achievements of the period April 2008 to March 2009, highlighting the major achievements, major challenges /problems affecting project implementation and recommendations for project performance. Presentations on expected/planned outcomes for the period April 2009 to March 2010 were made on Day Two. A session on the review of expenditure and budget for the period April 2008 to March 2009 was also

done. Implementing BirdLife Partners are at varying stages of progress in terms of activity implementation. Significant progress has been made by most of the countries although more work needs to be done in order to complete activities for year 1 and 2. Other issues discussed were the issue of 20% co-financing of the project, fundraising for projects, working on site-specific advocacy issues, experience exchange visits for neighbouring countries, contribution to national Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) reports, checking effort of site monitoring teams when assessing threats to IBAs, updating World Bird Database etc. There was a lot of experience-sharing amongst the seven participating countries that were present. A country such as Botswana is working mainly with National Parks and a country such as Tunisia is working chiefly with Site Support Groups (SSGs).

Findings of the mid-term evaluation were also presented by the consultants. The general perspective from the consultants was that the IBA monitoring project in Zimbabwe is going on well despite the challenges in the country. It was recommended that implementing BirdLife Partners should start working on producing monitoring results through National Status Reports and training of more people to get as much information from IBAs as possible. A detailed draft mid-term evaluation report was produced.

The BirdLife African Partnership Secretariat (BLAPS) is acknowledged for their vital contribution in regional coordination, technical input and organisation of regional meetings/workshops. Special thanks go to the BirdLife Partner in Tunisia (AAO) for the preparations and for hosting the 2009 APRM.

Kanisios Mukwashi - IBA National Project Manager

Crane Surveys in Driefontein Grasslands

Driefontein Grasslands is the main breeding ground for Zimbabwe's two crane species, the Wattled Crane *Grus carunculatus* and Grey Crowned Crane *Balearica regulorum*. As usual BirdLife Zimbabwe carries out annual surveys of Wattled and Grey Crowned Cranes in the Driefontein Grasslands and this year it was done in collaboration with the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority from 25-28 November 2008. The census was a follow up to a survey carried out in July the same year when the cranes were breeding. A total of 46 Wattled Cranes, consisting of 41 adults and 5 fledged immature, were counted. This figure was slightly more than the July count. The Grey Crowned Cranes record came to 89. Indications of this recent survey shows no records of cranes from known breeding sites and it is still to be established whether they have relocated to other areas within the Driefontein Grasslands. The gradual deterioration of the crane habitat at these sites could be the reason for the absence of the breeding pairs at these known sites. It is possible that breeding pairs have occupied new sites and the challenge is to survey all potential sites in this area during the coming breeding season.

During the survey indications of human-bird conflict were noted at Ruby, Chipisa and Marians Home. These areas have been occupied by rural communities in recent years and crop depredation by cranes and other bird species is a source of major concern for the new settlers. Due to financial constraints experienced in the past year, crane conservation awareness campaigns could not be done with these communities. However, plans are underway to try and fully engage these communities in crane conservation programmes. In January 2009 the Projects Officer of BLZ held informal meetings with the community leaders who pledged to cooperate. In the same month of January, a snap survey of the cranes was incorporated into the waterfowl counts. A small flock of 5 Wattled Cranes was recorded at the Driefontein Mission Dam and 3 pairs were sighted from the other sites. More than 19 Grey Crowned Cranes and ten other species of water birds were counted from the water bodies visited.

Togarasei Fakarayi – Projects Officer

A note from the BLZ Library

It was interesting to listen to Tony Alegria talk on Nightjars (report in the next *Babbler*). Other members planning an evening meeting – don't forget to use our Library to source information – it is an amazing resource. We also have broadband so online searches can be undertaken for no charge! If you give me a ring I can meet you there to assist with in-depth searches.

Dorothy Wakeling - Librarian

304298 or 0912-376506

Mashonaland

Bluff Hill 'acacias' – Alex Masterson's Vlei Walk - 25 January 2009

Alex's annual event drew in the usual enlarged flock of non-pterofomed waders and waterbirds from various parts of Harare, and as we never crossed the stream nor splashed around the edge of the dam, duck feet weren't even a prerequisite this year. I don't even think Geoff managed to fill his gumboots with water!

Whether we should call the site Bluff Hill 'acacias' is doubtful; there appeared to be a struggling stand of acacia scrub across nether side of the stream but its days are clearly numbered. We made our way through nearly completed houses that weren't there last year (next year we'll be asking, 'Pardon, can we walk through your garden and see what we can spot in yonder mealie patch?') and parallel to the houses in drier, more open grass that would normally attract Black-rumped Buttonquail. A flufftail had just burst from under my feet and it was marvellous to see that the main crowd ahead had ploughed two paths on either side, with a scant metre between, and it hadn't moved; a little later we listened to a Red-chested Flufftail complaining from a thick patch of waterlogged grass. Over towards the dam a female Western Marsh-harrier quartered the grasses.

As we headed into the wetter vlei we were rewarded with superb views of a Copper Sunbird whilst all but unnoticed and too close for my binos, his wife hopped around a *Lantana* bush, showing off the pale margin around her tail and dark stripe behind the eye that Alex had been talking about minutes before. Common stuff such as Yellow-mantled Widowbird, Red-collared Widowbird, Sedge Warbler, Little Rush-warbler *et al* were in constant sight or sound, 2 Gabar Goshawks sallied past whilst a third called from the houses and the first of a few Dark-capped Yellow Warblers attracted our attention to thicker clumps of grass; a Jacobin Cuckoo obliged with clear frontal views and noisy birds like Croaking Cisticola and Levaillant's Cisticola couldn't be missed. A Marsh Owl flushed next and as we avoided the stream crossing a faint Pale-crowned Cisticola was nearly overlooked but fortunately overheard. Someone up ahead had obviously vetoed the swamp walk through the bulrushes around the dam (for want of a panga and canoe no doubt) so we diverted back up to the cars, disturbing a Little Bittern or two.

Back at the starting point we did a preliminary list for the benefit of those departing whilst the stalwart and press ganged (at least one) elected to drive around through the new suburbs, bouncing and weaving and plunging into potholes, to the dam wall. This was a worthwhile exercise on which we peered into the flattened interior of the bulrushes to get at least partial views of the large Cattle Egret breeding colony (300 or so), heard the African Rail and African Purple Swamphen, saw Red-knobbed Coots on the water and (for those in front) 15-20 Common Moorhens perform a neat disappearing act. Little Bitterns seemed to abound and at least 6 more winged from the edges into the interior. Away from the water, additions included a Rosy-throated Longclaw, Lilac-breasted Roller and a few Flappet Larks, whilst back at the cars again someone spotted a few Marabou Storks overhead.

I have 74 species, so thanks again to Alex for yet another informative and insightful vlei walk and we look forward to next year – somewhere.

Ian Riddell

Komani Estate - 7 February 2009

On this Saturday, nine BLZ members met at Ashbrittle to travel the few kilometres to Komani to do the annual bird survey. This was our 4th survey. We split up into two teams, three may have been better, and headed off in different directions with the intention of meeting in an hour or so to consider our next move. Some of the birds seen in this first walk included Southern Black Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Petronia, Green-capped Eremomela and Spotted Flycatcher, all seen in the paddock areas that had mature msasa parkland with no understorey or bushes.

After a quick get together where we tried to find people that were keen on a mud walk we set off again. Ian walked away with the brave mud walkers and the rest of us climbed into Tony's 4x4 for some first class bird watching. The mud walkers were soon recording Cape Longclaws, Yellow-bellied Eremomela in a small acacia patch, White Stork, Pale-crowned Cisticola, African Snipe and a ringtail' Harrier. The 4x4 gang headed along the edge of the fields and vlei, happily counting Pallid Harrier, White-winged Widowbird, Southern Red Bishops, various weavers, cisticlas and Cuckoo Finch – happy that is until Tony said 'I don't like the look of this!' tried to accelerate and we sunk, gracefully, into thick glutinous black mud. The first class travellers now dragged themselves – none too willingly – into the very wet, thick mud. The cheerful sound of squelching mud entering boots and sloshing birders trying to push tonnes of immovable metal soon filled the air. Geoff and Innes went for a walk to distant acacia while the rest of us counted Amur Falcons flying over, listened to the Black Coucal laughing at us and watched the tractor sent to save us sink

into the mud! Our thanks go to Angus for allowing a second tractor to be sent into the quagmire to pull some very muddy and in some cases, exasperated, birders back to terra firma. On the way back to the meeting place we passed some of the mud walkers – they looked a lot cleaner and drier than the occupants of the 4x4! All in all most of us enjoyed the morning, got dirty and saw great birds – some just laughed and saw great birds! The two groups saw 88 species between them. We left a little later than anticipated but the 2 Wahlberg's Eagles that flew over as we had coffee were good compensation.

Thank you to the staff of Komani for inviting us to do the survey and for cheerfully rescuing us from the mud.

Dave Dalziel

Home Park Vlei, Macheke - 14 February 2009

Twelve or so birders from the Marondera area decided we had better try to catch a few grassland and marsh species before the vleis dried up too much and they disappeared, and so it was that we visited Home Park farm, about 14km out of Marondera, actually in the Macheke district. After good rains, the grassland around the vlei is also waterlogged, and this has produced Corn Crake in good numbers and one record of Blue Quail last season, but we were too late already, and the only water was found within the vlei zone itself, and even here it was low and not too difficult to pass through. Yellow-mantled Widowbirds were abundant, as were the Croaking Cisticolas. Yellow-throated Longclaws are common here, and in the mealie patches Southern Red Bishop and both Common Waxbills and Orange-breasted Waxbills. A fantastic view of a male Cuckoo Finch sitting close by on top of a fence post gave everybody a good look. Pale-crowned Cisticolas were calling overhead. A single Black Coucal was flushed from thick grass as we headed into the vlei proper. Considerable tramping around failed to flush the Red-chested Flufftails which were abundant last season, although we did hear them calling. We did however flush out the ever present Broad-tailed Warblers which can always be found here. A pair of owls was disturbed by our passing, and I'm not really sure if they were African Grass-owl or Marsh Owl, it is suitable habitat for both, although it was interesting that there was water under the grass they were roosting in. Going over the book later showed barring on the tail of Marsh Owls and I think I remember that feature, but nobody was really sure what they were as we did not manage good views from the front. One member of our party had decided to take a drier route round to the end of the vlei, where the reed patches start appearing and the river proper begins to take shape. Along the way he reported Streaky-breasted Flufftail calling, which are known from the area. Red-breasted Swallows, Red-collared Widowbirds, Black-shouldered Kites, European Bee-eaters and Rufous-naped Larks were some of the other species we recorded.

Altogether a fantastic afternoon's birding, in one of our more accessible vleis, and it is always encouraging to think that there are so many good vleis around here – we just never seem to get into gear and go look in them!

Damian Newmarch - Nyamwera Farm, Marondera

DOMBOSHAWA – 21 February 2009

A keen band of birders gathered at Sam Levy's Village, Borrowdale at 7a.m. to share transport for the trip out to Domboshawa. Our Saturday morning outings are usually short but this promised to be a little longer than usual! Domboshawa is not the sort of place where you are going to tick a long list of birds but what you lose in quantity you gain in quality. There were a number of rock pools and one had to be careful where the water was trickling down the rock as the algae made for a very slippery slide. After a slow walk up the hill, we had seen little more than a Yellow-throated Longclaw and a Northern Pygmy Toad. However, once we had reached the top of the hill we started to be rewarded for our hard work. A Rock Kestrel, White-necked Ravens, Augur Buzzard and Black-chested Snake-eagle were soon seen as we admired the view and picked out various land marks in the distance. The avian highlight of the morning was a Lanner Falcon racing inches from the rock face and over the scrub, presumably in the hope of flushing a Lazy Cisticola or Cape Bunting to make a breakfast snack. We saw the Lanner a couple of times during the morning and most of us had seldom seen a wild Lanner so well.

We looked at the cave paintings, scrambled up rocks and through the trees on the far side of the area. The group enjoyed the fresh air, exercise and sun before returning to the entrance where Jane and Innes cooked breakfast – the non avian highlight! We all had egg and bacon sandwiches before a slightly late return to Borrowdale Village. A fantastic morning, good walk, great birds, lovely breakfast and a lot of nonsense spoken by some of the party!

Dave Dalziel

Member Participation in IBA Monitoring – 19 February 2009

The BLZ National Project Manager, Kanisios Mukwashi delivered a presentation to the Mashonaland branch on what is happening in Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Sponsorship has been provided, amongst others, by the European Commission and BirdLife International (BLI) for BLZ to meet the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) obligations and the target is to reduce biodiversity loss by 2010 through support from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The specific objective is to institute an effective national biodiversity monitoring system that delivers information on biodiversity trends in Protected Areas (IBAs) to stimulate local, national and global action. The BirdLife International Criteria for selection of Important Bird Areas (IBAs) are:

- Species of global conservation concern
- Assemblage of restricted-range species
- Assemblage of biome-restricted species
- Congregations

Thus the 20 IBAs within Zimbabwe meet one or more of the above criteria. BLZ office staff underwent IBA training and has since liaised with stakeholders of the various IBAs and shared aspects of their training to jointly monitor and evaluate the protected areas. Results have been shared with the stakeholders, including the sponsors, with a view to influence management of the IBAs. The future plans of the BLZ office is to:

- Carry out vigorous campaigns to save threatened IBAs such as Wabai Hills, Banti Forest, Haroni-Rusitu, Mavuradonha Mountains;
- Develop a biodiversity and wildlife conservation working group;
- Develop an exit strategy, when sponsorship comes to an end – what then?

The one area where BLZ office is lacking is in their ability to identify birds, especially for purposes of producing checklists for the IBAs. Should any birders be able to visit any of the IBAs, they are requested to send in their bird lists by hand or by email to the office. Approximate numbers of each species of bird seen is vital information as it is an indicator of not only of what bird species are present, but also as guide to the densities thereof. The office would also appreciate help with the other aspects of the IBA – tree cutting, agriculture, human occupation etc. Since the presentation, the BLZ office has agreed to make a simple form which will cover the basics, although the full 9-page Monitoring Important Bird Areas Questionnaire would be preferable. Both of these forms and the Bird List will be available at the office or by e-mail at birds@zol.co.zw

The IBAs most likely to be visited by birders are:

Banti Forest Reserve, Batoka Gorge, Bvumba Highlands, Chimanimani Mountains, Chirinda Forest, Hwange National Park, Lake Mcllwaine, Matobo Hills, Middle Zambezi Valley (e.g. Mana Pools), Nyanga lowlands/ Honde Valley, Nyanga Mountains, Sebakwe Poort and Mavuradonha Mountains.

The other IBAs are:

Stapleford Forest, Haroni-Rusitu Junction & Botanical Reserves, Chizarira National Park, Wabai Hills (Debshan Ranch), Driefontein Grasslands, Limpopo-Mwenezi flood plain and pans, Save-Runde Junction. To date, the BLZ office has only managed to visit some ten IBAs on an annual basis and would like to visit the more remote IBAs to carry out an assessment of the flora and fauna. Opportunities for two birders to accompany the BLZ office staff will therefore arise in the next year with some sponsorship. Interested birders are therefore requested to contact their committee members and put their names down. When an opportunity comes up, meetings will take place to organise the trip.

Tony Alegria

Solar Farm, Stapleford – 22 February 2009

There was a good turnout at 6.30 am. at our meeting place for the trip to Solar Farm. It took a while to organise the sharing of transport but our timing was great because we arrived at the turnoff at the same time as Neil. We parked in a paddock and the first bird was a young Helmeted Guineafowl that had drowned in the horse trough.

We started off wandering around the paddock as the grass had been cut. We slowly broke up into a number of groups and headed in different directions. The grass was extremely long so it was hard to deviate too much from the paths but some hardy birders trekked a good distance to a small rocky outcrop that promised good birds but was shrouded in thick tangled vegetation. Those that walked down towards the wet vlei were rewarded with sightings of Pallid Harrier. Black Coucals were calling from their swaying perches at the top

of the isolated bushes and as we walked into nearby woodland they could still be heard in the distance. In the *acacia* trees good sightings were had of Burnt-necked Eremomela, Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler and Green-winged Pytilia. Some of the sound experts were able to identify the Thrush Nightingale calling. Some of the birds not often seen around Harare included Violet-eared Waxbill, White-winged Widowbird and Long-tailed Paradise-whydah. After tea and the calling of the list several people headed home while others went by vehicle to other habitats on the farm. We visited a few small ponds, grassland and vleis but unfortunately a combination of heat and human disturbance at some of the ponds meant we did not find any new species.

The group saw 96 species of birds on a lovely day. Unfortunately there is a good deal of tree cutting but this sort of area is important to monitor. As the habitat changes we will lose some species and others may be found or become more common.

Our thanks go to Neil Deacon for organising and leading the outing.

Dave Dalziel

Miombo Raptor Survey – Umfurudzi Safari Area, Shamva District (1731B2) – 27 February-1 March 2009

We have been to Hippo Pools 3 times now. During the February-March 2009 visit we checked empty nests, mostly on the ground, for prey remains and analysis. We have now found nearly 40 raptor nests and during the weekend saw a Hamerkop nest near the dam and another about a kilometre away on the Mazowe River. Hamerkop nests are of interest because they can contain Barn Owl, Verreaux's Eagle-owl, and Dickinson's Kestrel nests in/on them. We found a new species for the area – a Black-chested Snake-eagle. The highlight of the weekend was finding a pair of African Cuckoo Hawks mobbing a Verreaux's Eagle-owl. Later we think we found their nest, up a large Makonde tree (*Euphorbia ingens*). We released a Martial Eagle that had been injured near Marondera, and kept by Neil Deacon, until it grew out its feathers. (We all traipsed up to a fairly high valley with big trees and focused our cameras on the crate door, having been assured that when it opened, the eagle will 'take stock' before flying out. Well, this 'Miss Martial Eagle' hurtled out of that crate like a missile and I have a lovely picture of the tree it had passed seconds earlier and not even a tail feather! She then settled on a big msasa, surveyed her surroundings and had a preen – what a lovely sight and wonderful for Neil to be able to set her free – *Penny Rockingham-Gill*). An African Wood-owl and two chicks were above our lodge "Mahogany". Further down the campsite was a pair of African Goshawks with two chicks. We also saw 2 African Hawk-eagles. We regularly see Bateleur (but not this time) and have not recorded vultures for 10 years now. There is very little game. The poachers are now in the kopjes, after klipspringer, and the rivers are infested with gold panners, who use pans made of hollowed-out tree trunks, until they break. They prefer them to the metal ones you can buy at the store! It is hoped that more people will take part and help – obviously birders, but mountaineers, photographers and the whole range of naturalists from aloe experts to wildlife. The big nests are not that difficult to find, but the smaller ones are harder and we need all the help we can get. Please contact Neil for the next survey date.

David Rockingham-Gill and Neil Deacon (neil@dab.co.zw)

...David's wife, **Penny**, adds - Luckily we had no rain at night although the clouds looked ominous, but there was apparently a huge storm Harare-way and the Mazowe River rose about a metre. Mrs Hippo grunted and blew in the river with her calf, accompanied by the cries of bush-babies and the haunting call of African Wood-owls – just magic. The dam was full and there were a large number of White-faced Ducks, swimming with about 10 ducklings, but when I looked for them the next day I only saw a huge leguaan patrolling the bank – I hope it didn't get the ducklings. I was enjoying a leisurely breakfast of bacon, eggs, toast and coffee overlooking the Mazowe River when my peace was shattered by a tremendous racket from above, the trees shook and 2 Egyptian Goose, locked in mortal combat, crashed into the river in front of me. The battle raged on for about 5 minutes – I know geese don't have teeth, but they were savaging each other's necks with beaks and beating with their wings – an amazing sight. Eventually one of the geese took off, the victor taking longer in hot pursuit as I think he was pretty waterlogged!

Ian has employed a manager, Rob and his wife – everywhere is clean, with no leaking pipes and we had gas and a fridge and stove working – what a pleasure and what a beautiful spot.

Haka Park/Greengrove – Saturday 21 March 2009

A few of us braved this unnaturally cold morning in late March. We saw a Malachite Kingfisher sitting on the Cleveland Dam wall ignoring the low grey clouds. We got a really good look at it watching the still cold water. I think we were all pleased we did not have to dive into that water for our breakfast! We proceeded to Haka Game Park gate and walked through the woodland to the water. We saw, among other birds, African Purple Swamphen and African Openbill. On our way back to the cars we found two bird parties, the first party had Southern Black Tits, female Red-headed Weavers and a Miombo Double-collared Sunbird proudly displaying his yellow pectoral tufts. The second party included Black Cuckooshrike and Woodland Kingfisher, a wonderful surprise. After the Kingfisher flew we tried to follow for another look and although we failed we did disturb a Spotted Eagle-owl.

We then went onto Greengrove Dam to check on the breeding colony on the island. There were African Sacred Ibis and Cattle Egrets breeding, but in much lower numbers than last year. We got a good look at the chicks of both birds in various stages of growth. A Black-headed Heron was lurking in a tree nearby, seeing if there were any tasty chicks for easy pickings. There was a single Hottentot Teal and we got a glimpse of an Allen's Gallinule. Thick-billed Weavers were building their wonderfully constructed nests a few meters away, below the crumbling dam wall. Altogether we saw a combined total of 57 species.

Jane Rautenbach

Weekend to Imire Safari Ranch – 14/15 March, 2009

This weekend special, kindly organised (at short notice – Ed) by Duncan Kennaird, was an unqualified success despite the constant threat of rain on both days and actual pouring wet stuff on the Saturday afternoon and evening. Imire has remained operational thanks to its protected status as a breeding centre for Black Rhino. The staff are helpful and knowledgeable, the accommodation comfortable and attractive and the food plentiful and tasty. And what a location, far from the madding crowd somewhere between Marondera and Hwedza, comprising five habitats; miombo and acacia woodland, dams, kopjes and vleis.

The weekenders arrived Saturday morning just in time for coffee and biscuits, a quick change and onto the safari vehicle driven by Morris who, with Edmore, supplies the expert knowledge about the game park and its inhabitants. The Rufous-naped Lark called everywhere all weekend like the Rattling Cisticola at Monavale, but our first exciting sighting was 2 African Hawk-eagles quickly followed by a Wahlberg's Eagle. As we meandered through the grassland stopping at clumps of acacia we collected Green-capped Eremomela, Red-backed Shrike, Green Wood-hoopoe, Levillant's Cuckoo, Cardinal Woodpecker, Black Flycatcher and Fork-tailed Drongo galore. Yellow-throated Longclaw, Barn Swallow and Pearl-breasted Swallow and European Bee-eater hawked insects over the grassland while above them the Zitting Cisticola appropriately zitted. The only lapwing we saw was a group of African Wattled Lapwing.

The projected lunch in the bush had to be aborted when the drizzle became driving rain, so we headed back for camp and refuelled there. Just when we were all thinking of a snooze or a read Duncan, mindful of his responsibilities as leader, ordered us back into the vehicles. I say 'into' as this time we took the covered wagons as protection against the weather. Some birds also braved the rain; Amur Falcon, Steppe Buzzard, Meyer's Parrot, Yellow-billed Kite, Helmeted Guineafowl, African Pipit and Lizard Buzzard amongst others stayed out with us and the Senegal Coucal was literally in its element. On reaching the lodge we spotted 2 bedraggled Wahlberg's Eagles sitting in a gum looking pretty glum. As dusk and then darkness seemed to come rather early we repaired to our rooms to freshen up for dinner. Compound entertained us with pithy pearls of wisdom and a number of tunes on his chipandani, a traditional musical instrument. The prospects for Sunday and the visit of the day-trippers from Harare did not look good as the rain continued steadily.

At six the next morning the situation still did not look promising as the drizzle fell but we had a quick drink and set out for a pre-breakfast tour. Overnight the light sleepers had heard only Pearl-spotted Owlet. The Wahlberg's, who looked even more miserable than the night before, were making feeble attempts to dry their wings when we set out for the small dams. The resident croc eyed us suspiciously as we scoured the little dam finding Common Moorhen, Black Crake, Black-crowned Night-heron and a Wood Sandpiper. Purple Heron and African Darter flew over and nearby trees revealed Bearded Woodpecker. The rain having retreated for a while, we took a walk through the woodland and were rewarded with many common but welcome species like Brubru, White-throated Robin-chat, Long-billed Crombec (caught in a moment of sunshine), Golden-breasted Bunting and an Icterine Warbler (IR). The second and third dams held African Openbill, African Jacana, White-faced Duck, Red-billed Teal and a Pied Kingfisher while Little Rush-warbler, African Reed-warbler and Marsh Warbler and Dark-capped Yellow Warbler called from the reeds and bushes.

We had to rush back for breakfast and join up with our friends from town... there they all were wondering what had happened to us and eager to get under way. However, the offer of a cooked breakfast made them forget any irritation at our late arrival. Meantime they had all seen the resident Groundscraper Thrush and Magpie Shrike and the nesting colony of Village Weaver (ex-chairman, please note).

Without delay we were in the 3 vehicles detailed for our morning outing under a still overcast sky. But it was dry. First excitement was an Osprey over camp and those with keen hearing heard a Black Coucal. Without delay we were in the 3 vehicles detailed for our morning outing under a still overcast sky. But it was dry and the Wahlberg's were slowly drying out. Then we had Black Cuckooshrike and Black Cuckoo as we headed for the vast vleis dotted with patches of *Brachystegia*. We spied Striped Pipit, Pale Flycatcher and Spotted Flycatcher. Duncan's eagle eye espied a Brown Snake-eagle ignored by the first two vehicles. At this point, the bold and brave joined Mr Hamilton for a walk through the bush camp which entailed wading across a shallow river and climbing up the kopje to visit a fascinating grave site. Mocking Cliff-chat were seen there and another Striped Pipit. Back in the vehicles with the weather improving all the time we made our way to the delightful lunch site on a kopje with stunning views in all directions and birds of its own we'd not yet seen. Lunch was being prepared under a shelter and served on a huge rock table while pre-lunch drinks could be bought at the bar, another facility ingeniously fashioned among the rocks. How pleasant a location and what a lovely lunch was offered to us all! We were all very relaxed and there was no urgency about our move into the final phase of the birding; a survey of the extensive flattish summit of the kopje. Cinnamon-breasted Buntings were everywhere, plus Streaky-headed Seedeater, Yellow-throated Petronia, Long-tailed Paradise-whydah, Lesser Honeyguide and Wood Pipit. Above were 4 White-backed Vulture and a Eurasian Hobby.

Soon we were dragged away from our birding to return to camp, a cup of tea, more biscuits and the count during which we realised how many species each individual had missed but were recorded by the group; 142 in all, an excellent count for a mainly overcast weekend.

We mustn't forget the impressive list of mammals seen and the fascinating stories about them; black rhino, elephant, buffalo, giraffe, Nyala, tsessebe, sable, impala and warthog etc. We thank all involved in the planning, organisation and realisation of this must-be-repeated event, but especially Rowena, Duncan's wife (i/c kitchen) and the Travers family who direct operations on their property.

Ken Dixon

Matabeleland

Walk at Fortune's Gate – 7 February 2009

We had a very enjoyable morning's walk led by Sally Simpson. This took us down and off the end of Munn road, along the bottom of a kopje and into a vlei to a little dam. Lovely country, full of indigenous trees, shrubs and flowers, birds and butterflies – probably snakes too, but we didn't see one.

All in all we identified 47 species – and *probably* identified another 1, making it 48 – in just a morning! Fantastic. To mention a few – the *probable* Steppe Buzzard, Rattling Cisticola, Crested Barbet, Greater Honeyguide, Acacia Pied Barbet. On through the grass which produced an elusive Zitting Cisticola and in the *Acacia karoo*, several Marico Flycatchers. The dam was very rewarding. Species seen here were Golden Weaver, Little Grebe, Red-knobbed Coot and uncommonly, two Lesser Moorhens. With perseverance the elusive Sabota Larks were seen, whilst Rufous-naped Larks were heard singing away. A Crimson-breasted Shrike and Orange-breasted Bush-shrike were added. Up on the kopje there were 4 sunbirds – Marico Sunbird, White-bellied Sunbird, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and Miombo Double-collared Sunbird plus Tawny-flanked Prinia, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting and Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird. We descended the kopje in two groups in different directions and met at the bottom – where we were astonished to see a male Comb Duck flying fast and high.

Sally's absolutely charming garden brought yet more sightings and hearings, such as White-throated Robin-chat and White-browed Scrub-robins, a Chin-spot Batis and Black-collared Barbet. Warm thanks to Sally for taking so much trouble to make us welcome – we left with a strong desire to return before too long, to this beautiful area.

Cecilia Hubbard

Annual General Meeting – 21 February 2009

This year, we extend our thanks to our hosts Russell and Chantelle Edwards for their “car park” as the venue for our Branch AGM. The mundane term used to describe our venue belies the magnificent area in which we were seated for formal proceedings – a truly fantastic setting complete with large indigenous fig trees for shade, a tremendous view overlooking the Upper Hillside Dams, absolute serenity – and definitely ‘far from the madding crowd’.

Julia Duprée presented her Chairman’s report for 2008, which included tributes paid to branch members who had passed away during the course of the year. There was a summary of Branch outings during the course of the year (all of which have been reported on in *Babbler* during 2008). Members were thanked for contributions and support during the past year, and whilst membership numbers are down due to ‘migration’, the number of existing members is still healthy. Julia thanked her Committee and the members of the Branch for their unfailing support during the year, as well as thanking the National Office for their support.

Cecilia Hubbard presented a report on the Verreaux’s Eagle Breeding Survey 2008. This was the 46th consecutive year for this survey, and the results were once again promising for this species. All survey teams were thanked for their tremendous support during 2008, especially at the beginning of the survey period when making one’s way round in the Matobo area was made difficult by circumstance beyond anyone’s control. The National Office was thanked for their financial support for this survey.

The Hyrax Census Survey report was also given by Cecilia Hubbard. All teams were thanked for their participation. Whilst the census results showed a slight increase in numbers, it is believed that there may still be cause for concern. The population numbers recorded by the teams were significantly lower than those recorded in previous years (2004 and 2005).

Continuation of this survey is considered of the utmost importance in relation to the Verreaux’s Eagle Breeding Survey. The National Office was thanked for their financial support of this survey.

Then time for a repeat of face, and Julia presented the MATOPOS Raptor Survey report prepared by Vernon Tarr. From 117 reports received there were a total of 24 species recorded by observers. An estimated 85 raptors were seen. It was an observation that the more noisy, aggressive species were more reported on, giving an impression of being more common than shy species. Most raptor sightings were done during the Verreaux’s Eagle Breeding Survey period, giving a biased chronological, geographical occurrence. All observers were thanked.

It was then time for Sandy McAdam to present her report on the monthly species count conducted at AISLEBY. This species count begun by Sandy and the late Harry Erwee in 1998, has produced some interesting data. A total of 341 species have been seen over the years. Of concern is the continued absence of African Darters and Grey Crowned Cranes.

Elsbeth Parry reported on the Southern Ground-hornbill. Elsbeth and her team now have the help of 27 schools. With information from the pupils of these schools, custodians who live close to nesting sites and from local residents it has been recorded that there are 21 nest sites within the area surrounding the MATOPOS National Park. At January of this year, there were 4, and possibly a 5th chick reported. As February is peak breeding time, there is a possibility of further chicks being recorded. All sponsors were thanked for their support and contributions made throughout the year.

The Committee for 2009 was elected. They are: Chairperson – Cecilia Hubbard; Secretary – Adele Edwards; Treasurer – Jenny Brebner; Members – Julia Duprée, Bill Lewis and Judy Ross. A special vote of thanks was given to the outgoing Chairperson, Julia Duprée, for her unselfish and incredible contribution to the Branch and BirdLife Zimbabwe during her many terms in office. The meeting closed, and as is usual for Matabeleland Branch, all members moved to the adjoining veranda and braai area to enjoy the view offered, and our unique fellowship.

Cecilia Hubbard

Our 2009 Verreaux’s Eagle Survey Begins – 15 March 2009

With the inaugural meeting of the 2009 MATOPOS Verreaux’s Eagle survey due to take place at Inungu Guest House on Sunday 15th March, we decided we’d kick-start our particular eagling season on Saturday with a day’s visit to the game park to check up on any activity, then join some of the team back at the guest house for the night. By 7.30 a.m. we were in the park. We soon found out that they had also experienced most of the rain we had been enjoying back in Bulawayo over the last few days and the roads were awash

with plenty of water everywhere. The roads are never very good at the best of times and with all the rain the erosion in places was appalling with some of the back roads becoming less and less accessible. However, we had an excellent day out and managed to avoid any problems despite some of our firebreak tracks being almost totally obliterated with elephant-eye-high *Hyparrhenia* and masses of nasty *Heteropogon contortus*.

We saw a great many Verreaux's Eagles, perched and flying, although none seemed particularly active in nest building. At our penultimate stop, we had a short and easy climb to get a panoramic view which includes three of our nest sites at once. We were then on the home run and looking forward to our evening by the fire with delicious braai, the camaraderie of fellow eaglers and the always awe-inspiring spectacle of a Matopos night sky, when – oh, dear and oh, what a bother – we got hopelessly and firmly stuck in a small river crossing. Or, should I say, the vehicle got stuck. Despite all heroic, valiant and exhausting efforts by the male member of our two-man team to get us unstuck (while female member stood around being absolutely pathetic, making idiotic suggestions and generally getting in the way!) there was no way we were getting out without help and so organised ourselves to spend the night *in situ*. The night seemed rather longer than normal but we managed a bit of sleep in the car to the sound of the water rushing under, around and next to our spot. We set off to walk to the main gate at about half six next morning and it wasn't long before we were totally drenched in the long wet grass which had overgrown the road and we did our bit for seed dispersal, being liberally spiked with spear grass, black jacks and all manner of other sticky bits. (What a blessing it hadn't all dried off yet.) Walking in the cool of the morning with the sun just starting to turn the kopjies golden was glorious despite the ever present threat of perhaps walking into an unseen rhino or two of which there were many VERY fresh signs of their being in the immediate vicinity! We managed to do the 10 or so kilometres in just over two hours – not so shabby for two old tonsils.

While the Parks staff were all most apologetic they did not have the resources (no working vehicles, no working phones, no power so no radios) to assist us, they eventually managed to get through to the Hazelside office on a cell phone and we got the message that one of the black eagle survey team was coming to rescue us. Our heartiest and grateful appreciation go to Rod Tourle and the two Parks scouts, Tagara Alois Moyo and Given Nkiwane, who so willingly assisted in getting us out of the mire. It took about 2 hours for the men to shovel, grovel, dig, jack, stack with rocks, etc., etc., all the while joking, chatting and cheerfully smiling before our vehicle could be successfully pulled free – to much backslapping, ululating and hand shaking. Thanks go too to our other fellow eaglers who had had an anxious night worrying about us.

And so, that brought an end to our inaugural visit to our Black Eagles for this coming season.

Aldous Huxley (whoever he was) wrote "Experience is not what happens to you; it is what you *do* with what happens to you." This experience allowed us to achieve three things – our eagles obviously aren't yet into housekeeping at this time of the year and are still sussing out the real estate; we've always fancied spending a night in the game park and now we have; and we're probably a bit ancient now to participate in the Matobo eco-challenge so (sadly) will have to cross that off our "things to do before I die" list!! No experience is ever wasted.

Jenny Brebner

Malilangwe Birding Trip – 20-26 January 2009

Residing outside the major urban centres of Zimbabwe has both its pros and cons, but one of the latter is the difficulty in joining in on official Birdlife Zimbabwe outings and events that are organised in the relevant provinces. Marondera is one of the smaller centres within Zimbabwe that has 'survived' relatively well over the last several years and we are privileged to have an active natural history society that has interested and knowledgeable members within the fields of reptiles, insects and trees. However, I must admit there is a distinct bias towards birding, something which must be an inheritance from two of our founding members, both of whom are now based in South Africa – John Jones and Peter Ginn. Twice a year our club organises trips at destinations around the county, and occasionally we are lucky enough to get invited to bird at private wilderness areas. In this particular case a previous member of our community and club invited us to Malilangwe where he now works, and so it was that a weeks birding was planned for late January 2009. Before I continue, let me provide readers with some information about this venue. I am by no means an official authority and the information I provide here is solely my own point of view. Malilangwe Conservancy is based in the Southeast Lowveld, and is situated between the Save River, the main Chiredzi – Mutare road and Gonarezhou National Park. In fact the road in to Chipinda Pools is bordered on both sides by the conservancy. Malilangwe is managed both for tourism and conservation, the former being upmarket

photographic and the latter covering a range of fields from anti-poaching to captive breeding. Wildlife is well managed here and healthy populations of game exist in a generally undisturbed environment. There is the odd spot like the old cotton fields that are not entirely natural, but have a positive effect in promoting biodiversity and certainly help in boosting the bird list! In a nutshell, excellent infrastructure, good management and active conservation projects leave one in little doubt that Malilangwe is one of the best tourism-conservation operations throughout the southern African region. Local birders would have to be accommodated at Hakamela, an educational camp based within predominantly Knob-thorn Acacia woodland not far from the entrance to the conservancy, which is utilised by school groups and people like us. Conferences and training courses are also run from here, for which there are very good facilities. Birding groups wanting to stay here must be at least 12 in number, and bear in mind there are costs like the guide(s) who have to accompany you. You may be restricted to some extent as guests in the main lodges obviously have priority and are guaranteed exclusivity on their excursions. Book by contacting reservations@malilangwe.org

Over the last fifteen years or so, a number of experienced birders and guides have lived in the area and so it boasts an enviable list of species – roughly 446 give or take a few, with numerous vagrant records and rarities on the card. In order to really get the most out of the area, birders would need to visit the Save-Runde Junction where several species are best looked for, like Green Malkoha, Gorgeous Bush-shrike, African Broadbill, Southern Banded Snake-eagle and Plain-backed Sunbird. There are even records of Woodward's Batis and Green Twinspot in the dry forest away from the river. We were not really prepared for a lot of extra travelling and so did not manage to get there ourselves, but we did land with our bum in the butter (or should I say Land Cruiser), as the tourism manager and head guide were keen to keep their guides sharp and busy in between bookings. Hence we found ourselves provided with guides and allowed to explore as long as we didn't get in the way of any projects and work going on. I was impressed by the knowledge and skill of the guides, particularly where trees and birds were concerned.

We chose to travel down via Mutare, but let me advise against this route as the section between Birchenough Bridge and Chisumbanje is badly pot-holed, and really makes for an unpleasant 45 minutes of jolting on and off (and through) the road. Our return via Zaka – Gutu was plain sailing on a much better surface. A lunch break by the bridge gave us our first taste of lowveld birds with Meves's Starlings, Green-winged Pytilia and Laughing Doves galore all round. After settling into camp, we only had time for a short stroll up the road before dusk gave way to night. Woodland Kingfisher, Red-billed Buffalo-weaver and Long-billed Crombec kick-started the list and African Barred Owlet churred throughout the night.

The next morning we were up early and keen to get stuck in to the surrounding woodland, heavily covered in *Grewia* bushes. We found a cleared track which turned out to be preparations for the captive breeding programme fence and this provided us with an easy passage through the otherwise thick and green summer vegetation. One must remember that dangerous game occurs throughout the conservancy and birding must be done conscientiously. Greater Blue-eared Starlings flew overhead calling, White-bellied Sunbirds, Southern Black Tits, Chin-spot Batis and before we knew it, we were experiencing one of those occasions which makes birding such a pleasure. By simply standing still in the fresh morning air, not too hot yet, brisk and energised, we were bombarded with no less than twenty species in just a few minutes – common species but all from different niches. Red-backed Shrikes proved to be very common throughout the area and another bird which is not often seen back home is the Eurasian Golden Oriole, which was seen many times over the next few days, though not as common as its two cousins the Black-headed Oriole and African Golden Oriole. Retz's Helmet-shrike, Bearded Woodpecker, Red-billed Hornbill and Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill were all common here, as opposed to home where the latter two at least are not prevalent at all.

Over the next couple of days we targeted a number of different habitats and were rewarded with a fantastic diversity of birds. I am not going to go over everything we saw, as it was really a lot of what one could expect to find, but I will point out the more interesting sightings. A large part of the western boundary is the Chiredzi River, a typical lowveld river, sandy with high banks and large riverine trees. I would dearly have loved to walk along the bank for an hour or so, but without a weapon the danger of 'dagga' boys was enough to keep us to the vehicles. Narina Trogons, Pel's Fishing-owl, Black-throated Wattle-eye and Thick-billed Cuckoo all buzzed through my head at the sight of the superb riverine fringe, but sadly we never saw any of these! An Eastern Nicator was glimpsed flashing across the road, Collared Sunbird and Sombre Greenbul both occurred in the thickets along the river, Common Greenshank and White-crowned Lapwing patrolled the sandy water edges and Water Thick-knee hid in the reed patches. Thick-billed Weavers and White-fronted Bee-eaters favoured the open patches between the big trees. Yellow-bellied Greenbul and

White-browed Robin-chat called from the undergrowth. Burnt-necked Eremomela foraged through the *acacia* woodland whilst Banded Martin and Common House-martins mingled over the open areas. The more heavily wooded areas held Grey-headed Kingfisher, which was in fact abundant and only once was its cousin the Brown-hooded Kingfisher heard calling. Great Spotted Cuckoo was recorded once, and it was a rather different experience to hear the Stierling's Wren-warblers calling from solid Mopane woodland. We are so used to hearing it in well established *miombo* back home. Grey-headed Parrots flew overhead and the more commonly recorded Meyer's Parrots were flying through the trees. It was also great to see so many Red-crested Korhaans and Black-bellied Bustards, interestingly often in wooded areas. These birds are only rarely recorded up in our patch of highveld. A very unusual and interesting patch of munondo trees, the *Julbernardia globiflora*, exists in the conservancy in a band of sandy soils on low hills. It was rather eerie passing through a habitat like that down at that altitude in that environment, though the Racquet-tailed Rollers seemed quite at home there even though they didn't have their racquets. It's always amazing what you find when you look closely – many of us, myself included, don't check every bird out well enough and probably passed more off as Lilac-breasted Rollers. The guides say they are common down there.

A band of sandstone hills, running roughly east-west through the top half of the conservancy, make for fantastic scenery and change of habitat. The heavily wooded slopes held Purple-crested Turaco, whilst the interesting rock formation and cliffs held Verreaux's Eagle, Mocking Cliff-chat and Cinnamon-breasted Bunting. Boulder Chat was not recorded but is on the list for this area and must be at the edge of its range here. Further south and not so visible from the public road, are areas of more open land with scattered pans and grassland between stunted *mopane*. Long-tailed Paradise-whydah and Broad-tailed Paradise-whydah were recorded, as well as an abundance of European Rollers. After several days of inspecting baobabs, Mosque Swallows finally showed up and then of course after that they gave up hiding and were seen often along the main road back to Hakamela Camp on the last day! Spinetails were not seen, but the river crossing on this road did produce Crested Francolin and Thrush Nightingale. Grey-backed Camaroptera were abundant in every habitat, even the open stunted *mopane* which I found unusual; I had always associated them with thicker vegetated areas. The guides say that the Green-backed Camaroptera also occurs on the property. A trip several years ago to the national park had White-browed Sparrow-weaver recorded by John Jones, though they rarely come this far east. The head guide did, however, say that he had once recorded them here, so look out for them if you do go down that way. Both the Purple Widowfinch (Indigobird) and Steel-blue Widowfinch (Village Indigobird) were recorded, though on two occasions an Indigobird with a white bill and red legs was seen, leading one to the Black Widowfinch (Dusky). Much discussion and argument took place, mainly because the Dusky Indigobird should not occur here, as its host the African Firefinch is a forest species not known to occur in these parts. After numerous comments including "the lights playing tricks reflecting off the bill making it look white", and an even more common one "my binos are not good enough!", one member of our group managed some decent photographs. Inspection on the laptop later revealed a clearly white bill and red legs, and so what must one assume? It must be a Dusky and there must be some African Firefinches in thick riverine bush somewhere! It would be interesting to hear from other birders whether this bird has been recorded here before and if there is any other information about variations in bill colour in these parts. The thick green vegetation evident everywhere was obviously not to the liking of larks and ppits – we never even saw one. Neither was a Common Fiscal recorded during the five days of birding. Black-collared Barbets and Dark-capped Bulbul were not common at all, the former only recorded twice that week. I considered it a pleasant change! After several days of birding, treeing, driving, animalling, reptiling and getting-up-early-drinking-teasing, we sat down to have a bite, finalise our record lists and have a well earned forty winks. After at least another forty winks, a handful of us decided to give it one more go and off we went in search of an open patch we had been told about not too far away – in fact when we found it, it was rather close. Parking in the centre we waited to see what would come by. Some zebra and wildebeest decided to give us some space and made off into the bush, leaving us with a jackal and the Crowned Lapwings settling back down from their passing. Amidst sips of beer and the light fading fast, the Crowned Lapwings decided to have a go at stretching their wings, when a flash of white secondaries caught my attention and hey, those over that side are not crowned, they're Senegal Lapwings! I had been eagerly looking out for them in all the open patches over the last five days. Much excitement from me anyway, my first lifer for the trip, and we all managed to get excellent views of them before we headed home in the fading dusk. I could not help but ponder the ways of the birding world. So often I have been actively birding when, on the last day, tired and ready to

hang up the binos, one last effort so often produces something special. There are several birds occurring here that I have never seen and I was really chuffed to have found one of them, with excellent sightings to boot. I'm sure next time I come they'll be all over the place! I don't know much about this species, but they are noted as breeding migrants to Zimbabwe's southeast lowveld, leaving in November/December, so I was worried we were too late. It would be interesting to know if these birds stay throughout the year here or when the latest records are for their departure and where they go? I'm guessing to the coastal lowlands of Mozambique.

Altogether, including the Black Widowfinch, we recorded 205 species in a solid five days birding. Anyone interested can contact me for the complete list of what we saw. It was terribly hot and the power cable running underground to the camp had burnt out, so we were without power which meant the generator had to run and its not a small one and heavy on fuel, which you pay for. I would be very keen to visit the area again in the dry season, when the bush is not so thick. The camp is not really for use by the general public, but I am sure that if prospective birders got together (maybe as an official Birdlife Zimbabwe trip?), something can be arranged. I can only recommend the area as a fantastic birding venue, and if you have a scope, well, there were so many raptors we missed out on ID'ing, I'm sure there were Lesser Spotted Eagles just arrived, but sometimes you're just not confident enough to be sure.

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TAIL FEATHERS

The 'Red-chested' Crow

The report by Julia Duprée in the February/March 2009 Babbler titled the "Pied Crow Enigma" reminds me of a similar incident that happened to me in the late 1950's. On a cold spring morning in the County of Cheshire in England, my father and I were out in a wet meadow shooting wild duck for the pot in the company of an old wildfowler. We were not having much luck as the duck were very wary and the approaches to the small ponds scattered through the meadow were very open. As we were approaching one of the ponds, there suddenly appeared from the right a flight of three carrion crows *Corvus corone*, flying quite low and the leading crow being chased by the two other birds. The leading crow looked somewhat different from the chasing birds and being in the line of fire my father shot it. He went over to retrieve the dead bird and discovered an extraordinary thing – it was wearing a red waistcoat! The waistcoat was made of light red cotton fitted over the back with holes on each side to free the wings and neatly sewn along the breast to complete the garment. When the old wildfowler joined us we asked him what he thought was the reason for the waistcoat. He was a bit stumped at first and then his memory cleared and he said he remembered that in the past, country folk in Cheshire used to catch young crows and sew them into waistcoats with the aim of frightening other crows away from their nest sites. This explanation seems rather difficult to accept as carrion crows in England usually nest singly and are not generally regarded as a nuisance, unlike rooks *Corvus frugilegus*, which nest in noisy unsavoury colonies. Although this observation was published in "The Field" magazine there was no subsequent correspondence to suggest an alternative reason for giving the crow its waistcoat.

Ken Wilson

A Strange Bird Encounter

At the bottom of my garden (in Avondale, Harare) I have a number of old wire cages. At this time of the year they are the haunt of those big grey spiders with a leg span of about three inches and which weave large golden webs. I was down at that end of the garden the other day and was most surprised to see a Firefinch suspended upside down and hanging by one wing in one of the webs. The bird was absolutely still and at first I thought it was dead. The spider was at the top of the web and ignoring the bird. Perhaps she felt it was just too big a prey to tackle. I didn't want to go into the cage which would have resulted in breaking down some of the webs so I got a stick, planning to poke it through the wire and try to get the bird down to the floor of the cage so I could fish it out at the gap at the bottom. There is a gap between the bottom of the cage and the floor which is probably how the bird got in there in the first place. As soon as I touched the bird with the stick it sprang into life, broke free of the web and flew madly around the cage,

fortunately missing the other webs. It finally landed on the door of the cage. I opened the door and it flew away, apparently unhurt. I know spider silk is very strong but I am amazed that it could immobilise, even temporarily, a bird, even one as small as a Firefinch. I wonder if any other BirdLife members have had any similar encounters or heard of other instances of birds getting trapped in spider webs. **Olive Thornton**

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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 marked as endangered, threatened or special and notify Chip and Ian Riddell (gemsaf@mango.zw) if you see them, indicating the date, number and place.