

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	US\$10 per annum
Senior Citizens, Students & Juniors	US\$ 5 “ “
Corporate members	US\$30 “ “
Members outside Zimbabwe	Africa US\$20
	Other US\$30

Deposits can be made directly into the BLZ account – please contact Hazel for details.

I am still in chilly England and will return to chilly Zimbabwe at the end of June! Thank you to those who sent contributions – I look forward to hearing from more of you for the next one! Any interesting observation concerning birds and/or their behaviour will be welcome. The AGM proceedings will be sent separately. Ed

National Annual General Meeting

The national AGM is from 9.30 a.m. on Saturday 30 May 2009 at the Education Centre of the Mukuvisi Woodland in Harare, when a new Council will need to be voted in to represent you, the members. I believe an agenda has been sent out, so please take a copy with you. Note that following the AGM there will be a short tribute to the retiring education programme manager Leslee Maasdorp, for her dedication and hard work in bringing an awareness of birds to so many people. Bring your lunch and chairs – and catch up with old friends. Braai facilities will be available, provided by BLZ.

Members will be able to renew and pay their subscriptions, so please take this opportunity to do so. Please also check your details are all correct.

World Environment Day is 5 June and Environment Africa is co-ordinating Green Ribbon Week to raise awareness of the environment in Zimbabwe.

There is increasing global concern about climate change and this year the theme is – ‘YOUR PLANET NEEDS YOU – UNite to combat Climate Change.’ We should all carry out and encourage good environmental practices in our daily lives – one of the main ones in my opinion being litter and rubbish control!

FORTHCOMING 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

Evening Meetings on the 3rd Thursday of each month 5:30 for 6:00 p.m. 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 18 June: Flying High – Birds in the Rock Art of Zimbabwe. This will be a fascinating talk by Paul Hubbard, a well-known member of the Matabeleland branch, which provides an overview of past studies and currently accepted interpretations regarding the appearance and distribution of birds in the Rock Art of Zimbabwe. A variety of species, notably ostrich, swifts, swallows and cranes will be discussed and the position of avifauna within modern Bushman society extensively reviewed, complemented by relevant case studies from around the country and Southern Africa. We hope many members will attend this function.

Thursday 16 July: Birds and Insects

Ken Wilson will chat about the relationship between these species.

Please contact a committee member if you need transport to any of our outings. Beginners are most welcome – 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 to 8.00 a.m. in June and July.**

Saturday 20 June – 8.00 a.m.: Marlborough Vlei

Directions: drive to the end of Princess Margaret Road, turn left, continue to the short cul-de-sac on the vlei side with a small fenced off area at the end. Bring some cash for the guard.

Saturday 18 July - 7.30 a.m.: Ewanrigg

Visit these Botanical Gardens where there are usually many sunbirds at this time of year. Meet at CABS Northridge Park – Northend Close. There will be an entry fee – contact Tony Alegria for the cost.

Sunday 7 June and 5 July - 8.00 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 at the gate to let cars in and out – please take into account the price of a loaf of bread and the value of your vehicle!

Sunday 14 June and 12 July – 8.00 a.m.: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary

Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West. Anyone wanting a lift please contact a Committee member. Remember to bring chairs and refreshments.

Sunday 21 June and 19 July – 8:00 a.m.: Monavale Vlei Walk

Meet on the BS Leon side of Fenella Drive, for a walk with guides who know the area well.

Sunday 28 June – 7.30 a.m.: Ewanrigg Botanical Gardens

Hopefully we will catch the aloes in flower this year, which will attract the sunbirds and provide a spectacular show of colour. This is always a lovely walk. There will be an entry fee – contact Tony Alegria, who will have the latest information. Meet at CABS Northridge Park – Northend Close.

Sunday 26 July – 7.00 a.m.: Lanark Farm (Irvine's)

Meet at the Mukuvisi Woodland main car park, where you can leave your vehicle and share transport. As usual bring chairs and refreshments to this very pleasant venue.

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Saturday 13 June: Day Outing to Kloof Farm

Kloof Farm, Nyamandhlovu. Meet at 09:00 at Falls Road Garage. Bring chairs and picnic lunch. Contact Judy Ross phone (w) mornings 670851 or 011 419335

July: Waterfowl Counts

Throughout the month we will be conducting our bi-annual (January & July) waterfowl counts at Aisleby and the sewerage treatment plants at Khami (SAST) and Cowdray Park. Everyone is welcome and encouraged to attend. The format is the same as any of our outings: we enjoy a stroll outdoors, we note all the birds we see (not only waterfowl), there is a lot of banter and backchat, and we sit down at the end to share our tea and cake while compiling a final bird checklist. The only difference being that for waterfowl, instead of just noting the species we also attempt to count the number of each species. Further details regarding dates and times for each venue will be made available to members nearer the time.

Weekend 15-16 August: Raptor ID Course

Part 2 of our Raptor ID training with Prof Peter Mundy. This course is limited to members only and participants should have attended the first part in the series. To assist with seating arrangements please confirm your attendance in advance with Helen Lewis Phone 242285 (h)

Weekend 29-30 August: Matopos

Saturday will focus on the Black Eagle Survey. Sunday will be a general birding day in conjunction with members of the Matobo Conservation Society. Details nearer the time. Contact Cecilia Hubbard 285666 (h) 287692 (w)

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.

Eastern Districts and Other Areas – Those members in other areas – please let me know of any birding outings you organise – there may be other 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. We are always interested to hear what is happening in the rest of the country. Ed

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REPORTS

NATIONAL

Unfortunately I still have not received a summary of any of the discussions and/or conclusions decided on for the next 3 years by participants at the BirdLife Zimbabwe Strategic Planning Workshop held on 21/22 March.

Important Bird Areas (IBA) Monitoring Project Report

An internal evaluation of the project was conducted in March by the Regional IBA Programme Manager based in Kenya. The key recommendation among others is to start to formulate and apply a clear exit strategy. Some information on monitoring progress in Zimbabwe was also presented to the Regional IBA Programme Manager for publication in the BirdLife e-bulletin.

The IBA monitoring form has been simplified for use by members when they visit IBAs. We acknowledge the support that members have demonstrated in the filling in of field cards over the years. Knowing the baseline condition of birds, trends in their population and species composition on important sites will help us to understand the dynamics and plan effective conservation measures.

The first batch of monitoring results from the field have been analysed and a national status report highlighting the state of IBAs, threats to the sites and conservation actions taking place is being prepared. The state of the IBAs is going to be primarily based on the habitat(s) condition of key bird species.

Kanisios Mukwashi – IBA National Project Manager

New Project in BAP (Bird Awareness Programme)

In 2004 the Education Manager sent a proposal to BLI Africa Secretariat seeking funds to help Bird Clubs improve on their networking and this was approved in December 2008. The project is being funded by the Jensen Foundation through BLI Africa Secretariat and the title of the project is “Linking African children to the global conservation community – for the benefit of birds and people”.

To mark the beginning of this project in BLI partner countries in Africa, a workshop was held in Ghana between 6 and 8 April 2009, which the education officer, Rueben Njolomole attended. The workshop introduced the project concept and the Clearing House Mechanism (CHM) that clubs based in schools would use for web-based information-sharing purposes. The project entails the use of internet for networking and the following are four thematic areas along which participating countries were to develop proposals for funding:

- ✂ Web-based 'research' on specific conservation issues;
- ✂ Children from different countries working together to 'track' migratory birds across their countries and the continent (including tracking ringed birds);
- ✂ E-paint, poetry, essay and other competitions;
- ✂ Online debates, discussions, chatting and pen-pals; etc.

Successful proposals were to address two of the millennium development goals which are; goal number 7: to ensure environmental sustainability and goal number 2: to achieve universal primary education by 2015. The department developed a proposal with activities that included online debates and discussions as well as poetry, essay and other competitions. Very few schools will be able to use the web-based CHM because of lack of the necessary resources, but in order that all BAP schools are included in the project and also that new schools join in, newsletters will be the medium of information exchange.

Rueben Njolomole – Education officer

Is this brood parasitism?

On 18 April 2009 I received a call from one BLZ member based at Chikurubi Maximum Prison – Mr. Gibson Mapokotera. He has recently revived his membership and is keen on bird photography. He wanted to photograph the scene of a spectacular event, as he says it, which was a Blue Waxbill that found a Southern Masked-weaver nest on the tassel of a maize stalk and laid its eggs there. After a few weeks the bird successfully hatched its chicks and the photographer disappeared for a while to collect his photographic equipment. Just as he returned back he found that the maize tassel had broken down and the weaver nest had dropped onto the ground. The unfortunate thing was he found the skinny chicks dead! Has this ever been noticed before?

*Rueben Njolomole for **Gibson Mapokotera***

Mbazhe Waterfowl Counts – 2009

A waterfowl census was conducted at Mbazhe Pan Bird Sanctuary (0680807S; 7920560E) on 22 January 2009. It could be interesting to note that 8 members from the local community have

joined BLZ and participated in this successful exercise. I wish to acknowledge their presence. The water levels at the pan were extremely high; the pan was more than three quarters full. Most parts of the water surface were covered by beautiful water lilies. A total of 102 birds of 18 species were recorded. These included the African Fish-eagle, African Jacana, Common Greenshank, Yellow-billed Storks, White-faced Ducks, Reed Cormorants, Comb Ducks, Pied Kingfisher, Squacco Heron, African Spoonbills, Malachite Kingfisher, Common Moorhen, Wood Sandpipers and Egrets. African Jacana was the most common bird species sighted. The counts were also extended to other places in Nkayi namely Matshani Pan and Nkayi Dam. One Grey Crowned Crane was recorded at the latter dam. Water levels at these two places were above average. Plans are in place to carry out another waterfowl count in July this year.
Togarasei Fakarayi – Projects Officer

MASHONALAND

Birds of the Night and Flamingos at Lake Natron, Tanzania – 19 March. An unexpected bonus, two for the price of one (and it was free!), awaited the goodly gathering of Mashonaland members at the Bowling Club. In addition to Tony's presentation on the *Caprimulgiformes* family, we were treated to a short illustrated talk by Chris Magin, here from RSPB at Cambridge for the Strategic Planning Workshop the following weekend.

There was something to learn for all of us this evening as Tony dealt with the Nightjar family in general and global terms. Examples ranged from South America to Australia, from frogmouths to potoos – all night hunters with specially adapted wide opening mouths to devour insects as they fly around at dusk and into the night. Nightjars have evolved a special grooming comb called the 'pecten' on the claw of the middle toe of each foot. The comb is used for preening the feathers, for scratching and for removing parasites as well as straightening out the long bristles around the bird's gape at the base of the bill, which are used to channel insects into the mouth. Herons, egrets, bitterns and cormorants have evolved a similar claw comb. A museum example was produced and the audience was invited to look at pictures and listen to the calls in order to identify or guess those nightjar family members which may be heard in Zimbabwe at various times of the year. The most commonly correctly identified species was the Fiery-necked Nightjar whose "Good Lord deliver us" call is widely heard even in the capital.

After a short interval, Chip introduced Chris Magin, who offered a choice of 3 presentations from which the majority opted for the Lesser Flamingos of Lake Natron, a huge lake of soda ash in the Rift Valley in northern Tanzania. The breathtaking images of hundreds of thousands of these elegant, delicate birds feeding and breeding on the lake were in stark contrast to the ugly, intrusive towers and chimneys of the Tata Soda Ash plant on a similar lake (Lake Magadi) in southern Kenya. Environmentalists are currently mounting a campaign to make sure that such a factory does not ruin the pristine beauty of Lake Natron and drive away the Flamingos. Happily the prognosis is good and the Lesser Flamingos may well continue to breed in peace there for the delectation of eco-tourists.

Ken Dixon

Mazowe Springs – Sunday 22 March

There was a good turn out for the visit to Mazowe Springs a few kilometres past the Wingate Park golf course. John Whaley accompanied us on the walk, making sure that even those that were lagging 200m behind the group had got through the gates before they were locked. We walked through grasslands where a couple of sable and blesbok could be seen, past a small dam and then through the hills cloaked in Miombo woodland.

We were not very lucky with the raptors as only a Black-chested Snake-eagle was seen, but we were soon seeing a good variety of birds. Coqui Francolins were heard calling and African Green-pigeon were spotted by a few, flying fast and far. Both European Bee-eater and Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters were found. The Swallow-tailed Bee-eaters were the first I had seen around Harare this year.

As we walked through the woodlands Black Cuckooshrike, Common Scimitarbill, Green Woodhoopoe, Miombo Tit, Southern Black Tit and Southern Hyliota were all added. An interesting bird that is not seen very frequently was a Red-faced Crombec.

Most of the grassland birds still had some of their breeding plumage which always helps with identification! Yellow-mantled Widowbird, Yellow Bishop, Red-collared Widowbird and White-winged Widowbird were all seen, while on the telephone line on the way back to the house some people noticed a Cuckoo Finch.

Pammy and John Whaley then invited us onto the veranda where we had tea and watched all the garden birds being (unsuccessfully) stalked by the resident cat! The male Green-winged Pytilia and all the sunbirds were a wonderful way to end an excellent morning.

Many thanks to the Whaley's' for hosting us – we hope to be back in the not too distant future!

Dave Dalziel

At the **April evening function**, Alex Masterson told the 37-strong audience in his usual amusing way, about his involvement in the book entitled *LBJs: Little Brown Jobs Made Easier*. Alex suggested the idea to Ken Newman who, with other “partners” Derek Solomon and David Johnson, combined their knowledge to produce the book. All the illustrations, either demonstrating flight and song or which species occupy which habitat, contained therein, were drawn by Alex. Alex also contributed to a book entitled *The Complete Book of Southern African Birds*. This is a massive book with many contributions by many experts and amateurs. It is very detailed and has great photographs.

Thereafter the Questions and Answers session commenced, with Alex Masterson, Neil Deacon and committee members Dave Dalziel and Ian Riddell.

The following list of Q & As is no reflection of the order the questions were asked!

Q: Do Cattle Egrets eat cattle?

A: No, however if bits of meat are provided, they will be eaten – this was noticed by birders who have raised young egrets. Oxpeckers will open wounds on an animal and feed on the blood and flesh of their host.

Q: Why are there House Sparrows at homes in Bulawayo but not so in Harare?

A: In Harare, House Sparrows appear to be common around factories and in townships. Consensus was that these Sparrows prefer drier places than found in Harare homes.

Q: How many raptors will live in one Large Eagle territory?

A: The Martial Eagle has the largest territory of all eagles in Zimbabwe. The number of raptor species that can occupy a territory depends on what habitats and prey resources are available, so potentially many raptor species can occupy the same territory. Raptor species that have an overlap in prey species are less likely to occupy the same territory unless there is an abundance of food. All raptors will defend their nest sites against other species. Some such as the Peregrine Falcon are extremely intolerant of other raptors during breeding and will actively chase away or even kill other raptors in the vicinity of their nest site – even those that don't really offer any threat. For example in Batoka Gorge, a Peregrine Falcon tore the wing off a Black-chested Snake-eagle that ventured too close to its nest site.

Q: Do they manage to live in the same area by breeding at different times of the year?

A: Although there is a staggering of peak breeding season between species, especially large eagles and the smaller raptors, longer incubation and fledging periods of the larger species effectively negate this difference. Fledging of all species appears to coincide with highest prey availability which is generally during the rainy season when prey species have their young. Therefore competition between species in a territory is generally not avoided through differences in breeding period.

Q: Why do Blue Waxbills build their nests in trees which have wasps?

A: Sometimes one hears or reads that the Blue Waxbill builds its nest near wasp nests as they give some protection against predators.

Many years ago a study was done in South Africa. They placed a number of predators near the nest, including snakes and cats to see if the wasps would react to the intrusion. They seldom did, not even showing much interest in human beings especially in cold weather. What they discovered is that the acacia tree that the waxbill and the wasps often use was very often used by a type of ant. Not only did the ant attack the wasp nests but they also attacked the Blue Waxbills as they tried to build their nests. This meant that the wasps and the birds had to find a tree that was not patrolled by the predatory ant. Most of the trees had an attending ant nest so birds and wasps ended up building nests in the few available trees, free of attack. Hence the waxbill nest was often close to a wasp nest!

Q: Is there mysticism surrounding the Hamerkop?

A: Yes if they land on your home and call a lot, you must move house. If you don't move, an accident, illness or death will follow.

Q: Why does the Hamerkop have such a huge nest?

A: By having a large enclosed nest the young do not need as much parental attention as the temperature is better controlled and the risk of predation is much reduced. The adults can spend more time looking for food. Why Hamerkops need these benefits and other similar-sized birds manage without, is not known.

Q: Who taught crows to eat pecan nuts?

A: Crows are very intelligent birds and will try anything. So they will try eating pecan nuts and anything else that may be food.

Q: Why do Heuglin's Robins sound different in Harare compared to Bulawayo?

A: They sound different over large areas. So do many other birds with their different calls.

Q: A collection of Crows is called a "Murder of Crows" – why?

A: This name came about because a group of crows will kill a dying crow.

Q: Do you have any evidence of climate change bird wise?

A: No, there is continuous change due to all sorts of factors e.g. habitat destruction and persecution, so cannot say any changes are related to climate change at all.

Q: Do Southern Ground-hornbills call during the day and at night?

A: Normally they call during the day, but like many other birds, they will sometimes call at night, mostly during or near full moon.

Q: Are Grey Go-away-birds changing their habitat?

A: Not really clear but they are often around the edge of town and on sandveld areas. Movements in to town must happen now and again; there is also deforestation which must be pushing them one way or another.

Q: Do raptor nest sites get used by the same pair or is it a first come first served?

A: Most resident raptors occupy and defend a particular territory throughout the year and over many years, therefore use the same nest site or a close alternate within this territory. It is not clear what levels of fidelity breeding migrant raptors such as Wahlberg's Eagle and Black-shouldered Kites have to a particular territory or nest site.

Tony Alegria

Kutsaqa Research Station – 26 April

The destination for this April outing was the Tobacco Research Board's estate located near Harare International Airport. It is a low-lying area of dams, grassland, miombo woodland and some arable land used for producing and testing tobacco seed and plants.

The weather was of course beautiful as nine of us set out from the boathouse. One might have expected these shallow patches of water to be teeming with water birds but in the event we saw only 1 Reed Cormorant and 5 White-breasted Cormorant, 9 White-faced Duck, an African Jacana and a Black Crake. There were also brief glimpses of a Malachite Kingfisher and good views of a Giant Kingfisher and only the Lesser Swamp-warbler called from the reeds. The only waders seen were a flock of Kittlitz's Plover which were scurrying about on a ploughed field far from the bodies of water, accompanied by African Pipit and a few Red-capped Larks which were relentlessly pursued by Tony and Richard.

After splitting into 2 groups we made our way around the dams, sometimes following roads and paths, sometimes cutting across the grass and woodland. Birds were hard to find in the woodland but we heard Stierling's Wren-warbler and Brubru and saw Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, Variable Sunbird, White-bellied Sunbird and Amethyst Sunbird. Grey Go-away-bird and African Grey Hornbill were everywhere. The grassland and reeds produced Yellow-throated Longclaw and a few Cisticola – Zitting Cisticola, Levillant's Cisticola and Red-faced Cisticola.

The second group was fortunate to see Grey Penduline-tits very close in the woodland. As they got to the cars before the others they went for a short walk around the sports club buildings. There were a number of common species in the grounds, including Kurrichane Thrush, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Red-billed Firefinch and Speckled Mousebirds, but the best sighting was a beautiful 5ft python across the path on the way back to the boathouse.

Ken Dixon

Greystone Park Nature Reserve – 16 May

A dozen people arrived at Greystone Park Nature Reserve at the appointed hour and surveyed the low cloud and wet grass with a little trepidation. There were not a lot of birds on the dam but there were good views of Common Moorhen, African Jacana, Reed Cormorant and Black Crake.

As we ambled around the dam a White-browed Scrub-robin kept calling and a White-browed Robin-chat called from its usual patch near the willow trees. Once we were back on the dam wall a Long-crested Eagle flew across the dam giving all of us wonderful views of flight pattern and then, when it alighted in a tree, we could all see the beautiful long crest. A couple of raptors were perched in a leafless tree but we could not see them very well against a patch of bright sky. Fortunately one of them started to call and we were able to identify Gabar Goshawk. One of the sightings of the morning was an immature Ovambo Sparrowhawk watching us from its vantage point in a tall tree. This is a bird we do not see very often on our bird walks so it was great to get a very good view of this lovely raptor.

There were flocks of Violet-backed Starling on the tops of some of the trees and as the sun started to break through, the male's colour could be appreciated. We then headed down the path towards the bottom of the reserve. Jameson's Firefinch and Red-billed Firefinch, Blue Waxbill and Bronze Mannikins were much in evidence. Speckled Mousebirds sunning their bellies, looking very relaxed were photographed and then we came to the long wet grass.

To most 'normal' birdwatchers that was that and it was time to head back for coffee and biscuits but not Innes and Tony! In they plunged, followed by the meek and the sheep. Five minutes of soaking 9-foot grass, clinging silver leaf and huge fully armoured black jacks and they finally admitted defeat. A sorry bunch of birders retreated – all muttering 'never follow those two' The upside to our little misadventure was a pair of Black-throated Wattle-eye and a small flock of Terrestrial Brownbul on the way back to the car.

The list was done in the sun at the car park as we watched the Wire-tailed Swallow and Eastern Saw-wing catching breakfast. This is an excellent venue for the shorter Saturday walks and we will be back soon!

Dave Dalziel

Monavale Vlei – Sunday 17th May

The May, 2008 walk took place on a cold, windy morning and only 25 species were recorded, so this year had to be better and it was. The five of us managed a healthy 41 on a pleasant sunny day. The grass is still very high and dew-laden but the newly-mown firebreaks offered reasonable access to all parts.

As usual the Black-shouldered Kites were very active throughout and Jimmy showed us their nest in a gum, but the highlight was another raptor, a Marsh Owl, which quartered the moist grassland assiduously, searching presumably for small rodents for its young. The only other bird of prey was a Lizard Buzzard concealed in another gum tree. In the reeds were Lesser Swamp-warbler and Little Rush-warbler and a Black Crake and Red-faced Cisticola. Small flocks of Orange-breasted Waxbill and Common Waxbill and Bronze Mannikin flitted from clump to clump of tall grass, while a noisy loose group of 18 Crowned Lapwing flew over us. At ground level we came across a large freshwater crab and further on an Olive Grass Snake was sunning itself on the cut grass.

Thanks as ever to Jimmy and Dorothy for all their local eco-gossip.

Ken Dixon

On 21 May, the chairman of Birdlife Zimbabwe, Mashonaland, gave a presentation on **Owls** at Avondale Sports Club (ASC).

We had a seasoned presenter and organiser in Tony Alegria. Laptop and projector were ready well beforehand, car-watching was arranged for vehicles parked outside the Club gate and orders for the excellent ASC steak/chicken pies were taken before the talk. Tony also took charge of a large brass bell which effectively quelled social chatter in the hall and summoned the bar-flies from the adjoining bar on the dot of 6.

He began with announcements and a diversion, a video clip of Susan Boyle (the 48-year old unlikely-looking “Idols” wanna-be from UK) giving her amazing performance at the contest. Susan’s exquisite voice was only the first surprise; the stunned faces of the judges were equally entertaining.

Attention secured, Tony launched into the two broad classifications of owls (Tyto... with heart-shaped facial discs and Strigidae, without) detailing the number of sub-types and of species for each, the size variances and global distributions of the various species. It was good to have so many illustrations and actual photographs of the different owls to look at while he pointed out their peculiarities and to be able to see and touch some actual owl parts (feet and feather with a “comb”).

There was a flow of interesting owl snippets: the third “side to side” eyelid for example, which makes a disconcerting wink; the fact that no eye movement is possible within the socket ... and the compensating extra swivel in the neck; the pellets of fur and bones etc that have to be regurgitated ... and the ‘Dalziel’ method of analyzing these using his mother’s soup pot and flour sieve; the owls’ approach to accommodation (don’t make a hollow in a tree, find one) ... and their charming acceptance of a man-made owl-box instead, particularly the up-market one with a landing-ridge. And what delightful collective nouns! I am so looking forward to seeing several owls together one day and commenting casually to someone “Look, a parliament of owls!”

Tony had unearthed plenty of information on folk-lore and superstitions relating to owls. Most had sinister connotations but for some cultures there were positives. It was amusing to hear that the ancient Greeks believed that seeing an owl before a battle meant you would win, while the ancient Romans believed the opposite.

Serious birders were also catered for with a set of recorded calls from various local and South African owls and some “Which Owl Was That?” time after each one. The variety of sounds was bewildering for a novice but I hope to recognize at least two in future: the Barn Owl at one end of the spectrum and Pel’s Fishing-owl at the other.

And after the hard work identifying owl calls we were regaled with two more video-clips from the Alegria repertoire: “5 Lucky Escapes” and “the Mom Song”. A very entertaining evening (and the pies were delicious!)

Sally Britten – prospective new member

(Hopefully fully fledged by the time this goes to print! Ed)

UMFURUDZI RAPTOR MONITORING PROGRAM:

February 2009 Survey Results

Neil R. Deacon* & David Rockingham-Gill

*Corresponding Author: neil@dab.co.zw

The rationale behind fieldwork in February was to identify any prey remains found under nest sites active in the previous season, and attempt to locate active Snake-eagle (*Circaetus sp.*) and Bateleur (*Terathopius ecaudatus*) nest sites. There was no success in the latter, with no Snake-eagles or Bateleurs even seen during the course of the survey. Two Snake-eagle species, the Brown Snake-eagle (*C. cinereus*) and the Black-chested Snake-eagle (*C. pectoralis*) are recorded for Umfurudzi, with both seen during the course of this study (Deacon & Rockingham-Gill, 2009). Only 6 species of diurnal raptor were seen during the course of the February survey, including the African Cuckoo Hawk (*Aviceda cuculoides*), African Harrier-hawk (*Polyboroides typus*), Dark Chanting-goshawk (*Melierax metabates*), African Hawk-eagle (*Aquila spilogaster*), Wahlberg’s Eagle (*Aquila wahlbergi*) and African Goshawk (*Accipiter tachiro*). This was considerably fewer than the 18 and 19 species, respectively, recorded in previous surveys (Deacon & Rockingham-Gill, 2009).

However, while verifying nests located in *Euphorbia* trees, a preferred nest tree species for Black-chested Snake-eagles, an interesting observation was made. One of a pair of African Cuckoo Hawks, located from their mobbing of a Verreauxs’ Eagle-owl (*Bubo lacteus*), was observed removing dry sticks from a Knob-thorn (*Acacia nigrescens*). On following this individual there was evidence that it was building a nest in a nearby Tree Euphorbia, *Euphorbia ingens*. A small well-constructed stick nest was found built in the junction of 3 branches inside

the crown of the *Euphorbia*. A Knob-thorn twig was found on the ground underneath the nest, despite the absence of this tree in the immediate area, suggesting that the Cuckoo hawks were still nest building at this site. If this nest is confirmed to be an active African Cuckoo Hawk nest it differs considerably from the norm for this species, described in Miombo woodland to be most often built amongst thick foliage in the upper branches of the tree (O'Donoghue & Hartley, 2002). Tree species used for nesting by Cuckoo Hawks in Miombo woodland recorded by O'Donoghue and Hartley (2002) include White Thorn (*Acacia polyacantha*), Msasa (*Brachystegia speciformis*), Mnondo (*Julbernardia globiflora*) and Muwanga (*Pericopsis angolensis*). Two other nests of similar construction were found in *Euphorbia* elsewhere in Umfurudzi, suggesting that this may be an important nest tree species for small raptors, and specifically Cuckoo Hawks, in this area of Miombo woodland.

The addition of the abovementioned nest brings the total number of recorded nest sites to 40 within 50 km² area surrounding Hippo Pools. Another nest suspected to be that of an African Hawk-eagle was also found during the February survey. Amongst this total, two additional active Wahlberg's Eagle nests were confirmed, bringing the number of active territories to 8 for this species. However, two other nest sites where eagles, suspected to be Wahlberg's, were seen at were not verified. Further prey remains recovered from underneath Wahlberg's Eagle nests include the leg and pelvis of a Thick-knee (*Burhinus sp.*), hind leg of a sub-adult Scrub Hare (*Lepus saxatilis*), pelvis and femurs (still attached) of an unidentified bird species, the skull of a Giant Bullfrog (*Pyxicephalus adspersus*) and more remains of Giant Plated Lizards (*Gerrhosaurus validus*). The total active nest sites for the season are summarized in Table 1. The remaining nest sites include those where the species has not been verified, but is likely a raptor nest, and sites that are dilapidated and apparently not in use. Amongst the unverified nests are some that may be in use but found after cessation of breeding in the past season, these include cold dry (winter) nesting species, such as eagles, and hot dry nesting species, such as Lizard Buzzards (*Kaupifalco monogrammicus*) and *Accipiter* species. Location of latter nest type is becoming more frequent as the search methods for sites are refined. Recording of old or abandoned nest sites is useful as it is indicative of territory and may be reused if they are alternate nest sites. Abandoned nests may also be adopted by other raptor species.

Table 1. Summary of active nest sites (13) recorded in Umfurudzi in the period August 08 – February 09.

Name	Species	Site History
African Goshawk	<i>Accipiter tachiro</i>	2 chicks fledged Nov.08, still dependent Feb. 09
African Hawk-eagle	<i>Aquila spilogaster</i>	1 chick Aug 08, fledged seen hunting with adult pair
African Crowned Eagle	<i>Stephanoaetus coronatus</i>	1 chick seen on nest Sept 09. Fresh prey remains recovered under nest
Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>	2 chicks hatched Sept 08. One fledged chick still at nest site Dec 08
Lanner Falcon	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>	Adult incubating in cavity Aug 08
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>	Fledged chick observed returning to nest site Dec 08 also soliciting food from adults.
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>	Downy chick observed in nest, prey remains recovered from under nest site
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>	Adult incubating. Fresh prey remains recovered under nest
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>	Adult pair seen on nest. Prey remains recovered.
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>	Adult in vicinity of nest. Mutes under nest
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>	Adult on nest. Mutes under nest. Prey remains under nest
Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>	Fledged chick seen with adult on nest.

Wahlberg's Eagle	<i>Aquila wahlbergi</i>	Mutes under nest. Fresh prey remains recovered.
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Up to now fieldwork has mostly concentrated on surveying for and verifying the location of raptor nests, however, as the cold dry season approaches activity at nests of the large eagles and falcons will begin to be monitored. Specifically there are two African Hawk-eagle nests, one Verreaux's Eagle (*Aquila verreauxii*) nest, four African Crowned Eagle (*Stephanoaetus coronatus*) nests and one suspected Martial Eagle (*Polemaetus bellicosus*) nest that have been located. These will be surveyed at the end of May and perhaps again in June or July depending on their status in terms of the breeding cycle.

Acknowledgements

The following observers participated in the February 2009 survey and are acknowledged for their contributions: Z. Bachelor (BLZ), I. Jarvis (Wilderness Africa Trust), G. Lowe (BLZ), M. Mundy (BLZ), T. Ndadziira (Wilderness Africa Trust), P. Rockingham-Gill (BLZ). The project is funded from a Royal Society for Protection of Birds (R.S.P.B.) grant to Birdlife Zimbabwe.

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Would anyone interested in participating in the raptor monitoring survey, which is undertaken several times a year, please contact Neil Deacon at neil@dab.co.zw All volunteers are welcome and the Umfurudzi is an interesting area with varied habitats.

MATABELELAND

Weekend at Cawston Block – 27 to 29 March

Having expected a larger contingent this year, only ten birders managed to make it out to Cawston Block over the weekend of 27 to 29 March. Having installed ourselves in our allotted tents and unpacked the supplies for the weekend, leaving all the catering in the capable hands of the wonderful camp cooks and bottle washers, we all settled down to have a great birding weekend. Our host, Peter Johnstone and girlfriend, Lyn, joined us for the weekend and we shared their company along with Brian and Eileen Deacon at mealtimes. After our first delicious dinner, we all enjoyed sitting around the central fire on the deck, which was ably stoked by Tom.

Just before most of us retired, there was a heart-wrenching squawk, much like a chicken being strangled and on investigating the torch beams zoned in on a vociferous bush baby (*Otolemur crassicaudatus*). Its cries were soon answered by others and during the night they kept up their calling in competition with several Barn Owls.

On Saturday morning we had a leisurely breakfast before setting off in our groups for the day. Our intrepid leader had given us carte blanche to go where we liked and our team of four opted to do the drive mostly along the meandering Umgusa River. We had not gone much further than the sheds when we stopped to have a look at all manner of avian activity – White-fronted Bee-eaters swooping from their perches, an African Paradise-flycatcher trailing its tail, Yellow-fronted Canary, Blue Waxbills and Bronze Mannikins fluttering around in the long grass along the side of the road, a couple of African Grey Hornbills flying overhead issuing their rather mournful baby's cry, a Swainson's Spurfowl was scratching around near the car, we could hear a Tropical Boubou and a White-browed Robin-chat and of course, there were several of those LBJs that just would NOT sit still for a moment. Just as we were about to continue, high above we spotted a small group of White-backed Vultures. We stopped off at various points along the way and enjoyed the morning stint although by the time we returned to camp for lunch, it was now pretty hot and birding had all but ground to a halt. We all set off again in the afternoon, this time in a different direction to the morning and it seemed as if each group had had a good day's outing. While driving around, we came across an astounding number of game birds with small chicks and were particularly surprised at seeing the youngest Helmeted Guineafowl chicks any one of us had ever seen in the wild. Obviously the game birds had bred well this season. We all thoroughly enjoyed another pleasant evening around the fire and of course, another delicious

dinner before retiring early, once again being serenaded by the bush babies and Barn Owls with the odd Fiery-necked Nightjar joining in.

After a gargantuan Sunday breakfast, our group set off for Waterpoint 5, where we had decided we would sit for a bit to see what might turn up. On our way to the water point we saw the tiniest, weeniest quail chicks, no bigger than the end of a man's thumb (apologies – no ID on which quail – mother had disappeared into the long grass and we could only hear her soft cooing). Once we got to the water point, we went for a short walk to see if there was any water remaining in the small dam. A little while later we watched a very obliging Gabar Goshawk, just sitting in a tree, allowing us to take pictures and have a good look at it. It was almost certainly a youngster and could be heard plaintively calling. While there, we had one of those wonderful spectacles when a Martial Eagle flew directly over our heads – what a magnificent creature. There were hordes of Red-billed Quelea coming down to drink – perhaps a draw for the smaller raptors, although we didn't get to see any action as we had the previous year. Once again, it got too hot towards lunch time so we packed up and returned to camp to join the other teams.

This particular outing was held a little earlier in the year than last year as we were hoping to catch some of the migrants before they departed. Last year's count came to 132 different species and we managed to add a further 36 to this year's list, making a total of 168 species seen. Grateful thanks to the Deacons for their wonderful, friendly hospitality and to Peter Johnstone for once again allowing us to hold this event. Thanks go too to the teams that participated.

Jenny Brebner

Outing to Kensington – 25 April

Fifteen of us headed out to Jean and Tom Cranston's farm, including two welcome visitors from Harare. After the habitual cup of tea we all (with the exception of those who stayed to discuss the serious matter of the weekend's grand prix) headed off to look for Violet-eared Waxbills which are always found in the chicken run – except not a sign that day. But we lingered for ages to watch Grey Waxbills, Yellow-bellied Greenbills and Bronze Mannikins drinking and splashing in one of the many birdbaths provided, and in the trees were Greater Blue-eared Starlings, Green Wood-hoopoes and Red-faced Mousebirds.

Eventually we headed off through the pasture to the dam where we sat under the 'owl tree' that has housed a Spotted Eagle-Owl nest for well over 40 years. Here were more Grey Waxbills, Red-billed Quelea, Green-winged Pytilias, a little group of Common Waxbills, a couple of Laughing Doves standing on the shoreline next to a Red-eyed Dove in beautiful plumage, lots and lots of Grey Go-away-birds dashing from tree to tree, Southern Masked-weavers and a couple of Hamerkops. In the distance we heard an Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike, displaying Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills and a Crimson-breasted Shrike.

On through the pasture we came to the back garden where we heard a Brubru, saw a Tropical Boubou, Red-billed Buffalo-weavers fiddling around with their condominium in a dead tree and White-browed Sparrow-weavers noisily doing something similar with their abodes. But the piece-de-resistance – or the cherry on the cake – was the little Black-shouldered Kite sitting on her nest in a low acacia, turning her head this way and that to watch us. This was a comforting sight for the Cranstons who had not seen her for several days – because, it became apparent, her grassy nest was so well disguised that unless her white head was seen the nest was not.

Lunch provided a perfect opportunity to see who came to bath in the sprinkler set up by Jean and Tom in their shrubbery. Well, lots of interest came from the trees above, but not a bird descended for the simple reason that we were invading their privacy! However, sunbirds were moving about in these trees, predominantly the Scarlet-chested Sunbird with its loud, sharp voice.

After lunch we went over the road to the forest section of the farm. This proved very productive, particularly along the margins. One of the more unusual sightings was that of two species of flycatcher in the same small bush – Spotted Flycatcher and Marico Flycatcher, the former a late departer. (It is our experience in other areas that these two species almost never overlap). Round the corner were Southern Grey-headed Sparrows, more Marico Flycatchers, Blue Waxbills and a Kalahari Scrub-robin which tantalisingly kept moving just ahead of us. And on the way back a Gabar Goshawk was spotted by those who hadn't rushed back to their tea.

Our warm thanks go to the Cranstons for their kind hospitality which resulted in a wonderfully friendly and interesting day out.

Julia Duprée

Raptor ID Course – Matopos – 2 May

Saturday 2nd May saw 26 enthusiastic members gather for a Raptor ID course conducted by Professor Peter Mundy. For most of us it was many years since we were last in a classroom and you could almost hear the cogs creaking in the old brains as we tried to keep up with Peter while he briefly discussed the classification of birds and the definition of terms such as palaeartic/Afrotropical, migrant-resident-nomad-vagrant, etc. It is to his credit that 3 hours later he still held our attention! As the afternoon progressed, with the aid of Roberts' multimedia, we started focusing on specific birds. We learnt, with some dismay, that 75 raptor species occur in Zimbabwe (12 owls and 63 diurnal species) – and the only one we all agreed we could ID with any confidence was a Secretarybird! We ended the day having covered the vultures and eagles. Luckily there are a further 2 sessions planned, for August & November, as it is obvious we still have a lot more to learn.

The following day the participants gathered on the edge of the Matopos to put in to practice some of what we had learnt. (Describe what you are seeing out loud – it will help to focus your thoughts and make it easier to remember the distinguishing features when the bird is long gone and you are pouring over your field guide). For a change the birds were very cooperative. First seen was a pair of African Hawk-eagles (most likely confused with Ayres's Hawk-eagle). Distinguishing features: usually in pairs, underwing has zebra pattern (black/white/black), lacks 'landing lights' on front base of wing). Next we watched 7 White-backed Vultures rising on a thermal. Then a pair of Verreaux's Eagles, with their distinctive wing shape and white windows on the under wing, which were being dive bombed by a Lanner Falcon. Meanwhile looking back to where we had left the cars, we could see 'a bird' perched on top of the unsightly radio mast. Guesses varied from a Lilac-breasted Roller to an eagle. (Well it was difficult to gauge the size from that distance!) But even when we got close, and had 3 telescopes trained on it, there was controversy. Only when it flew off were all convinced it was a Brown Snake-eagle. (An immature Bateleur was the other likely contender as our bird appeared to have a short tail and the bright yellow eye was not obvious). Then a perched immature Verreaux's Eagle, with golden head and looking nothing like the adults we had seen a short while earlier, reminded us that with raptors nothing is simple. We moved a few kilometres to another site and as we stopped to regroup, a magnificent adult Martial Eagle took off from a nearby field giving us a textbook sighting. (From below: large size, dark head and breast, spotted belly, dark underwing). This bird repeatedly hovered for us – not usual behaviour but excellent for our observations). At this point our luck ran out as the weather turned nasty and, instead of a leisurely lunch followed by another walk, we ate our sandwiches in the car then headed for town.

Many thanks to Bill and Helen Lewis for hosting the Saturday session and to Peter Mundy for sharing his knowledge.

Adele Edwards

Jerrard's Farm – Woollandale – 11 May

The veld is starting to take on its dry and dusty winter look, so it was a delight to arrive at the Jerrard's garden with its bright green lawns and gay, colourful flowers. Very much at home on the front lawn were a group of Spur-winged Goose and a pair of Grey Crowned Crane. I've never before had such a close up view of these cranes – the crowns looked like they were made from strands of burnished copper wire, while the black patch in front of the crown looked like velvet. After half an hour in the garden we had already chalked up 14 species, ranging from House Sparrows and Blue Waxbills to Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills, and from both Dark-capped Bulbul and Yellow-bellied Greenbul to White-backed Vultures (admittedly they were seen from the garden, rather than in the garden).

We then took a stroll round the farm, picking up such species as 3 sunbirds (Scarlet-chested Sunbird, White-bellied Sunbird and Miombo Double-collared Sunbird), 3 shrikes (Magpie Shrike, Southern White-crowned Shrike and Crimson-breasted Shrike), 3 doves (Laughing Dove, Cape Turtle-dove and Red-eyed Dove), White-browed Sparrow-weavers, Red-billed Buffalo-weavers, Green Wood-hoopoes and Black-faced Waxbills. The little dam provided a welcome stop and

there we saw several more birds including White-faced Duck (3 adults and 11 juveniles), Red-billed Teal, Little Grebe, African Wattled Lapwing and Blacksmith Lapwing, Cattle Egret and a Pied Kingfisher. We returned to the garden where Ken & Shirley made us welcome and kindly shared their lunch with us. More birds were seen and heard, bringing our final total for the day to 51 species.

We are grateful to the Jerrard's for their hospitality and for allowing us the pleasure and privilege of spending the day on their property.

Adele Edwards

Seldomseen, Bvumba: 23-27April 2009. Damian Newmarch writes –

Having never been to Seldomseen and hearing a lot about it, the Marondera birders decided to visit the Bvumba and see for ourselves what the area is like. Several of us, myself included, have never had the opportunity to thoroughly bird the Bvumba forests and we were looking forward to seeing some new birds. My first impression of the area was: "wow, we're going to get some exercise here!" The entire area is steeply sloping and the birding paths are nowhere near level. However, the forests are fantastic and there is no doubt that the quality of birding here is high. If you are in a small group, the best place is the Crimsonwing Cottage down at the bottom, whereas larger groups would be more at home up in the larger Witchwood Cottage. Electricity supply is terrible so don't expect to use a kettle or have plenty of hot water, but it did improve on our last day and I hear it is a bit better now. Still, it would be wise to take gas and candles.

Birding-wise we were not disappointed, seeing plenty of Bvumba specials, with all of us managing a lifer or two! We spent time walking along other roads in the area, as well as a trip to Leopard Rock golf course, where we got permission to walk early before the golf began. A trip up to the telecom mast had great views but had gale force winds blowing. A good spot we found was on the road down to the old Eagle School, where there is now a training camp or something. The road passes through a good patch of forest, where Black-fronted Bush-shrike, White-eared Barbet and the usual doves (Tambourine Dove and Lemon Dove) and Greenbuls (Stripe-cheeked Greenbuls and Yellow-streaked Greenbuls) were found. Around Seldomseen, the sunbirds were plentiful with Collared Sunbird, Bronzy Sunbird and Western Olive Sunbird being common. Red-faced Crimsonwing were eventually spotted in the undergrowth, but one needs to be exceptionally alert and prepared to get one's knees dirty! Yellow-bellied Waxbill and Gurney's Sugarbird were seen in the open areas out of the forest. Olive Thrush and Orange Ground-thrush were common, especially the latter, which I would describe as exceptionally numerous around Seldomseen. Just learn their call!

Our thanks to Bridget and Emma Holland for taking us to some areas they know. Some of us were lucky enough to see the Swynnerton's Robin with Emma, as well as some grassland species such as Cape Grassbird and Singing Cisticola. Those who came in my direction were not so lucky, though we did see the Yellow-throated Woodland-warbler! The White-starred Robin was heard calling at lower elevations along the road up the Bvumba and around the Leopard Rock golf course, but not up in the Bvumba highland areas. On the golf course Ayres's Hawk-eagle and Grey Waxbill were seen with Malachite Sunbird being common. I shall tentatively mention a rich rufous-tailed bird seen disappearing into the forest edge – anyone seen Collared Palm-thrush around here? They were recorded in Mutare some years ago. Red-backed Mannikins were seen several times, as were Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird. Of interest was a White-tailed Crested Flycatcher heard calling near the main complex at Seldomseen. This species I understand is not common around here and by now should have moved down-slope to warmer altitudes, though I don't state this as fact! Altogether we managed 87 species, which is not bad for forest birding I might add, though quite a number were seen in other areas of the Bvumba.

TAIL FEATHERS

In the February/March issue of *Babbler*, Robyn Gilmour's name was inadvertently left off Tony Alegria's Buzzard Creepers Birding Big Day team. Apologies. Ed

Ian Riddell comments:

The problem with **Indigobirds**...

Damian spoke to me at one of the evening meetings about seeing the (putative) Black Widowfinch (Dusky Indigobird) at Malilangwe, mentioned in *Babbler* 87 and as I pointed out to him then, there can be problems with identifying these birds since bills can be variable in colour. There are quite a few articles in *Honeyguide* and one that should be read is Payne's 'The species of Indigobirds in Zimbabwe' (40(2):78-86). He talks about many of these problems and basically the song is necessary to be sure on some of the 'funnies' – if it mimics the Red-billed Firefinch it is no doubt the Steel-blue Widowfinch, or Village Indigobird. This is possibly what was seen at Malilangwe despite the presence of a white bill and the Dusky and its host, the African Firefinch have not been recorded there and are unlikely. It is interesting that white-billed forms of the Village occur in east Africa but also in Namibia and north-western Botswana and to Maun in the southeast. This makes me wonder if these western forms are attached to dry conditions and if so, do they also extend further east than is known and into the dry lowveld of Zimbabwe? The Black is supposed to have pale pinkish-white feet in our part of the world, what Payne calls 'the pale-footed Central African counterparts of the orange-footed Black Widowfinches of South Africa'. And you also need to note the plumage colours and tones, not always easy unless you have the right light on the subject. It can all get a bit confusing but any out-or-range birds really need to be well studied.

In reply to Olive's note in *Babbler* 87 of a Firefinch caught in a spider web, there are quite a few records in *Honeyguide* and John Shaw records a Red-headed Weaver trapped at Mana Pools National Park (*Honeyguide* 40(4): 250). Since he gives a summary of some other records I'll simply quote the last paragraph of his short communication: "Vernon (1976, *Honeyguide*, 85:41) recorded a Red-faced Crombec *Sylvietta whytii* which had been caught in a spider's web and supplied a photograph of the desiccated body and Donnelly (1981, *Honeyguide*, 102: 34) recorded a Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis*, a Jameson's Firefinch *Lagonosticta rhodopareia* and a Fork-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis* being caught in a spider's web, of which only the drongo 'after a supreme effort managed to escape'." I once corresponded with someone about birds and webs and it is a worldwide phenomenon; he sent me this reference – 'Spider webs and windows as potentially important sources of hummingbirds' mortality.' There is a note in an issue of *British Birds* of a Goldcrest that was trapped in a spider's web in a Heligoland trap at Walney Bird Obs. in Cumbria, England. It was discovered by the warden and released unharmed. At least in Zimbabwe the main culprit is no doubt the golden orb spider which spins a very strong web.

Ian Riddell

Photographs of a giant spider eating a bird in an Australian garden have stunned wildlife experts. Queensland Museum identified the bird as a native finch called the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin. The head spider keeper at the Australian Reptile Park said the spider was a Golden Orb Weaver. He said the bird must have flown into the spider web and become stuck and it uses its venom to break down the bird for eating and what it leaves is a food parcel. Cases of the Golden Orb Weaver eating small birds were "well known but rare", but the spider would not have attacked until the bird weakened.

The Golden Orb Weaver spins a strong web high in protein because it depends on it to capture large insects for food.

Michael Irwin writes – ".....But what of a tall forest canopy from which an Eastern Bronzetailed Pigeon calls? I have decided to review its status in Zimbabwe and will need a little something in the next issue of *Babbler* to see what other information I can get. It has been quite well documented over the years in the pages of *Honeyguide*, but a lot clearly remains to be

said. There are in fact only two citations covering the situation at Nyanga and in the Honde Valley and the true picture is still blurred. We could even do with an update on the Vumba and its status there and we have heard nothing more about the status in the Chirinda Forest since Anthony Cizek wrote about it. And it is only when one looks at what has been said that one can see the gaps, so we need to clarify the position in each area of its occurrence. The whole point is of course, that this is a species which should be in decline and even 'endangered', when in fact with us it seems to be doing very well. And we need to know why?

The problem often is that people just say enough but leave out other aspects that are of importance if one is to really grasp what is happening. How have we benefited a bird that was once seemingly so rare, or is it just another aspect of climatic warming and good for some and not others? Anyway, that provides something to go on and the subject is actually a very exciting one. I have seen the bird on two occasions - in the Kakamega Forest in Kenya and on Gorongosa Mountain in Mozambique....”

Anyone with any information on this bird please e-mail Michael at hilarym@yoafrica.com, clearly marked for his attention or forward it to me rolly@zol.co.zw and I will ensure he gets it. Thanks. Ed

I write to tell you that in one of the *Telegraph* newspapers passed down by my mother-in-law, there was an article stating that the British did not know much about Common House-martins and where they go to, because of 300 000 ringed there has been one recovery. From Irwin *Birds of Zimbabwe*, a bird ringed in Finland (Siilastupa) was recovered in Zimbabwe (Tjolotjo) on 2/1/1974. Maybe we can find out a little more, especially if one has access to the internet. It will start people thinking and hopefully corresponding, on the House-martin – a very common bird seldom seen and recorded.

David Rockingham-Gill

The following excerpts were taken from the www.telegraph.co.uk website:

The moment a praying mantis caught a hummingbird has been caught on camera by a youngster from West Chester in Pennsylvania, US. The predatory insect dangled from a plant and used its spiny left foreleg to impale the helpless bird through the chest while leaving his right leg free. The mantis, which is not much bigger than its prey, then gorged itself before releasing the lifeless body of its victim. "This was an unfortunate experience for the hummer, but we are amazed to realise how fast, precise, and powerful the mantis must be to accomplish such a feat." Mantises are masters of camouflage, using protective colouring to blend in with the surrounding foliage to avoid other predators and stalk their victims without detection. They normally eat other insects but larger species can prey on small lizards, frogs, birds, snakes, and even rodents.

Conservationists have warned that more than half the species of wading bird numbers are in rapid decline across Europe, Africa and Asia. Water birds such as lapwings, plovers, godwits and curlews undertake long distance migrations from breeding grounds as far north as the Arctic to wintering areas as far away as South Africa. Many congregate in huge numbers in only a few sites, making those areas critical to the birds' survival, according to Wetlands International, which drew up the newly-launched atlas of key sites for waders. The organisation said that while species and their habitats are protected in Europe, there needs to be better protection of key wetlands along the migration routes of the birds, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. A string of wetlands on the western coast of Africa, along the Senegal and Niger rivers and around Lake Chad and in east Africa along the Rift Valley and coasts, is crucial for many migratory waders. But these wetlands, and others in Asia, are under huge pressure from irrigation schemes, conversion to farming and development. For example, the Tana River Delta in Kenya is under threat from conversion to sugar cane plantations and damage to the one site would hit resident birds and the survival of migratory birds whose ranges stretch from Siberia to southern Africa. In some places the birds themselves are extensively hunted. Wetlands International and its specialist study group, the International Wader Study Group, hope the recently launched Wader Atlas will provide the necessary information for conservation of wading species in Europe, Africa and west Asia.

Migrating birds returning to spring breeding grounds in the UK and Europe could be forced to fly up to 250 miles further as a result of climate change, scientists warned recently. Birds as small as 9g are among the half a billion birds which migrate from Africa to Europe and Asia, to find food and a suitable climate in which to breed, before returning south in the winter. The birds have to put on a large amount of weight to make the journey – with some doubling their weight before they set off. But with warming temperatures pushing their breeding habitat further north, some species face longer migrations by 2071 to 2100, researchers from Durham University, Cambridge University and the RSPB said. Migration is already a high-risk time of year because of the dangers of running out of energy or being at risk of predation, and adding miles to the journey could increase the threat to these species. Birds which have to cross the Sahara will face the furthest extensions to their journey – up to 250 miles – because suitable breeding grounds are projected to shift northwards while the areas in which they over-winter in Africa will not move. The researchers said that from 2017 to 2100, nine out of the 17 species they looked at are projected to face longer migrations, particularly birds that cross the Sahara desert. Their findings show that marathon migrations for some birds are set to become even longer journeys. European species such as the Subalpine Warbler, Orphean Warbler and the Barred Warbler would see some of the biggest increases. While the researchers concentrated on the potential impacts on warblers, this is indicative of what is likely to happen across the whole range of migratory species. It will be vital to protect natural habitats such as those in North Africa, which provide crucial stops en route for species to stock up on food, in order to help them survive the journey. These tiny birds make amazing journeys, pushing themselves to the limits of endurance and anything that makes those journeys longer or more dependent on rare and vulnerable pit-stop habitats used for refuelling on migration could mean the difference between life and death.

The number of bird species around the world threatened with extinction has risen this year to almost 200 species despite conservation efforts. The International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species found more than 10% of all bird species – a total of 1,227 – are in danger of being wiped out, including birds in Britain like the Red Kite and Eurasian Curlew. Of this, 192 bird species are listed as "critically endangered", which means they face an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild. The number of birds in the "critically endangered" category increased by nine this year while the number downgraded to just "endangered" was seven, meaning there are two more species in the more serious category. Among those added to the list is a colourful species of hummingbird only recently discovered in Colombia, the Gorgeted Puffleg. Its tiny fragment of habitat, just 1,200 hectares in the cloud forests of the Pinche mountain range, is being destroyed for coca farming. The Sidamo Lark of Ethiopia has been moved from endangered up to critically endangered, as it faces the danger of becoming mainland Africa's first bird extinction due to changes in land use. And on the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, which drew on evidence collected on the Galapagos, one of the islands' bird species, the Medium Tree-finch, has been listed as critically endangered for the first time. The species is threatened by an introduced parasitic fly and because it has such a small, restricted range, any threat makes the bird very vulnerable, according to BirdLife International. Simon Stuart, chairman of the IUCN's species survival commission, said "It is extremely worrying that the number of critically endangered birds on the IUCN Red List continues to increase despite successful conservation initiatives around the world."

Birds are better at singing in the rain – and the cold, claim scientists. Researchers at the National Evolutionary Synthesis Center in North Carolina have found that birds sing more sweetly in colder climates than their laid-back cousins in the tropics because they have to try harder to attract a mate. They believe that because survival in less comfortable weather is more critical than in the warmth, female birds become more choosy about the quality of their mates. That means males have to go to greater lengths to show their worth. The researchers found that species subject to more variable and unpredictable climates had more elaborate "song displays". When the climate is less certain, those songs probably become even more critical as females become choosier in their mate selection. "After all, the reproductive consequences of choosing a "less-than-the-best-available partner" can be quite severe when times are tough."

Tony Alegria says he has just returned from a houseboat trip to Kariba, where he caught a lot of fish but that “it is the first time I've been to Kariba and not seen a Tern! Not many animals. Water very high with only some 1.5 to 2 metres before the water gets into the trees!”

Any comments? Ed

And last but not least – more collective names of birds from **Tony Alegria**:

Cover of coots Wake of buzzards Sedge of bitterns Paddling of ducks
 Storytelling of crows Aerie of eagles Cote of doves Covey of grouse
 Colony of gulls Ascension of larks Gaggle of geese Scold of jays Tidings
of magpies Company of parrots Host of sparrows
Ostentation of peacocks Huddle of penguins Bevy of swans
Mustering of storks Flight of swallows
Murmuration of starlings Plump of wildfowl
Brood of turkeys (immature) Charm of finches or goldfinches
Wedge of geese (flying in a 'V')



NOTICEBOARD

Madrugada –

BLZ member, Roger Castelin’s cottage accommodation high up in the beautiful Bvumba Mountains, below the Bunga Forest and the Botanical Gardens, offers the perfect setting for several activities including holistic health treatments, walks in the Madrugada and Bunga forests and Gardens.

For birders, the following specials may be found in Madrugada Forest and surrounding area: Lesser Seedcracker, Red-faced Crimsonwing, Green Twinspot, Red-throated Twinspot, Red-backed Mannikin, Grey Waxbill, Yellow-bellied Waxbill, Western Olive Sunbird, Bronzy Sunbird, Black-fronted Bush-shrike and Gorgeous Bush-shrike, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher and Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher, Roberts’ Warbler, Chirinda Apalis, Swynnerton’s Robin and White-starred Robin, Red-capped Robin-chat, Stripe-cheeked Greenbul, Square-tailed Drongo, Blue Swallow and Red-rumped Swallow, Green-backed Woodpecker, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, White-eared Barbet, Scaly-throated Honeyguide, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill and Trumpeter Hornbill, Narina Trogon, Scarce Swift, Blue-spotted Wood-dove, Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon, Striped Flufftail and Buff-spotted Flufftail.

Contact Roger on 011-630698 or 011-206543

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.