

BABBLER

The Newsletter of -



BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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Messenger:	Vengai Dengu

SUBSCRIPTION RENEWAL – 2009/10

BirdLife Zimbabwe membership year runs from April to March, so please make sure you renew your membership now. Those who have not renewed by the end of September will unfortunately be taken off the list. If you are having difficulty with payment please contact any branch committee person, as we do not want to lose members.

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 the office for details.

Please note the next edition of *Babbler* will be delayed as I will be away, so please contact any branch committee member for details of activities. Ed.

Summary of content and results of deliberations of the 28th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING of BirdLife Zimbabwe held at Mukuvisi Education Centre on 30th May 2009

The meeting was attended by 27 members and 4 non-members. The retiring President, Ken Wilson, welcomed all and thanked the office staff, Council and membership for their support to him during his 3 years in the post. In his address he made the following points:

- He had firstly to unite the office and the membership, which had been achieved successfully with the help of CEO, Dr Chip Chirara.
- Secondly he had the task of consolidating work of previous years. Digitisation of field cards and nest records is going ahead. Michael Irwin had made two visits to Bulawayo to inspect skin and egg collections at the museum, which were found to be in good order.
- A new library is urgently needed to house the growing collections of valuable information and books, a great deal of which had been donated by birders leaving Zimbabwe.
- The purchase of Monavale Vlei must be completed without further delays.
- Dr. Chirara had served with distinction as Chairperson of CAP (Council of Africa Partnership) for 2007/8 and is still a member of the Africa Regional Committee until March 2010.
- The administration of the office had improved but was still unsatisfactory.
- 2009/10 would be a very difficult year financially, due to the fall in the value of the GBP (currency of funding) against the US\$.
- In March membership stood at approximately 400, 40% from Matabeleland.
- Carolyn Dennison was working on producing an up-to-date membership list – something the office had failed to do despite repeated requests – which would be regularly updated by the office in order to facilitate distribution of *Honeyguide* and *Babbler*.
- There is a critical shortage of active ringers and the branches should work on facilitating training of interested members.

He concluded by thanking Leslee Maasdorp for her sterling work as Education Programme Manager and saying thanks and goodbye to Dale Hanmer, who was leaving for the UK.

Director's Report: Dr Chirara reminded members that BirdLife Zimbabwe's mission is to conserve birds for their intrinsic value and for the enjoyment of future generations and he expressed satisfaction with the work in the 3 years since the last Strategic Plan (2006-2009) and said a workshop for the Strategic Plan for the next 3 years was held in March 2009.

Staffing had remained stable, except for the retirement of Mrs Maasdorp. The IBA Monitoring Project is the key project and one which members can contribute to and other projects undertaken were Mbazhe Pan Ecotourism, Avian 'Flu, Driefontein Wattled Crane and Murowa Mine Ecodiversity. He thanked fellow staff members and the Council for their support.

Treasurer's Report: Colin Rawson stressed the exceptional difficulty of 2008/09 with the reduction in the value of the GBP and the 3% lower funding from RSPB for 2009/10. Members' subscriptions would henceforth be handed to branches to use as they see fit after certain subtractions for posting journals etc.

Research and Conservation: Dr Neil Deacon said BLZ needs to find out what everyone is up to and who is up to what and that the important information that is at present in various places must be collated. Ongoing work includes IBA monitoring – 11 out of 20 sites have been visited – and threatened species under observation are Blue Swallows, Swynnerton's Robin and Wattled Crane. New field cards have been produced and historic data must be entered. Invasive species like the Common Myna must be monitored. Members have assisted in the bi-annual Waterfowl Counts and counting of migrating Kestrels. The Mashonaland branch are carrying out a raptor survey in the Umfurudzi Area and doing monthly surveys of Mukuvisi Woodland, Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary and Monavale Vlei. The Red Data List is now all but complete. Matabeleland branch have the Verreaux's Eagle and Dassie surveys, the Matopos Raptor Survey and monthly Aisleby counts. The Southern Ground-hornbill study continues and interest in birds is nurtured in schools. The Eastern Highlands Swynnerton's Robin Project is now complete and the Important Bird Areas will be allocated to branches, which should ensure increased member participation.

Education Report: Leslee Maasdorp, who retired from her post at the end of March but continues with the Murowa Project until September, reported continued expansion of the Bird

Awareness Programme in primary schools and great enthusiasm for Big Birding Days and quizzes in the clusters, fruitful partnership with SCOPE and an agroforestry project in Murowa.

Library Report: Dorothy Wakeling spoke of her vision of a new library/study room and the importance of obtaining funding for this project and for the completion of the *Honeyguide* index.

Publications: *Honeyguide* (Vol. 54: 1&2) was being distributed and the next edition will bring it up to date. The June/July *Babbler* was out on e-mail and hard copies were available at the AGM, thanks to excellent work by Carolyn Dennison, at present on holiday in the UK.

Branch Reports:

Mashonaland: Tony Alegria, the new chairperson, reported well-attended weekend outings and growing audiences at evening meetings.

Matabeleland: Cecilia Hubbard, the new chairperson, said that the branch has 102 members, almost all involved in one project or another and taking part in a wide variety of events. Once again they had successfully organized the Birding Big Day but hoped for even more teams in 2010. She thanked the office for funding some Matabeleland projects.

Eastern Highlands: Peter Gwidibira sent an e-mail reporting on a recent visit to Old Mutare and plans for outings to La Rochelle and Osborne Dam for the waterfowl count. There will be an educational event, sponsored by the Hildebrands, bringing together the Burma Valley and Vumba primary school clusters. Recent acquisitions to the archives from members leaving the country are in Peter's possession. The main problem for the branch is the lack of transport to assist the keen active members.

The New Council is constituted as follows:

President	Dorothy Wakeling
Vice President	Dr Neil Deacon
Treasurer	Vacant
Secretary	Ken Dixon
Research and Conservation	Dr Neil Deacon
Education	Geoff Lowe *
Council Members	Leslee Maasdorp David Rockingham-Gill

*Mrs L Maasdorp will take over the Education post in September and G Lowe will revert to Council member.

Editors:	Honeyguide:	Dr Brian Marshall and Julia Duprée
	Babbler:	Carolyn Dennison

The meeting was followed by a tribute and presentation to Leslee Maasdorp and a sad goodbye to Dale Hanmer, the doyenne of Zimbabwe's ringers and contributor of many articles to *Honeyguide* and other ornithological journals.

N.B. The full version of all reports can be obtained from the national office.

Ken Dixon

**NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT THERE WILL BE A SPECIAL GENERAL MEETING of
BIRDLIFE ZIMBABWE at
AVONDALE SPORTS CLUB on BRIGHTON ROAD BETWEEN 2ND STREET EXTENSION
and UPPER EAST ROAD
at 5.30 p.m. for 6.00 p.m. on THURSDAY 20 AUGUST 2009**

AGENDA: To conclude business arising from the AGM of 30 May 2009
To elect the Honorary Treasurer to BirdLife Zimbabwe Council.

Roger Castelin has agreed to stand as Honorary Treasurer. However, although the Executive Committee has given its approval, in terms of the Constitution, a formal election must take place.

(Any further nominations and proxy votes to reach Sabina Mapika in the BLZ office (birds@zol.co.zw), by 6 August 2009)

This election will be held at the monthly evening meeting of the Mashonaland Branch.

This notification was sent to members on 22 July 2009.

A MESSAGE TO BIRDLIFE ZIMBABWE MEMBERS FROM YOUR INCOMING PRESIDENT

My appreciation is extended to the Members for their support in my election as President of BirdLife Zimbabwe. Being President of this prestigious organization is an honour, as well as a daunting but exciting prospect. The incoming committed, influential and knowledgeable Council will ensure we make progress in achieving the objectives of the organization. It is recognized that BLZ has survived enormous financial constraints caused by the socio-political conditions that have prevailed in Zimbabwe in recent times. Well done. In particular, special thanks go to Ken Wilson, our outgoing President, who has wisely and sensitively steered BLZ through troubled times to the more settled organization it is today.

Recent Background: Success combined with a Crisis of Expectations

Ten years of the BirdLife International / BLZ partnership has shown positive aspects such as networking BLZ to the bird conservation world, provision of core funding by BLI partner, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to manage the national office, and access to donors for project funding and provision of expertise. Donors have favoured the conservation of threatened habitats and the birds dependent on them, through working with communities. The successful Education Programme has targeted schools within these areas.

However, this approach has diminished focus on the membership and its numerous activities and outputs – a foundation stone of BLZ. An expectation that the national office would source funding to carry out projects of a more ornithological nature, as well as provide a strong administrative base, has created an ongoing crisis, as very often these expectations have not been met. Looking more closely though, many of the Matabeleland Branch long term projects, and more recently a Mashonaland project, do receive a small amount of funding through Secretariat connections, and *Honeyguide* is partially funded by RSPB.

Current Status of the Organization

- The Secretariat is working on only one major funded project – the Important Bird Area (IBA) Project – which focuses on training National Parks personnel in the protection and management of specific IBA habitats within Parks. Other long term projects have run their course, though proposals will be sent out to source further funding. Two smaller funded projects end in early 2010 – the Mbazhe and Driefontein Projects.
- Donors prefer to fund health, food and poverty issues. Environmental funding is not easy to find.
- Core funding may be reduced.
- Administrative and management functions need attention.
- The Membership is very active with weekly outings, monthly meetings and long term projects. However, poor attendance at the May 2009 AGM may be attributed to members not receiving reminders due to communication difficulties.
- To date (17/7/09) only 191 members are paid up for 2009/10, out of 400 on the list.
- Digitized access to the extensive records that have been accumulated over the past 50 years still needs to be made available. These records should form the ornithological baseline of decision-making relating to the conservation of our bird species and their habitats as well as influence the direction in which BLZ is heading with its objectives and projects: IBA, Red Data Book, Keep Common Birds Common, Ringing, a new Atlas project, Education and Awareness and many more.
- *Honeyguide* and *Babbler* are flagship publications.
- The Library requires expanded accommodation.

Moving Forward

The platform on which to address the above-mentioned issues and move forward is already in place: the March 2009 Strategic Planning Workshop (SPW), from which a verbatim report is available. The Workshop has given the Membership, as well as the Secretariat, the opportunity to influence the direction of BLZ over the next five years. The Strategic Plan framework satisfies the requirements of both BLZ and the core funding donor, RSPB. The Director has just completed the Annual Workplan and the 5-year Strategic Plan based on the outcome of the SPW. Interested members are encouraged to review and comment on these documents as soon as possible. They are available through the Council Secretary or the Director. This will assist the membership in claiming back its ornithological confidence in a constructive manner and ensure the appropriate plan of action for the Secretariat.

2010 is the International Year of Biodiversity. BLZ sits on the Ministry of Environment IYB Steering Committee. As BLZ is biodiversity-based in all its activities, its profile will be enhanced through its involvement in this awareness campaign.

BLZ is renowned for the expertise within its membership. This must be tapped in order to help to focus its objectives and activities. Fundraising, which is essential to achieve our goals, should not be restricted to the office only – we as members are permitted to seek funding opportunities for membership-driven projects, but with the knowledge and support of the national office and utilizing its proposal-writing expertise and sound administration.

If we work together with the same values, good communication and management techniques, much can be achieved. I look forward to an interesting and successful time working for BirdLife Zimbabwe's best interests together with Council, the Members and the Secretariat, which includes RSPB.

Dorothy Wakeling – July 2009

Summary of tribute to Leslee Maasdorp to mark her retirement:

Katie Mhlanga, head of GEF (General Environment Facility of UNDP) called Leslee "The Royalty of the Environment Scene".

Leslee has retired after many years imparting her knowledge to many people. Always the top student at school, Leslee obtained a Botany degree at the University of Rhodesia, followed by a PGCE (Postgrad. Certificate of Education). She spent 25 years teaching at Prince Edward School in Harare, and was well known for her incredible energy and adventurous field trips. She left to become education officer at the Museum – again a successful undertaking. She then set up the RIFA Hunters' Association Camp with her husband Hugh in the early '90s, where she ran and taught the education programmes.

Leslee got involved with birds when her daughter Dorothy became interested and in 1998, worked voluntarily to set up the BirdLife Zimbabwe Education Programme with Pat Saunders, Geoff Lowe and Patrick Smet. She wrote *Enjoy the Birds of Zimbabwe* with their help. Leslee established and directed the Bird Awareness Programme (BAP), gradually involving large numbers of schools, teachers and teachers' colleges, mainly in areas where there was a threat to certain species. She regularly visited areas such as Chitungwiza, Vumba, Honde Valley and Chimanimani setting up bird groups, herb gardens etc and organising cluster activities with talks about local endangered birds, quizzes, poster competitions etc. and she was always warmly welcomed at all the schools. Last September she was invited to present a paper at the BirdLife World Conservation Conference in Argentina.

Leslee is very thorough and persistent and has spent hours organising educational activities. Although the education department of BLZ has been poorly funded, she has managed to scrape bits together from everywhere and put up with that awful old vehicle for years. Leslee officially retired at the end of March but will run the Murowa Project until the end of September, 2009. Respected by all, her dedication and enthusiasm will be greatly missed. Although she has not really been replaced, Rueben Njolomole will carry on with some of the work, but unfortunately there is no funding forthcoming.

Ken Dixon

FIELD CARDS

Progress is being made towards sorting out the archiving and processing of field cards. There are a multitude of field card formats in use at the moment and there are still considerable stocks of printed field cards in at least 2 different formats. In addition there are also various electronic field cards. There are so many versions that it is difficult to accurately separate them so we all know which one is which.

Basically the purpose of any field card is to aid and cue the collection of field observations. So provided a field card contains the following information:

- the date of that outing;
- the place name where the outing took place;
- the quarter degree squares covered in the outing;
- the names of the observers and contact details of at least one of them;
- all the species that you have seen on an outing;
- species reference numbers, e.g. Robert's numbers;

it is a valid field card. Any additional information that you provide, such as a brief description of the habitat where the outing took place and the numbers of each species seen, is also very useful. The main difference between the various field cards is the species names. If you are using a field card with old names, it does not mean the information cannot be used. It will be processed into the most recent species name format anyway. Electronic field cards are now perhaps a more convenient format to submit field observations, but not a necessity if you don't like them. Ian Riddell has developed a recent version of a field card that is in a readily printable format. This is being distributed through the BLZ office. However, the format is such that it is a little difficult to fill in on screen. I am sure this can be sorted out quite easily.

Many members want to know what has happened with their field observations. Ultimately they will be compiled and analyzed in order to answer specific questions. The results of these analyses will be published and in time also added to the Worldbirds.org website. Starting immediately you will also receive acknowledgement of receipt of any field card submitted. The nuts and bolts of this system have been compiled by the office for distribution to the members. As for historical field cards, efforts are underway to locate them all and input them onto a database. At present this is simply a spreadsheet, but will be put together so that the pertinent information can be extracted. The design of a database is related to questions being asked. We still need to decide what questions are to be answered. As field cards are being located and archived for processing it is evident that there are chronological gaps. A report on what is where is being put together. We request that if you have any field cards (e.g. nest record cards, migration records, ringing data forms, special species survey forms etc) stored in your possession please send copies or originals to the BLZ office so that they may be included in this collation and archiving exercise.

Field observations are fundamental to our understanding of bird populations and species distribution. As we all know these are ever changing variables that need to be followed in order to effectively conserve bird life. Please keep submitting your observations!

Neil Deacon

Letter to the *Babbler* – from **Anthony Cizek**:

I am currently trying to map the distribution of miombo (*Brachystegia/ Julbernardia* formations) across southern Africa towards a general aim of better understanding the distribution of the miombo specialist avifauna. While the *Flora Zambesiaca* map (Wild and Barbosa 1968) shows where miombo is dominant over landscapes, there are patches which are obviously too small to map at such broad scales. These patches are important because many will be able to support small, fragmented populations of some of the miombo specialists. The distribution of the Mashona/ Southern Hyliota is of particular interest because it was discovered in the early 2000s in the patch of miombo at Gundane Village in the eastern Soutpansberg, northern South Africa. The hyliota is known to occur in Zimbabwe only in well-developed miombo, and it probably breeds in northern SA, but the patch is very small (c.20ha) and can only support a few pairs of hyliotas, which is remarkable, because it means that this tiny population has managed to hang in for a considerable time – since the last palaeohistorical contraction of the Miombo Region – or it is supported by immigration. The other alternative is that there is more habitat for it in northern SA – either more (unknown) patches of miombo, or it is able to use other non-miombo vegetation, but which function like miombo. It is known to move into riverine acacia in the Southeast Lowveld during the dry season, but these are probably only short-distance movements (of birds from adjacent patches of miombo). The nearest known birds to Gundane occur in *B. glaucescens* on Mutandahwe (375m asl) in the Save Valley just north of the boundary to Gonarezhou NP (where MPSI found them), some 200km away. It is unlikely that birds make it to Gundane from n. Gonarezhou NP, but there might be other, unknown (sub)-populations between northern Gonarezhou and Gundane. As MPSI notes – this region is poorly-known ornithologically relative to other parts of the country. The distribution of *B. glaucescens* is of particular interest since it can occur on even quite small kopjies in hot, low-lying areas, especially in the Southeast Lowveld where these intercept the moist, south-easterly airflow. Therefore its distribution on the granite inselberg and kopjie landscapes south of the watershed – from the Matobo Hills to Bikita and northwards – is important, but incompletely known. (A team of German botanists surveyed Zimbabwe's granite inselberg ranges but, although they showed the interesting diversity of xerophytes which penetrate deep into the moister Mashonaland Plateau, frustratingly, they didn't survey woody veg. so the point where *B. glaucescens* "drops out" in the southwest still needs documenting accurately.)

Therefore, I am writing to ask if there is anyone who knows of stands/ colonies – even small ones – of *B. glaucescens* away from the Miombo Region (i.e. away from the central plateau). In particular, (i) does anyone know of its occurrence in the Gwaranyemba CLs west of Gwanda? Another potentially important area is (ii) the Mateke Hills. A Rhodesian Schools Exploration Society survey of this area did not find it, but it is a relatively large area and a colony of *B. glaucescens* could have been overlooked. Have any members visited these areas and botanised/ birded there? If members know of any colonies in other areas away from the plateau, I would be grateful to hear of them.

During the course of this enquiry – which requires collating and synthesizing vegetation surveys across Zimbabwe, northern Botswana and Mozambique – I have learned that much of the early vegetation survey work was published in the Rhodesian Agricultural Journal and some of this vegetation mapping is the only work that exists for large areas of the country. I have had difficulty sourcing this journal as it is not widely available even in South Africa and having read through a selection of the issues realised fully what an important resource this is. So I am also writing to ask if there are any members who have or know of anyone who has a set of the RAJ which they are looking to off-load. I cannot say how the libraries and other collections in Zimbabwe's research institutions are faring, but there are worrying signs of a loss in integrity; e.g. the loss of the only known copies of some data. This data is crucial for understanding fully the patterns of distribution of Zimbabwe's biodiversity which is fundamental to the correct management of its natural heritage. There is a real need for a "stock-take", which will be a mammoth task and until this can be done, there is a need for consolidating data into collections that can be looked after.

anthonycizek@mac.com

This has already been sent to *Tree Life* (the Tree Society newsletter) – but BLZ members might also have information/suggestions. Ed

FORTHCOMING ACTIVITIES

Please diarise these events now, as it is easy to forget later on. Those members who have not signed an indemnity/membership form please remember to do so at any outing, where a committee member will have these with them. Subscriptions can also be given to a committee member at any activity, but please ensure you fill in a form so we know who has paid and can check your details!

MASHONALAND BRANCH

Please contact a committee member if you need transport to any of our outings. Beginners are welcome – don't worry if you do not have a pair of binos – there is usually an extra pair at most outings.

Mashonaland Branch Annual Long Weekends

This year we have **three** long weekends planned!

The first of which will be during August – Friday 21st to Tuesday 25th. The owners of Casa Msika, situated at the northern end of Lake Chicamba in Mozambique, have asked us to carry out a bird count on their site – some 750ha – and also at a 3000ha property some 100km further on. Discounted rates of US\$12.00 per person per night apply. There are no self-catering facilities, thus birders will have to use the restaurant on site at a cost of some US\$15-20.00 per day. Presently there are two chalets, with three single beds each, booked for us, but if demand exceeds 6, additional accommodation is available.

The second trip is to RIFA proposed from Thursday 1st to Sunday 4th October 2009. Half the camp has been booked at a cost of US\$50 per night. The cost per person therefore depends on the number in the party – 16 maximum. This is a self-catering trip.

It is proposed we go to Seldomseen in the Bvumba, leaving Harare Friday 16th October and returning Monday 19th October 2009. The accommodation is in cottages of various sizes and is self-catering. The cost is US\$20 per person per night, although a small discount may apply i.e. a total of \$60 maximum. There is room for up to 20 people. Please contact Tony Alegria or Dave Dalziel to express your interest in any of the above outings. Contact details are on the first page of the *Babbler*! We obviously need to deal with the Casa Msika trip a.s.a.p.

N.B. these outings are open to all BLZ members.

Tony Alegria

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 20 August: Bird Migration

This should be an interesting talk by David Rockingham-Gill, as migration is affected by climate change, hunting and loss of sites along the route due to pressure from man, and other issues.

Thursday 17 September: A Ringing Career

Dave Dalziel will be recounting his ringing experiences – some rewarding, some disappointing, but always interesting – and hopes to attract new people to be trained in this absorbing activity.

Note change of time to 7.00 a.m. for August and September

Saturday 15 August – 7.00 a.m.: Botanic Gardens

Visit these Botanical Gardens where a lot is happening at this time of year. Meet at CABS Northridge Park – Northend Close. *There is no charge.*

Saturday 19 September – 7.00 a.m.: Greystone Park Nature Reserve

This is an excellent venue and worth the effort. Hopefully it will be warmer than the last time. Bring your chairs and refreshments for the “bird count” afterwards.

Sunday 2 August and 6 September – 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 at the gate to let cars in and out – please take into account the value of your vehicle!

Sunday 9 August and 13 September – 7.00 a.m.: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary

Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West for this pleasant venue and a chance to get out of town. Anyone wanting a lift please contact a Committee member. Remember to bring chairs and refreshments.

Sunday 16 August and 20 September – 7:00 a.m.: Monavale Vlei Walk

Meet on the BS Leon side of Fenella Drive, for a walk with guides who know the area well. It will be interesting to see what changes have occurred following an unplanned burn!

Sunday 30 August – 7.00 a.m.: Mbizi Game Park

Meet at the Mukuvisi Woodlands main car park where vehicles can be safely left and shared. There is no gate charge at Mbizi!

Sunday 27 September – 6.30 a.m.: Goshu Park, Marondera

Meet at 6.30 for this out-of-town trip at the Mukuvisi Woodlands main car park, where vehicles can be safely left and shared. As usual bring chairs and refreshments to this very pleasant venue and the possibility of seeing Red-faced Crombec.

MATABELELAND BRANCH

DIARY DATES – Note the Changes

26 July: Waterfowl Census – Aisleby. Morning. Ring Julia on 246269.

1 August: Waterfowl Census – SAST. Morning. Ring Julia on 246269.

15 & 16 August: Raptor Identification Course.

Part 2 of a 3-part course conducted by Peter Mundy. **POSTPONED.** Ring Helen on 242285(h).

22 August: Outing to Lakeside, Kabot Drive.

A walk in this lovely birdy area, close to town. Ring Cecilia on 287692(w) or 285666(h).

13 September: September Suburban Surprise!

A morning in and around Bulawayo, finishing with a bring-your-own picnic lunch. Ring Judy on 242943(h) or 67085(w) (during August ring Julia 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.

Eastern Districts – Monthly outings are on the last Sunday of the month and the departure point is Mutare Museum at 7.30 a.m. Spare binoculars and books are available for 2 people.

We encourage members with a vehicle to attend as we are currently using bicycles. Fuel can be provided. Contact Peter Gwidibira 011-377076 pgwidibira@mutare.matanuska.co.zw
Other Areas – Those members in other areas – 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

REPORTS

NATIONAL

The following is a summary of the objectives for the BirdLife Zimbabwe themes determined by the participants of the Strategic Planning Workshop held in March, 2009. Interested members are encouraged to review and comment on these documents. Copies of the full reports are available through the Council Secretary or the Director.

SPECIES: Conservation status of birds and their habitats improved with emphasis on key species: Revival of bird ringing • Introduction of tagging/sat tracking of at least of SPP • Garden bird surveys • Action Plan for invasive bird species • Intensive and accurate monitoring (migrants)

Collection, analysis, publishing and dissemination of data: Field cards made available country wide • Publication on existing data • Links with world groups on species of interest • Revival of atlasing • Checklists for IBAs and National Tested Seeds; Red Data list • Education make use of media • Avi ecotourism birding routes • Bird identification Courses

Climate change adaptation measures incorporated into national conservation planning: Climate change adaptation enhanced

Species Relevant policy, legislation enforcement underway to maintain our national list: CITES monitoring for birds • Preservation of our species and habitats

HABITATS: Identify and Assess Key Priority Habitats: Maintain ecosystems and function and services • Priority IBAs/Habitats • Criteria for assessment of habitats • Extension of pristine miombo woodland • Distribution of map of different habitats • Assessment of new impoundments

Habitat Conservation: Population in urban environments • Wetlands in communal lands • Priority list of Wetlands for waterfowl counts • Control of invasive species in grassland habitats • Local awareness of habitat threats • Mining activities river banks • Subject plan to City Urban Planning for all Harare’s wetlands • Reduction of incidence of fire • Ecological restoration (reforestation) • Protection of pristine woodlands.

Develop National Policy for Habitats: Ratification of Ramsar • Grasslands awareness protection • Involvement in EIA’s • Influence sectoral policy (agriculture, forestry etc)

PEOPLE: Improvement and enforcement of law: • Improved enforcement of laws and regulations dealing with biodiversity conservation • Improve wildlife laws • Improve natural resources laws

To strengthen education, raise awareness and improve partnerships to enlarge the constituency of bird conservation: Bird issues integrated into school curricula • Better relationship between office and members • Increased membership including a majority of indigenous members • Enhanced partnerships • Engagement of younger generation • Changed attitude of people towards bird conservation • Improved networking • Capacity built within government and parastatals • Increased appreciation of birds

Livelihood enhancement in communities: Livelihood improvement in communities • Increased involvement of communities

Improve networking and advocacy at Regional, National and International levels to enhance bird conservation in Zimbabwe: Increased contribution to regional BLI programmes • BLI objectives versus BLZ objectives • Increased input to conventions EMA • Improved communication at National, Regional and International levels

For BLZ to be an efficient and effective organisation: Capacity building for BLZ membership and staff • Improvement of facilities for research and learning – library office space • Project and Unrestricted funding secured • Enhanced institutional capacity of BLZ • Improve capacity of BLZ to improve resources.

SITES: Site Conservation to promote public participation in Site Conservation: Develop education awareness tools • Build partnerships with stakeholders • Community Involvement • Eco-tourism selected sites • Establish socio-economic value of sites

Effective Monitoring of Sites: Tools for monitoring of remote/big IBAs • Effective monitoring of sites • Capacity of site monitors built • Create response models to change • Identify new sites • Create monitoring

database • Site monitoring information available to international treaties e.g. CBD • Delist existing sites based on IBA criteria

Effective Governance of Sites: Understand the definition of site • Criteria for selection of important sites to be reviewed • Define the site boundary • Management plans in place • Legal protection of Sites • Policy on site protection achieved • Buffer zones

MASHONALAND

Hippo Pools – 20-22 March 2009

Weather-wise it rained half the time we were at Hippo Pools, so unfortunately we did not get to do much birding. The river was in flood, as most of the farms these days are not irrigating as much as they used to and the island and sand bank in front of the camp was under water, although the vegetation was not submerged. The weir was more than a ripple, but certainly less than the feature it usually is and downstream of it the water was bank to bank, instead of the much narrower channel usually found below the wall.

Water birds were obviously scarce under these conditions – most recorded were flying overhead. No waders on the river, although a Grey-headed Gull was foraging around the weir. A Squacco Heron was also flushed from the submerged vegetation. An Osprey was seen flying down the river – surely he must be headed north soon.

The Narina Trogons were calling around the swing bridge, as were the Red-throated Twinspots. Fantastic views were had of Half-collared Kingfisher perched by the “swimming pool” below the dam wall where the hide is. There was basically no water flowing in the river and this surprised me as I know this species to prefer fast-flowing larger rivers. It was later seen along the channel by the bridge and come to think of it I’m not surprised as the main channel was un-fishable under flood for a little bird like this.

If anybody has a complete list of birds for Hippo Pools I would appreciate a copy, as the one supplied is riddled with mistakes and surely out of date. I had good views of a Collared Sunbird which is not on the list, although it should occur there being a bird of the Zambezi Valley system. Another bird not on the list and also part of this system is the Western Banded Snake-eagle, which was not seen this time, but I did record it this time last year sitting atop the baobab tree straight over the river from the camp. Three species of cuckoo were seen. Good views of both Common Cuckoos and African Cuckoos perched with the undertail suitably in view, allowing good identification. The third species, on our last foray before we left, was seen perched in a tree in the water at the small dam behind camp, up the little gorge where the hide is. The minute I saw it I realised we were on to something special. A clear rufous back and rump belonging to the jizz of a cuckoo was perched in fairly clear view, but the front was not visible. Keeping two spotters in the hide, I crept round the back of the dam wall, circled through the trees for cover and came in head-on to get a good look. Yes, it was clearly a cuckoo, with its drooping sickle wings hanging on its side, not too fazed about life as it had yet to get cautious of me. It had a much paler underside – almost cream coloured, clearly barred, as were its wings, head and tail. A distinct yellow eye ring and base to the bill, with bright yellow legs were the only other notable features. Immediately I suspected Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo. Its tail was not disproportionately long as shown in my old copy of Newman’s, but the other references don’t show such a long tail. The habitat is open, hilly, mixed woodland – very green from the plentiful rains, mature and in good condition. Nearby is thick, tall, well-developed riverine woodland, almost forest-like, as those who have been to Hippo Pools know. To complicate things though, a rare hepatic morph of the female Common Cuckoo occurs – very similar to a Barred Long-tailed Cuckoo. Possibly somebody out there could shed some light on records for this area and whether they know if the rump and back of either of these species is barred or not. The bird in question was clearly not barred in these regions, being a rich chestnut/rufous colour. As mentioned, I had recorded Common Cuckoo in the area the day before, obviously from the normal morph. I have a photograph, though not fantastic, if any expert would like to have a look! Not counting the above-mentioned suspect we recorded 96 species altogether.

Go to 20 Le Roux Drive, Hillside to book (04-747929) or wildernessafrica@zol.co.zw . National parks fees were \$2pp and \$3 per car. To end, all I can say, and many of us know it, Hippo Pools is a fantastic birding venue close to Harare, and a personal thank you to Ian Jarvis for hanging on these last several years to keep the place going.

Damian Newmarch 011-442096 dnewmarch@zol.co.zw

Apologies to Damian for inadvertently leaving this out of the last *Babbler*. Many of us would be interested in reader's comments – please let me know as well. Ed

Bushman's Rock – 25 May

There was a good turn out of eager birders for the trip to Bushman's Rock, a new venue. We were met by Rick Passaportis, the owner of Bushman's Rock and he gave us some history of the area and the plans they have for the estate. This is a beautiful place, probably the most scenic place we have visited over the last few years. A picturesque dam is surrounded by miombo woodland and overlooked by magnificent kopjies. We left the cars in the guest area and split into two groups. There was plenty of sign of game like wildebeest, zebra and giraffe but the birds were in hiding. We meandered along the base of the kopjies and eventually down toward the dam. Some people were lucky enough to find bird parties and Black Cuckooshrike, White-breasted Cuckooshrike, Southern Hyliota, Southern Black Tit and Miombo Tit were all seen. At one stage Mocking Cliff-chat and Red-winged Starling were seen high above us on the rocks and the African Fish-eagle could be heard below at the dam.

We were kindly given permission to have a braai round the guest pool. About half the people stayed to eat while the others left after doing 'the list'. Birding did not stop while we ate and garden birds like Kurrichane Thrush and Crested Barbets kept us entertained. After lunch three of us went back down to the dam in front of the house and saw, among others, African Black Duck, Red-headed Weaver and White-breasted Cormorant.

A wonderful day at a beautiful estate! 79 birds were seen and it may be an idea to visit during summer where many more birds could be expected. We thank the Passaportis family for allowing us to visit.

David Dalziel

NGOMAKURIRA – June 2009

On a recent Saturday a couple of us went out to Ngomakurira to see if the Black Stork nest was active and to have a look at the other birds in the area. The good news is that the nest appears to be active with two adults seen on the nest. It is hard to see into this nest but a visit in a few weeks time will be worthwhile as there should be large chicks that we may be able to see from below. Interesting birds were seen on the hill, including Striped Pipit, Rock Martin, Speckled Pigeons and a good number of Cape Buntings. On this visit there were no Cinnamon-breasted Buntings to be found.

The bad news is that there is an incredible amount of tree cutting taking place. The river that runs from the paintings and was well wooded has been cleared of trees to the one side of the crossing. We watched eleven people with huge piles of wood come down from the woodland towards the top of the kopjie. When I got back to the bottom I asked the policewoman to go and have a look at what was happening. Unfortunately they are only too happy to accept US\$ from visitors but there is no action being taken about the tree felling or damage to the paintings.

Dave Dalziel

Flying High: Birds in the Rock Art of Zimbabwe – 18 June

Paul Hubbard began by stating that it is impossible to know what inspired the artists to create Rock Paintings and no-one really knows the meaning of rock art – it was certainly not 'Art for art's sake'. Bushman paintings in southern Africa are very old – up to 13,000 years. The oldest paintings in Zimbabwe in the Bambata caves are about 8,500, those in Matabeleland 1,500 years old and in Mashonaland less than that. Pigment was made from ochre – crushed, mixed and applied with quills, feathers etc.

From 1890 to 1970 students tried to identify species and held that birds painted had usefulness to man – eggs, feathers, meat. In the 1980s ideas changed and it was decided that religion was the motivation. Through the Trance Dance the shamans (medicine men) were able to pass into the spiritual world. They had the sensation of flight and weightlessness, sprouting feathers and becoming birds.

Paul then presented 3 case studies; Swallows and Swifts, Ostriches and the Shoebill, using examples mostly from the Matopos Caves.

Swallows and Swifts: impressed probably because they flew into and out of caves in large numbers like messengers from the spirit world and even nested on the walls.

Ostrich: common in rock art and important, its deep voice could scare the lion, its egg shells were used as currency, made water and ochre containers and beads and could cure coughs when burned.

Whalehead Storks (maybe Shoebills): may be a trance picture with its huge head and beard painted with 1000's of red dots and the extra 'knees' may be leg-rattles as worn by those performing the trance dance.

Other birds depicted are mainly game – guineafowl, duck, geese, storks (associated with the coming of the rains), a Malachite Kingfisher and Ground-hornbill.

This was a great presentation giving an insight into many facets of Rock Painting. I will never again view rock paintings in the same light. I will definitely be looking for birds and transitions from man to bird.

If anyone comes across any man to bird transition rock paintings, he/she should e-mail Paul on: "Paul Hubbard" hubcapzw@googlemail.com

Tony Alegria

Marlborough Vlei – 20 June

We normally visit the vlei a bit later in the year and we were reminded why when we arrived! There was still a lot of water around and the little river still had plenty. Fortunately some advice from a passer by enabled us to cross without too much problem and we ambled off down the vlei. Over the last few years we have noticed good numbers of Black-chested Snake-eagles in this area at this time of year. At one stage we could see 3 hovering and have had up to 7 visible at any one time in previous years. A Black Sparrowhawk was noticed crossing the vlei by some lucky people, while the rest of us wrestled with identifying LBJs in non-breeding dress. With the swamp area being very swampy with the good rains and leaking sewerage ponds, a bit of a sanctuary has arisen. There were Red-billed Teals and Hottentot Teals flying around and African Sacred Ibis were also seen flying in and out of the flooded area. Common Moorhen, Black Crakes and various warblers like Lesser Swamp-warbler and Little Rush-warblers were heard in the reeds.

On the way back to the cars a Marsh Owl was flushed. In some years there are large numbers of Marsh Owls in this vlei but we were pleased to see one and we all had great views. At the cars, waiting for one of the domestic pigeons to get careless, was a Gabar Goshawk.

An enjoyable, short walk but definitely an area to be visited during the rains for the 'specials' or a month or two later when it is a little drier and easier to cross the stream.

David Dalziel

EWANRIGG BOTANICAL GARDENS – 28 June

Despite the midwinter cold, 11 of us assembled at one of the Ewanrigg picnic spots for our annual visit. We believed that the aloes and the Kenya Coffee Shade had flowered early this year but looked forward to a pleasant stroll through the grounds with no great expectations.

The *Babbler* editor, fresh from grandmothering and shivering in the UK, and her husband had arrived a bit earlier and already had an impressive list before we started. They'd seen Black-shouldered Kite, Grey-rumped Swallow and Wire-tailed Swallow and even 2 Meyer's Parrot eating the fruits of the *Combretum molle*.

Our route led us from sunny patch to sunny patch towards the Coffee Shade but this yielded mostly Miombo Blue-eared Starling and southern Masked-weavers and Red-headed Weavers. Natal Francolin was briefly heard, Tropical Boubou and a White-browed Robin-chat. Much work has been done to make the gardens more attractive and ease of access for visitors and we made our way gradually up to the 'Water' (sadly not a lot of it around) and Herb gardens. The Black-headed Oriole which reportedly feeds on flowering aloes was calling repeatedly. White-browed Robin-chat sang and Kurrichane Thrush moved through the woodland. High above, Val spotted 2 Black-chested Snake-eagle, magnificent against the blue sky. A bit later the same group saw the creamy silhouette of a Dark Chanting-goshawk and a Little Sparrowhawk.

Eventually we came to the aloe section to search for the sunbirds, the target family of the trip and some had high expectations of seeing the Western Violet-backed Sunbird. Unfortunately the bird was not seen, although there were plenty of Blue Waxbill, Red-billed Firefinch and its parasite, the Steel-blue Widowfinch, but all too few sunbirds. The White-bellied Sunbird was the most common, along with Miombo Double-collared Sunbird and Variable Sunbird. Later, at the count, we discovered that Copper Sunbird, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and Amethyst Sunbird had also been spotted, but not on aloes. As we returned to the picnic area for the count we met

more large flocks of Bronze Mannikin, 40-50 strong, which contained a few Red-backed Mannikins and many Red-billed Quelea all pecking feverishly in the grass-cuttings. By now it was very warm and we wondered where the winter had disappeared to. Our total of 69 species was respectable but even so we left Richard searching for number 70, which turned out to be an African Stonechat.

Ken Dixon

And again....one month later. Interesting to note some changes. Ed

EWANRIGG BOTANICAL GARDENS – 18 July

Eight keen birders met at CABS to share transport for this Saturday outing to Ewanrigg. The entry fee was \$3 per person and \$3 for the car. On Sunday (the next day!) entry was \$2?! The gardens have been tidied up considerably since my last visit and people were hard at work removing some lantana (that used to be good for birds!).

The sightings of the day were probably the two Black Storks that Innes spotted as he turned off the main Harare-Shamva road onto the Ewanrigg road. Once we had all met we split up into two groups to see what we could find. African Green-pigeons were calling and sitting on top of a tree near the gate so most people had good views of this beautiful bird. The Kenya Coffee tree was in flower so one group headed in that direction. There were good numbers of sunbirds and it is one of the best places to find Western Violet-backed Sunbird at this time of year. After a lot of careful looking we managed to find a single female. In all we found seven species of sunbird.

Speckled Mousebird were common but there were no Red-faced Mousebird to be found. I wonder if the Speckled is always the more common of the two at Ewanrigg? Black Cuckooshrike was seen by one group. This is a bird that tends to leave the Harare area in winter but does it remain at Ewanrigg all year? A small flock of Magpie Mannikin was seen near a large flock of Bronze Mannikin and two young Orange-winged Pytilia were with a small flock of Red-billed Firefinch. The adult Orange-winged Pytilia were in a nearby bush but very shy.

Other interesting birds noted during the walk were African Golden Oriole, Ashy Flycatcher and Grey-headed Bush-shrike.

A very pleasant morning ended with a count of 67 birds!

David Dalziel

Birds and Insects – 16 July

Avondale Bowling Club was well-filled for this instructive, fascinating and amusing presentation from our leading entomologist and ex-President.

As we are all only too well aware, there are more insects around in our country than there were Zimdollars last year – 29 Orders in fact; some primitive like booklice and some advanced like bees, ants, flies and beetles. A typical insect has head, thorax and abdomen and grows from egg to adult without passing through those awkward child and adolescent phases.

There are insectivorous birds in all families but few entirely so. They hunt insects in the air (swallows and swifts), from a perch (drongos), by leaf gleaning (willow warbler), by listening on the ground (thrushes and larks), wood searching and boring (woodpeckers), and by straining water (flamingos). Different swallows and swifts hunt aerial plankton at different heights, picking on the weakest and avoiding those with stings. The swift collects aphids and using saliva, makes a ball of them, stores it and regurgitates it for its young. Swallows feed on larger prey.

Africa is host to a superabundance of insects. Just think of the locusts which Marabou Stork, White Stork and Abdim's storks feed on, the army worm, termites and ant alates, mopane worms, harvester termites and lawn caterpillars. What is more, the insects can defend themselves in various ways; some are just too big to swallow, some have hard skeletons, others use camouflage (stick insect), or warning colours. Grasshoppers have spines on their legs, other species emit foul smells, use stings or bites or even toxins (Monarch butterfly). But the doyen of defenders is the Bombardier Beetle which has an exploding backside, deafening and reeking of cordite!!

Thanks Ken and thanks Tony for putting together the Power Point presentation.

Ken Dixon

Monavale Vlei – 19 July

Early on Sunday, I'd been thinking to myself "Do I really want to leave my warm bed and go and trudge round for 2 hours through 3m high grass to see a few, mostly anonymous, Euplectes-type birds?" In the event, I got over my resistance, managed to start the car and arrived at the venue only 2 minutes late to join 3 other brave birders. But what a surprise! Instead of a sea of waving long grass the vlei was flat and black. (DW notes in defence of wetlands that the 3m long grasses occur on the edges with the shorter vlei grasses throughout the body of the vlei, though it definitely is a sea of grass!) The previous Thursday lunchtime, 16 July, a local vagrant known as 'The Giant' had decided to fire the long, rank grass. Within an hour it had gone. The local community made valiant efforts to minimize the damage but to no avail. Jimmy counted 15 Marsh Owl fleeing the devastation. Fortunately it is believed they had already bred and their young had fledged. Replacing them already were pairs of Grey-rumped Swallow which had quickly found nesting holes and were using them. Presumably they had moved in from the neighbouring golf course. In the aftermath of the fire, a Three-streaked Grass Snake had been found and a number of addled owl eggs. Jimmy saw a bush pig being chased and pecked at by crows until it reached the safety of the stream. One presumes most of the mice and snakes had survived in their holes. Of interest also on the surface of the vlei are the ridges, evidence of previous cultivation and all the drainage channels.

Such sudden habitat change will bring different species of bird. Capped Wheatear, lots of Black-headed Heron, Pipits and Larks are already appearing. The Widows, Orange-breasted Waxbill and Black-shouldered Kite remain as well as Zitting Cisticola, Red-faced Cisticola and Croaking Cisticola. Our count was poor compared to the 52 species seen in an hour two days before the fire, but will increase again. The Black Stork has been seen four times in recent weeks.

Ken Dixon

MATABELELAND

Morning at Cowdray Park Sewage Ponds – 12 July 2009

This area has become one of our favourite spots and we have become pretty familiar with, and familiar to, those in charge. These friendly persons happily allow us to let ourselves in through the ostensibly chained and padlocked gates – or when the chains defeat us to gain access to within by crawling along the channel through the sludge house!

This outing formed part of our Matland Waterfowl Census but we also enjoyed seeing and recording everything of a non-waterfowl nature that we could. The day dawned bright and sunny with a beautiful clear sky – and NO WIND thank goodness! And it proved to be a day full of young and surprising things. Seven of us pootled slowly round the 5 large ponds – the first being a sludge collection pool and the next 4 becoming progressively cleaner – which resulted in them becoming progressively less patronised.

The sludge pool was in full swing receiving all manner of good things including bits of clothing, cans, plastic bags and, of course, succulent natural ingredients so sought after by many birds and barbel. Here we found 47 African Sacred Ibis, a few African Jacana, something like 13 Three-banded Plovers, a couple of Black Crakes, a sprinkling of Cattle Egrets, two Grey Herons, one Hamerkop, a family of adult and sub-adult Common Moorhens. *And* – an African Stonechat on a tall weed keeping an eye on the fosickers (which, in case you were debating it – and contrary to my Spellcheck's advice to substitute it with 'frolickers' – means 'rummagers', nothing more, nothing less).

The first of the 'clean' ponds produced a flock of about 105 White-faced Ducks resting on the bank and a couple of Little Rush-warblers in full song, some more Common Moorhens, a few Black Crakes or three and numerous Little Grebes dipping and diving – which is why we can't be precise as to exact numbers – not to mention another Grey Heron.

Next stop we witnessed a Little Rush-warbler feeding a youngster and two or three in the rushes just singing. In the middle of the water were Southern Pochards and with them – seen for the first time in this location – three Maccoa Ducks doing their stiffy-tail thing (which is how we knew for sure they were Maccoas and not colour-pale Pochards), more Little Grebes, some Red-billed Teal and a few Hottentot Teals.

But at pond 3 came the first of the three *pièces de resistances* (don't even *think* about criticising my French) encountered during the morning – an African Purple Swamphen feeding on a succulent bulrush shoot as she ambled along the water's edge followed, we subsequently spotted, by her chickling (well, what would *you* call it? Its mother is called a "hen" and she

swims like a duck). This turned out to be a delinquent as it refused to take to the water after mum and we all thought – ‘oh, poor thing, it can’t swim’. Well it could and did when it realised that its mother had no intention of waiting for her example to be followed. And the second *pièce*, at the far end of the pond, was the sight of a pair of Cape Shovelers and their 11 half-grown ducklings!

Pond 4 was less inhabited (too clean) which enabled us to study in more detail the many Little Grebes of varying colours. After much consultation and checking of books, we came to the conclusion that the brightly coloured models were the males in breeding gear, the less brightly coloured were females ditto (well, actually we knew this all along, we didn’t really need the books) and the much paler, mostly white with dark markings, were juveniles (which we hadn’t been so sure of and did need the books). However, on reflection, we reckon there were actually two different models of the lighter ones – read on.

Pond 5 was the last, and probably the cleanest of the lot. There wasn’t much here – Black Crakes, the odd Common Moorhen, several singing Little Rush-warblers, a host of multi-coloured Little Grebes again and a lovely sighting of a Striped Kingfisher. But what was here was our third *pièce*. One amongst us, intent on upstaging the census leader, not to mention the Chairperson, made an astonishing discovery – one of the light-coloured Little Grebes had a *BRIGHT RED EYE* and a *BLACK NECK*. Imagine that! This (and one or two other little things such as shape of head and general jizz) turned it into a Black-necked Grebe, rarely reported down here, certainly not in the last six years (to my knowledge) and definitely not at Cowdray Park. So could it have been that some of the light birds in earlier ponds were also Black-necked Grebes? We shall have to put on our specs and go and have another look.

Our final tally was 578 birds, of 42 species. The waterfowl census accounted for 418 birds of 21 species.

Julia Duprée

Bulawayo Horticultural Society Meeting – 19 July

Peter Mundy, the original speaker, was unable to attend, so at short notice Penny and I were invited to talk to BHS members on *Birds in your Garden* which we tremblingly agreed to do. Penny was the speaker; I was just the display board and occasional sound system. Penny opened with an overview of Bulawayo’s position in relation to the watershed, its habitat and climate. Thereafter followed descriptions of the birds found in and around Bulawayo and its gardens, their behaviour and (in some cases) sounds. Questions led to discussions and to end off a note was made of interesting things to look out for and report, such as African Red-eyed Bulbuls, Northern Grey-headed Sparrows and hybrid Cut-throat Finches and Red-headed Finches.

The meeting was hosted by Mrs Doolabh in her lovely Ilanda garden and was well attended by members and friends and – appropriately – by a host of birds visiting a nearby Kenya Coffee Shade tree which was in full flower! The support of the BLZ Matland members who came along was much appreciated and we were very grateful for the tea and delicious cake provided by Mrs Doolabh. We look forward to the possibility of another meeting with the BHS at which, perhaps, they will talk to us about *Plants that Attract Birds!*

Julia Duprée

EASTERN HIGHLANDS

Old Mutare – 17 May

The idea of touring Old Mutare area came after I realized that no member had a vehicle at present. It was then that I resolved to cycle. Thanks to the Swynnerton’s Project sponsors, the RSPB, we had managed to get 3 bicycles for the project and currently it is our means of transport. At around 8 a.m. I was at the Mutare Museum to check for Elijah and Enock, faced with a challenge of cycling part of the Christmas Pass but unfortunately they did not turn up. I found the going tough at the half-way point due to lack of exercise as I spend most of my time in the office! Upon reaching the summit I decided to check for just one of the specials – the Cabanis’s Bunting and it was there in an acacia tree just after the entry point. Afterwards it was a matter of rolling on gravity, heading for Old Mutare. What welcomed me were calls of the Three-banded Plovers and Cape Wagtail from the adjacent Africa University’s sewage ponds. The day was promising and I would have recorded more if I had plunged deeper into forest

behind Hartzell Schools. I managed to reach a total of 72 boosted by some African Pipits, Whyte's Barbets and Red-capped Larks. Whilst gripped by the fear of losing brake control when going down Christmas Pass back to Mutare, my confidence grew as I heard some birds calling as if urging me on – the Emerald-spotted Wood-dove, the African Golden Oriole and the White-browed Scrub-robin.

and

Burma Valley/ Chikubvu – 28 June

I have always loved and been fascinated by the Burma Valley or Chikubvu, about 40km south-east of Mutare. There is a 4km slope that has a heavily curved tarred road that leads to the adjacent farms and a border to Mozambique. The slope has varied vegetation patches on either side of the roads, from the evergreen forest to miombo. The other notable feature about this slope is the granite outcrops and giant boulders. On this cool Sunday morning, I cycled to Chikubvu with the intention of investigating the presence of Boulder Chats. My first search for Boulder Chats in Mutare started with Carl Beel, a veteran birder now based in South America, and we managed to locate Boulder Chats at Cross Kopje near Marymount Teachers College. I started by slowly following the stream that runs parallel to the tarred road. The stream is heavily covered with evergreen forest but the roadside is full of *lantana camara*, under which I saw some Red-throated Twinspots and heard some Square-tailed Drongos calling. I turned into the Miombo woodland to be greeted by a giant bird party! It was such a good sight and I wished I had a camera! The group comprised of specials like the Spotted Creeper, Olive Sunbird, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Grey-headed Bush-shrike and the Scaly-throated Honeyguide. I started climbing the scattered boulders in search of the chats and passed through a huge cave with nice Bushman paintings. It was fairly a tiring exercise but when I was about to give up, 4 Boulder Chats and Mocking Cliff-chats were right in front of me on a giant boulder! My questions are:

Is there anybody with a record of Boulder Chats in and around Mutare?

Do Boulder and Mocking Cliff-chats usually mix?

I would love to hear the answers.

Peter Gwidibira 011-377076 pgwidibira@mutare.matanuska.co.zw

Birding trip to Namibia (7000km) – May 2009

With Riana back from the UK after 3 months, we set off on our holiday with “cheers” to Harare Pied Crows and a 'keep awake' idea of recording bird species along the way.

First species seen out of Harare were Amur Falcons and a quick stop at the Golden Spiderweb added half a dozen more including a 'Zim' Familiar Chat. At Masvingo we observed a Little Banded Goshawk (Shikra), followed by 12 White-necked Ravens around the Runde River and Southern White-crowned Shrikes, 3 'owls', Meves's Starlings, Groundscraper Thrush, African Golden Orioles, Natal Francolin and nyala at Three-Way Safari lodge, where we over-nighted. A lone White-backed Vulture 'viewed' a desolate area about 70 km from Beitbridge. Unfortunately in excess of 36 Pied Crows were counted along the road between Buby and the border! A miserable approximately 46 species count for the Zimbabwe side.

Musina to Johannesburg yielded only 14 species. My daughter Rianna's flat and immediate suburb hosted Cape Sparrows, Rameron Pigeons (African Olive-pigeon), and Grey Go-away-bird, Spotted Thick-knees, an African Cuckoo Hawk, Cape Robin-chat, Hoopoes and barbets. Total collated was 24 species within 1km of her flat – a nearby kopje does help.

Next, we did a 770km trip through new territory to Uppington – South Africa's home of sultanas. We listed 50 species including 5 White Storks, Pied Starlings, Long-tailed Widowbirds, Purple Rollers and European Rollers, 2 Kori Bustards, Ostrich, Northern Black Korhaan, flocks of Sociable Weavers, Ant-eating Chats and Lesser Grey Shrikes. Staying overnight in a 'lapa' on the banks of the Orange River we experienced an evening tropical storm, but saw Cape White-eyes, African Fish-eagle, African Black Ducks, the ever inquisitive African Red-eyed Bulbuls, Speckled Pigeons, a Barn Owl, Southern Masked-weavers, warblers, and sandpipers.

The following morning's 135km drive to the SA/Namibian border added Mountain Wheatear, Namaqua Doves, Cape Glossy Starlings and at last a number of Pygmy Falcons! (Thanks to my alert, understanding wife – what's that, check the rear view mirror, stop, reverse, binocs to eye...) We encountered only 4 vehicles on this stretch and both border crossings were pretty stress free.

We travelled the next 900km to Windhoek. The first raptor in Namibia was a juvenile Martial Eagle, followed by Grey-backed Sparrowlarks, Black-chested Snake-eagle, Jackal Buzzard, Marabou Storks, more Namaqua doves, scores of Little Swifts, Southern Pale Chanting-goshawks, European Roller and Greater Kestrel – in total only 19 species. Windhoek at last, where my other daughter Teresa's flat is nestled in a ridge with wild bush as a frontage, yielding 29 species recorded from 'a garden chair' – really strenuous! (her neighbour is a bird feeder.) The were Pin-tailed Whydah and Shaft-tailed Whydahs, African Paradise-flycatchers, Rosy-faced Lovebirds, Pirit Batis, White-backed Mousebirds, Tit-babblers, Grey-backed Camaroptera, White-browed Sparrow-weavers, Dusky Sunbirds, Black-faced Waxbills, Diderick Cuckoos, Pale-winged Starlings, Bradfield's Swifts, Banded Martins, Mountain Wheatear and cackling Helmeted Guineafowl.

We travelled to Swakopmund/Walvis bay/Mile 4/Henties Bay (a return trip of 1300km) which presented a plethora of shoreline birds – Grey Plovers and Chestnut-banded Plovers, both Greater Flamingos and Lesser Flamingos, Great White Pelicans, Pied Avocets, Common Whimbrel, Sanderling, Ruff, Hartlaub's Gull, Kelp Gull and Grey-headed Gulls, Ruddy Turnstones, Black-necked Grebes, Common Waxbills and even the 'Namibian' Familiar Chat. We visited the Spitteskoppe on the way back and saw Dusky Sunbirds, Buffy Pipits, Stark's Lark, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Pale-winged Starlings and Southern Masked-weavers, but sadly no Herero Chat – although this is a 'known site'. Local birding hot spots around Windhoek (excluding the sewage works) included the nearby Avis dam which provided approximately 40 species and the Dan Viljoen game park, 30km out of town, which produced 22 species. Specials were Black-chested Prinia, Rockrunners, more Mountain Wheatears, Violet-eared Waxbill, Marico Flycatchers, South African Shelduck, Black-throated Canary and Yellow Canary, Crimson-breasted Shrikes, Tawny Eagles and Mountain Wheatears (male variable species – b) I did not manage to see the White-tailed Shrike, but should have made more effort to see the Black-eared Sparrowlarks and the Monteiro's Hornbill, which means I should have stopped the vehicle but I was adamant that 'it' was a Sand Plover at Mile 4.....

Returning to South Africa via Windhoek, Gobabis (cattle country) and then through Botswana we picked up 23 species. The 800km 'casual drive' along the Trans-Kalahari highway in Botswana (luckily there is a fuel point midway) was host to Drongos, Pale Chanting-goshawks, Pied Babblers, Cape Crows, Gabar Goshawks, Black-chested Snake-eagles, 2 vulture species and plenty of Pied Crows towards the east where there is human habitation. A word of advice to others – be mindful of time differences to get through border posts before they close! As we entered South Africa near Zeerust we witnessed a Yellow-billed Oxpecker having a meal on a cow next to the main road. Our next birding spot was Ingwelala game park next to Kruger National Park where we counted 90 species, including 5 Southern Ground-Hornbills, Bateleurs, African Hawk-eagles, Burchell's Starlings, a Jacobin Cuckoo, Dusky Larks, Red-crested Korhaans and even a Dark Chanting-goshawk (southerly limits). Our regular braai guest was Spot the Hyena and his family, mom Macleans, and kid Aquafresh...uncomfortably close and very keen on our meat and plastic chairs, which seemed very vulnerable. On our second day driving around in a 6 cylinder automatic Landrover we met up with a leopard.

We finally returned home having added 7000km wear to our butts and only 230 species including approximately 24 lifers if you include 2 'variables'! We happily negotiated the border on both sides in less than 1/2 hour, dodged a few pot holes, drove into Harare and were heartily welcomed by dozens of friendly Pied Crows, but alas we regrettably could not *tick* a Pied Crow during our 2600km travels in Namibia – elusive crows or an indicator of city cleanliness?

NB – If you stop regularly the less obvious species will be identified.....and the list will grow!

Innes Louw

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TAIL FEATHERS

Further observation of birds caught in spider's web:

At Otter's Holt Cottage, Valley Road, Juliasdale, on 15 April last year (2008) at about 10 a.m., my wife and I had an encounter that was very similar to the one in Avondale recently. From the bay room window overlooking the valley behind Punch Rock, we saw what at first sight looked like an inert butterfly or bat hanging at the end of a spider web – spun below an acacia branch

by one of those very long-legged yellow and black spiders that proliferate in that part of the world after the rainy season. When we went outside and touched the web with the tip of a long stick the inert form "sprang into life" – it was a female Variable Sunbird, which just like the Firefinch was "suspended upside down and hanging by one wing" from the elongated strands of the spider's web. With the help of the stick the struggling bird swung at the end of the web in increasingly high arcs until it eventually managed to find a claw hold on the branch of a nearby tree. It soon "broke free of the web" and flew off, "apparently unhurt."

Perhaps these encounters are commoner than we think – but do they always end happily?

Bob and Colette Challiss

Peter Gwidibira writes: There was a question about the locations of the Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon. I saw it near the popular Seldomseen Hotel just before the Bunga Forest.