

BABBLER

The Newsletter of -



BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

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2010 is International Year of Biodiversity

World Wetlands Day 2010

World Wetlands Day is on Tuesday 2 February and is an annual celebration of the importance of wetlands and how vital it is to conserve them. The World Wetlands Day theme for this year on wetlands, biodiversity and climate change is:

Caring for wetlands – an answer to climate change

This year the venue will be the Mukuvisi Woodlands on Hillside Road in Harare and will focus on the Mukuvisi River. A number of schools will be participating. Please make an effort to attend.

Thank you very much to all who contributed to the *Babbler* during the past year (especially Ken Dixon, who takes on the lion's share of outing reports) and to you, the members. I am always very happy to receive contributions, so please continue to send information on what birds you see – when, where, what are they doing? You may not think it is interesting, but it may be something not known and there is so much out there still to find out. Michael Irwin, our EEEOOH (see *Abiding Mysteries* for explanation!) whose brain goes like a train, always has a fascinating question that needs answering. At least please send in your field cards to Colin Baker cbaker@halsteds.co.zw, who does such an excellent job collating the sightings for Field Observations in the *Honeyguide*. Blank forms can be sent by e-mail – contact me or the office. – Ed

Obituary - JOHN SHAW

John Shaw passed away suddenly on 5 December 2009 at Aberfoyle in the Honde Valley, where he, his wife Jeanette, their three children and seven grandchildren were spending a weekend to celebrate his daughter's birthday. John Shaw was born in Cardiff, Wales, but he was fortunate to be able to roam the countryside as soon as he could walk. He delighted in the wonders of nature and grew up into a man for all seasons, imbued with a deep love for the outdoors, a seeker of adventure, and an admirer of all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small. After matriculating, John did his National Service in the Gloucestershire Regiment, serving in Kenya which was then in the throes of the Mau Mau uprising (he was mentioned in despatches for his conduct during operations in the Aberdare mountains), and later, in Aden. But Africa had claimed him and he returned, to climb Mt Kilimanjaro. When there was no job opportunity in Kenya, he went to Northern Rhodesia, where as district administrator and later, commissioner, he and his wife, Jeanette were posted to various small towns and outstations all over the country, including Barotseland, often living under primitive conditions. The first three of their four children were born during this adventurous period of their lives. Many of John's official tours were on foot, with a string of porters following a man carrying perhaps not a rifle, but certainly a pair of binoculars! This kind of life provided him with wonderful opportunities for observing and recording the birdlife in remote places. Later they moved to Southern Rhodesia, where John was employed by the Cotton Marketing and Grain Marketing Boards, when his work and call-ups during the war involved much travelling, enabling him to indulge in his hobbies of birding and butterfly collecting. For 23 years, until 2006, John was capably at the helm of Fumigation Services.

John became a member of the Rhodesian Ornithological Society in 1967, where he was soon recognized as a noteworthy amateur ornithologist. An astute observer, blessed with excellent eyesight and not disinclined to put pen to paper, he wrote several articles and a great many short notes and observations which were published in *Honeyguide* over the decades. He built up an impressive ornithological library over the years. For almost 20 years, he led the monthly bird count walks in the Mukuvisi Woodlands, becoming intimately acquainted with this prime birding area as well as the Cleveland dam area, studying nightjar behaviour largely on his own. John visited many places including Hippo Pools, Nyanga, Chimanimani and for at least the last 18 years, shared regular rough camping trips on the lower Runde River in Gonarezhou and later at Mana Pools, with two other 'dagga boys'. He also made a number of journeys to the East - Australia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and India, never missing an opportunity to acquaint himself with the birdlife.

He will be remembered for his sometimes uncanny ability to spot a bird sitting on the far side of a bush without the use of his pre-WW2 Zeiss binoculars and his deep knowledge of birds, accumulated largely through personal observations in the field. His hobbies were varied, including reading, fly-fishing and horse racing. He was a man one could depend on – be it a business deal; on a canoeing trip down the Sabi River; an extended hike in the Chimanimani mountains or around a campfire where his toast of 'happy days' was invariably heard when glasses were raised. A true gentleman, John was an outgoing and generally gregarious person with an infectious laugh, who always made the best of any situation. BirdLife Zimbabwe has lost one of its outstanding members, and we convey our sincere condolences to his family.

Rolf Chenux-Repond

The British Ornithologists Union (BOU) supported by BTO; Department of Energy & Climate Change; Durham University; Natural England; RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage are hosting a **conference on Climate Change & Birds** from 6–8 April 2010 at the University of Leicester, UK. The programme

will include terrestrial and marine environments, provide an update on the impacts of climate change and of mitigation measures, and consider adaptation strategies, including those for the network of protected sites. The scope is international. I can e-mail further details and the programme to anyone interested or look on their website www.bou.org.uk

BRANCH FORTHCOMING EVENTS

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

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 3rd 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. Pies and meals like lasagne, spaghetti bolognese, cottage pie and chicken curry can also be ordered when the list goes round at the beginning of the meeting – either to eat there or take home and pop into the microwave.

Thursday 18 February – Birds of the Night – Part 3

We have heard from Tony Alegria about owls and nightjars and he will be concluding his intriguing series with 'the others'.

Thursday 18 March – Winter Visit to Botswana

Julia Pierini will be talking to us about her trip to Botswana and the interesting birds and sights at that time of the year.

Saturday 20 February – 7 a.m.: Ewanrigg Botanic Gardens

Always an enjoyable venue with a variety of sunbirds, and the migrants will still be in evidence. Meet at CABS. Please note that this outing will finish later than usual due to the distance from Harare.

Saturday 20 March – 7 a.m.: Haka Park

Meet at the gate to the Park where there will be an entry fee – allow \$3 per person and \$3 per car. The fenced portion has now been trebled so there is a larger protected area to enjoy. The pretty little African pygmy-goose is usually seen as well as woodland and grassland birds.

Sunday 7 February and 7 March – 6.30 a.m.: Mukuvisi Woodlands

Rarely seen around Harare, a Eurasian Golden Oriole and European Rollers were spotted here last month. Turn off the Chiremba Road into Ford Road (opposite Queensdale shops) and continue down to Blatherwick Road (T-junction). Turn right and the gate is about 150 metres on the left. Bring chairs and refreshments and a reasonable tip for the guard, taking into account the value of your vehicle!

Sunday 14 February and 14 March – 6.30 a.m.: Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary

There is the possibility of seeing Lesser Jacana and Common Moorhen, Allen's Gallinule, African Rail and European Honey-buzzard. Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West. Remember to bring chairs and refreshments.

Sunday 21 February and 21 March – 7:00 a.m.: Monavale Vlei Walk

A Dwarf Bittern was seen here recently and there should have been some rain to make this venue very worthwhile. Paths have been cut so you need not slosh around too much. Meet on the BS Leon side of Fenella Drive.

Sunday 28 February 6.30 a.m.: Ngomakurira

We have not been to this venue for a while. Meet at CABS.

Sunday 28 March – 6.30 a.m.: Xanadu Farm, Ruwa

There is a variety of habitats to explore at this pleasant venue. Meet at Mukuvisi Woodland main car park.

MATABELELAND BRANCH

Saturday 6 February: Waterfowl Census Cowdray Park

To be confirmed. The road in to Cowdray Park is in a very poor state of repair so this outing will depend on prevailing weather conditions. Contact Julia for further details phone 246269.

Saturday 20 February: Matabeleland Branch Annual General Meeting

The branch AGM will be held at 10:30 a.m. at the home of John and Jenny Brebner, 24a Inverlieth Road, Burnside. Please bring your own chairs and refreshments and plan to stay on after the meeting for lunch. Braai fires available. Contact Adele for further details; phone (w) 280029/030, (h) 882242 or (c) 011-366917.

Sunday 14 March: Verreaux’s Eagle Survey Briefing

To be confirmed. The traditional start of season briefing will be held at Ndungu Guest House. Contact Cecilia for details; phone (h) 285666 or (c) 0912-433733

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 0913-524844 or pgwidibira@mutare.matanuska.co.zw for details.

Other Areas – Those members in other areas – please send me any details of events and short accounts 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

Results of the **Birding Big Day 2009** event! Unfortunately there was no entry in the Garden Section, but we will hopefully be able to encourage some for next year. And what a shame that the Turaco Tea Totallers were unable to make the date or they would have won their category hands down – but very sporting of them to take part nevertheless!

Matabeleland sponsorship raised to date amounts to US\$407, SAR220, BP10 with more to come in. This is a wonderful effort and the funds come just when we need them most for all our activities in 2010 – in the absence of any support from the National Office. Mashonaland branch have donated to the Library Fund.

Thank you all very much for participating in this event. Think about taking part in the 36-hour section next year, which is terrific. You will have worked out that what it amounts to is that you count for 12 daylight hours on the first day, rest for 12 dark hours that night (keeping one ear open for owls and the other for nightjars), and then count for another 12 daylight hours on the second day – it gives you the chance to actually watch and enjoy birds, not just count and run because you’re against the clock. If you have any comments or suggestions please let us know. Just a reminder (in case you had something in mind) – THE JUDGES’ DECISION IS FINAL – so ‘e and oe’ are irrelevant and complaints about the results cannot be entertained.

Julia Duprée

Counts undertaken on 15-16 November 2009

POSITION	TEAM	MEMBERS	SCORE
36 hour category			
1st	The Chickchats	Cecilia Hubbard Julia Duprée Sandy McAdam Penny Feather	191
2nd	Grey-headed Bush Shrikes	Bill Lewis Helen Lewis Tom Cranston Jean Cranston	124
24 hour category			

1 st	Variable Team 3x3	Tony Alegria Ian Riddell Geoff Lowe Ken Dixon	159
2 nd	Harare Harriers	Richard Dennison Ken Wilson Luke Wilson Di Rushforth	158
3 rd	Dambari Hawkeyes	Nicky Lunt Adele Edwards	105
4 th	Louw Toppies	Innes Louw Riana Louw	99
5 th	Fishing Lightfeet	Gaynor Lightfoot Elton Lightfoot	70

24 hour category – undertaken on 28 November 2009 – so out of time

N/A	Turaco Tea Totalers	Gavin Blair Marjorie Blair Darryl Tiran	176
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The Director, Chip Chirara reports:

Our birds continue to face serious threats, mainly from human activities. Habitat destruction and disturbance, egg collections and general persecution are some of the threats recorded in 2009. Wattled Crane and Grey Crowned Cranes in the Driefontein Grasslands are under renewed threats from local communities. There are reported cases of groups of egg collectors who are also targeting Kori Bustards. BLZ has received support from the Prins Bernhard Foundation in the Netherlands to combat this threat.

Our website has been revamped but our host has been facing challenges. We hope to have it up and running again at the end of January 2010. Should you have articles for the website, please send them to the Director. The site is updated by the 25th of every month.

Togarasei Fakarayi was fortunate to be sponsored to attend the **Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen**. The following is his report:

The changing climate is no longer an abstract issue; rather it is something that needs urgent attention. The reality of climate change is being felt by everyone, everywhere. Climate change impacts including droughts, crop failure, flooding, sea-level rise and extreme weather events are already being felt across the world, with the poorest people and vulnerable ecosystems being hit hardest. Africa is no exception – hundreds of millions of people are already suffering from the effects of climate change and are being frustrated in their efforts to escape poverty.

The Climate Change Conference had strong representation from BirdLife International, with 18 representatives from partners – I represented BirdLife Zimbabwe. In Copenhagen, BirdLife was working as one family and covered a wide spectrum of activities ranging from policy analysis and advocacy, lobbying governments through meetings with delegates, joint work with other NGOs, and developing future collaborations. BLI was also involved in internal planning and sharing knowledge through daily meetings and workshops, organising and attending high level meetings and other events. A new agreement on climate change policy was negotiated by the Conference of Parties (COP) in Copenhagen. It was a major opportunity for Governments to sign up to a legally binding agreement to address emission reductions and adaptation to climate change. NGOs and other civil society organisations were observers but played a crucial role in influencing the negotiation process for a fair deal. BirdLife's policy was to advocate for a global deal that must:

- Cut global emissions by the amount needed to limit global average temperature rises to less than 2° Celsius above pre-industrial levels.
- Recognise and support the vital importance of safeguarding biodiversity, ecosystems and the essential services they provide in climate change mitigation, in particular, reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation (REDD). Recognise and support the vital importance of

safeguarding biodiversity, ecosystems and the essential services they provide in climate change adaptation.

- Provide funding for developing countries to reduce emissions from deforestation, support low-carbon development and enable adaptation to climate change in developing countries.
- Ensure that when developed countries account for their land use sectors they fully account for carbon emissions to and removals from, the atmosphere.

BirdLife was able to make recommendations to governments and the international community on climate change policy, processes, planning and action, building on and highlighting our unique local-to-global structure and strong science base. BirdLife is an active member of the Climate Action Network (CAN), a worldwide network of 450 Non-Governmental Organisations working to promote action by governments and individuals that will limit human-induced climate change to ecologically sustainable levels.

Major negotiation themes were Adaptation, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD), Shared vision and Finance. My area of interest was adaptation to climate change and I was in the group tracking this theme. Most developing countries wanted a deal that put additional funds for adaptation and cater for vulnerable people and countries. They also wanted a deal that would reflect reduction of greenhouse gases by industrialised countries to required standards. BirdLife Adaptation Group wanted ecosystem text to be reflected in the Copenhagen output on adaptation and shared vision.

Besides the conference, there were a number of side events and one of these was the BirdLife workshop held at DOF offices (BirdLife Denmark), where we reviewed the negotiations, shared experiences and planned for post COP. Climate Change has been incorporated in the regional and global programmes of BirdLife International. Other events I attended were for Wetlands International, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Development and Climate Days organised by International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), and a NABU reception on climate change mitigation and adaptation in Africa.

Unfortunately the Copenhagen Conference outcome was not impressive – it failed to deliver for the people and planet – no targets, no time bound or legal commitment and less-than-anticipated adaptation funds. Various outcomes are on the UNFCCC website: <http://unfccc.int/2860.php> and http://unfccc.int/files/meetings/cop_15/application/pdf/cop15_cph_auv.pdf.

Regardless of the political outcome, the COP obviously helped BirdLife people to work together and a climate change network was created where we will share experiences and knowledge at regional and global levels. The workshop was very useful as it developed staff from BirdLife Partnerships on climate change programmes. Although the final COP outcome was not what was wanted, there remains much to be done in 2010 and I think we can be very pleased and proud of what we achieved as a Partnership.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dansk Ornitologisk Forening (BirdLife Denmark) for their hospitality and guidance. Special thanks to Melanie Heath for coordinating activities relating to Copenhagen and seeking funding for myself and other Partners.

Important Bird Areas (IBA) Monitoring Project Report

There were visits to Matobo Hills, Hwange National Park, Batoka Gorge, Chizarira National Park, Middle Zambezi Valley, Robert Mcllwaine Recreational Park, Nyanga Mountains, Stapleford Forest, Chimanimani Mountains, Chirinda Forest and Save-Runde Junction from October to December 2009 to carry out assessments, surveys and follow ups on IBA monitoring teams. IBA Monitoring forms for the 2009 monitoring period were submitted by site monitoring teams in the 11 IBAs. Wabai Hill (Debshan Ranch) and Sebakwe Poort in non-protected areas were also visited to see their general status. Four adult Grey Crowned Cranes and one Black Stork were birds of particular interest at Wabai Hill and Sebakwe Poort respectively. There were reports by local people that the Cape Vulture is still found at Wabai Hill and is seen each time there is a carcass at the vulture restaurants. None of the Cape Vultures were seen during the time of visit. There is need to monitor Wabai Hill and Sebakwe Poort to establish data on bird populations or index of abundance as well as other information such as roosting, nesting and breeding.

Preparations have also begun to develop the 2009 National IBA Status Report that will be published by October 2010. Members who have completed IBA monitoring forms in 2009 are kindly requested to submit them to the office.

Kanisios Mukwashi - IBA National Project Manager

Library Report

The Library has received *Handbook of Birds of the World Volume 14* and *Southern African Birdfinder: where to find 1 400 bird species in southern Africa and Madagascar*; Callan, Cohen *et al.* Thank you to Rita Mills and Rolf Chenaux-Repond for their donations. Those of you who have finished reading *Honeyguide* and thinking of throwing them out, please return them to the library, or we can arrange for collection. library@blz.co.zw or 481496/490208)

BLZ members have donated US\$1075 to the Library Fund which will go towards the purchase of the container – the target is US\$2500 plus, so we are getting on very well. Many thanks to all those who have donated. The Library will not be housed in the container, but in the existing and to-be-revamped store room!

Library student, Memory Manzongo, will assist you should you wish to visit the library – 8.30 a.m.– 4.30 p.m. but closed 1-2 p.m. It is always useful however to 'phone first to check the library is open!

Dorothy Wakeling – Librarian

Searching for African Pittas: 11-14 December 2009

Geoff proposed a trip to look for African Pitta at the Zimbabwe Hunters Association's Nyakasanga fishing camp at the mouth of the Nyakasanga River (QDS: 1529C3) from 11 to 14/12/09 and four people participated in this outing. This river mouth empties into the Zambezi River about 25 km downstream of Chirundu and the campsite is on the upstream bank and surrounded by mixed riverine woodland, containing about a hectare of jesse bush which merges with mopane woodland inland. It was in this jesse bush that there was suitable habitat for the Pitta and it certainly appeared to be so when we investigated it. Ken J, who is a member of ZHA, arranged to ferry us from Tiger Fishing Safaris at Chirundu to the campsite as it was doubtful that a 4x4 vehicle could get through the sticky, black clay stretches on the dirt access road during the rains. As it turned out we had quite a lot of rain, so this was a wise decision. Our first afternoon was largely spent pumping water into the camp storage tank and settling in, so the only birds we identified were around the camp or on the river. That night it rained hard. After breakfast we went for a walk along the bank to the Nyakasanga mouth and returned via the road at the back of the camp. There was a lot of water in pools, some of which were quite deep and the black mud was very clinging. Large numbers of frogs of various types were calling from the larger pools – and even Geoff could not be sure where they disappear to when these pools dry up.

It was such a pleasure to be birdwatching in the Zambezi Valley in the rains when the summer migrants are around, so I was eagerly anticipating possible additions to my life list. Birds were plentiful and the checklist grew quite quickly but by mid-morning we had not heard or seen any Pittas. However, we did manage to hear Livingstone's Flycatcher and see 2 Woolly-necked Stork, several Purple-banded Sunbirds and Collared Sunbird and large numbers of African Openbills and Violet-backed Starling. Possibly the best sighting of the whole trip was that of 8 adult Painted Hunting Dog in the Nyakasanga river bed. They were about 300 metres from us and we started to walk towards each other, but after about 50 metres the dogs started to back away so we left them in peace. We decided to go for our next walk back to the river in the afternoon and because Ken was armed (being a licenced hunter) he was able to safely lead us through the thick jesse bush in the first part of our afternoon amble – this enabled us to see Black-throated Wattle-eye and Eastern Nicator.

Sunday morning was 'hunt the Pitta' morning, so equipped with a lap top computer we entered the jesse and played the Pitta call while sitting still in various likely spots. Alas no Pittas were heard or seen, but we did see Red-throated Twin-spot, Green-winged Pytilia and Bearded Scrub-robin. We were also much entertained by the mimicry of a Red-capped Robin-chat which flitted through our midst on one occasion. That afternoon we explored the jesse upstream of the camp and continued into the mopane woodland and a grassy plain. Highlights on this walk included 2 White-backed Vulture, Western Banded Snake-eagle and Bateleur.

On the last morning the boat was due to pick us up at 10 a.m. so we did a quick but longish walk further into the mopane along the road and managed to see a White Stork, a flock of Retz's Helmet-shrike and a Side-striped Jackal. At our final call-over we had 105 birds on our list and some of the highlights not already mentioned include 3 Black Heron, 3 Crested Guineafowl, 2 African Mourning Dove, 4 Jacobin Cuckoo together, 3 African Emerald Cuckoo, 3 Woodland Kingfisher, 1,000 Barn

Swallow, 2 Mosque Swallow and 5 Red-billed Oxpecker. My hope for lifers of Barred Long-tailed and Thick-billed Cuckoos and Shelley's Sunbird did not materialise. The mammals and reptiles not already mentioned and which were based on sightings, spore and calls included lion, leopard, hyaena, elephant, hippo, crocodile, waterbuck, kudu, bushbuck, impala, warthog, baboons and monkeys.

Richard Dennison

Pittas were seen at Masoka in the Zambezi Valley in December and a report by Gary Douglas will appear in *Honeyguide*. Anybody else seen Pittas? Please let me know as Michael Irwin has an article in the pipeline. Michael has also said he is happy to give advice on what other birds to look out for if anybody is going to an area specially to see certain species – *Ed*.

Bird Ringing Workshop held at LAKE CHIVERO: 5 – 10 January 2010

It was a great relief when Kobie Raijmakers, Tony Raijmakers and Josef Heymans, the South African trainers, drove up our driveway on 5 January, as they promised they would, having over-nighted at Great Zimbabwe. Intense planning began with Kobie in July 2009 and networking our local ringers Peter Mundy, Tracey Couto, Dave Dalziel and the BLZ office began in August, with Peter Mundy bussing up from Bulawayo in October to attend the Workshop Planning Meeting which was well attended! Geoff Lowe and Tracey Couto followed up on this with a ringing demonstration at Mukuvisi Woodlands in December to expose future trainees to the rigours of the activity!

All of this effort paid off as the Workshop ran smoothly and quite beyond all our expectations – it was an amazing, uplifting and highly energized week. 19 trainees – eleven of them young people – 6 trainers and support folk brought the numbers attending up to 28 – who arrived at Jacana Yacht Club on the first day. They pitched their tents, checked the ringing station at the LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY, and later that afternoon received training in setting up nets from the South Africans, on the lawns at Jacana. What great excitement when the first bird of the Workshop, a female Giant Kingfisher arrived in the net.

The 60mm rainfall which lasted the whole of our first night was of concern and prevented our 3.45 a.m. departure for the ringing site! A second downpour ended the ringing session later in the morning. Two sessions were held at the Sanctuary but after re-traps, a new ringing site was located – JB Ranches, with the permission of the landlord. These open grasslands and vleis proved to be very productive and were used for the rest of the workshop.

Carla and Julia Pierini arose daily at 2 a.m. to prepare tea and coffee for the participants and Jacana was evacuated for the ringing site within a couple of hours... the 45 or so nets were up before dawn and the 6 ringing tables ready to receive the birds, which were rapidly removed from the nets. The trainees were organized into groups which rotated between the 6 trainers in order to learn the different techniques. The training was of the highest standard and the strictest discipline and Kobie gave evening Power Point presentations on feathers and moult. Altogether 72 different species were recorded and 460 individual birds ringed. A detailed report on this Workshop is to appear shortly in *Honeyguide*. Birds that attracted much interest were the Corn Crake, Little Bittern, Thrush Nightingale, Common Whitethroat and Stierling's Wren-warbler and 9 other warbler species and both Southern Masked-weavers and Lesser Masked-weavers caught at the same time.

Jacana proved to be a perfect home for us all, storms and twisters aside, and we extend our thanks to Des and Sue Fenner and their staff for making us so welcome. Thanks to Anne Heelas for arranging the booking. Carla Pierini worked like an absolute trojan, together with assistant Andie, in providing our meals – this was very much appreciated and meant we could focus on the Workshop. Innocent Magunje worked hard at liaison from the BLZ office – not easy over the Christmas period – finalizing the list of participants. Our trainers Peter, Tracey and Dave took time off work to train us and the South Africans Kobie, Tony and Josef donated their time and made considerable effort to get up here. Kobie put together training files for each of us. He and his team donated three 12m state-of-the-art mist nets to BLZ which will be used by Peter, Tracey and Dave to continue with training. We were overwhelmed by, and most appreciative of, this generous donation as our equipment is aged and new equipment not easy to obtain. One very hard worker in the back ground was Ferdie Couto – quietly getting on with Tracey setting up nets and assisting with the training and removal of birds from the nets. A very big thanks to this remarkable group of trainers for their time, effort, equipment and considerable expertise. This Workshop would not have been possible otherwise. It was very pleasing to have so many youthful people taking part in the Workshop: Nick Hart, Forest Worsley, Jean Blake and Alan Morris – Luke Wilson and Erin Murphy were unable to attend but are keen to get involved. NUST students Angela Nyadenga and Welensky Madheneke, who are Professor Mundy's students on attachment to BLZ for a year, attended this Workshop as did Fadzai Matsvimbo and

Innocent Magunje, BLZ staff, and Tongayi Mwedzi, Curator of Ornithology at the Bulawayo Natural History Museum. This is most encouraging – I see these young people as future contributors to ornithology, bird ringing, bird photography and bird conservation in Zimbabwe. It was good to have Neil Deacon and Neil Goodwin bring to the Workshop their extensive knowledge of raptors through their falconry experience.

Outcomes:

- It was agreed at the Workshop that BLZ Ringing Organizer Peter Mundy and his team – Dave Dalziel and Tracey Couto will decide on the methods of assessment and standard required for acquiring A-Grade ringer status and recommend to the BLZ Director those who have achieved this standard. The BLZ Director will then recommend these ringers to AFRING for registration. New A-Grade Ringers will then be able purchase their own rings and mist nets and submit their records through AFRING. B-Grade ringers are those with experience in ringing a single group of birds such as raptors or waterfowl and who have been assessed by an A-Grade ringer as being competent, with the same procedures being followed as for A-Grade ringers. C-Grade ringers are trainees. A and B-Grade ringers will require two years of active ringing experience after qualifying before being permitted to train.
- BLZ Office will secure permits to trap on behalf of ringers and permission to ring in Zimbabwe's National Parks, from the National Parks Authority.
- Those interested in continuing with ringing training will contact the trainers to arrange outings. Trainees will contribute to the trainers' expenses in order to lighten the financial burden. Trainees will accumulate their own equipment such as rulers, pliers, Vernier callipers, scales etc.
- Measured Effort Sites will be selected for training.
- Formal workshops will be held twice a year – the next one mid-year in Matabeleland. Hopefully the next Mashonaland workshop will be held at the same time and place in January 2011.

So after many years of lapse in the bird ringing training field in Zimbabwe, which can be attributed to the prevailing socio-economic circumstances, I feel things are up and running again. We have also made new friends in working with Kobie, Tony and Josef and cannot know what an invaluable connection this is for us and for them. We have been isolated for so long, it is stimulating to expand our horizons, and confirm that we are still very skilled in this arena! Kobie has written today to say he and Tony have acquired 5 more new nets, plus some used nets and other callipers, to contribute to BLZ ringing training efforts! We are so grateful.

A successful training exercise was held at Monavale Vlei on 23 January, with Dave Dalziel and 10 trainees taking part. 46 birds were ringed with a flock of Southern Masked-weavers in the majority!

Dorothy Wakeling – BLZ Bird Ringing Workshop Co-ordinator

Contact: piumosso@zol.co.zw or 304298 and 0912-376506

MASHONALAND

The Mashonaland branch held their **Annual General Meeting** on 21 January. The chairman, Tony Alegria, thanked all those who had made their properties available for members to look at birds. The most popular outings have been the regular walks at Mukuvisi Woodland, the various venues on the last Sunday of the month and some of the Saturday morning ones, especially the Botanic Gardens. The leaders were thanked, especially Richard Dennison and Dave Dalziel as well as all those speakers who gave their time to present a variety of very interesting evening talks – the attendance at these has been steadily increasing and Avondale Sports Club were thanked for providing the venue. Ken Wilson and Dave Dalziel stood down from the committee and Julia Pierini was voted onto it. Tony Alegria thanked the committee for their contribution over the past year and assured members that Dave Dalziel would still lead the Mukuvisi and Saturday outings.

Dave Dalziel reported that the Mukuvisi Woodlands are in good condition at present, although there has been an increase in illegal wood chopping and the river is frequently poisoned from factories upstream. The staff work hard trying to control the destruction and should be supported. The month with the most species recorded was December – 115 – and 170 species were seen during the year. Dave can e-mail a list of birds seen every month to anyone interested. Most of the Mukuvisi specials are still to be found – Spotted Creeper, Miombo Blue-eared Starling and Whyte's Barbets, Miombo Tit, White-breasted Cuckooshrike and Southern Hyliota. Cabanis's Bunting was seen in January. However there were no records of Miombo Rock-thrush or Southern Black Tit this year.

The Woodlands support a good variety of small raptors and many were seen over the year such as Black Sparrowhawk, Lizard Buzzard, Little Sparrowhawk, Gabar Goshawk and Shikra. Members were reminded of the hide overlooking the dam at the Woodland which is little utilised – the key can be collected at the main entrance.

Richard Dennison reported a slight reduction in fish and wood poaching at the LAKE CHIVERO BIRD SANCTUARY since a National Parks presence returned, but up to 20 poachers have been seen at a time and unfortunately they have now burnt the hide down completely. The significant reduction in the population of fish-eating birds and birds breeding on Bird Island noted previously has persisted into 2009 as netting of fish has continued around that island and the sanctuary. The annual species count was 187, which was low and 3 less than last year and the total number of species recorded since 1992 rose by 1 to 325. The 74 Great Egrets in September, 8 Allen's Gallinule in February, 235 Grey-headed Gull in August, 26 African Fish-eagle in March and the record numbers of Lesser Masked-weaver are noteworthy. Of concern however is that some birds are becoming scarcer in the sanctuary – African Marsh-harrier and White-winged Tern were last recorded 4 years ago, Common Scimitarbill and Whyte's Barbet 3 years ago, only Cardinal Woodpecker was recorded in the last 2 years and no Miombo Tits and Southern Black Tits in the last 5 years, possibly due to human disturbance.

The total number of species seen at MONA VALE VLEI during 2009 was 163, down from the 2008 total of 165 – however, the total bird list has risen to 220 from 208. BLZ Vlei Scout Jimmy Muropa can be contacted on 0912-772771 to arrange a time if you would like a walk other than the 3rd Sunday of the month and regular reports on birds seen appear in *Babbler*. New species are being added all the time. Dorothy Wakeling was instrumental with Steve Davies in helping the Conservation Society of Monavale (COSMO) successfully obtain a small grant from UNDP for funding to run the Monavale Vlei Biodiversity Project, which includes removing alien flora, monitoring and evaluation, awareness to other communities, schools, municipal and government officials on the link between vleis and our water supply. One practical aspect of the biodiversity awareness is the Indigenous Tree Nursery, which has over 8000 trees of 58 different species, with 2000 more to be grown before the end of this year and compiled data as to how to germinate the different seeds. The plants are ready for sale at US\$1 - \$2 each and can be purchased at the Nursery, 2 Fenella Drive, Monavale or ring Tapfuma Muriro on 0914-066360. The funds go back into sustaining the project. Livelihood enhancement is another aspect of the project and composting and vermiculture to enhance vegetable gardens and process kitchen waste has been very successful with farming of worms for domestic wormeries which are now being distributed to households in the rural areas as well as the low and high density suburbs of Harare.

Of concern for all of Harare's wetlands is apparent new development seen on the vleis. If anyone notices any development please contact either Steve Davies on 308302 or 011-636458 or Dorothy on 0912-376506 or 304298 who are in constant contact with officials who deal with this. The City and EMA (Environment Management Agency) need our support.

An update on the Umfurudzi Raptor Survey was given by Neil Deacon, who mentioned that little is known about how raptors utilise miombo habitat – for example, of the 30 different species so far found 14 breed in miombo, and that of 138 sites identified, 54 are active. Very interesting data is emerging. For instance there are 5-6 pairs of African Crowned Eagles in a relatively small area which utilise the same food as the African Hawk-eagle and Verreaux's Eagles – what is supporting them? A Martial Eagle was observed trying to eat an African Hawk-eagle chick. This is a unique opportunity to see raptors close up and BLZ members are urged to take part in this survey, which is mainly around the Hippo Pools area for easy access. Neil needs a lot of help during September to November this year, so please contact him on 011-607538 or neil@dab.co.zw

Bird Ringing Demonstration at Mukuvisi Woodlands – 6 December 2009

The Couto family – Ferdie, Tracey, their son Antonio and his girlfriend, Camilla and I met at Geoff's house early that morning. Geoff, Ferdie and Innocent Magunje with help from the Mukuvisi Woodlands' staff and had already had the vegetation at the chosen ringing site cut back so `all` we had to do was put up the mist nets. How does a mist net work anyway? Firstly they are erected in an area in which the target species occur and set so that they are as concealed as possible from the birds in flight, against a dark background or in the shade. Tracey is a qualified `A`-ringer and both she and Ferdie have had many years of accumulated ringing experience, a lot of which they have passed on to their son, Antonio. As a result, the setting up of the nets, the retrieval of the trapped birds from the nets, the processing and subsequent freeing of the birds went smoothly and did not cause undue stress or injury to the birds.

The SAFRING Bird Ringing Manual gives an accurate description of the purpose of this activity – “Bird ringing has been described as the research tool that produced the most important results in ornithology during the 20th century. Much of our insight into bird movements and migration, and our knowledge of population dynamics, exists because individual birds have been uniquely marked and subsequently found either at the place of original capture or at another location. It is only by making a bird individually identifiable that we can learn about that individual’s movement, longevity and social associations. In this way, aspects of the life histories of a large number of bird species have gradually been unravelled, giving new understanding of the movement of birds as well as raising a whole new set of questions relating to causes and factors contributing to population movement, dynamics and behaviour.”

By the time BLZ members and visitors arrived at the ringing location the first birds were being carefully extracted from the nets. One of the first to be extracted – to everyone’s amazement – was an immature male Tambourine Dove! Only one had ever previously been recorded at these first-Sunday-of-the-month Mukuvisi Woodland walks (also a male)! The group was broken up and alternated viewing the bird ringing demo and going on the traditional bird walk around the woodlands. Tracey – with the help of Erin Murphy who acted as scribe – ringed and recorded the details (measurements, weight etc.) of the following birds: the Tambourine Dove, Speckled Mousebird (a Red-faced Mousebird was also caught but got away thanks to my maladroitness as I opened the bag holding it!), Terrestrial Brownbul, 2 palaeartic migrant Garden Warblers, 7 intra-African migrant and resident African Reed-warblers, 3 Red-faced Cisticolas, 2 Dark-capped Yellow Warblers and 2 male and a female Variable Sunbirds. (Southern Masked-weavers and Dark-capped Bulbuls were also caught but not ringed). The opportunity bird ringing gives to studying birds ‘up close’ is invaluable...and frankly awe-inspiring! Therefore a big thank you for a successful morning must go to Geoff for organizing the event, to the Coutos for all the hard work they put in to set up and run the bird ringing demo, to Erin Murphy for helping with the processing and to Rolf Chenaux-Repond who, having bird ringing experience himself, assisted with the extraction of the birds from the nets.

Julia Pierini

Peterhouse Wilderness Area – 24 December 2009

Gosho Park is a well known birding site in the Marondera area, especially good for miombo birds. However, it lacks a large water body and is surrounded by agricultural lands and considerable human settlement and birding here can often produce quality without quantity! The highway surveyors did a good job keeping to the watershed, as going east from Marondera, this left side of the road drains into the Nyakambiri Catchment, which drains into the Nyagui and then Mazowe, eventually emptying into the Zambezi. Over the road is Peterhouse Boys’ school which drains into the Ruzawi Catchment, which empties into the Macheke and then Save River which leaves our country by Gonarezhou in the south east lowveld. From the boys’ school, one can look down into a valley covered with miombo woodland and *gomos* and there is little sign of modification to the habitat until some 5 km down the valley, where the hills end and farming could develop. Even though all the land is sectioned off as farms, it still remains surprisingly untouched. Peterhouse’s property extends down the valley for a further 3 km or so, after which there is no evidence of having reached any boundary, and one can simply carry on walking through beautiful miombo-clad hills, interspersed with little rivers, which stop flowing shortly after the rains end.

With these differences in mind, several local birders decided to at last take a walk through here. There are two dams, not particularly large, but certainly bigger than those in Gosho and which during the rains hold a fair amount of water. The various egrets, herons, ducks and the ever present Black Crake do make a change from the other side of the road. We arrived a bit late, but in a few hours we counted 56 species, and apart from the waterbirds, we recorded some specials. In one bird party alone we saw Red-faced Crombec, Southern Hylia, Miombo Tit and Grey Penduline-tit, Spotted Creeper and Cabanis’s Bunting amongst the other more common species and at the end of the larger dam, Lesser Moorhen. I have actually birded briefly here before and can also report species like Red-chested Flufftail, Ovambo Sparrowhawk and further down the valley, I am aware of two African Crowned Eagle nests, which used to be active a few years ago. With such good habitat, more effort will almost certainly produce other specials like the Western Violet-backed Sunbird, Miombo Rock-thrush and Rufous-bellied Tit. I would be particularly interested to record Collared Flycatcher here. There is only one other place apart from Gosho where I have seen this species, but the new farmers have destroyed the trees to make way for fields. Recently some South African birders spotted the Collared Flycatcher at Gosho on their first afternoon – these birds are seen within the same area year

after year and it would be interesting to hear from other birdwatchers whether the same pattern of predictability has been noticed?

Damian Newmarch, Nyamwera Farm, Marondera.

Monavale Vlei – 17 January 2010

Sunday was my second walk on the vlei that week as there is always something there to delight and surprise. On Wednesday Jimmy and I had seen African Cuckoo Hawk, Cuckoo Finch, Black Coucal, 4 Levaillant's Cuckoo and we heard a River Warbler. Sunday was just as kind to the dozen of us who attended.

During the week, a working party had already removed all the alien species and slashed a broad path along the streams. This makes the walk so much easier be it wet or dry and we thank them. There was an amazing abundance of birds in the reeds and grass. Most of course were very common like the Southern Red Bishop, Red-collared Widowbird, Yellow-mantled Widowbird, Little Rush-warblers and African Reed-warblers and Rattling Cisticola. The sky and the trees on the vlei were full of European Bee-eaters with just a few Grey-rumped Swallows and Barn Swallow and African Palm-swift and Little Swift. The Yellow Bishop never lets us down. The call of the lone Black Coucal attracted our attention from time to time, mostly from an acacia it shared with bee-eaters and Southern Masked-weaver. A Marsh Owl was put up, which performed elegantly for us. Near the golf course a dark bird was spotted gliding into the reeds along the stream. This turned out to be a Dwarf Bittern, not often seen here before and we had to flush it to be sure of its identity!

Jimmy was pleased with the count of 56 species and we thank him for his sharp-eyed and eared leadership. Contact him on 0912-772771 to go for a walk any time and any day and you will see what I mean. And you don't need gumboots – yet!

Ken Dixon

You will certainly need them now! *Ed*

Bluff Hill Vlei – 24 January 2010

Alex Masterson led 14 of us on a walk in his favourite Harare vlei, near Philippa's Dam. It has changed a lot since I was last there – the reeds and bulrushes have expanded and so has the housing. The acacia trees have vanished and only stunted shrubbery survives – this was predicted by Ian Riddell some time ago. Only 60% of normal rainfall has fallen so far this season and the wetland was very dry with no squelching in ankle-deep water as in the past. The Red-chested Flufftail was heard calling as was an African Rail. Approximately 200 Cattle Egrets were moving in and out of the reedbeds, suggesting they were nesting and feeding young and 3 Purple Heron were seen flying in their direction. In the distance, telescopic sight confirmed an immature Black-chested Snake-eagle. The Western Marsh-harriers were coursing over the reedbeds and we found evidence of a cattle egret which had probably been eaten by them. These harriers are now the most common, having invaded 30 years ago and replaced our indigenous African Marsh-harrier. We spotted 10 Amur Falcons over the grassland and 2 Marsh Owls in it. We had very good views of 4 Black Coucal, heard the Pale-crowned Cisticola and saw 4 swallow species – 2 White-throated Swallows drinking from a pool, Barn Swallow, Red-breasted Swallow and Lesser Striped Swallow. Of the difficult little brown jobs we recorded 5 different warblers – African Reed-warbler, Sedge Warbler, Lesser Swamp-warbler, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler and Little Rush-warbler and 6 different cisticolas – Zitting Cisticola, Rattling Cisticola, Red-faced Cisticola, Levaillant's Cisticola and Croaking Cisticola. Also seen were Variable Sunbirds and White-bellied Sunbirds, Southern Grey-headed Sparrows and brightly-coloured Red-collared Widowbirds and Yellow-mantled Widowbirds and Southern Red Bishops. Interestingly the Yellow-mantled Widowbirds preferred much shorter grassland than the others. A Cape Wagtail was an unexpected highlight.

D.V. Rockingham-Gill

Notes on Bustards on the Mashonaland Highveld

Whilst returning home from Marondera on 16 January, I encountered a female Black-bellied Bustard *Eupodotis melanogaster*, accompanied by a single chick as they were crossing the road and heading into scattered and semi-degraded miombo woodland. I have lived here for the last 19 years and birdwatched for at least 12, and had never recorded these birds before so close to where I live. My own sightings elsewhere included one in Goshu Park in 2006 and another in a conservation area maintained by a surviving commercial farmer in the very southern part of Macheke, also during 2006, where I believe they are seen regularly. But as a general rule, these birds are now rarely recorded in this area, whereas before they could survive on private land which practised rotational agriculture and

tried to conserve woodland. But now, the new system of semi-communal small scale farming has put an end to the safety of this species and its habitat, now sectioned into small plots. And even woodland which forms part of this species habitat, is heavily utilised under this new system. Records from 20 years ago, leading up to the late 1990's show this bird was common throughout the farming districts of Marondera, Macheke and Wedza.

The Kori Bustard *Ardeotis kori* was also a regular resident down in the south of Wedza and I recall Richard Moore photographing them on this farm on the southern border of the area. I have not seen any records of these birds since then and one can only assume they have disappeared; although in fairness I don't know that anyone has looked at the area subsequently. And while on this point, I would like to say that the same is true for the Secretarybird *Sagittarius serpentarius*, a very common bird, as I recall from the middle 1990's. I knew a nest that is only a few kilometres from the centre of Marondera that was abandoned early on in 2003 – the area is now settled with small scale farmers. In the last 5 years, I can only recall one sighting, interestingly a few months ago, close to the old nest site.

The Red-crested Korhaan *Lophotis ruficrista* is a bird of drier areas, but known to occur not too far to the south and west of Harare and it would be interesting to hear from others within these areas, whether or not the same pattern of occurrences is evident, or indeed, where the closest record of this species is from the capital city?

Damian Newmarch, Marondera

MATABELELAND

Visit to Aisleby – 17 January

As usual Matland branch are busy throughout January with waterfowl counts. So far counts have been done at SAST and Aisleby. A formal report of the census results will be presented later – this is just a record of one team's morning out at Aisleby. We made an early start as we had been allocated the far side of the dam, which was full due to good rains. This had its disadvantages – there was little or no shoreline to attract waders; the water was pushing back into the reeds making counting very difficult as birds popped in and out of cover; and we had to squelch through several patches of rather sticky, smelly black mud. The open water presented a different challenge – hundreds and hundreds of water birds!! Definitely time to bring out the telescopes and numerous Little Grebes, Red-knobbed Coots, Red-billed Teal, Southern Pochards and Maccos Ducks were spotted – but scattered amongst them, to add to the confusion, Hottentot Teal, Cape Teal, Egyptian Goose and White-faced Duck. There were also a lot of very decorative Cattle Egrets draped in reeds and on tree stumps, a couple of Yellow-billed Egrets, Grey Herons and Black-headed Herons, surprisingly few African Sacred Ibis, surprisingly many Glossy Ibis, Black-winged Stilts, and one each of African Jacana, Wood Sandpiper and Common Sandpiper (these were more plentiful at other water points around Aisleby). As an extra bonus we saw 2 Greater Flamingo and 2 White-backed Pelicans [Great White Pelican?]. If you feel water birds are one of your weak points you really should try to join us on one of the water fowl counts. Even if you cannot stay for the whole morning, come for an hour or two. Being able to see, and compare, so many different types of water birds at the same time is really useful.

Adele Edwards

Verreaux's Eagle Breeding Survey 2009

2009 was the 46th consecutive year of reporting for the Verreaux's Eagle Breeding Survey in the Matobo Hills. Twelve teams participated in the survey.

The results show that of the 104 nest sites allocated to these teams, 99 sites were checked and of these monitored nest sites, 37 territories were confirmed as occupied by pairs of eagles. Twenty two pairs of eagles rebuilt their nests, but observations recorded indicate that only 14 pairs made a breeding attempt. One pair did not succeed, for unknown reasons, in raising their chick. Therefore a total of 13 chicks fledged successfully in 2009.

The enthusiasm and dedication displayed by the teams who participated during the season has once again been overwhelming. They have excelled themselves by continuing with this survey, with donations of time, cash and kind. The Branch would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the teams, as well as our donors, for ensuring the continuation and completion of the 2009 survey. The National Office is thanked for funding for the start of the 2009 survey.

In the words of Valerie Gargett from her closing line in her book *The Black Eagle – A Study* - "It is intended to continue the Breeding Survey for as long as circumstances and the availability of helpers permit."

EASTERN DISTRICTS

Upper Vumba – 17 January 2010

It is now a tradition for the EDBC to start a new year by visiting 'Good Old Vumba!'. Vumba forms the basis upon which 'birders' derive their zeal and unfortunately I was not able to contact keen birdwatcher Bucks Conradie at short notice. Regrettably there is a low turnout these days due to the prevailing economic and climatic conditions, but this was a warm morning of a drought-bound summer! Enock is a birder and artist who is trying to get all the Vumba specials on canvas and ink and together we started on the areas covered by the so-called 'Mid Vumba' – the area stretching from Paul Hulley's former farm down to Greencroft Primary School. Silvery-cheeked Hornbills were seen overhead, Chirinda Apalis, Roberts's Warbler, Lesser Seedcracker and Red-faced Crimsonwing. We tried to climb the mountain to the police training centre which is opposite the popular Stonechat Cottage, but we were overwhelmed with fatigue! We did manage however to add the Bronzy Sunbird, Stripe-cheeked Greenbul and Red-throated Twinspots. An enjoyable outing nevertheless.

Next month, on 21 February, we will be in the lower Vumba concentrating on miombo patches. Anyone visiting the Vumba who would like someone to accompany you or would be interested in viewing Enock Mureyani's art, please contact me on 0913-524844 or e-mail pgwidibira@mutare.matanuska.co.zw

Peter Gwidibira

ABIDING BIRD MYSTERIES

The Curious Case of the Black-faced Swee Waxbill

Most of us just take things for granted and don't ask too many questions when we bird watch or whatever, and it is not only our life list which tapers off as we get older. But, as the newly rebranded Editor Emeritus Excelsus Ornithologicus Octogenarius Hibernicus (EEEEOH!) I am supposed to know it all, but have now finally had to admit that in all my travels and explorations in Zimbabwe and on so many field trips to out of the way places, that never ever have I encountered a Swee Waxbill *Coccygia melanotis*! And I am sure you haven't either? It is indeed something that I have been puzzling over for years and just can't come up with an answer, and it is not for want of trying either.

It has an intriguing history of course since its original one-off discovery in the Matopos Hills, when a single specimen was collected on the property Absent Farm in February 1958. It was said to have been nesting in a Euphorbia tree but when I spent a few days there I could find no sign of it and picked up a bad tummy bug instead. The next record was a sighting at Great Zimbabwe in 1965 and where in fact it became quite common in subsequent years and through to the mid-1970s. But one might ask why nobody had recorded it there earlier and in such a frequently visited area? And is it still there today? We just don't seem to know. There was also a sight record from Mount Buchwa in May 1974 but I did not find it there in the course of a Matabeleland Branch Schools Exploration Society visit – and not for the want of searching. But the one fact does emerge; that all three localities lie on the southern edge of the central plateau in areas of higher rainfall, ecologically distinctive and certainly so botanically.

The next record was much further away and at Juliasdale, Nyanga in December 1987, rather unexpected and certainly a long way from Great Zimbabwe. It was once more reported from the same general area in October 2000 with another very recently from Juliasdale in May 2008. This would seem to indicate that there is another and perhaps independent population on the Nyanga rain-shadow and of course overlapping the range of the Yellow-bellied Waxbill and perhaps providing the ultimate proof that there are two species and not just one! But how come then that this and at least the Great Zimbabwe population are so isolated one from another, or do they occur somewhere in between? Otherwise how is gene-flow maintained or do the birds somehow move between one area and another? But why indeed should a little waxbill such as this have to move at all when its habitat seems to remain stable? And as I said at the outset, this seems to be a mystery and I just can't come up with a logical explanation. The situation would appear to be a unique one. So being the age I am, I shall have to leave the question to others more active to come up and provide the answers to what clearly, as I have pointed out, remains an abiding mystery. So go forth now and find out!

M.P.S. Irwin

As there have been no observations of this bird recorded from Great Zimbabwe and surrounding areas for such a long time, perhaps BLZ members can do something about that? - Ed

A Further Record of the Swee Waxbill at Juliasdale, Nyanga

At the Wyrley-Birch cottage near Troutbeck, Penny and I decided to have lunch at Inn on the Ruparara, Juliasdale (1832B3) on 24 May 2008. Before lunch, we were wandering around the gardens and Penny drew my attention to four "pretty little things" feeding under a fig tree on the ground, in a lawn situation, between the cottages. These were the Swee Waxbill *Coccygia melanotis*. I knew what they were, but not having seen them before I looked them up in Newman's and confirmed the identification. Visibility was very good, and we could clearly see the black upper mandible and the red lower mandible of the birds. One of the four had the black face of the male.

All the places mentioned in Zimbabwe where the bird has been seen have huge boulders in kopje country, or rocks in hilly country, are much more wooded and have a higher rainfall than the surrounding countryside. Swee Waxbill and the East African Swee or Yellow-bellied Waxbill share the same quarter degree square at Juliasdale – 1832B3. It could be that if we look hard for this bird, we will find it more often than the few records indicate. The records show it lives in very rugged country, like the Cape Eagle-owl [MacKinder's Eagle-owl] *Bubo capensis mackinderi*.

I believe we, in our society of Birdlife Zimbabwe, are responsible for our birds in Zimbabwe. The Swee Waxbill has not been well evaluated for our Red Data Book and it should be considered Rare or Critically Endangered, while it is obviously not endangered or of little concern in South Africa. The population size in this country could be less than 250 individuals. Considering the very few individuals seen at the locations mentioned, the bird can be considered data deficient, in this country, but it is good to know it is not extinct in the wild.

Thanks go to Penny, the Wyrley-Birches, Rob van Rensburg, Ian Riddell, Michael Stuart Irwin and Carolyn Dennison for contributing in various ways to this sighting and publication of this note.

D.V. Rockingham-Gill

TAIL FEATHERS

Further to the query in the last issue of *Babbler* about **Pied Crows** dunking their food in water, presumably to soften it, several members have told me that they have observed similar behaviour – Ed

Jo Scott writes: I live in a small complex in St Brelades Road, Ballantyne Park, Harare. We have a garden that runs the length of the complex with ponds and a stream that is fed by a borehole with a reticulating pump. On the night of 9 December 2009, I heard a **Buff-spotted Flufftail** *Sarothrura elegans* calling and it continued to call most of the night. I know this bird fairly well, as when I lived on Busi Farm in Chipinge it was a regular visitor to my garden during the rains. I first recorded it in 1977 and it continued to come every year until 1985. It was not heard again until 1996 and we heard it on and off until we left the farm in 2007. I caught a brief glimpse once when it called during a drizzly morning. Are there any other recent records for Harare?

In the September 2009 Bulletin of the African Bird Club, (Vol. 16 No 2. p.225-226) there are rare photographs taken by Hugh Chittenden, who lives in Eshowe, KwaZulu-Natal, of Buff-spotted Flufftail with chicks. He notes that these birds were attracted to a garden with a shallow bird bath sunk into the ground near dense cover – Ed

The following was received from **Neil Deacon**:

Just to advise you that on 27/1/2010 I received a report from a professional hunter and AGrade falconer, Derrick Adams, that he collected a **Common Mynah** whilst hunting in Matetsi in November last year. In confirmation he will forward the carcass, photos and GPS co-ordinates in due course. The mynah, just a single bird seen, was amongst a flock of Wattled Starlings and in an area inhabited by Red-billed Buffalo-weavers.

I believe this record might be both the most northerly and westerly record for a Common Mynah in Zimbabwe – it is about 60 km from the Victoria Falls. There are also several sightings of Common Mynahs from Falcon College, Esigodini that I will confirm.

As this species represents a serious problem, please report sightings to Geoff at wildfire@mweb.co.zw or 011-705983

For the first time in approximately 25 years, a male **Yellow-mantled Widowbird** was seen by **Richard Dennison** in Hillside Park on the morning of 30 January 2010.

I used to have a copy of Michael Stuart Irwin's *Birds of Zimbabwe* many years ago, but fear it was inadvertently given away. Does anyone have a copy – I find that I need it for reference more and more! Please contact me – many thanks. Carolyn Dennison

SOMETHING FROM THE PAST

The Rev. F.A. Rogers and the Inaccessible Island Rail

The late Dr Phillip Clancey always used to say that birds were people – and quite correctly so! They are a reflection of one of our interests and is it we who concern ourselves, or take an interest, in them. And when it comes to it, it is we who write the bird books or whatever. So as you will clearly see, it is US and not THEM and hence that insightful observation. And as a further perspective, there are the lives and history of those who have such an interest and that can become just as fascinating. It follows then that if we come to learn about birds we must think just as much in terms of those who have had an interest and there have been a great many in Zimbabwe, who have very often been long forgotten today. One such person from the more distant past was the Rev. F.A. Rogers of whom I suspect, none of you have ever heard? Yet it was he who was responsible for the discovery of the extraordinary Inaccessible Island Rail *Atlantisia rogersi*, named in his honour in 1923 by the British ornithologist Percy R. Lowe. And the same author was to provide a fuller account of its discovery in the learned journal *The Ibis* in the same year, accompanied by a coloured illustration by the artist Henrik Grönveld. But you might now well ask, what has all this got to do with us? But to add a bit of history, the Rev. Rogers for many years ran the Railway Mission in Bulawayo and clearly must already have had an interest in birds and perhaps science more generally, for he was also in the early days of the last century, quite a prominent member of the Rhodesia Scientific Association and must have left some record there of his own. But he was later, as so often happens to those in the missionary field, transferred to the island of Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic, of which Inaccessible is a more distant outlier.

But what makes the story even more interesting is that *Atlantisia* is not only completely flightless, but the smallest member of the family Rallidae. Just as interesting is that we now know that there were two other species of *Atlantisia*, one on St Helena and the other on Ascension, but both became extinct soon after the islands were discovered and known only by their remains, and were flightless too. All this of course opens up an entirely new field of interest and what else perhaps did the Rev. Rogers accomplish during his life time and where for that matter did he originally come from and how much more he may have known about birds, although as far as we know, he did not write anything himself. Yet most of this history must be hidden away somewhere in the archives of this country and of the various institutions involved and much historical research can clearly be done by those who are interested in our wider history, and also, from the perspective of birds themselves. And how nice it would be to be able to add a history section to the pages of *Honeyguide* and one hopes that there may be someone among us who would like to take up such a challenge, which I am sure would be of interest to many?

M.P.S. Irwin