



# BABBLER

The Newsletter of -

## BirdLife Zimbabwe

The BirdLife International Partner in Zimbabwe

ISSUE # 78 – OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2007

	<b>Mashonaland</b>		<b>Matabeleland</b>	
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### SUBSCRIPTIONS

A reminder that at the AGM, members approved a 'top-up' subscription of \$50 000 a quarter or \$150 000 to 31 March 2008 as the annual subscription of \$20 000 agreed at the beginning of the year has proved unrealistic in our hyper-inflationary environment.

If you haven't yet paid, payments can be made at or sent to the office, paid to your Branch or brought to a meeting or outing. Pay in instalments if you cannot afford the full \$150 000 in one payment. Payment can be made into Mashonaland Branch CABS Account 9012703755 at any CABS Branch but PLEASE ensure your name is on the deposit and ALSO email [jcarter@cabs.co.zw](mailto:jcarter@cabs.co.zw) OR [gcarter@mweb.co.zw](mailto:gcarter@mweb.co.zw) with details - name, date and place.

Office number 490208 doesn't work during power cuts so please use 481496 if there is no reply from 490208.

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **MASHONALAND BRANCH**

*Please contact a committee member if you need transport to any of our outings. We want to see you!*

#### **Regular outings**

#### **Sundays 7<sup>th</sup> October & 4<sup>th</sup> November : Mukuvisi Woodlands 06:30 a.m.**

Directions: Turn off Chiremba Road into Ford Rd. (opposite Queensdale Shops) and continue down to Blatherwick Rd (T Junction). Turn right and the gate is about 150 meters on the left. Bring chairs and refreshments. Also a reasonable tip for the guard who will be on hand to unlock the gate to let cars in and out, remembering the price of a loaf of bread and the value of your vehicle.

THE ANNUAL BREAKFAST IS CANCELLED FOR THIS YEAR DUE TO THE DIFFICULTIES OF GETTING SUPPLIES. IF THE SITUATION CHANGES, WE WILL CONTACT MEMBERS.

#### **Sundays 14<sup>th</sup> October & 11<sup>th</sup> November : Lake Chivero Bird Sanctuary 06:30 a.m.**

Meet at Marimba Shopping Centre, Samora Machel Avenue West. Bring chairs and refreshments. Beginners are most welcome and spare binoculars will be available.

#### **Sundays 21<sup>st</sup> October & 18<sup>th</sup> November : Monavale Vlei Walk 7:00 a.m.**

Meet on Fenella Drive, (BS Leon side) for a walk with members of the Monavale Vlei Residents Association. The vlei will be getting busy with breeding birds and migrants.

#### **Saturday Morning, 20<sup>th</sup> October: Greystone Park Nature Reserve 07:00 a.m.**

Meet in the carpark, on Halford Rd off Gaydon Road at 7:00 a.m. The dam and the walk below the dam give a good range of habitats and a surprising number of species. It's a good outing.

#### **Saturday Morning, 17<sup>th</sup> November: National Botanic Gardens 7:00 a.m.** Meet in the car park.

*On Saturdays, bring chairs and refreshments for a cuppa while you tick the list – Dave still aims to get you away by 9:00 a.m. for shopping!*

#### **Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> October: NO OUTING as all members of the committee will be away at the Blue Swallow survey or out of the country.**

**Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> November: Tony Naismith at Goromonzi 06:30 a.m.** Meet at Tony Alegria's, 7 Pringle Road, Greendale at 6:30 a.m. where cars can be left and transport shared. This is a new venue and should be interesting. Bring chairs and refreshments.

**Thursday Evening Meetings on FRIDAY** Although power cuts are more haphazard now, we still feel they are more likely to occur on Thursdays in Milton Park.

**FRIDAY, 19<sup>th</sup> October: Bird Slides from Dr. Harrison Vermuelen on Snakes** Dr. Harrison is a keen birder and has a wonderful collection of bird slides, mainly birds found in Zimbabwe.

**FRIDAY, 16<sup>th</sup> November : Education Dept presentation "Birding at Schools, success stories illustrated with slides"** Support the wonderful job being done by the BirdLife Education team. Bring magazines, bird books and/or cash to help the excellent schools project. Every little helps.

**Venue: Bowls Pavilion, Old Hararians Association, Drummond Chaplin Street, Milton Park.  
Time: 6.00 for 6.30 p.m. A cash bar will be available. Security is provided and, if necessary, POWER BY GENERATOR.**

### **MATABELELAND BRANCH**

#### **Monthly Outings**

**Saturday, 20<sup>th</sup> October: How Mine swallow roost** Drive out in convoy in the afternoon to view the roost and the signage erected by BLZ Matabeleland and to meet our Swallow Warden, Laften Tembo. Meet at Hotel Rio at 4p.m., returning after sunset. Phone Penny 230414.

**Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> November: Talk by Paul Hubbard entitled "The Zimbabwe Birds: Symbols of a Nation?"** explaining their history, meaning and significance. PLEASE NOTE CHANGE OF DATE.

The popularity of Paul's talks is such that this event is likely to be sold out! Come one, come all, but above everything else, come on time! 3.00 pm at the Lion's Den. 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue/Moray Road, Famona courtesy of the Lion's Club of Matopos. Bring & share tea (we'll provide the liquids, you please provide the solids). Ring Adele 882242.

**Weekend 24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> November, National Birding Big Day:** Sponsored 24 hour bird watch throughout the country – contact Julia or Adele for more details and entry forms. This is a fun event with a serious side to it - we do need your sightings for our national records and sponsorship funds which branches are permitted to keep for their projects.

**1<sup>st</sup> December, Christmas Bistro:** Advance notice, details will follow! Make a note!

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

## **EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB**

**Outings around the Mutare area on the last Sunday of every month.**

**Contact Carl Beel on 020 65525 or 023 416249 or email [cbeel@zol.co.zw](mailto:cbeel@zol.co.zw).**

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## **MASHONALAND SOUTH**

**KADOMA :** Outings will be held at 7.00 a.m. on the 3rd Saturday of each month.  
Contact Margaret Parrock ☎ 068-22005 for details.

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## **REPORTS**

### **NATIONAL**

#### **Staff Appointments**

BirdLife Zimbabwe has hired Mrs Sabina Mapika as Administration Manager. Sabina has more than thirteen years experience of working as an Administration assistant.

Mr Kanisios Mukwashi also joins BLZ as the IBA Project Manager responsible for the new IBA Project. A holder of an MSc in Tropical Resource Ecology from UZ, Mr Mukwashi has been working for the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority and he replaces Mr Osiman Mabhachi who has left the organisation to further his studies in the UK.

Please help me welcome our new members of staff who are joining us at the beginning of October.

**Dr. Chip Chirara**

#### **IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS (IBAs)**

BirdLife International's Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme is a global initiative aimed at identifying and protecting a network of critical sites for the world's birds. The sites are selected according to agreed global criteria. In Zimbabwe we have 20 IBAs. In this issue we focus on one IBA, the Matobo Hills.

#### **Matobo Hills (IBA Code ZW016)**

Located in Matabeleland South, Matobo Hills are one of the most beautiful hills in Zimbabwe, and hold the highest density of San (Bushman) rock paintings in Africa. This IBA contains the catchment areas of ten rivers and has a diversity of flora. The Matobo Hills IBA is probably one of the best monitored in Zimbabwe because of the active and enthusiastic involvement of the Matabeleland Branch of BLZ. The key species include Verraux's (Black) Eagle, Black Stork, Boulder Chat and both Yellow-billed and Red-billed Oxpeckers. The Matabeleland Branch monitors the Verraux's Eagle population annually. The Matobo Hills is a World Heritage Site. Part of the Hills lies outside the National Park and conservation challenges include cutting down of trees and poaching of small animals such as dassies. More information can be obtained from the Matabeleland Branch.

#### **Wattled Crane Survey Report**

The Wattled Crane Survey was carried out between 9 September and 12 September 2007. This was the second one of the year. An earlier one was carried out in April. The Felixburg, Mvuma and Chivhu areas were explored. Five people divided into two teams took part in the survey, three members of staff and two students. Even with two vehicles, there were still vast areas to be covered. A total of 44 Wattled Cranes were counted; 14 pairs, a flock of 13, one juvenile and two chicks. The number of Southern Grey

Crowned Cranes was 110 (with 105 birds in a flock terrorising someone's field!). The biggest threat to cranes in this IBA are veld fires, which reduce the foraging ground for the birds and expose the chicks to domestic dogs. Last year's rainy season below average, most small dams and pans were dry. It is likely that cranes moved away from their traditional places to places where they could find water. According to members of the community we talked to, most Wattled Cranes they normally saw moved after the fires swept through their area. It was quite encouraging to note that most people from different villages including young school children could tell apart the two types of cranes when presented with a picture of the two. Other species of interest sighted during the trip were the Black-chested Snake-eagle, Brown Snake-eagle and Secretary birds. **Fadzai Matsvimbo, Conservation Officer**

## **EDUCATION REPORT**

### **Prepared by Leslee Maasdorp – Manager of the Education Programmes**

You would have read of efforts of Elisha Chipendo of Chihota last issue of Babbler where he appealed to the Mashonaland Branch for support. Our department has assisted by giving him our expensive school resource books for distribution to new schools in Seki where he has established his garden.

The latest newsletter has been produced and sent out to all BAP schools. Thanks to our German partners NABU's support.

Killing of birds has become more prevalent and both Eastern Highlands, of (Aberfoyle) and Tanganda Tea Estate have reported an increase in the shooting of birds with catapults. Recently a 16-year-old girl, Lennah Namauke has written in as follows, "I live at Gleneagles Reserve (Aberfoyle) and I always listen to the music of birds. I started learning about birdlife since 2000 and am really interested in keeping every kind of bird safe. I have seen it better to proceed with this program so that I can teach children that birds are essential and people must not use catapults to shoot birds, What must I do to protect them (birds) from being used as meat"?

In our department, we are producing a pamphlet at the request of the Eastern Highlands p/c Management entitled 'Musauraya Shiri' (Don't kill birds) accompanied by a note in Shona to explain why birds are important. It seems to me that a meeting of stakeholders, which include catapult users, should be held as a follow up. A similar pamphlet is being developed in conjunction with Parks and Wildlife, aimed at making schools aware of the big poaching problem in the Victoria Falls area.

### **Killing of owls**

Facilitators from our programme paid a visit to a school in the Masembura area where there was an excellent permaculture garden and a bird club flourished. After five years our trainers wondered if the projects had been sustained but water difficulties had almost destroyed the garden and the teacher transferred. Teachers confessed to children killing owl chicks, which they feared. Teachers promised to revive the club next year with the aid of resource books provided to them.

### **Poisoning of owls?**

In the Banket Farming area, reports of owls dying have come in. Rats have been targeted by Temic poison granules in villages and it is suspected that owls are eating these rodents. Parks and Wildlife have been notified and a few dead owls will be taken to the Vet Research Station for investigation.

### **Transporting school parties to Monavale Vlei**

In the coming term we are seeking funding to bring schools in for a visit to this protected wetland. Western suburb communities in particular would benefit from this exercise but teachers and learners cannot raise the high costs of bus fares.

### **RioTinto World Birdwatch at Murowa Mine**

The dates fixed for this event are 23 – 25<sup>th</sup> November and three guides all BLZ members will lead the birding teams.

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## **MASHONALAND BRANCH**

### **Sunday, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2007, Stapleford Farm (QDS: 1730DB)**

Thirteen birders set out from the Carter's on a crisp, sunny, winter's morning, not unduly cold for the time of year, to meet falconer, Neil Deacon at Stapleford Farm opposite Afdis on the Lomagundi road. Neil hunts his African Hawk-eagle on this farm where she catches food for all his raptors and he knows the area well. Neil decries his ability as a birder, saying he groups birds into two varieties – raptors and food!

We met on the currently empty lands where some saw Red-capped Lark and Pied Wagtail. On the way to the birding area, Red-billed Quelea were seen. After parking in a paddock under some large trees, we moved into the acacia bushveld, immediately seeing several White-browed Scrub Robin, Drongos and Black-collared Barbet as well as several of the more commonly seen species. This was the area where we had previously seen a Marico Sunbird and a lucky few saw one again. Rufous-vented Titbblers were also seen here. It is nice to see some acacia specials.

We moved into open lands, a brisk, cold wind making it a bit unpleasant. But everyone seeing a number of Red-capped Larks and African (Grassveld) Pipits made it worthwhile. When Neil put up a Kurrichane Buttonquail, it was even better. There was a pair of Wattled Starlings and several Capped Wheatears in the burnt areas. On a small kopje, a few were lucky to see a Wood Owl and a Violet-backed Sunbird, neither seen often on our outings, as well as the more often seen White-browed (Heuglin's) and White-throated Robin-chats.

We made our back to the vehicles for refreshments and the first count. This increased as we were calling it as 2 Meyer's Parrots flew in, then a Secretarybird flew over, then a closer look at what was thought to be one of several Lilac-breasted Rollers seen revealed that it was a Purple Roller, rarely seen near Harare. Both these latter caused great excitement as we do not see them often these days (well I was excited!).

Suitably refreshed, we piled into and onto the bakkies for Neil to lead us to the sand veld. The previous day, we had seen 6 Black-chested Snake-eagles on the outing to Marlborough vlei (as well as African Harrier Hawk and Greater Kestrel – not to mention a large wild boar put up by Richard's bitch who discovered she had bitten off more than she could chew!). Neil was excited about 2 Brown Snake-eagles he had seen on the farm the previous week, also not often seen close to Harare, and was delighted when we soon encountered one sitting. We later saw a pair soaring above us as well as a Black-chested, perhaps one of those we had seen the day before, not far away as the Black-chested Snake-eagle flies.

We had excellent sightings of a Secretarybird, this time on the ground – probably the same one seen flying over earlier. They really are magnificent birds. On the other side of the road was a Dark-chanting Goshawk. Long-crested Eagle, Lizard Buzzard and Black-shouldered Kite completed a respectable raptor count.

A walk to another burnt area exposed 3 Yellow-throated Longclaw on the way and there were a number of Temminck's Coursers on the burnt land – always an enjoyable sighting.

A count of 92 species was excellent for the time of year. There were a number of birds that we don't often see and we all had a thoroughly enjoyable outing, enhanced by Neil's local knowledge and enthusiasm as well as his very good birding skills, despite his disclaimers. A few lucky members went back with Neil to his home to meet the Dickinson's Kestrel he has raised from the egg, the Taita Falcon he is breeding and his other raptors – not to mention his lovely wife Nicky and baby daughter!

Thanks, Neil, for a super outing.

**Jennifer Carter**

### **Sunday, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2007, Marirangwe Farm (QDS: 1830BB)**

After a bit of confusion about how to access the car park at Agrifoods, 11 of us set out for Marirangwe farm which we had not visited since I joined the committee about 11 years ago. The turnoff to the farm is about 16km along the Mondoro road so we were on the farm within about half an hour. At the farmhouse we were welcomed by Maas and Lisbet Kirk and their children and here we managed to pick up a nesting colony of Lesser Masked Weaver, 4 species of Sunbird and various other garden birds

before setting out with our hosts for the dam about 3km away. The weather was perfect as it was fine and warm with not too much wind.

The dam is in a very attractive setting with miombo woodland in amongst granite rocks on the eastern side and more open country on the western side. It was pleasing to note that there was no evidence of the exotic weed infestations that have choked up many of the waterways around Zimbabwe in recent decades and that water lilies for the possible arrival of lesser jacanas in summer were abundant. We were quickly into birding as we soon encountered a bird party that included Southern Black Tit, Orange-breasted Bush Shrike and Red-headed Weaver. Further on we encountered a Spotted Dikkop, Stierling's Barred Warbler and a pair of Terrestrial Bulbul. Highlights on the dam included a Green-backed Heron, a Little Bittern, 2 African Black Duck and an over-wintering Osprey carrying what appeared to be a cichlid of about 600g! The Osprey was certainly the best bird of the day as it was a very unusual sighting for the high-veld in winter!

We crossed over to the western side of the dam at the top end and saw a pair of Buffy Pipit and 5 Quail Finch in burnt grassland and 2 pairs of Tropical Boubou involved in what appeared to be a prolonged and noisy territorial dispute in riverine woodland. Towards the dam wall the highlights included 2 Meyer's Parrot and about 20 Swallow-tailed Bee-eater. A few more species were added on the drive back from the dam.

Our total bird species count was 90 and we look forward to a future summer visit to check for summer migrants if possible. Thank you to Maas and Lisbet for guiding us and for your hospitality.

**Richard Dennison**

### **Friday, 17<sup>th</sup> August, Ben Vermuelen on Snakes**

As predicted, this was another fascinating evening. It is always a pleasure to listen to an expert talk about his subject.

Ben started off describing how a snake – a boomslang – hunts for baby birds. Having found a nest with eggs or fledglings, the snake observes it, sometimes for days. When it is ready, the snake makes its move. If it is lucky, it can get in unobserved and swallow the eggs or babies. However, if it is seen, there is a community effort to chase it away. We have all heard the noise made when small birds find a snake or a raptor to close for comfort. The Dark-capped Bulbul apparently a ring leader, making a great racket but also bouncing up and down on a branch near the snake because, of course, snakes 'hear' through vibrations. The noise is to alert the other birds but has no effect on the snake. Other birds then dive-bomb the snake, hoping the attack and the vibrations will persuade it to leave.

Quite soon, we diverted Ben from his planned talk by asking him all sorts of questions. Our worst fears were confirmed when he stated that every block in the suburbs has a variety of snakes living there, mostly clandestinely. However, they want to meet us even less than we want to meet them and keep out of our way if it is possible.

Ben told us that even the Black Mamba is not as aggressive as myth has it. Other snakes are not aggressive at all and will come in your direction only if they feel it is the only way out. Snakes expend a lot of energy making venom and do not want to waste it unnecessarily. Even the puff-adder will probably only bite if you actually stand on it – in self-defence!

Ben finished his talk by describing the different types of poison that different snakes have and how the antidote serums are produced.

The whole time during the talk, my husband, Graham, sat with a brown house snake curled up contentedly around his hand, preferring the warmth of his hand to the cold bag the snake had been brought in through the cold winter's night. Shows how far my Pommie husband has come having lived for 10 years in Zimbabwe. He wouldn't even touch one when he first came to Zimbabwe in 1990!

We are very grateful to Ben for giving us his time to give us this fascinating talk.

**Jennifer Carter**

The planned talk on Parrots by Ant Clarke had to be cancelled. Instead, few of us watched 'Blue Wonder', an excellent National Geog film on the Blue Macaw – truly a magnificent bird.

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## MATABELELAND BRANCH

### African Waterfowl Census - Matabeleland

The analysis and reports for our Matabeleland January and July waterfowl counts are ready and will be dispatched to the Wetlands International centre in Senegal in due course. We also put together a summary of the Mashonaland counts which will be covered by their own report produced in Harare.

In January we undertook counts at Aisleby, three areas in Hwange and SAST; in July we added Cowdray Park. The last two new areas produced healthy numbers and in particular we saw more Cape Teal than before, a family of tiny fluffy Dabchick chicks (you *have* to say it like that because *Dabchicks* without the *chicks* isn't so expressful) at SAST, and Shovelers, young and older, cavorting around Cowdray Park, splashing and diving and showing off their ostentatiously yellow legs.

Here is a summary of salient points:

	January 2007	July 2007
Total birds	5106	3154
Total species	67	51
Top census location	Bulawayo: Aisleby – 2954 birds	Bulawayo: Aisleby – 1971 birds
Second top location	Hwange: White Hills – 870 birds	Bulawayo: Cowdray Park - 476
Numerically strongest group	Geese & ducks = 2034 = 39.8%	Geese & ducks = 1291 = 40.9%
Group with most species	Waders = 16	Geese & ducks = 12
Highest single species count	Red-billed Teal = 596	Red-billed teal = 535
Second highest species count	Southern Pochard = 335	Dabchick = 346

In 2004 concern was expressed at the decline of 25 species over the previous 10 years of the census. Included were Maccoa Duck, Red-billed Teal and Purple Gallinule. Well, we've got Aisleby, haven't we, which comes up trumps every time to boost our figures and make things look better! Top-of-the-pack at both counts all sites this year are Red-billed Teal which have maintained their numbers in Matabeleland, reaching over 1,000 this year, boosted by healthy counts at our new sites, SAST and Cowdray Park. Maccoa Duck are ever present at Aisleby and multiple sightings of Purple Gallinule are reported from regular monthly counts there.

However, Murphy's Law dictates that quite often numbers are down and/or species totally absent during the formal census exercises, making it difficult to assess the true picture. For instance, we saw 91 Maccoa Duck at Aisleby a month before the count (in 2003), the highest during a census being 43 in January 2006 and the lowest nil in July 2005! Conspicuous by their absence during January since 2005 to now are Ringed Plovers (only two seen in 2006) and Curlew Sandpipers, species seen regularly in the summer at Aisleby.

Thank you to the 21 members of Matland who enabled us to undertake our extended census - without your help we could not have achieved this.

### Black Eagle Survey

Phase III has begun – to see whether everyone grows up and fledges safely. Of the nest sites so far checked, we have 17 occupied by eaglets, higher than in the last couple of years. Fledging dates are going to be quite widespread, because three weeks ago we saw all age groups from brown jobs with golden heads (not long to go), to little pure white fluffy jobs (only just started).

Our Black Eagle camp at Gordon Park was very successful with 19 bodies staying in the chalet or camped around this beautiful area. We were delighted to welcome six Mashland members, particularly as they were always first up in the morning to resuscitate the cooking fire, organise morning tea and generally keep us on the straight and narrow. On Saturday we went off on an all-day trip down the notorious Honeyguide Highway to Togwana (picnic lunch) and then a longish walk to a beautiful nest, and a perfect display by Rock and Yellow-spotted dassies which enabled us to undertake a quick ID session on who was which. Thence to the stunning Mtshелеle Valley (tea and more nests) and home. We checked 7 nests and watched active eaglets in all but one – that one is the one you can see beautifully from Gordon Park, eye to eye – that is, if the eaglet doesn't remain glued to the bottom of its nest, which it did.

On Sunday we waved goodbye to the Harare contingent following which we were joined by several members of the Matobo Conservation Society – all go, really. Thanks to John Sullivan's kind

hospitality, we spent the morning walking through his beautiful farm to view the most pampered chick in the area, which he watches over from his breakfast table.

Kind hospitality again – this time from the Hubbards who invited us to have our picnic lunch at Inungu Farm. Then a quick walk up the kopje and off in different groups in different directions to take Scouts back to Gordon Park, check our Game Park eaglets or view the Best Nest in the West (mine, of course), where a couple of weeks before we had witnessed (for the first time) one chick viciously knocking off the other, in true Black Eagle tradition. Fingers crossed, please, for everyone to fledge safely.

### **Southern Ground-Hornbill Survey**

Now that term has started again, our industrious and dedicated team are diving back into the far yonder to the last area to be visited in rural Matopos, for discussions and interviews with the schools. They will also be attending cluster meetings with school heads to present final details of the next and probably most important phase of the survey to date.

There are reports of a group of 20 Ground Hornbills to be investigated and logged, and hopefully shortly we will see breeding activities.

A full report will be prepared at the appropriate time, but suffice it to say that the survey is excellent, we are indebted to our team who are dedicated, knowledgeable and carry out their work meticulously, modestly, without publicity, fuss or bother and with little funding. What's more, they seem to enjoy themselves!

**Julia Duprée**

### **Aisleby**

Monthly counts at Aisleby continue, co-ordinated by Sandy McAdam, and there is always something new and interesting to observe. On my last visit, in August, the team was struck by the noticeable absence of cormorants. Sandy has extracted data for sightings of White Breasted and Reed Cormorants over the last 10 years – the results confirming our impression that numbers are declining. Now the real challenge is to decide why.

<b>Species</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>
Reed	2,083	1,168	1,208	1,038	292	274	205	12	196	46
White Breasted	330	395	299	226	145	84	140	12	44	39

Note figures for 2005 are for two months only (January & February) and for 2007 are for 9 months (January to September).

### **Hillside Dams Walk**

On the afternoon of Saturday 15 September, 10 members gathered for a walk at Hillside Dams. The area has been a bird sanctuary for many years but of late low maintenance and poor security have resulted in a decline in popularity and fewer visitors. However there is a new initiative afoot to rehabilitate the Dams, and the Hillside Dams Conservation Trust has invited input from BLZ Matabeleland as well as other interested parties. With this in mind, we spent a happy couple of hours wandering around the area, covering the upper dam, the aloe garden, and part of the wilderness area with open grassland and scrub. We recorded 42 species of birds including: at the dam – Little Grebe (Dabchicks), Blacksmith Lapwing, 3-banded Plover, Hammerkop, Pied Kingfisher, Pied Wagtail, Grey Heron & Wood Sandpiper; and on our wander – Harlequin quail, White-winged Widowbird, Lesser Honeyguide, Orange-breasted Bush-shrike, Southern Red Bishop & q-Red-billed Quelea. We discussed suggestions for development of the area while enjoying a cup of tea, and adding a few more species to our list, and will be submitting a report to the HDC Trust. If any other members/readers have had any experience with similar projects and would like to share their ideas we would be glad to hear them

**Adele Edwards**

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## EASTERN DISTRICTS BIRD CLUB

We are sad to report that Ndundu Lodge, run by members, Bart Wursten and Petra Ballings, has been destroyed by fire on Tuesday 11 September. It is a great loss to them as everything inside was destroyed by the fire. It is also a loss to all of us as it was a very nice place to visit.

### A walk along Thompson's Vlei to Cross Kopje on 22 July 2007 (QDS :1832DC)

Whenever itching to go birding, members of the EDBC phone 020 65525 to make arrangements. Peter Gwidibira and I started off uphill along Mutare Boys' to the little dirt road that cuts into Cecil Kop along the edge of Thompson's Vlei.

The first highlight of the day was a Cabanis's Bunting sitting on the telephone wire. A few other miombo birds were also present, including Miombo Tit. We strolled on and descended with the road into a strip of riparian vegetation. As we stood gazing around, a Livingstone's Turaco flew into a nearby clump of trees, and then another one and another one and another two and ... We counted at least 14 turacos entering the same group of trees; it could well have been 20. They were not really behaving as a flock but maybe they were all attracted by a fruiting tree. Some Thick-billed Weavers passed overhead and we decided to return to the main road. We strolled along the edge of Thompson's Vlei and past the gate towards Marymount and Cross Kopje. Along the way we heard and saw several bulbuls, barbets, sunbirds and the like.

While turning into the track towards Cross Kopje we had glimpses of a White-throated Robin-Chat and good views of Golden-breasted Bunting. Finding the correct trail that leads to the top is always a bit of guess work so we followed anything going up. After a bit of crawling we eventually ended up on the right path that leads to the top. When approaching the summit we saw a bird hopping out of sight over some large boulders. We waited for it to reappear but to no avail. We climbed further towards the cross. As we rounded the last bend towards the summit we were surprised by several birds close to and on the cross itself. A male Mocking Cliff-Chat showed well half-way up the cross. On the rock below another bird quietly moved around – Boulder Chat!!

To the best of my knowledge, and later confirmed by Tony Curtis, this is the first ever Boulder Chat in Mutare. It gave us splendid views and at long last disappeared at the back of the rock. We climbed on top of the rock and sat near the large cross, enjoying the view and trying to identify landmarks. A familiar call attracted our attention to a few Cape Buntings. And then the Boulder Chat reappeared, with some friends. In total three Boulder Chats were present. They stayed with us for a long time. After watching an Augur Buzzard gliding past, we called it a day and headed back home.

**Carl Beel**

### Stapleford Forest, Penhalonga (IBA Code ZW003, QDS:1832DB)

Members of the EDBC are currently carrying out a survey of the Swynnerton's Robin on behalf of and with assistance from BirdLife Zimbabwe. As a result, many of the EDBC trips are aimed at finding the bird and getting some idea of its population and possible threats to its survival.

On 13 May 2007, we headed out to Penhalonga to visit Stapleford which is a known Swynnerton site and an IBA. We were 7 in total but none of us had any previous experience of the place. We drove along a winding road past Lake Alexander and Smallbridge Dam. The road changed from tar to gravel and a little bit further we reached the gate of Stapleford Estate. We asked some people at the gate how to get to patches of natural forest within the estate and were directed onto some tracks that took us through endless pine plantations to the top of Mount Rupere.

Splendid views, but no forest. A small patch was visible amid plantation and we decided to investigate. Several Eastern Highland specials were present, including Orange Ground-Thrush, Stripe-cheeked Greenbul, Chirinda Apalis, loads of Roberts' Warbler, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher and Olive Bush-Shrike. We walked some distance into pine plantation which was obviously planted on top of former mountain forest. We decided to climb the tower on top of the mountain to see if any larger patches of forest could be located. One patch was visible on the edge of the estate. We learned from the fire watchman that large sections of Stapleford have been resettled, only the highland areas remain part of the estate. On the way down we investigated another tiny patch which provided us with nice views of

Red-faced Crimsonwings. We went home feeling a bit unsure about the continued presence of Swynnerton's Robin at Stapleford.

A few weeks later, on 03 June 2007, 5 of us went back to Stapleford. Michael Irwin, who has seen Swynnerton's Robin at Stapleford some years ago, provided some information after his talk for BirdLife in Harare that made it obvious that we had tried to find the bird in the wrong place. The place to be is the environs of the forest research station and guest house. The moment we crested a small hill into the valley where the station is located, we entered a different world. Instead of monotonous plantation, a large tract of luxurious mountain forests flows down the mountains. We stopped immediately and dashed off into the forest. It did not take long for each of our two separate groups to get face to face with the robins. We drove on towards the station and had a second stop; again robins were located with ease ; one was spotted from the road itself while rummaging in the leaf litter!

Swynnerton's Robin is obviously common in this forest with four birds seen and some more heard in a very short span of time. Curiously only one Starred Robin was found. As this is the cold season they probably moved to lower altitude. Visitors can stay at the guest house within the research station if arrangements are made with the Forestry Commission. We were told by one of the forestry officers that this nice patch of forest is protected within the estate, so for now the Swynnerton's Robin seems to be safe at Stapleford.

**Carl Beel**

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## **TAIL FEATHERS**

**OR RATHER ELEPHANT TALES** from Natureways Safaris – September Newsletter.

I hope that James Varden, a BirdLife member, doesn't mind my filching this story and that BLZ members don't mind my putting it in Babbler, even though it isn't a bird story.

“At Nyamepi Camp, Mana, recently, some teenagers decided to climb a Faidherbia Albida tree (previously known as Albida Acacia or sometimes called the Apple Ring Acacia tree) – and this tree was in pod, when along came a bull elephant to eat these pods. Bear in mind the teenagers were in the tree when he approached, and of course the elephant started to shake the tree to get the pods to fall out. Anyway the teenagers held on for dear life and no harm came to them. Later that night, their father was walking to the bathrooms when he passed some tourists and mentioned to them that they must be careful as there was a herd of buffalo close by. The group turned round to him and said "Those are nothing. We saw an elephant today trying to shake some kids out that tree over there.....”.

As well as elephants and buffalo, Mana also has marvellous birds. The way to see them is with Natureways Safaris, email : hayley@natureways.com or bookings@natureways.com or tel : + 263 4 339001 fax : Tel / Fax : +263 4 333414 Fax : +263 4 339008

### **Recording Species on BLZ Outings**

At Hippo Pools recently, we had some discussions on whether recording numbers of birds or just 'ticking' the bird as seen was best. Some counts can be estimates at best. Geoff Lowe has sent the following for discussion.

### **TERMS USED TO DESCRIBE BIRD STATUS AND ABUNDANCE**

Ref. Newman's Birds of Southern Africa.

In some locations some small birds are not countable. Exceptions may include Mukuvisi and Chivhero where the bird populations are relatively small and regular visits will indicate trends over time. Observer bias will be reduced if the same recorder is used.

Numbers of birds recorded during an outing depend on a number of factors including the duration of the visit, the number of observers, the ability of the observers to identify the species (especially by call), where the observers went during the visit etc. Using the categories below would provide more accurate information.

VAGRANT (V)	a species not normally seen in Southern Africa
RARE (R)	a species recorded 10 times or less in any year in suitable habitat.
UNCOMMON (U)	a species recorded 30 or less times a month in suitable habitat
FAIRLY COMMON (FC)	a species recorded 1 – 10 times a day in suitable habitat
COMMON (C)	a species recorded 10 – 50 times a day in suitable habitat
VERY COMMON (VC)	a species recorded 50 – 100 times a day in suitable habitat
ABUNDANT (A)	a species recorded 100 or more times a day in suitable habitat

It would probably be possible to count birds which would fall in the RARE and UNCOMMON and if this is done the information would be of value.

The letter/s representing the category could be recorded in all instances and the number where it is possible to count the species.

**Geoff Lowe**

Editor: The table above showing the decline in cormorants numbers at Aisleby perhaps argues against this suggestion as both 1038 Reed Cormorants in 2001 and 292 in 2002 would be 'abundant' but wouldn't indicate a dramatic decline in numbers. Let us know what you think.

## **NOTICEBOARD**

### **Honeyguides**

If members have any back copies of Honeyguide they no longer require please could you let National Office have them. In particular, we need copies of September 2005 Vol.51(2) - it has the photograph of Gurney's Sugar Bird on the front cover.

### **Items for Sale at National Office - contact the office**

**T-Shirts**, various sizes: motifs White-fronted Bee-eaters, Bateleur, Ground Hornbill, Black Eagle and Barn Swallow. Good bush colours. The artwork is by Sue Bell and Penny Feather.

**Golf shirts** with motifs on the pocket and arm, good colours, nice shirts.

**Bush hats and caps** with the BirdLife logo embroidered on them.

**Ceramic bird feeder and water bath, hand painted and unique** (if you wish you can have the birds of your choice painted), an **ideal Christmas present** for the person who already has everything or for an elderly person living in a home which prohibits pets but they can keep birds.

**Window Mobile** – to stop birds flying into large windows.

**Jigsaw puzzles** for adults and children.

### **National Office**

The National Office is situated in the most "birdless" garden I have ever known! Despite my attempts at trying to tempt the little creatures into the garden with water baths and a seed/fruit tray, the only ones to take up the offer so far are the crows. So I am going to try and attract them using plants and would be most grateful if any member can help with indigenous/water wise plants that you may have in your gardens and can let us have some cuttings/offshoots. Please do not give us any invasive alien plants. Suitable plants such as aloes, clivias, agapanthus, any succulents will be most welcome.

**Hazel Hatton**

**PUBLISHED BY JAY KAY PUBLISHING**

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