

# BABBLER

The Newsletter of -



**BirdLife Zimbabwe**  
The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

## ISSUE # 91 – DECEMBER 2009/JANUARY 2010

| <b>Committee</b>       | <b>Mashonaland</b>   | <b>☎</b>               | <b>Matabeleland</b> | <b>☎</b>               |
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Office hours: Monday to Friday 8.30 – 4.30.

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**? The Editor, BirdLife Council, Committee Members and the National Office staff extend their good wishes to you all for a very happy holiday and a successful New Year.**

**Let's wish for at least one lifer in 2010! ?**

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### Office Hours Over the Holiday Period

The Director informs me that there will be staff in the national office between 0830 hrs and 1300hrs on 21, 23, 24, 28, 29 and 30 December, who will also be able to attend to membership issues. The office will be closed on 22, 25 and 31 December and re-open on 4 January. Ed

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Please diarise these events now, as it is easy to forget later on.

Geoff Lowe reminds you that there will be a **bird ringing demonstration** at Mukuvisi Woodland in Harare on Sunday 6 December. Come along to see what bird ringing is about! Meet at the Mukuvisi Woodland office car park at 6.30 a.m. from where you will drive through the game paddock via the stables and the quarry gate and park at the concrete bridge. Interested people will see the ringing in separate groups to reduce numbers. Bring chairs, drinks and snacks as there will be a picnic afterwards, but not at the normal Blatherwick Road site.

### ***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.

**Evening Meetings are on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday** of each month at 5.30 for 6.00 p.m. The venue is the Avondale Sports Club on Brighton Road between Sam Nujoma Street Extension and Upper East Road. There is a cash bar and a security guard.

**Thursday 17 December – No meeting**

**Thursday 21 January 2010 – Mashonaland Branch AGM**

We look forward to seeing you at this event which will be followed by a video on: "Interesting aspects of Wildlife at Hippo Pools".

**Saturday 19 December – No Outing**

**Saturday 16 January 7 a.m.: Botanic Gardens**

Meet at CABS Northridge Park, Northend Close. There is *no charge* for the Gardens.

**Sunday 6 December and 3 January – 6.30 a.m.: Mukuvisi Woodland**

We saw the Narina Trogon at Mukuvisi during the December walk last year – so you never know! If the river is clean there is a possibility that the Green Sandpiper may put in an appearance. Other than that, many of the little brown jobs are now getting some colour, the migrants are present and we should get over 100 birds for the morning in December and January. 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 13 December and 10 January – 6.30 a.m.: LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY**

Highlights in November included Great White Pelicans, an African Cuckoo Hawk, African Rail, Greater Painted-snipe and Lesser Masked-weavers. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West for this venue. Remember to bring chairs and refreshments.

**Sunday 20 December and 17 January – 7:00 a.m.: Monavale Vlei Walk**

Temminck's Courser – a new bird for the vlei, was seen in November. Meet on the BS Leon side of Fenella Drive.

**Sunday 20 December – No Outing**

**Sunday 24 January - 6.30 a.m.: Bluff Hill Vlei**

Alex Masterson's popular annual vlei walk – 74 species were seen last year. Enter Lorraine Drive from the southern end off Harare Drive and head north towards Westgate. At the big gum trees on the left as you go up out of the open vlei, turn left into a broad tar road then head west out of town, with the hill on your right and houses on both sides. At the T-junction at the end of this road turn left and meet at the end of the road. Bring suitable foot wear, especially if we have had good rains!

**Sunday 31 January – 6.30 a.m.: Komani Estate**

Meet at the food court on the corner of The Chase/Golden Stairs Road for the 5<sup>th</sup> annual bird survey.

## **MATABELELAND BRANCH**

### **Saturday 5 December: Evening Bistro**

Our annual end-of-year dinner is once again kindly being hosted by Cecilia Hubbard at her home in Eglesfield Road. Numbers will be limited. Please contact Cecilia for further details and price. Cell - 0912-433733

### **January 2010: Waterfowl Census**

As usual the month of January will be dedicated to taking part in the African Waterfowl Census. We will definitely do a waterfowl count at Aisleby (provisionally on Sunday 17<sup>th</sup>) and hopefully also at SAST and Cowdray Park and in Matobo National Park – weather permitting. Contact Adele for further details; phone (w) 280029/030, (h) 882242 or 011-366 917.

## **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 depart at 7.30 a.m. from the Mutare Museum. Spare binoculars and field guides are available for two people. Members with a vehicle are encouraged to attend and fuel can be provided. Contact Peter Gwidibira 011-377076 [pgwidibira@mutare.matanuska.co.zw](mailto:pgwidibira@mutare.matanuska.co.zw) for details.

**Other Areas** – Those members in other areas – please send me a short account 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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## **RECENT REPORTS and SIGHTINGS**

### **MASHONALAND**

#### **Eighty Years of Birding: 15 October 2009**

The size of the audience at Avondale Club was ample evidence of the popularity of our speaker from Mutare, Darrel Plowes. And we were not disappointed. If we take the title literally, Darrel began birding in South Africa in 1929 or thereabouts, particularly attracted by a Yellow White-eye. Thanks to his father's peripatetic career as a magistrate, the young boy moved around South Africa, observing birds, identifying them from his 'Natal Bird Book' and, given the chance, stealing their eggs. This interest in eggs led him to 'shell out' 1/6d on his brother's collection. It also nurtured a desire to photograph birds at the nest and at Estcourt High he was able to devote time to eggging and searching for snakes. At 16 he became a prospector with de Beers before serving 3 years in the army during which, instead of smoking his ration of tobacco, he sold it to buy a camera and binoculars. It was after this that he went to Wits University on a conservation course. Shortly after, when the South African government decided it didn't need such bright young men he, with his peers, moved north to Rhodesia to farm. Here, his reputation in the birding world became such that a variety of the Cape Bunting identified in the Matopos acquired the suffix *plowesii*.

As photography developed, Darrel took advantage of the new science and began to take more and more, better and better slides, the quality of which was astounding to the audience. They also form the basis of Darrel's great library of slides still in demand for magazines and books all over the world. He is especially proud of the slide of his great aunt with her Dodo egg, presented to her for her research into the Coelacanth. These amazing slides were accompanied by fascinating anecdotes from periods spent on different activities in various parts of Rhodesia and southern Africa. In order to obtain photos, the young Plowes and assistants risked life and limb on the crags of Christmas Pass where Verreaux's Eagles saw fit to risk nesting. This impressive series of slides should have earned good money for filming rights but somehow the naive young Rhodesian lost out.

Those with a deep knowledge of film and cameras must have appreciated more than I the historic value of many slides but we all were impressed by the talk, the content and the speaker. I'm sure we all hope to return in ten year's time for the next episode.

Thank you Darrel, and you Nina, for undertaking the drive from Mutare.  
**Ken Dixon**

### **RIFA Conservation Camp, Chirundu: 1 – 4 October 2009**

Much to the surprise of our Chairperson, 18 members chose to spend a long hot weekend in the Zambezi Valley. In the end the weekend didn't seem long and it wasn't even hot. This really is a most favoured venue for its tranquillity, beauty and wealth of wildlife.

Our first foray was on Thursday afternoon following a cup of tea or coffee kindly provided by Brian Peters and his most polite and helpful assistants, Jackson and Ben. The contribution of these three to the success and harmony of the camp cannot be underestimated; their ability to provide what we wanted, when we wanted it was amazing. Even before setting out we'd had the opportunity to hear and see Meyer's Parrot, Red-headed Weaver and African Green-pigeon in the huge fig that dominates the camp area. We split into two groups to wander down to the river, one going via the bream pools, the other via the Chipandaure river bed. The exceptionally high Zambezi river had reduced the islands and submerged the sandbars but we still found Spur-winged Goose, Saddle-billed Stork, Goliath Heron, Green-backed Heron, Rufous-bellied Heron and Purple Heron, Great Egret and Little Egret. There were few waders in these conditions but Wood Sandpipers and Common Sandpipers flew along the shore together with Southern Carmine Bee-eaters and White-fronted Bee-eaters. Back at the camp over sundowners we were treated to the sight of two hyenas feeding on a 'mombie' leg kindly supplied by Brian and placed in view of the bar by Derrison. Also for our delectation were an African Scops-owl and Fiery-necked Nightjar. Later these were joined, I'm told, by a Square-tailed Nightjar. The elephants which regularly visit the camp overnight were explicable absent; one of their numbers had recently been killed upstream.

Friday at 0630 we were all ready for the walk to the Chipandaure Cliffs and Long Pan. A marvellous sight awaited us at the cliffs where a hundred or more Southern Carmine Bee-eaters and perhaps double the number of White-fronted Bee-eaters flew in and out of their nest-holes in the red cliff. Also perched in the cliff-top trees were Lilian's Lovebirds. Flying high above them were a few Bohm's Spinetail, Mosque Swallows, Lesser Striped Swallows and Wire-tailed Swallows and Horus Swift. Long Pan was absolutely dry and pitted by elephant footprints making crossing it quite a mission. The other group had Crowned Hornbill, Lizard Buzzard and Tawny Eagle by taking a 'shorter' route back to camp. That day the entertainment provided by Brian was the Vulture Restaurant. He had obtained parts of the elephant carcass which was viciously fought over by Lappet-faced Vulture, White-backed Vulture, White-headed Vulture and Hooded Vulture who were later joined by Marabou Stork. We were delighted at lunchtime to welcome Guida Bell-cross, Chair of the Zambian Ornithological Society, who had made the journey from Lusaka alone to join us. She assured us at the end that her trip had been extremely worthwhile both for the birding and the opportunity to share ideas with us all.

After, for some, a welcome siesta, we piled into the vehicles for the 9km drive to Vulture Point, a regular spot some years ago but not visited recently. Few new species here but a very pleasant couple of hours were spent strolling along the river bank and then sipping sundowners watching hippo with Red-billed Oxpeckers and various water birds as the sun set over the opposite bank. Double-banded Sandgrouse, Water Thick-knee, Namaqua Dove and a Gabar Goshawk were additions to the list.

On Saturday we left camp early and drove to the river at Chirundu, to the fishing cottages now owned by Tiger Safaris. One species targeted here did not let us down – the Lesser Masked-weaver – but it was in riverine trees not at the swimming-pool. Another special more difficult to locate was the African Mourning Dove. The disappearance of the sandbars meant that the African Skimmers were confined to the beach of the island. Two were seen, one of which appeared to be sitting on a nest. In the course of our search for these elusive rarities, we came across lots of small birds in the thorn scrub; Green-backed Pytilia, Sombre Greenbul and Yellow-bellied Greenbul, Black-throated Wattle-eye, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Long-billed Crombec and many Grey-backed Camaroptera. During lunch Ian Riddell called us out to see 2 rare Ayres's Hawk-eagle, one a juvenile, all creamy white underneath and the other a classic adult complete with landing lights. The sceptics were mumbling in the background but even they couldn't question the identification of a Black-chested Snake-eagle which plummeted earthwards just in front of us and flew off triumphantly with a small snake.

That afternoon, plans to search for Arnot's Chat had to be modified as the area was the target for the Anti-poaching Unit, so instead we drove to Mongwe Spring, one of the many hot springs along the Chirundu-Makuti road. There a Rufous-bellied Heron took flight as we arrived but new birds were hard to find. En route we explored the wetlands near the bream-pools and found Kittlitz's Plover and Blacksmith Lapwing and White-crowned Lapwing, African Pipit and saw two elephant in the tall reeds. On returning to camp we loaded up the cool-boxes and drove down to the river again, to Sunset Point, for a final sundowner. What a great way to bring this wonderful weekend to a conclusion especially as a male Pennant-winged Nightjar floated by in the fading light.

On Sunday, we had just time for one last early sortie to give Guida the chance to see our Carmine Bee-eater colony. One group was able to add Western Banded Snake-eagle to the list and we had Collared Sunbird, Barn Swallow and lots of Red-billed Firefinch and Jameson's Firefinch. It was with great reluctance we returned for our final breakfast and the last count. In all we amassed 155 species, lower than some years but what happy memories we took away.

We thank the Zimbabwe Hunter's Association for allowing us to stay, Brian Peters for providing such an exciting and varied programme, Ben and Jackson for cooking for us, Samson and Stefan for keeping the camp so spruce and Leslee Maasdorp, who set it all up in the first place and who has retired once again, after 10 years as BirdLife Education Manager.

**Ken Dixon**

## **SELDOMSEEN and VUMBA BOTANIC GARDENS QDS 1932B1/1932B2: 16-19 October**

### **2009**

Eighteen members, all from Harare, attended this annual outing – 17 of us arrived about 1 p.m. on 16/10/09 and one person arrived at about 9 a.m. the following day. For the whole of our stay the weather was sunny and warm with mist lasting until about 10 a.m. on the last two mornings. The gardens were full of flowers, the stream north of the chalets was flowing and the forests were green and well conserved. Six of us first listened to calls of the Eastern Highlands birds and then went for an afternoon walk in the forest on the south side. As is usual for forest birding we heard much more than we saw, so the recent listening to the calls was useful. It is also easier to see birds in the early morning or late afternoon than in the middle of the day when the sun is overhead and birds tend to seek shade. Meanwhile others of us visited the forest, the protea plantation and the grassland on the north side. On the first day there was a power cut for our daily bird count call-over so we had to use a torch to tick the checklist. The total species count for Day One was 60 and included birds seen or heard in the Vumba on the way to Seldomseen. Highlights on the journey in included African Fish-eagle, Yellow-throated Longclaw and Orange-breasted Bush-shrike while highlights at Seldomseen included Augur Buzzard, Buff-spotted Flufftail, Tambourine Dove, Lemon Dove, White-eared Barbet, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Striped-cheeked Greenbul, Olive Thrush, Orange Ground-thrush, Cape Robin-chat, White-starred Robin, Swynnerton's Robin, Barratt's Warbler, Chirinda Apalis, Wailing Cisticola, Singing Cisticola, Roberts's Warbler, Cape Batis, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher, Gorgeous Bush-shrike, Olive Bush-shrike, Gurney's Sugarbird, Malachite Sunbird, Bronzy Sunbird, Olive Sunbird, Collared Sunbird, Dark-backed Weaver and Red-throated Twinspot.

We arranged to go on walks early the next morning with the two guides, Buluwezi and Peter. These ended a couple of hours later and then we went off to the Botanical Gardens until lunch time.

**David Rockingham-Gill** arrived in time to go to the gardens and his personal report for the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> follows:-

Seldomseen is four hours from Harare. No sooner had I got there on Saturday than we were off to the Bvumba Botanic Garden (159ha) and the Bvumba Botanic Reserve (42ha) which were originally part of Manchester Farm, Mutare District. The Gardens were developed in the 1940's by one-time mayor and mayoress of Umtali, Fred and Helen Taylor. Mrs Taylor died in 1954 and a subdivision (201ha) known as Manchester Park was given to the Federal Parks Department in October 1960. By then 32 ha had been developed into formal garden. I saw African Crowned Eagle, African Dusky Flycatcher, Bronzy Sunbird near the water feature, Yellow-bellied Waxbill, Red-winged Starling, Common Waxbill and Lesser Striped Swallows with good views, and I didn't see these at Seldomseen. New to me was a White-eared Barbet. The only nest found was a Bronze Mannikins in a Rafflesia Palm.

Sunday was a nesting bonanza for me. We found the nest and three chicks of White-browed Robin-Chat, the nest and three chicks of Swynnerton's Robin and Richard saw 4 Buff-spotted Flufftails with three chicks – these must be double brooded, because Penny and I found the nest and eggs of Buff-spotted Flufftail at the end of January 2001 in the same place. Bar-throated Apalis were nesting in a Virginia Creeper next to Swynnerton Chalet and elsewhere, a pair of Cape Batis was building closely on the way into the forest. An Orange Ground-thrush was sitting very tight on a nest we walked past. Then Peter Madziwana pointed out an abandoned Swynnerton's Robin nest very close to the ground, so I took the opportunity to have a look and found a Yellow-throated Woodland-warbler had built on top of the robin nest. On close inspection a large chick just about to fledge jumped out of the nest and hopped and tried to fly/flee into the forest. It only got about two metres when its mother intercepted it to feed it a worm, so making identification certain. *Birds of Zimbabwe* only had 3 records of this bird nesting in 1980, so finding a nest and chick of this bird is a scoop. Near the dam we came across the hole of Eastern Saw-wing which had been used continuously for 25 years (Peter has been on the property for 35 years). A Collared Sunbird was feeding a large chick in mid-canopy forest nearby and we saw four very old nests (last year's?) of the Olive Thrush, the White-tailed Crested Flycatcher, a sunbird and a Dark-backed Weaver. So if you want to see the nests and eggs and chicks of montane forest birds, Seldomseen in October cannot be bettered.

Tambourine Dove and Lemon Dove were both seen, Red-chested Cuckoo, African Emerald Cuckoo and Gorgeous Bush-shrike were heard, as were European Bee-eater, Barratt's Warbler and Wailing Cisticolas and Singing Cisticolas. Other birds seen were Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird (a lifer for me), Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Red-capped Robin-Chat, Cape Grassbird, Roberts's Warbler, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher, Black-fronted Bush-shrike and Olive Bush-shrikes and an Olive Sunbird which had a ring on its foot. I studied 4 Red-faced Crimsonwings for nearly 30 minutes, feeding on the forest floor – a good two days of birding for me.

**Richard Dennison** continues – the species count for Day Two was a very respectable 90. The new highlights from Seldomseen included African Goshawk, Red-necked Spurrow, African Emerald Cuckoo, Square-tailed Drongo, Yellow-streaked Greenbul, Sombre Greenbul, Red-capped Robin-chat, Cape Grassbird, African Dusky Flycatcher, Black-fronted Bush-shrike, Red-faced Crimsonwing, Yellow-bellied Waxbill and Red-backed Mannikin. At the Botanical Gardens the new highlights included African Crowned Eagle, Yellow-throated Woodland-warbler, Thick-billed Weaver and Cape Canary. Some of us visited Leopard Rock or went on a walk through some miombo woodland in the afternoon and added species to our tally including Wahlberg's Eagle, Red-winged Starling, Green-backed Honeybird and Spotted Creeper. The species count for Day Three was 81 and included the new highlights from Seldomseen of Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon and African Wood-owl. Visits to Leopard Rock and surrounding miombo woodland added the new highlights of Giant Kingfisher, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill, Grey Penduline-tit and Neddicky.

On the last morning, 19 October, we had short walks before packing up and holding the final call-over. The species count for Day Four was 48 and did not include any new species. The total species count for the Vumba was 108 and a brief visit to the Burma Valley did include some new but fairly common species.

Many active nests were found and those not already mentioned in Dave Rockingham-Gill's report included Cape Robin-Chat, White-starred Robin, African Dusky Flycatcher and Golden Weaver.

### **MONAVALÉ VLEI – 15 November 2009**

On Sunday 15 November, the small group of Monavale Vlei-lovers saw 59 species in the course of their walk. This in itself is an achievement. However, the best sighting of the day and yet another first for Monavale was one, possibly two, Temminck's Courser (*Cursorius temminckii*). Jimmy Muropa and I were searching the ground in the distance for Capped Wheatear and Crowned Lapwing, which have both bred there this year, when Jimmy came across a similar bird, but neither of the above, running through the short charred grass. It was some time before I realised it was a Temminck's Courser – a new bird for the vlei. There may have been two as another bird was partially hidden behind a furrow and did not come into full view. Fortunately, Erin Murphy was in the group taking photos for the COSMO Calendar and was able to get proof of our sighting. Buy the Calendar and you can see it too!

**Ken Dixon**

## **DOMBOSHAWA: 25 October 2009**

A small group of 10 met at CABS for the drive through the vibrant communal lands to this ancient site, famous for its rock paintings. On arrival we stumped up our \$2 and set out to spend a pleasant 3 hours wandering over this extensive granite outcrop. Birds are not abundant there but in the pockets of woodland and copses the usual miombo species soon appeared – Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, Chin-spot Batis, White-browed Robin-chat, Willow Warbler, Black-backed Puffback, Yellow-fronted Canary, Terrestrial Brownbuls and scores of Dark-capped Bulbul. My small group chose to go off in search of Boulder Chat in a small ravine. We only heard it, but saw Lazy Cisticola, White-throated Robin-chat and a lone Swainson's Spurfowl perched atop a rock. Our route then took us around the perimeter of the rocky area where on one side we heard Rufous-naped Lark and on the other that delightful but uncommon Violet-eared Waxbill. As we climbed gradually we came across Cape Bunting and more Lazy Cisticola. The expanse of smooth granite attracted only a very confiding Buffy Pipit but over a neighbouring kopje a Black-chested Snake-eagle soared. The most exciting moment of the walk was when, pausing in a dense stand of Muzhanje and msasa, a startled Spotted Eagle-owl flew noisily out and resettled just above my head.

As we sat in the attractive communal area slaking our thirst we called the list which reached a grand total of 50 species.

**Ken Dixon**

## ***MATABELELAND***

### **Walk at HILLSIDE DAMS – 24 October 2009**

We started brilliantly – 13 of us – at the Lower Dam where we watched an African Hoopoe feeding her young. Unperturbed by our presence, she made several sorties to gather food a few metres away and deliver it to her young residing in a hole in a fig – whose receiving little beak we saw if we looked hard enough! Then we headed off to see what was what from the top of the dam-side kopje – and mostly what we saw were discarded food packs and a Golden Weaver with a mouthful – whether food or nesting material wasn't clear. On past a large gathering of churchgoers and into the beautiful forest section, harbouring a variety of birds both up above and down at our level. A White-throated Robin-chat flitted to and fro quite close, a young baby-faced Emerald-spotted Wood-dove sat quietly watching, and a Kurrichane Thrush sang. Some saw an African Yellow White-eye, others of us were thrilled with a first sighting of a Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler (chestnut vent and all), and we heard – but only with difficulty spied – Miombo Double-collared Sunbirds and White-bellied Sunbirds.

The telltale scratchy voice of African Paradise-flycatchers drew our attention to two birds flitting around, both working on their tiny nest just above our heads, delivering mouthfuls of wild asparagus fern and once or twice sitting together on the nest. This sighting is a puzzlement. These flycatchers are monogamous (one husband to one wife), yet we were watching two apparent females (short tails) working together – how come? One, by the way, had a lesser blue eye ring than the other. A possible explanation is that the second 'female' was in fact a short-tailed male, which is rare but has been recorded somewhere (*Roberts' Bird Guide*, p.210) – see also photo below. This might also explain why the (long tailed) male flitting around on the other side of the stream, was not interested in the nest, which he never went near, but was apparently fascinated by the bark of a tall jacaranda. Over the stream we had two more special sightings. Half the party saw an adult Spotted Eagle-owl perched conspicuously on a jacaranda (yes, the very same jacaranda) surveying the scene – at the same time as the other half had spotted (excuse the pun) what it was surveying – the kids. Two juvenile Spotted Eagle-owls with fluffy ears had stretched long and thin and were pressed tight against the trunk, trying to look like bark.

On past a very attractive acacia plantation housing another White-throated Robin-chat, and several other flittings, twitterings and singings, up a bit of a step which some of us found tricky (and not because we were wearing tight skirts, but more to do with creaking knees). This was well worth negotiating, because it led us to a lovely kopje in the front of which is our hide site where several excellent suggestions on its design were put forward. Also here intense discussion took place on a couple of Little Grebes – were they or were they not Black-necked

Grebes? We think not – but have you ever tried picking out detail on a bird that is constantly under water? Some of the other species we noted during our perambulation around the place were 3 dove species; a solitary Violet-backed Starling in his full glory; Grey Heron, Black-headed Heron, Squacco Heron and Green-backed Herons, Reed Cormorants, Common Moorhen, Little Grebes and a Hamerkop in on or next to the dam; Little Swift and African Palm-swifts circling over the water hawking for insects; and wonderful views of European Bee-eaters dipping then soaring heavenwards showering droplets as they went. White-browed Scrub-robin and White-browed Robin-chats were heard, Rattling Cisticolas rattled all over the place, with a variety of dialects, but identical rattles, and we saw a Groundscraper Thrush, Common Waxbills and Blue Waxbills, a fully clothed Pin-tailed Whydah, Bronze Mannikins and Jameson’s Firefinches.

All in all we listed 54 species – it would have been 56 if our sight of feral geese and sound of a Cuckooshrike hadn’t been disallowed.

We are grateful to Mulusi and Able of the Hillside Dams Trust for their assistance.

**Julia Duprée**

**African Paradise-flycatcher** *Terpsiphone viridis* with a mouthful of building material.



Photo: Betty van der Merwe

Question - Is he or is he not a short-tailed male?  
Note the second short-tailed bird on the nest.

**Raptor ID Course – Kezi Road: 7/8 November 2009**

The third and final session of the Raptor Identification training course was held on Saturday and Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> November 2009 with 22 members present. Unfortunately, we were treated to one of ZESA’s unscheduled power cuts on Saturday afternoon for the lecture portion of the course and so were unable to make use of the video presentation. However, as per normal Professor Peter Mundy rose to the occasion and kept us all enthralled with his witty and informative lecture on the last two raptor groups, namely Falcons/Kestrels and Owls. We were able to listen to a sound track of owl calls off a battery-powered laptop – but this was actually unnecessary as Peter’s vocals were far more effective than the real thing! The Falcon/Kestrel group can be divided into the diving and chasing falcons and the hovering kind. The diving and chasing falcons are the Lanner Falcon, Peregrine Falcon, Taita Falcon, Eleonora’s Falcon, Saker Falcon, Eurasian Hobby and African Hobby and the Bat Hawk. Hovering types are Lesser Kestrel, Rock Kestrel and Greater Kestrel.

On Sunday morning we all assembled at the Churchill Arms for a slow drive out on the Matopos Road for another “raptor hunt”. At our first stop at the gates to Tshabalala we had our first sighting of the “T” shape of the Wahlberg’s Eagle with his pencil-shaped tail and straight wing shape. We “pootled” on to stop again at the site of the old Matopos Hotel – only to find that one of our group had disappeared. They finally arrived to tell us they had seen a group of what they believed to be 15 Lesser Spotted Eagles flying from north to south followed by another 3. They had also been treated to a sighting of Lesser Kestrels hovering over the lands. We all dashed back in the hopes of seeing these birds, but to no avail. On the way back we were stopped by the sighting of a beautiful Tawny Eagle and a couple of Lesser Kestrels hovering over another set of farmlands. During the course of the day we were treated to



several sightings of Wahlberg's Eagles, a Yellow-billed Kite, Brown Snake-eagle, White-backed Vulture and an unusual sighting of a Secretarybird in flight. There was some debate as to whether we had seen a pair of Verreaux's Eagles, but decided we could not credit these to the list as they were too far away for a positive ID. At our stop for morning tea Barn Swallows were plentiful. Besides the raptors, other notable sightings included White Storks in the lands near where the Kestrels were hovering, European Bee-eaters lining up along the telephone wires, and a Black-bellied Bustard (Korhaan).

Once again grateful thanks to Peter Mundy for his input and most interesting and informative discussions during the weekend. We do hope that we can organise the odd outing in the New Year to reinforce the knowledge we have gained. As Peter advised we need to keep on practicing!

**Helen Lewis/Gaynor Lightfoot**

### **Birding Big Day: 14/15 November 2009**

Completed checklists, sponsorship and entries forms from around the country had not all reached the Matabeleland co-ordinator of this event by the time of going to press – so we shall have to wait with baited breath until the February 2010 edition of Babbler to hear how the teams fared this year!

The following is an account of one team's activities.

#### **Birding Big Day Rookie Report**

The Zimbabwean "Birding Big Day" event was scheduled for the weekend of the 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> November, and we "Dambari Hawkeyes" – the Marwell Zimbabwe Trust team comprising a veteran and two rookie Big Dayers and a dog – set a target of at least 100 species and plotted our attack accordingly. Our plan was to concentrate our efforts around Dambari Field Station, 24 km from Bulawayo on the Gwanda Road: an apparent bird paradise where we've recorded in excess of 150 species over the past five years. We'd also make a sojourn to Ncema Dam to pick up waterfowl and if necessary end up in Bulawayo itself to mop up a few more species. We commenced our count at mid-afternoon on Saturday, armed with a variety of field guides, the strongest binos we could muster and a spotting scope. A quick flip around the gardens at Dambari settled us into a decent rhythm, before we set out for Ncema. Apparently dogs are "chick magnets", so Toffee was co-opted into accompanying us in the hopes that she'd work her magic on the feathered variety. We picked up a few species on the way to Ncema, and seemed to annoy only one other motorist en route. It's easy to forget to completely leave the dirt track when one is attempting to identify a bird before it disappears into the scrub... Ncema dam was rather quiet on the small wader front, but provided us with Yellow-billed Storks, African Sacred Ibis and a Woolly-necked Stork, in addition to the larger "old reliable" species one would expect to see. We were also treated to aggressive displays between three adult and two juvenile African Fish-eagles below the dam wall. Following the mandatory sundowners and snacks, we returned home for the evening, where our attempts to listen for night birds were thwarted by the din of the generator. Sunday dawned bright, clear and birdsong-filled – we know, as we were up before sunrise – so we donned our birding kit and sneaked around the field station until breakfast. The list continued to grow at a comfortable rate, despite the conspicuous absence of a few of the purported resident species (fear not – they reappeared on Monday!) and repeat offenders of several species (notably Rattling Cisticolas and Spotted Flycatchers). After an essential caffeine and grub break, and noting with horror the exponential rise in temperature and humidity, we expanded our search to the immediate vicinity of the field station. Toffee, apparently being a sane dog, was less than enthusiastic about a W-A-L-K in the mid-morning heat, but the three determined humans were undaunted. Our toddle was fairly productive, culminating in great sightings of a Black-chested Snake-eagle directly overhead, and a Wahlberg's Eagle catching a thermal nearby. Plus there was a great rarity: three birders agreeing on the ID of a lark! OK, it was a Rufous-naped Lark and hardly the most challenging species, but it's worth a mention. By early afternoon we'd made our 100 target but since we had an hour in hand, a quick jaunt around Hillside Dams was called for. Despite the fact that half of Bulawayo seemed to be there already and there was a storm brewing, we rustled up a further three species, to wrap up our 24 hours with (we think) a respectable 105 species! All in all, it was a great weekend spent birding. Now that we have a target to beat, the 2010 episode can't come soon enough!

**Nicky Lunt**

## **African Waterfowl Census 2009 In Matabeleland**

In January we undertook counts at all but one of our regular sites plus three new areas in the Matobo Hills. Two “ps” prevented us from covering Cowdray Park – precipitation and politics.

In July we were also constrained, this time by lack of funds from the national office. However, thanks to the generosity of Bill & Helen Lewis, Tom and Jean Cranston, Paul Hubbard and Anna Mabrey, who personally funded their trips, dams and pans were covered on the Ngweshla-Kennedy circuit and at the Sinamatella end of Hwange. We are most grateful to these observers.

Results and comparative figures are as follows.

### **SUMMARY JANUARY AND JULY 2009 – BY SITE**

| SITE               | January 2009 |               | July 2009   |               |
|--------------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
|                    | Total Birds  | Total Species | Total Birds | Total Species |
| Aisleby            | 1247         | 39            | 2251        | 35            |
| SAST               | 467          | 20            | 154         | 21            |
| Cowdray Park       | -            | -             | 420         | 22            |
| Matobo Hills       | 132          | 20            | -           | -             |
| Hwange White Hills | 409          | 29            | -           | -             |
| Hwange Ngweshla    | 439          | 32            | 131         | 13            |
| Hwange Sinamatella | -            | -             | 117         | 20            |
| <b>TOTAL</b>       | <b>2694</b>  |               | <b>3073</b> |               |

### **SUMMARY 3 YEARS 2007-2009 – ALL SITES**

|               | 2007    |      |             | 2008    |      |             | 2009    |      |             |
|---------------|---------|------|-------------|---------|------|-------------|---------|------|-------------|
|               | January | July | Total       | January | July | Total       | January | July | Total       |
| Total sites   | 5       | 6    |             | 6       | 5    |             | 5       | 5    |             |
| Total birds   | 5229    | 3153 | <b>8382</b> | 4239    | 1919 | <b>6158</b> | 2694    | 3073 | <b>5767</b> |
| Total species | 69      | 51   |             | 77      | 54   |             | 66      | 52   |             |

Expanded schedules have been submitted to the national office for counts by species for January and July 2009 and the 3year 2007 – 2009 comparison. These are for onward transmission to Wetlands International for the African Waterfowl Census. Copies are available from me at [dalia@netconnect.co.zw](mailto:dalia@netconnect.co.zw). Telephone 09-246269.

### **TOP TEN SPECIES FOR THE TWO COUNTS – JANUARY AND JULY 2009 (All occurred at Aisleby).**

| Species             | January 2009 | Species             | July 2009 |
|---------------------|--------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Cattle Egret        | 438          | Little Grebe        | 830       |
| Red-billed Teal     | 339          | Red-billed Teal     | 466       |
| Blacksmith Lapwing  | 304          | Red-knobbed Coot    | 309       |
| Comb Duck           | 190          | African Sacred Ibis | 224       |
| Ruff                | 155          | Blacksmith Lapwing  | 165       |
| White-faced Duck    | 148          | Cattle Egret        | 130       |
| Wood Sandpiper      | 145          | White-faced Duck    | 128       |
| Red-knobbed Coot    | 130          | Crowned Lapwing     | 63        |
| African Sacred Ibis | 100          | Black-headed Heron  | 54        |
| Little Grebe        | 85           | Hottentot Teal      | 34        |

The overall census figures were well down on those of the previous two years. Particularly good rains this year, most in January and February, resulted in numerous seasonal pans and dams filling throughout the province, giving opportunities for waterfowl to disperse to many temporary wetlands not included in the survey.

Aisleby always produces the highest numbers of most species as well as the widest diversification of species. During the last two years in particular conditions here have changed and are less favourable for waterfowl. The three sewage treatment stations ceased operating in 2007 resulting in a lack of recycled water for the small dams, ponds and irrigation canals throughout the area. The dry pastures and drinking troughs forced cattle numbers to be drastically reduced and thus there was an absence from these areas of the erstwhile large flocks of Cattle Egrets, African Sacred Ibis and Egyptian Goose. However, two of the sewage works are up and running as of now and the water reticulation is already vastly improved. Spur-winged Goose and African Darters were absent from Aisleby – the latter species has not been seen here for some years – and were found only in Hwange. In recent years there has been a notable decline in the numbers of Little Grebe at Aisleby (592 in 2007 to 259 in 2008) but they appear to have bounced back this year to 915.

#### **UNUSUAL SIGHTINGS**

The unusual – but not unknown – appearance at SAST in January of a juvenile Greater Flamingo was a welcome surprise as was the presence of a Goliath Heron in July, a species not previously recorded here and an adult and juvenile Yellow-billed Stork

As a matter of general interest this year the Umgusa Dam at Aisleby received rare visits from flamingos and pelicans, but not on census days! At the end of July an adult and two grey juvenile Lesser Flamingos were swimming with a group of Maccoa Duck. In early August on the same dam two adult and two juvenile Great White Pelicans spent the day. And in October two adult Greater Flamingo were feeding on the main dam. During July four Yellow-billed Stork were seen, two each at SAST (as mentioned above) and Sinamatella; a Common Greenshank over-wintered in the Ngweshla area; and Common Sandpipers stayed over, two at SAST and another two at Aisleby.

We are grateful to the many observers who turned out to help us with our counts. Your support is much appreciated

**Julia Duprée**

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#### **ABIDING BIRD MYSTERIES**

Another ‘mystery’ from our Editor Emeritus, **Michael Irwin** in the series of interesting and intriguing problems that remains unresolved. Hopefully someone will be able to help increase our knowledge and understanding of these birds in the Zambezi Valley, as with the Southern Boubou in the Lowveld in the last issue of *Babbler*.

#### **The Case of the Dark-backed Weaver**

Another species that has yet to give up all its secrets is the Dark-backed Weaver *Ploceus bicolor*, and I refer not so much to the birds of our Eastern Highlands that frequent evergreen forest, but to those in the lower part of the Middle Zambezi Valley where its distribution and status remain very imperfectly understood and it is apparently rare. The very first record away from its true forest habitat goes back many years when a solitary bird was collected along the lower Mazowe River in the Chimanda Communal lands. It was then not until many years later that it was found in the Ruckomechi area of Mana Pools National Park in a habitat comprising largely of deciduous *Acacia albida* woodland with very little sub-storey or thicket and often as well in association with mixed woodland bird parties. But at the same time it was also known from the Zambian side of the Zambezi below Kariba around Mbendele near Siavonga where it was associated with dry deciduous thickets. But strangely, there are no other records from the Zambian side further downstream. Yet there are subsequent records from the vicinity of Ruckomechi and more recently, a very typical nest has been collected from riparian forest upstream from Chirundu and would seem to confirm that there is a breeding population there. However, it does seem to be extremely localised. Of course it may be noted that these weavers are common and widespread in much of Mozambique where there are moist situations and dense thicket cover and not necessarily in direct association with forest so that the species can be adaptable. And it does certainly appear to get around a bit where there is a clearly perfectly acceptable sight record from just outside Harare at Lake Manyame! Some movement or other therefore seems very probable. And I have noticed in the past that while the bird itself

often seems to be elusive, the first evidence of its presence is that of its nest which is often conspicuously placed. It may be simply that it has been largely overlooked and every effort should be made to determine more clearly the true status of the Middle Zambezi population as indeed its conservation status there. The form involved would appear to be the more widespread *stictifrons*, rather than the somewhat darker *sylvanus* found in the Eastern Highlands, which has a more restricted distribution and whose more lowland forest habitat has been extensively destroyed, although it ranges higher in places such as in the Vumba.

But anyway, there is yet another challenge for someone and where there is an opportunity that should not be missed. And what satisfaction it might bring as well!

### **TAIL FEATHERS**

In July this year Ida and I visited our granddaughter, who works for the Kapama Private Game Reserve near Hoedspruit in Mpumalanga. One morning I noticed a Southern Yellow-billed Hornbill beating an object it had in its bill, on the ground. On taking a closer look with my binoculars, I observed it was a Yellow-fronted Canary. The canary appeared to be supple i.e. freshly dead. The hornbill did not swallow it and for about 15 to 20 minutes it kept shaking and beating the canary, while being pursued by three or four other Yellow-billed Hornbills. Eventually it flew off so I don't know whether it ate the canary, nor do I know whether it had killed the canary or found it dead.

**David Gray**

**Colin de Beer** writes:

Our Marondera group recently spent 4 days birding on Tavistock farm at Beatrice. The habitat variation is a little limited but we identified 133 different species. The sighting of hundreds of water-associated birds around the ponds below the dairy was spectacular. Some of us are quite convinced that we saw a pair of Whinchat instead of the similar-looking African Stonechat, The birds were seen a few hundred metres west of the dairy just above a barley field.

(Further investigation will be interesting – we look forward to hearing your comments – *Ed*)

The Mandara area had obviously had a sprinkling of rain in the beginning of November, 2009 as millions of small flying ants (termites) were erupting from lawns and the adjacent vlei to the east of Ness and Wallis Roads and many birds were taking advantage of the feast. Just after 4 p.m. on 6 November, we rounded the corner into Ness Road and stopped to observe Pied Crows and Cattle Egrets feeding on the verges. Overhead we noticed raptors circling and eating too – catching the flying ants in their feet and then passing them up to their beaks. None of them came down to the ground – they were leisurely gliding around and plucking them out of the air! There must have been around 50 Black Kites/Yellow-billed Kites. We had a good look at them – some looking quite tatty with primary feathers missing from wings and gaps in their tails! I think they must have been feeding there for some time and as we watched they caught a thermal and disappeared—some went in an easterly direction and others south over the city. I have never seen Yellow-billed Kites in large numbers like that before.

**Vee Hadingham**

Dunking Crows – Reed-warblers are well known for their practice of dipping dry nesting material into water so as to soften it up for use, but I have been unable to find any record of crows dunking their food in water to soften that up. Some years ago however Alistair Cowan showed me a crow that used to bring bread crusts to his bird bath where it would wet them before eating them. More recently I have had a crow come to my nice new bird bath into which the bird dunks the flattened and desiccated remains of toads that have been run over by cars passing through B.S. Leon cottage complex where we now live. As the frog-biltong softens so the crow has his meal.

Does anybody else have any such records? Are our crows a step ahead of those elsewhere in perfecting this technique? All comments will be welcome

**Alex Masterson**

Please let me know if you have noticed anything like this – *Ed*.

**David Rockingham-Gill** remarks that “the latest *Honeyguide* with a bit of history in it reminds me that when I was librarian before 1980, I had in the archives an envelope, in which was a receipt for 7/6d, to a man called Carol, who was a member of The Rhodesian Ornithological Society in 1907. Many years later I was peering through a South African Who’s Who dated 1910 and listed was a man who owned a hotel in Bulawayo and amongst his accomplishments was being Vice-President of the Rhodesian Ornithological Society at that time.”

**Ian Riddell** has some information from *Honeyguides*...The Rhodesia Bird Club (RBC), founded in 1948 was intended as a branch of the South African Ornithological Society (SAOS), a plan that didn't materialise. In 1951 a meeting was held in Salisbury where it was proposed that the Rhodesian Ornithological Society (ROS) be formed as a branch of the SAOS, and a portion of the annual subscription to be retained by the branch to cover expenses. Approved by the SAOS in August 1951, the ROS was born with 50 members, covering an area including Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). The RBC held its AGM on 25 August 1951 and voted to retain that name, thus two organisations existed with the RBC having a larger membership of 175. The RBC wound up at the end of 1956 and its assets were transferred to the ROS. (It sounds as if a little more research is required – does anyone else know anything about the ROS? – Ed)

The latest update of the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species shows that 17,291 species out of the 47,677 assessed species are threatened with extinction – 21% of mammals, 30% of amphibians, 12% of birds, 28% of reptiles, 37% of freshwater fishes, 70% of plants and 35% of invertebrates assessed so far are under threat and the scientific evidence of a serious extinction crisis is mounting. BirdLife International is the Red List Authority for birds and released the 2009 update for birds earlier in the year, listing 192 species of bird as Critically Endangered (the highest threat category) – a total of two more than in the 2008 update. Dr Leon Bennun, BirdLife's Director of Science and Policy said that in global terms, things continue to get worse – although there are some real conservation success stories to give us hope and point the way forward. Of the world's 9,998 birds, 137 are Extinct or Extinct in the Wild, with 192 Critically Endangered, 362 Endangered and 669 Vulnerable. Many species will not be here in 10 years time and it is not only rare birds that we should be concerned about Birds of prey widespread across Africa are disappearing at an alarming rate and symbolic species such as the Bateleur and Martial Eagle have been uplisted in the BirdLife/IUCN Red List. January sees the launch of the International Year of Biodiversity and the latest analysis of the IUCN Red List shows the 2010 target to reduce biodiversity loss will not be met. It is time for everybody to get serious about climate change and saving species and work together, especially governments, before it is too late.

I have often wondered how to attract more sunbirds to my garden and what sugar solution to put in if I use an artificial feeder. In the October/November 2009 issue of *Birds & Birding* an article on this subject by Mark Brown and Steven Piper (now deceased) tells me. Birds that visit garden nectar feeders fall into two groups – the specialist nectarivores such as sunbirds and the generalist nectarivores that include bulbuls, starlings, white-eyes, weavers and orioles. Plant nectars contain sugar in different forms i.e. sucrose, glucose and fructose and research has shown that although the two groups prefer different sugar types, the best option is an easy-to-prepare solution of 15-25% plain table sugar, (which is sucrose) and which does not ferment too quickly in sun. The solution needs to be changed every couple of days and the container washed thoroughly each time. It is not necessary to add anything to this solution as nectar-feeding birds get nutrients from insects or other sources. However birds that cannot forage for dietary nourishment e.g. captive, will need supplements. To attract both groups of birds, a container that they can drink from easily will usually suffice, but if one wants only sunbirds, a more specialised one is recommended – flower mimics are apparently preferred! It may take a little while for the birds to find it, but look out for other ‘sweet-toothed’ creatures that may be a problem, such as bees! Ed

BirdLife Zimbabwe members can also become members of the **African Bird Club** by paying an annual subscription of twice that of the current BLZ subscriptions. The aims include providing a worldwide focus for African ornithology and to encourage an interest in the conservation of the birds of the region. They publish a twice-yearly colour bulletin which

provides a forum for news, letters, notices, recent publications, expedition results, reviews and results of studies on African birds by contributors throughout the world. The African Bird Club year runs from January to December so if you pay now you will be just in time. Payments can be made through Hazel at the BLZ office.