



Introduction

This safari was run by Letaka Safaris as a combined tented and lodge-based safari. The routing of the safari was Johannesburg to Livingstone where the group were then transferred to the Chobe region in Botswana as there are currently no direct flights to Kasane (we believe these will be available shortly). In total we spent three nights in Botswana and the remaining two weeks in Zambia with Shoebill Island being the main destination. The trip was run slightly later in the year than previous trips in order to increase chances of seeing the Shoebill. The safari was guided by Brent Reed and participants were Charlotte Dyer, Jane Richards, Steven and Ann Cameron.

30 May 2009 – Arrival – Chobe National Park

The group flew in to Livingstone on two different flights and then took a road transfer to Kasane where we met at Chobe Safari Lodge around 15h30 in the afternoon. Our drive took us west into the Chobe National Park where elephants were definitely the dominant feature. Every few hundred metres there was another small herd of elephant, in all we must have seen close on a thousand. Our first official bird was a rather mundane Pied Crow followed by the ubiquitous Lilac-breasted Roller which occurred in abundance almost every 50 metres of road travelled. Once we got into the park we had great views of three White-browed Scrub-Robin displaying very noisily on the top of a Woolly Caper bush. Down on the river there were hundreds of Egyptian Geese as well as big flocks of Yellow-billed Stork and African Spoonbill. The African Skimmers had not yet made an appearance but the rapidly dropping water levels must soon expose sandbanks and bring them back. A number of White-backed Vultures were seen settling down to roost in the numerous dead trees around the Serondela area. Just before another beautiful Chobe sunset we arrived in camp for sundowners and an orientation evening around the fire. Dinner was made more special by the fact that Charlotte was celebrating her 76th birthday with us and everyone on the trip had travelled with us before so it was a bit like a gathering of old friends. After dinner we discussed the plans for the following day before retiring to bed with great expectations for the following day.

31 May 2009 – Chobe National Park

We were woken at 6am to the sound of Moses filling our stand basins with warm water and the smell of fresh coffee brewing on the fire. The dawn was eerily quiet with not even a francolin call to break the morning's hush. All around our camp there were tracks of two honey badgers which must have visited us in the dead of night, Jane had heard something snuffling about in the grass in the early hours of the morning and was pleased to know after we had inspected the tracks that it was only a honey badger! Our morning drive took us down to the Chobe river which is now dropping very

rapidly, this year the water was the highest it has been since 1984 and the entire region between Chobe and the Caprivi strip of Namibia was inundated forming a massive body of water that looked more like a lake than a river. Tens of thousands of White-faced Duck lined the water and rank grassland and every time a Fish Eagle flew over there would be another panicked flock of duck sent whistling into the air. We had some good views of a White-browed Coucal peeking out of the dense Woolly Caper bush at the river's edge as well as excellent views of Red-billed Firefinch and Green-winged Pytilia , because Grant had seen a Golden-winged Pytilia on the Chobe last month we were closely examining all the Green-winged Pytilias in the hopes of spotting a 'Goldy' but alas it was not to be. Not this morning anyway. A juvenile Black-chested Snake-Eagle allowed us to drive right beneath his perch before flying off and giving us several more good looks. There were quite a number of raptors about and we had cracking views of a melanistic Gabar Goshawk who performed several fly-bys before perching right by the vehicle. A Shikra afforded slightly less pleasing views but was nonetheless easily identifiable as he worked the *Capparis* thickets along the edge of the woodland, there were also numerous Bateleur and White-backed Vultures soaring. Just before the turn-off to Kabulabula Island we watched an African Hawk-Eagle cruising for Guineafowl and this was followed by a pair of Brown Snake-Eagles not too far from our camp. Our best views for the morning however were two pairs of Giant Kingfishers noisily declaring their territories with full wings-out displays from both male and female birds.

As we headed back towards camp through the teak woodlands we came across a productive little bird party which produced Green Woodhoopoe, Red-headed Weaver, Yellow-throated Petronia, White-bellied Sunbird, Bearded Woodpecker, Cardinal Woodpecker, Long-billed Crombec, Southern Masked Weaver and a disappearing flock of White-crested Helmet-shrike. We also heard Scarlet-chested Sunbird but were unable to pin it down.

Compared to yesterday afternoon the river in the morning was very quiet from a wildlife point of view but the Chobe always peaks in the afternoon when the heat (even in winter) drives the animals to the water to drink.

Brunch was ready when we arrived back at camp and we were all more than ready for the delicious pizza which was served with a delicate curry cauliflower salad and a greek salad to round it off. With full bellies we retired for a siesta before heading out to our boat cruise which started at 3pm from White Sands on the Chobe river.

The drive to the boat station was fairly uneventful bird-wise but there were plenty of elephants, buffalo and giraffe on the way. We very nearly got stuck as we arrived at the boat station and had to let half the pressure out of the tyres before we were able to rocket out of the sinking sand at the water's edge. Our boat was a twin hull type with a 60Hp outboard motor known locally as a Skimmer. This was to be good karma because African Skimmers were top of our list of target species for the afternoon cruise. After some very close up views of some absolutely enormous crocodiles we moved down to a herd of elephant which were drinking noisily at the water's edge. It is incredible how close we were able to get to these behemoths as they went about their rehydration without paying us the slightest notice even though we were literally ten feet away from the nearest individual. Shortly after the elephants we came across our first target species, the White-crowned Lapwing which was enjoying the reappearance of the river banks which had been missing for several months under the exceptionally high water. A number of Wire-tailed Swallows made sure they got onto the list by actually perching on one of the pontoons of the boat and flying past us within a few

feet of our noses. Other *hirundines* included Brown-throated Martin, Lesser-striped Swallow and Pearl-breasted Swallow as well as a small flock of Grey-rumped Swallows over one of the large Namibian floodplains.

Once again the White-faced Ducks were too numerous to count but ten thousand would be a very conservative guesstimate. There were also a number of Fulvous Ducks, Comb Ducks and both Egyptian and Spurwing Geese but the real prize was a flock of six Pygmy Geese amongst the emergent water-lilies. We failed to find the Lesser Jacana but we also did not manage to get as far down the river as we had hoped and missed out on the prime habitat for these little birds.

We did manage some fantastic looks at our primary target, the African Skimmer which treated us to flying and perched views from every conceivable angle. We were able to get fairly close to some of the birds to the point where we didn't need binoculars to see all the detail.

After searching hundreds and hundreds of hippo for oxpeckers we finally came across a small herd of Kudu on the bank of the river and Charlotte spotted a group of four Yellow-billed Oxpecker clinging tenaciously to a Kudu that was trying it's best to get rid of them by prancing around like a rocking horse.

Another spectacular sunset on the Chobe signalled the end of another day although there was more to come when we got to our camp. Dinner had been prepared and whilst we were sitting around the fire listening to Chris announce the night's menu, we heard the African Barred Owlet calling in the distance. After a bit of encouragement the owlet came into camp between starters and main course and we had some excellent views as he moved from the dense foliage of the teak trees into a dead tree where he seemed perfectly content in the limelight. Although we heard Southern White-faced Scops Owl we didn't manage to see it and to taunt us it continued calling virtually throughout the night.

1 June 2009 – Chobe National Park, Kasane & Surrounds

We left camp early once again and headed into the *Baikiaea* woodlands in search of the Racket-tailed Roller and other teak forest specials. Although the morning started off quietly we did find a few bird parties which produced numerous Golden-breasted Buntings as well as Southern Black Flycatcher, White-crested Helmet-Shrike, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, White-bellied Sunbird, Yellow-throated Petronia, Striped Kingfisher, Cardinal Woodpecker, Bearded Woodpecker and Yellow-fronted Canary. We had excellent views of several Dark-chanting Goshawks and one Little Sparrowhawk with what looked like a Yellow-fronted Canary in his talons.

As we got to the town of Kasane we found a patch of dry *Acacia* woodland which produced Crimson-breasted Shrike, Burnt-necked Eremomela, Jameson's Firefinch, Southern Masked Weaver, White-browed Sparrow-Weaver and Black-backed Puffback. Soaring overhead were numerous Marabout Storks, White-backed Vultures and Hooded Vultures with a single Tawny Eagle and Bateleur.

Our route took us to the Mowana Lodge in Kasane where we started off with Copper Sunbird, Collared Sunbird, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and White-bellied Sunbird all feeding on the mistletoe growing in the *Bauhinia* just at the foot of jetty. Further into the garden and along the edge of the river we found Red-faced Cisticola, Brown Firefinch, Bronze Mannikin and Village Weaver. Everyone had excellent views of several Collared Palm-thrush below the chalets and the birds were so confiding we managed to get within a few metres of them. Several Giant Kingfishers were displaying

along the river but there were no African Finfoot or Half-collared Kingfisher in evidence and the pathway to our normal sites for these two birds was still deep under water. Part of the group managed to find Spectacled Weaver but it remains off the list for the rest of us.

After Mowana Lodge we headed to Chobe Safari Lodge for lunch in the campsite beneath the shade of the Water-berry trees. During lunch Yellow-bellied Greenbul and Terrestrial Brownbul were both in evidence and very vocal as were a pair of White-browed Robin-chats which were advertising their territorial rights.

After lunch we headed back up to the park where we had a fleeting glimpse of a suspected Racket-tailed Roller disappearing into the teak but no amount of calling would coax the suspect back into view and we had to leave it as an unconfirmed sighting. Just further down the road we had excellent views of Purple Roller feeding on some large beetles but his glory was stolen by a family of five Southern Ground Hornbills which were foraging right next to the road. The teak was much quieter in the afternoon and apart from two Paradise Flycatchers we did not add anything to our lists on the way down to the river.

Back on the river we were once again astounded by the sheer number of White-faced Ducks which seemed to take up almost every inch of shoreline in some areas. The usual suspects were all there with Black-winged Stilts, Egyptian Geese, Comb Ducks, Fulvous Ducks, Little Egrets, Great White Egrets and Yellow-billed Egrets all contributing to the awesome avian biomass along the river. Two new birds for the list were Wattled Lapwing and Spotted Thicknee, both within a few hundred yards of each other. The many buffalo, kudu, lechwe, impala and puku could only offer a handful of Red-billed Oxpecker amongst them and the elephants as usual contributed not much at all except for a few trailing Cattle Egrets.

After sundowners along the river watching another spectacular Chobe sunset we started heading back to camp. On our drive back, just before it got properly dark we were treated to the sight of nine African Wild Dogs lying in the road literally metres from the vehicle. We watched the dogs for several minutes before they decided they had pressing business elsewhere and suddenly jumped up and loped off into the bush.

Back at camp the White-faced Owl continued to taunt us and we were unable to walk into the bush to track him down because of all the elephant and buffalo activity but most of us were happy just to know he was there. Chris treated us to another excellent dinner of pork *schnitzel* and brown rice with some amazing vegetables and sauce and after a short chat at the fire we were all off to bed to sleep off another excellent day's birding.

02 June 2009 – Chobe to Taita Falcon Lodge (Zambia)

Our morning got off to a cracking start with the same pack of wild dogs we had seen the previous evening hunting impala just a few hundred metres south of our camp. Although we didn't see any full chases the dogs were very active and we saw the entire pack chasing back and forth through the woodland with the Chobe River as backdrop.

The first new bird for the morning was a pair of Violet-eared Waxbills which were part of a little party of seedeaters feeding around a Woolly Caper bush (*Capparis tomentosa*). Although initially difficult to see they popped up quickly with a bit of spishing and we had fabulous views of both male

and female in the soft morning light. Just further down the road and not in typical habitat we picked up a Chestnut-vented Tit-babbler also in the Woolly Caper bush thickets along the road.

As we reached the park boundary we found a male African Golden Oriole perched in a teak tree alongside the main road. This was quickly followed by the sought after call of the Coqui Francolin. After ten minutes of searching Jane finally spotted one of the males emerging from the shade of a teak tree into a clearing. Once we had put the scope onto him we found that there were two males having a bit of a territorial debate and the calling continued affording us all excellent scope and binocular views. We had coffee at another Racket-tailed Roller site but these birds continued to be elusive and it became evident that if we were going to get these birds it would have to be in Zambia.

We arrived at the Botswana border post where we quickly cleared customs and immigration formalities before getting on the ferry to cross the Zambezi into Zambia. It soon became apparent that we had left the efficiency of Southern Africa and were now truly in the wilds of Central Africa and the bureaucratic jungle proved to be an interesting place indeed. The ferry crossing went smoothly enough, we even managed to pick up Rufous-bellied Heron and Malachite Kingfisher on the crossing but once we got into Zambia we were stumped by the formalities at the border. Carbon tax, council tax, road tax, 3rd party insurance, vehicle identification permits and customs import permits were just some of the hurdles we had to jump. Eventually, after more than two hours of waiting we finally managed to enter Zambia with all the correct paperwork properly stamped and signed and precious birding time lost. The group dealt very well with the delay and everyone was just pleased to get through and be on our way to our next destination.

Having lost birding time we were pressed to get to the lodge before dark and could not afford to stop too often on the way. Our trip did however yield Broad-tailed Paradise Whydah just going out of breeding plumage as well as another pair of African Golden Orioles and a little flock of Retz's Helmet-Shrike. Just into Livingstone we had some excellent views of a Lizard Buzzard on a power line in perfect light and un-obscured by any branches.

We arrived at the fabulous Taita Falcon Lodge with plenty of light still to spare and we had not been there ten minutes before Anne spotted an Augur Buzzard perched on the cliff below us. Whilst we were taking in the astounding view of the Zambezi River three hundred feet below us we saw a number of Red-winged Starlings and heard the Natal Francolins calling in the distance below us. The sight of the mighty Zambezi tearing through the Batoka gorge was well worth all the waiting at the border and after fortifying ourselves with a sundowner we retired to our rooms to shower and freshen up before dinner.

Oom (Uncle) Faan and his wife Ann-Marie, the owners of the lodge entertained us royally and we had a sumptuous meal complemented with some more great South African wine before calling it a night and returning to our rooms for a well-deserved rest with the roaring river lulling us to sleep.

03 June 2009 – Taita Falcon Lodge, Livingstone – Zambia

We started our morning with coffee to break the chill whilst we looked over the rushing Zambezi River below us. Initially there were few birds in evidence but as the sun warmed the cliffs so the birds started filtering in. White-bellied Sunbird, Cinnamon-breasted Bunting, Jameson's Firefinch and Red-Winged Starlings were all around and far below us we could hear Natal Francolin heralding the new day but no matter how much we scanned with the scope we couldn't get eyes on them. Just as

we were sitting down to breakfast a Peregrine Falcon flew by but turned quickly and was out of sight in a heartbeat. We saw one of the Augur Buzzards heading off down the gorge and then it was time to head back to the town of Livingstone for the obligatory trip to the sewerage works. On the drive into town we picked up Familiar Chat and Village Indigobird as well as a mixed flock of White-crested and Retz's Helmet-Shrikes which seemed to be having an argument over something. We had reasonably good views of a pair of Cut-throat Finches which had joined a small flock of Red-billed Quelea and even managed to get them in the scope for everyone to have a good look as they warmed up in the morning sun.

At the sewerage works were a number of Cattle Egrets, Sacred Ibis, Black Crake, Common Moorhen, Black-headed Herons, Hadedda Ibis and a single pair of Allen's Gallinule. We also saw a single immature Lesser Moorhen and heard but could not find several African Rails. We decided there and then that we would return early the following day to try for these elusive birds that occasionally venture out into the open in the early morning or on rainy overcast days. Since there was no chance of a rainy or overcast day we resigned ourselves to the fact that tomorrow was going to be an early start.

Our trip to the Waterfront Lodge for Half-collared Kingfisher proved unsuccessful and the gardens in general were uncharacteristically quiet. We did manage to locate a Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird high up in a Jackelberry tree after hearing the characteristic tinkling call.

After buying sandwiches for lunch we headed off to the Victoria Falls to do the touristy thing, the falls were not quite in full flood but not far off and the roaring thunder could be heard from over a kilometre away. Needless to say everyone was drenched to the bone by the incessant spray which comes up and around from every conceivable angle but luckily, even though we are in our first month of winter the mid-day temperature was still around 30C so no discomfort was felt although it did take some time to dry out. Our trip to the falls added no birds to the list and our drive back to the lodge was similarly quiet with all the avi-fauna apart from the ubiquitous White-browed Sparrow-Weavers having gone for an afternoon siesta.

Back at the lodge there was time for us to have a quick siesta before regrouping on the viewing deck for another bash at the Verreaux's Eagle which remained elusive. We did however have more excellent views of the pair of Augur Buzzards flying in tandem and cruising back and forth past us at eye level. Little and African Black Swifts were added to the list but apart from a number of Rock Martins and Red-winged Starlings the gorge was relatively quiet. A walk around the lodge grounds produced glimpses of a Black-crowned Tchagra which was new to the list and better views of a Familiar Chat but all in all it was a quiet afternoon.

4 June 2009 – Livingstone to Choma (Nkanga River Conservancy)

After a quick breakfast and a cup of coffee whilst gazing over the Batoka Gorge we headed off to the sewerage farm in the hopes of catching the African Rails out in the open before their long day of skulking had begun.

On the road to Livingstone we managed to add three new raptors before reaching the sewerage farm, a Long-crested Eagle was first, followed by a wonderfully co-operative African Goshawk and last and unfortunately least was a Black-shouldered Kite just a few hundred metres before the sewerage works.

As we arrived we heard the rails calling from several different locations and after about ten minutes of searching we were rewarded when Steven spotted the first rail coming out into the open. We had almost a full minute of good views of the adult before seeing several juveniles darting in and out followed by more good sightings of two adults. We really couldn't have asked for better views of these birds. We followed the Rail sightings with excellent views of a family of Purple Swamphen in the early morning light strutting through the open like a bunch of farmyard chickens and showing off their colours for all to see. Around this time we also picked up the first Little Rush Warbler which we had heard several times but had been too busy to pay any attention to and this was followed quickly by a pair of Lesser Swamp Warblers which showed themselves well after the usual bit of skulking. *Hirundines* also proved very co-operative and the surprise of the morning was a Barn Swallow who had obviously neglected to schedule his migration north and was still happily flying in-amongst a mixed flock of Wire-tailed Swallows, Greater-striped Swallows and White-throated Swallows. This morning also produced many more Allen's Gallinule than we had seen the previous day and a few of us managed a fleeting view of a Goliath Heron as it flew over a bank of bulrushes and disappeared on the other side. Despite a lot of scanning of the ponds we were unable to turn up any more Lesser Moorhen but we did manage to finally add a Little Grebe to the list just before we left.

We took a very culturally scenic route back through the sprawling 'suburbs' of Livingstone and eventually managed to wend our way out of the city after a quick stop to buy supplies for lunch. Just outside of Livingstone we had a great view of an African Cuckoo Hawk, our fourth new raptor for the morning. After putting some mileage between ourselves and Livingstone we stopped alongside the road for a leg stretch and picked up Miombo (Lesser) Blue-eared Starling which was new for the trip as well as Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike, Black Flycatcher, Brown-crowned Tchagra, Chinspot Batis, Meyer's Parrot, Southern Black Tit, Violet-eared Waxbill and Jameson's Firefinch.

After a few quick stops along the way to check out little bird parties we had another break just outside Kaloma where a Fig tree provided much entertainment with both Green Pigeon and European Golden Oriole being added to the list as well as a number of other repeat species flitting in and out. On the opposite side of the road Short-winged Cisticola, Burnt-necked Eremomelas, Yellow-breasted Apalis, Long-billed Crombec and Southern Black Tits vied for our attention.

Soon after the town of Choma we turned off to our destination at Bruce-Miller farms with only one stop along the way once we had penetrated fairly deep in to the *Brachystegia* woodlands. This stop produced Yellow-bellied Hyliota, White-tailed Blue Flycatcher and Neddicky amongst a host of the usual suspects but by this time we were ready to get to our lodgings after a long day's birding. After welcome drinks on arrival at the camp we headed into the woodlands for a last birding session before sunset and although generally quiet we did manage to turn up Shelley's Sunbird which was new to the list.

After dinner an African Wood Owl was heard on the other side of the river but no amount of coaxing would bring him any closer and he was added to tomorrow's list of target species before we retired for a well deserved rest.

5 June 2009 – Choma (Nkanga River Conservancy)

It was strange to wake up in the morning to the sounds of roosters and tractors as the early morning farm activity got going because we had grown used to the sounds of the wild after a few nights in Chobe. Our mission however was Chaplin's Barbet and the Bruce-Miller farm is the best place for

this bird and although the farm is commercial there are vast tracts of pristine miombo woodland and more importantly, lots of fig trees for our barbets. Our morning started off with some great views of Bennet's Woodpecker and Sooty Chat which were new additions to the list, this was followed by a number of Yellow Bishops in non-breeding plumage which took a while to get everyone onto as they shot up and down in the grassland. After a bit of distraction in the *Acacia* savannah which produced a busy little group of Yellow-bellied and Burnt-necked Eremomela we finally got into habitat for the Chaplin's and were just starting to have a scan around when two white blobs appeared at the top of a nearby tree. We were very pleased with the views we were having when the two birds decided to fly off and reposition themselves even closer to us and perfectly lit on top of fig tree not 30 metres from us. We all had brilliant views with scope and binoculars and this picture was taken through the scope (actually this is one of a total of about 30 pictures we took through the scope!). We were terribly pleased with ourselves for having done so well with this



Chaplin's Barbet - Photo B. Reed

rarity and after about 20 minutes of gazing at the birds warming themselves in the sun we finally decided we had seen enough and headed off to look for the Three-banded Coursers which Raston, our local guide assured us were relatively easy to find. Although we did not manage to find Three-banded Courser we had some wonderful views of Bronze-winged Courser in perfect light. After the coursers it was time to make a bee-line for the miombo woodlands towards Mukusi Lodge.

Miombo birding is not for the faint of heart and it can be very difficult to keep up with the frenetic pace of arrivals and departures in the bird parties which typify birding in this habitat. Our first bird party produced Southern Hyliota, White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike, Miombo Tit and a much sought-after Spotted Creeper which Anne spotted whilst we were all trying to pin down a suspected Yellow-bellied Hyliota. This was all amongst a heap of other more common birds which kept popping up to throw us all off balance. We walked a good distance into the woodland before returning to the vehicle for tea and coffee which was interrupted by the arrival of another bird party which led us off leaving half-finished cups of coffee behind. This party produced another Spotted Creeper which afforded better views than the first as well as little group of Green-capped Eremomelas and a tantalising glimpse of a Little Spotted Woodpecker that no-one could really get a decent look at. All too soon the morning had run out and it was time to head back to camp for lunch.

Birding at the lunch table in camp provided some good entertainment with African Golden Oriole, Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike and Yellow-breasted Apalis all making an appearance. After lunch some people took a little siesta whilst others birded around the camp. Siesta-time birding produced Red-throated Twinspot, Giant Kingfisher, Bennet's Woodpecker, Shelley's Sunbird, Brown-hooded Kingfisher and Trumpeter Hornbill.

Our afternoon drive took us back to the miombo where we started off with a pair of Crowned Hornbills and soon thereafter a terribly un-cooperative Miombo Scrub-Robin which refused to be

pinned down. Soon we were into another bird party which yielded Cabanis' Bunting, Southern Hyliota, Wood Pipit, Miombo Tit and another fleeting glimpse of the Little Spotted Woodpecker.

A few hundred metres down the track we were once again on foot after another bird party and this time managed much better looks at the Miombo Scrub-Robin as well as our best looks thus far at the Little Spotted Woodpecker.

Back at camp the Wood Owl started calling in camp whilst we were having dinner and after a quick look around we managed to locate the owl which then conveniently moved to a nice low perch where we all had excellent views of this sought-after bird. After dinner we went out for a night drive with our target bird being the Three-banded Courser. Although we dipped on the courser once again we did get some really good looks at male Fiery-necked and Rufous-cheeked Nightjars which sort of made up for the lack of coursers.

6 June 2009 – Choma to Lusaka

The miombo woodlands were not as kind to us this morning as they had been the previous day and our day got off to a slow start with only Rufous-bellied Tit and Black-headed Oriole being added to the list. The few bird parties that we came across were widely dispersed and mainly confined to the upper stratum of the canopy which made viewing difficult. We did have fleeting glimpses of some of yesterday's stars such as the Spotted Creeper and White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike but generally the morning was slow and uneventful, something that our journey to Lusaka would not improve on.

There was very little birding on the way and our lunch stop produced only a Miombo Scrub-Robin that was of interest although there were a number of the usual suspects around the birds all seemed rather nervous and flighty.

The remainder of the drive to Lusaka was uneventful and we arrived at our camp with very little to show for the day's birding. Around the farm we managed to pick up several woodland species but nothing new apart from a suspected Ovambo Sparrow-hawk which could not be confirmed. We decided to write today off as a travel day and concentrate on tomorrow's possibilities.

7 June 2009 – Lusaka to Forest Inn (Loza Guest House)

We left Lusaka at 7am for the drive north to Forest Inn, one of Zambia's most renowned miombo birding spots. The road north took us through some depressing countryside with hundreds of thousands of hectares of once virgin miombo woodland turned to grassland through agriculture and firewood harvesting. All over Zambia the fires are burning, turning precious woodlands into charcoal for retail in Lusaka and other 'urban' centres. Seeing this devastation made us appreciate all the more the patches of untouched woodland still standing. Zambia has a large population which are mostly dependant on natural resources for their day to day existence and although we cannot begrudge the struggling rural families their firewood it seems that this finite resource is burning it's way through an astonishing quantity of once-excellent birding habitat. Sometimes we would not see trees for several kilometres, in places where I had birded *miombo* woodland years before there was now grassland, hundreds and hundreds of acres of virtually sterile grassland. Finally, after the town of Kabwe we came to large tracts of mature woodland and felt that we had left the destruction behind us. The drive up produced Little Sparrow-hawk, Lizard Buzzard, Long-crested Eagle, White-backed Vulture and a host of the usual woodland species such as White-crested Helmet-shrike, Green Wood-hoopoe, Scarlet-chested Sunbird and Cabanis' Bunting amongst others but we had to wait until we got beyond Forest Inn for the real birding to begin.

Just a few kilometres off the main road we found a small bird party which seemed to grow as we followed it. The first bird new to the list was a Violet-backed Sunbird which was quickly followed by a Red-capped Crombec which led us a merry dance as we tried to get everyone onto it whilst it flitted about the canopy with annoying regularity. At least three Spotted Creepers were seen during the chase and we finally got decent views of the White-tailed Blue Flycatcher which a no-one had got decent views of at Choma. One of my personal highlights was the Souza's Shrike of which we saw no less than three, this is a bird which we hunt for endlessly in Namibia's Caprivi strip and seeing it here is always rewarding even if it can't go on my Southern African list. The frenetic pace of the bird party was exhausting and before we knew it we had moved several hundred metres through the woodlands still hoping for better views of everything we had seen. As we emerged from the woodland and headed back to the vehicle a *Gymnogene* was seen flying in the distance, our first since Chobe.

We arrived at the Loza Guest House around mid-afternoon and after installing ourselves in our rooms we headed back out to the woodlands but before we had even left the property we were treated to the sight of a Long-crested Eagle, Lizard Buzzard and Black-shouldered Kite all within 50 metres of each other. The afternoon excursion was quieter but did provide fleeting views of four or five suspected Black-eared Seedeaters which could not be confirmed despite our best efforts to track them down in the long grass. Our first breeding plumage weaver for the trip was a male Village Weaver with his entourage of females nicely lit in a dead tree. Several Flappet Larks were seen displaying over the fields of a nearby farm but we battled to locate any bird parties such as we had seen earlier in the day.

All in all it was a good days birding with plenty to keep us entertained, most of all we were excited for the drive to Kasanka National Park the following day and all of us had our wish-lists that we wanted to tick off.

8 June 2009 – Forest Inn to Kasanka

After a full English breakfast we were on our way, or so we thought. We only made it to the car-park of the lodge before getting stuck into a whole bunch of early morning birds. The Red-faced Cisticolas were calling in the grassland, Variable and Scarlet-chested Sunbirds were attacking the mistletoe and both Brown-crowned and Black-crowned Tchagras were skulking in the garden. White-browed Robin-chats were displaying and a flock of Common Waxbill were a late addition to the list. We eventually managed to leave only to get into the miombo woodland and straight away a bird party appeared which contained no less than nineteen species. This included Miombo Scrub-Robin, Violet-backed Sunbird, Southern Hylia, Spotted Creeper, Miombo Pied Barbet, Souza's Shrike, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Yellow-throated Petronia, Chinspot Batis, Black and Brown-crowned Tchagra, Neddicky, Rattling Cisticola, Short-winged Cisticola, Long-billed Crombec, Yellow-bellied Eremomela, Green-capped Eremomela, Yellow-breasted Apalis and Cardinal Woodpecker.

Eventually we had to leave to start ticking off some mileage on our way to Kasanka National Park. Once again we were struck by the annihilation of the woodlands throughout the north with many areas having fallen prey to commercial logging and then having suffered further from rural firewood collecting. We were struck by the how populace this country is, even when you think that you are in the back of beyond there is a little village around every corner and every villager seems to be carrying another piece of firewood, another piece of indigenous forest added to the enormous carbon footprint of rural life in Zambia.

Although the drive was pretty uneventful we did have some interesting lunch shopping in Mukushi village where we realised how much we missed having Chris around to do our packed lunches! Nevertheless we did manage to supply ourselves sufficiently to get through lunch without our Letaka

Safaris staff but they were sorely missed as we munched on beef *samosas* and an assortment of sandwiches which are better left un-described, we knew that Chris would be cooking dinner for us that night so a bit of a dodgy lunch could be tolerated.



Black-backed Barbet – Photo B. Reed

We arrived at camp in Kasanka and after a bit of break to settle in we got back down to birding where the guide (who shall remain nameless) decided that a bit of a walk over the floodplains to Fibwe Hide would be a good idea. It turned out to be a brilliant idea even though we never saw, or by all accounts came close to Fibwe Hide. It must also be noted that at times we were not entirely certain of our precise whereabouts but the important thing was that there were birds, lots of birds. Steven managed to spot a Black-backed Barbet sitting in a *Ficus* almost a hundred metres away and we had excellent scope views of the bird and later managed to walk up and get even better binocular views. The picture included here is a digi-scope picture which I took with Jane's little digital camera – not the greatest resolution but a worthy record shot of the bird. Other birds on the walk included Black Cuckoo-

shrike, Brown-headed Kingfisher, Green-capped Eremomela, Long-billed Crombec, Slaty Egret, Giant Kingfisher, Green Pigeon and a tantalising call which sounded very much like Ross' Turaco although we were unable to find the source of the call.

The walkers never made it to Fibwe Hide and to be honest we are still not sure exactly where we were but suffice is to say that we made it back to camp before dark for a well deserved sundowner. Steven, Jane and I had done quite a bit of mileage on foot whilst Kobus, Charlotte and Anne had been swanning around the fringes of the Kasanka river in the Land-cruiser under the guise of looking for us and the elusive Fibwe Hide.

Back at camp the grunting of hippo greeted the ritual birdlisting and it was a worn-out crowd that tackled another of Chris' excellent dinners which was rounded off with an amazing cheesecake before we took our rounded off bodies to bed to sleep off another day in Zambia.

9 June 2009 – Kasanka National Park

The morning started off with grunting hippos in the Kasanka River below camp and just before sunrise there were a number of Black-crowned Night-Herons squawking their way back to their roosts. We had a fleeting glimpse of Bar-winged Weaver at the pontoon crossing but that was soon forgotten once the actual crossing got underway. The Kasanka pontoon travels a very short distance, probably no more than 15 metres in total but the craft is only just big enough to take a land-cruiser and no more. Everyone had to wait on shore as I drove the vehicle onto the pontoon and then crossed the river with rather little freeboard, we did however get safely to the other side and once I had driven off the pontoon headed back to collect everyone from the opposite shore. The crossing done we were on our way to Luwumbwa Lodge to find the Pel's Fishing Owl which Steven was particularly keen to see having missed it all but once on numerous trips to Africa over the past 20 years.

Just a few kilometres after the crossing we had a shufti of a Schalow's Turaco disappearing into the woodland, a quick chase produced no results although the stop did provide our first Lappet-faced Vulture flying overhead. Further along we stopped at a little *dambo* where we had excellent views of a Martial Eagle overhead and numerous seed-eaters flying about the surrounding woodland. We were very lucky to see a Broad-tailed Paradise Whydah in breeding plumage and this was followed by a Reichard's Seed-eater (Streaky-breasted Seedeater) perched on the top of a dead tree. As we were about to leave Steven and Ann became aware of three little things moving around the short grass in the water and were then treated to wonderful views of what turned out to be Lesser Jacana. Because there was no real place for them to hide we had really good binocular and scope views and Kobus even managed to get a couple of decent photographs.

We eventually arrived at Luwumbwa Lodge where we boarded our trusty little craft for a cruise down the Luwumbwa river in search of the Pel's Fishing Owl. The boat trip took is unlike any we are used to, the Luwumwa is a tiny little river lined with *Zyzigium* trees which grow so close in at certain places that you literally have to duck under branches as the little boat weaves it's way down the winding channel. The river opens up into larger areas with



Half-collared Kingfisher - Photo: G. Reed

big trees where the Pel's is likely to be found and these were the areas we searched. Although we dipped on the Pel's we did see a female African Finfoot and some excellent Half-collared Kingfishers which eventually posed long enough for all of us to get good views. Giant Kingfishers accompanied us virtually the entire trip and then suddenly there was a flash of red as a group of turacos flew out alongside the boat and disappeared into a thicket. We quickly landed the boat and jumped out onto shore to investigate and only after a lot of frustration and fleeting glimpses of a wing here and a head there did we manage to get enough on the birds to discover that we were following a mixed flock of Ross' and Schalow's Turacos. The views were not fantastic but most of us managed at some stage or another to get reasonable views as the birds moved from the canopy of one tree to the next. None of us were really disappointed about the Pel's because it is the nature of that bird that it is more missed than ticked and we had picked up some really good birds for the morning.

The boat trip had taken a bit longer than expected because of all the wandering around after the Turacos and various other delays so we had to do a quickish drive back to camp. After another slightly less hair-raising pontoon crossing we were back at camp for lunch and a short break before heading out for an afternoon along the Kasanka river floodplains.

The afternoon drive got us into some massive floodplains where African Openbill abounded, Kobus spotted a single Wattled Crane in the middle of a floodplain surrounded by over a hundred Puku but there was no sign of the Grey-crowned Crane which we expected to find along this chain of floodplains. Two herds of elephant were seen crossing the river and there were a number of hippo in and out of the water. Steven, Kobus and I had a distant look at a Goliath Heron whilst checking out a river crossing which turned out not to be a crossing at all but looked a rather good place to drown a vehicle if one were so inclined. There was a lot of birdlife to be seen around the floodplains but we found the miombo to be decidedly quiet, we did manage to find three Red-necked Spurfowl on the fringe of the miombo which was another new bird for the list.

After sundowners on the Kabwe floodplains we headed back to camp using the spotlight to keep a look out for coursers and nightjars. Of these there were none but we added two new mammals to the list, Scrub Hare and Oribi which is a tiny little antelope with a rather swollen looking face. As we arrived back at camp we heard the Wood Owls calling and after a bit of searching in the tall riverine trees we managed to locate the bird and all of us had good binocular views of the bird as it called out to its mate. Thick-tailed bushbaby were also calling around the camp and we found a pair in a large *Acacia* tree at the back of camp.

10 June 2009 – Shoebill Island (Bangweulu Swamps)

A five thirty wake-up call roused us from our slumber, everyone was very excited about the flight to Shoebill Island and the prospect of seeing the bizarre Shoebill in the flesh. We drove to Wasa Camp where we met up with Edmund Farmer who would fly us from the Kasanka airstrip to Shoebill Island. The flight was only twenty minutes long which is about my limit in a Cessna 206 but the view from the air in the cool morning was absolutely glorious. We flew over the Kasanka and Luwumbwa rivers and on northwards to the Bangweulu swamps which stretched before us in a never-ending array of islands, floodplains and glistening channels. As we descended towards the airstrip we were greeted by the truly awe-inspiring sight of thousands upon thousands of Black Lechwe on the open plains and a staggering amount of birdlife exploiting the muddy flats and shallows of the receding waters. Flocks of several hundred Collared (Common) Pratincole rose up along with endless numbers of African Openbill, Black-winged Stilts a variety of egrets, Glossy, Hadeda and Sacred Ibis, White-faced

and Fulvous Ducks, Egyptian and Spurwing Geese, Marabou Stork and even a pair of Wattled Crane. Wherever we looked there were birds, birds and more birds, in fact it seemed if there was a space not occupied by a bird it was because there was a Black Lechwe standing there. It took us a minute or two to adjust to this extraordinary environment before we boarded the open land rover and drove across the plains to the boat which would take us to Shoebill Island.

The boat trip to the island was amazing with new species around every turn. Swamp Flycatcher, Katanga Masked Weaver, Long-toed Plover, Blue-breasted (White-cheeked) Bee-eater and Hottentot Teal were amongst some of the new additions to our list. Sliding quietly through the channels with just the swishing of the bamboo poles pushing our craft through the water made the experience all the more memorable, and when we arrived at camp we were all on a complete birding high. Once we had settled in we had a quick cup of coffee before heading out for the real business of the day, finding the Shoebill which is sparsely distributed through this million hectare wetland wilderness. Once again we boarded our little craft and our two polers, David and Pearson set off to the west of camp into the never-ending swamps beyond. Once again we were surrounded by a staggering number and variety of birds and we added Saddle-billed Stork, Red-shouldered Widow, Red-knobbed Coot, White-winged Black Tern, Chirping Cisticola and Banded Martin to the ever-growing list. And then suddenly, there it was, larger than life. An enormous slate grey puzzle of a bird standing in the flooded grassland about 60 metres from our boat! Even those of us who had seen this bird before were struck once again by what a remarkable creature this is and how fortunate we were to be able to see it in this phenomenal environment. After a bit of manoeuvring we managed to get the boat into a position where everyone could see clearly. The floating mats of grass made it virtually impossible to keep the scope steady and digiscope images were poor to say the least. Nevertheless we did have brilliant binocular views of the bird before it flew off and beyond a large cluster of *Phragmites* reeds. Our polers decided that they could get us in for another view if we parked the boat several hundred metres along the channel from where we would then walk back around. Charlotte decided that the views we had from the boat were more than adequate and decided to skip the opportunity to wade through the calf-deep flooded grassland. The rest of us followed the polers through the swamps and after a few hundred metres we saw another Shoebill flying off from one of the small palm islands. We decided to install everyone on one of the raised mounds with the scope and the group soon managed to get head-only views of the bird whilst one of the polers and I looped around to see if we could locate the first bird. Although we did manage to locate the first bird it once again moved off and we decided against following it again lest we cause more disturbance.

We returned to the boat elated with the day thus far and just before getting back to the boat we were treated to a flying view of a Little Bittern which flushed in front of us. A slightly round-about route to camp meant that we were absolutely starving after all the trudging around and there was silence for the first five minutes as we wolfed down a well deserved meal.

After a bit of time for siesta and afternoon tea we did a short walk around the island and didn't make it very far before getting stuck into a very busy clump of trees dominated by a large *Zyzigium* where it seemed all the island's birds had congregated. Copper and Scarlet-chested sunbirds abounded and Brown Firefinch and Red-throated Twinspot occupied the rank vegetation. Dusky Flycatcher and Paradise Flycatcher flitted through the branches and then we had excellent views of a Klaas' Cuckoo which Anne spotted sitting dead still in the centre of the tree. As the sun set we wandered down to the water where we watched vast flocks of Collared Pratincole wheeling above

the water with large numbers of White-throated Swallows competing for aerial insects and all too soon the day was over.

11 June 2009 – Shoebill Island (Bangweulu Swamps)

Once again we were up at dawn for a continental breakfast and some strong Zambian coffee before a bit of birding around the lodge grounds. Almost immediately we had several Ethiopian Snipe drumming overhead and we watched some marvellous displays of at least three snipe cruising up and drumming down over the floodplain just south of camp. A pair of Spectacled Weaver flew in to the top of a leafless Quinine Tree and sunned themselves in perfect view whilst several Red-faced Mousebirds clung comically to the lower branches exposing their bellies to the morning sun. After half-an-hour of birding around the grounds we boarded the boat for another excursion through the wonderful water-lily laden lagoons which were teeming with birdlife. We saw an number of Lesser Jacana, Fan-tailed Whydah, Fulvous Ducks, Hottentot Teal, Wattled Cranes, Lesser Swamp and Little Rush Warblers as we cruised silently along the winding waterways. Back towards the 'harbour' we the mud-flats were covered with at least twenty different species of bird and we feasted our eyes on the spectacle of several hundred birds in any direction we looked. On our way back to camp we stopped on a floodplain to search for Rosy-breasted Longclaw but no amount of searching could turn any of the numerous Richards (African), Plain-backed and Buffy Pipits into Rosy-breasted Longclaws. Nevertheless it was a great morning's birding and we still had the afternoon to try for the Rosy-breasted and, with a bit of luck, Fullerborn's Longclaw.

After brunch and a quick siesta, which was pleasantly interrupted by Steven's discovery of a roosting Mocambique (Gaboon) Nightjar in camp, we headed out on the boat but this time our destination was dry land and the trusty but slightly rickety Shoebill land rover. En-route to the harbour Steven and Ann spotted a 'funny' three-banded plover which on closer inspection turned out to be a Forbe's Plover which was a big tick for all of us. Just to give confirmation the bird flew off giving it's single 'pleeuw' call as per the instructions in the book, so by the time we landed at the harbour we considered ourselves to be ahead of the game. We boarded the land rover and drove across the plains through thousands of Black Lechwe and then on up to the tree-line where we found Temminck's Coursers to be quite common on the fringe of the plains. After searching a number likely looking areas we eventually turned up a juvenile Rosy-breasted Longclaw and all of us had decent views and although we would have liked to find an adult we were pretty happy to get the bird in the bag.

We stopped for our sundowner drinks alongside the main channel and we were all standing around chatting when the bush beside us erupted and a very large Spotted Hyena bolted off into the distance dragging his distended belly with him. Closer inspection revealed that he had been feeding on a Lechwe carcass and by the looks of things he had eaten the entire lechwe on his own. This was a new mammal for the trip and a good bit of excitement to end off the afternoon. There was one more bird to come though and on the boat ride back to camp in the failing twilight we saw a nightjar fluttering over the reed beds. On a hunch we played the Swamp (Natal) Nightjar call and in a flash the bird was over the boat giving us lovely flashlight views of it's broad white outer retrices and then after giving one quick confirmation call before it left us to continue feeding.

We had heard Barn Owl down by the boat station the previous night and decided to go for a quick walk down there after dinner as we had not yet seen the bird. We had literally been walking for under a minute when the owl flew out from one of the Quinine Trees and circled around the boats

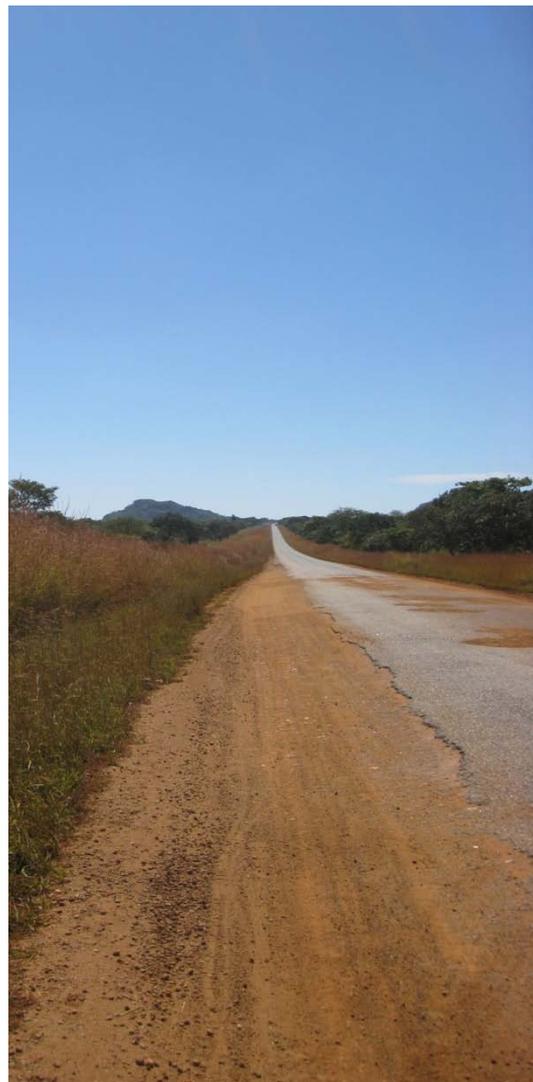
before heading off for quieter quarters making that one of the easier ticks of the trip. The Spotted Eagle-Owl which we had heard calling during dinner could not be located and we retired to bed happy with our 50% strike rate.

12 June 2009 – Shoebill Island to Mutinondo Wilderness

We had to leave our little island in the swamps today and dawn saw us drinking coffee and enjoying a light breakfast before boarding a boat with all our attendant baggage back to 'the harbour' where we would meet Ed and his aeroplane for the flight back to Kasanka. Due to flooding of the airstrip we had to do the flight in two legs as there was not enough runway to take off with all five of us on board. Charlotte and I flew first and were treated to some brilliant medium level flying over the Bangweulu plains on the short hop to Kasanka, we flew directly over David Livingstone's grave and were reminded that the Bangweulu Swamps had been his last adventure in a long series of adventures. Knowing that his heart was buried just a few hundred metres below us made us wonder what he would have thought had he been able to see us now, winging our way over the land through which he had toiled and struggled, a land which had eventually taken his life. Such melancholy thoughts were quickly put to rest when we landed at Kasanka because the birds were busy and the plane had to take off to collect the remainder of our party. Whilst we waited we managed to add Pied Mannikin to the list as well as getting some more good looks at Black Cuckoo-Shrike and Violet-backed Sunbird. Whilst we had been flying Steven, Ann and Jane had also been busy and had seen numerous Kittlitz's Plover in their search for another Forbes' Plover but unfortunately had not been able to add any new birds to the list. Once we were all reunited we took leave of the park hoping to pick up the elusive Pale-billed Hornbill but we dipped on that once again and had to be satisfied with some glorious views of a pair of Ross' Turacos just a few kilometres from the park gate.

The road to Mutinondo was not the greatest with a number of potholes slowing our progress but the drive was interesting with a distinct change in landscape as we entered more mountainous terrain having spent the last two days in the vast gradient-challenged Bangweulu Swamps. Most of the sunbirds we encountered on the drive turned out to be Miombo Double-collared but we did get one excellent view of a pair of Violet-backed Sunbirds.

We encountered a small bird party as we turned off the main road to Mutinondo, the most exciting species this party produced was the Scaly-throated Honeyguide which presented itself on a naked branch for all to see. Also at the party were White-breasted Cuckoo-shrike, Eastern Black-headed Oriole, Miombo



The road to Mutinondo - Photo Dr J. Richards

Double-collared Sunbird, Amethyst Sunbird, Spotted Creeper, Reichard's Seed-eater and Southern Black Flycatcher. We got tantalisingly close to a Blue-spotted Dove which was calling but it flew off before we could get binoculars on it, a few of us got naked eye views but not good enough to tick it off.

At camp we were reunited with the camp staff who had been patiently waiting for us whilst we paddled around the swamps, it was great to see them all again especially Chris whose cooking we had missed whilst we were away.

Whilst we were waiting for lunch Steven managed to find a female Narina Trogon about 20 metres from our campsite but none of our Trogon impressions could conjure up a male. After lunch we took a walk down to the river looking for the Bar-winged Weaver which is a strange *Ploceus* weaver that behaves nothing like the rest of his family and spends most of his time lurking in the canopy probing the bark and lichen for insects. Although we dipped on the weaver we did get our first views of Anchieta's Barbet which sat right on top of a tree on the opposite side of the river in perfect sunlight allowing everyone excellent full-frame scope views. Just further down the river we found a brilliant little tree that seemed to be on the way to somewhere for a lot of birds. Here we had Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Rufous-bellied Tit, Orange-breasted Bush-Shrike, Eastern Black-headed Oriole, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, Amethyst Sunbird and Lesser Masked Weaver. Whilst we were watching this same tree a parrot screamed in and out of the trees on the opposite bank and I was almost certain that I saw red on the wings but it flew deep into woodland and was not seen again. That would have been our first Grey-headed (Brown-necked) Parrot for the trip but at least we now knew they were around. At the waterfall we had a little Dusky Flycatcher and a White-browed Robin-Chat as well an eye level fly-by of a Half-collared Kingfisher. As we arrived at the waterfall I had caught a glimpse of a furtive warbler but was distracted by the kingfisher's fly-by, luckily the warbler then presented himself for some very good views on the exposed branches above the water and turned out to be a Red-winged Warbler which was also new for the trip and a new bird on the Mutinondo birdlist.

We arrived back at camp just before sunset to contemplate the bucket-list and how we were going to structure our last two days to maximise our chances of getting some of the birds we were missing.

We had dinner with the distant roar of the waterfall in the background which was very *feng-shui* and I'm sure our collective energies were infused with something but it was more likely just the effects of the excellent South African wine.

13 June 2009 – Mutinondo Wilderness

We started the morning with a tour of the campsite and an introduction to the trees of the miombo woodland conducted by Lari, one of the owners of Mutinondo. Getting an insight into the diversity of the habitat in which we were doing our birding was very interesting and made us all appreciate the number of species of trees which make up this seemingly homogenous habitat. After our botanical walk we got down to business and started with a little bird walk around the campground. This produced our first really good views of the Anchieta's Sunbird (Red-and-Blue Sunbird) which perched in the sun for all to see, other sunbirds included Scarlet-chested, Amethyst, Variable and a number of Miombo Double-collared. White-winged Black Tit was added to the list after a bit of a chase as a pair flitted from one tree to the next and we also had a number of Reichard's (Streaky-breasted) Seed-eaters which are common around camp. Familiar Chat and Dusky Flycatcher were

also common but the big bird for the morning was a pair of Bar-winged Weavers which were very un-cooperative and flew off before everyone could get a good view of them.

We moved operations to the vehicle and took a drive out to Charlie's Hill to thrash some of the *dambos* for Fulleborn's Longclaw, Marsh Tchagra and Moustached Grass Warbler among others. As we drove through the *miombo* we got onto our first bird party after Ann had spotted a Bar-winged Weaver creeping about the *Usnea* lichen (Old man's beard) but once again the views were poor and the bird was off without very good looks. Trying to follow the weaver we picked up more Dusky Flycatchers and Familiar Chats, had a fleeting glimpse of a White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike and found a little group of Green-capped Eremomelas who were chased off by an incoming flock of White Helmet-Shrike.

The first *dambo* we walked produced Red-collared Whydah, White-rumped Babbler and the bonus bird, a pair of Brown-necked (Grey-headed) Parrots which were in the treeline on the edge of the *dambo*. After much traipsing through the rank grass we moved on to Charlie's Hill where we stopped for tea and a search for Miombo Rock-thrush as well a walk to the rock paintings. We didn't find the thrush or the rock paintings but we did do some serious walking around which was not rewarded with much apart from a few Miombo Double-collared Sunbirds.



The view from Charlie's Rock (Mutinondo) - Photo B. Reed

The view from the top of Charlie's Rock was magnificent, everywhere we looked there was just vast wilderness and the *miombo* woodland was broken only by grassy *dambos* of varying sizes. Ten thousand hectares of this pristine woodland and its granite inselbergs are what makes up Mutinondo Wilderness and it really is a staggeringly beautiful area. Unfortunately a strong wind got up rather early and made the birding really difficult particularly for the smaller species which simply disappeared into the leafy canopies only to reappear when they flew off before offering any decent views.

We moved on to other *dambos* after Charlie's Hill and Steven managed to pick up a Marsh Tchagra which popped up from the centre of one of the little marshes to be added to the list. Despite much splashing through the marsh and cursing through tall grass I managed to dip on this bird which always seems to elude me somehow.

Several small bird parties were found in the surrounding woodlands but apart from Cardinal Woodpecker and better views of White-breasted Cuckoo-shrike the *miombo* was keeping its secrets to itself this morning. Lovely aerial views of a White-necked Raven, new to the list, improved matters slightly but the wind was still playing merry hell with our woodland birding. After a challenging but enjoyable morning we headed back to camp for brunch in the hopes that the wind would die down in the afternoon.

Fortified after brunch we headed out on another walk this time determined to get good views of the Bar-winged Weaver but although we did hear the bird on the opposite side of the river we were unable to locate it in the dense canopy. We did have another festival of sunbird viewing with Scarlet-chested, Amethyst, Collared, Variable, Anchieta's and Miombo Double-collared all vying for a position on the many flowering *Tapinanthus spp. (Mistletoe)* which adorned a number of the trees around the lodge grounds.

A Red-capped Crombec gave us some good views as he moved through the canopy of a tree nearby the stables where we were once again trying to track down the Bar-winged Weaver and again this skulking bird managed to elude us. Finally we returned to camp and whilst I went off to shower the rest of the group were enjoying sundowners when a pair of Bar-winged Weavers arrived in the camp and gave everyone a wonderful display whilst they flitted from tree to tree calling all the time. By the time I arrived back they had left but at least the group had seen the bird we had worked so hard to find.

As we sat down to do the birdlist for the last full day's birding there were several birds that were significant in their absence from the trip list, these included Racket-tailed Roller, Fullerborn's Longclaw, Bohm's Flycatcher, Pale-billed Hornbill, Chestnut-backed Sparrow-Weaver, Pel's Fishing Owl, Western Banded Snake-Eagle and Stout Cisticola. Because this trip was specifically designed to easily see the Shoebill we were six weeks too late to catch the migrants and had the itinerary been run in April we would have easily added as many as a hundred birds to the list through a combination of migrants and birds still breeding and displaying. Nevertheless we were satisfied with our trip total of 333 birds although I felt we could have done better. Next year's trip will be scheduled slightly earlier in the year, the big trick being to miss the rain and still catch the migrants!

14 June 2009 – Mutinondo Wilderness to Lusaka

Today was basically a travel day and most of our birding was done at speed although we did have a couple of stops on the way to do a bit of birding. As we left camp we picked up a couple of birds including White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Amethyst Sunbird, Reichard's Seed-eater and a number of the more common birds in the area. At our lunch stop we picked up a busy little group which included African Cuckoo-Hawk (apparently unwelcome), White-browed Scrub-Robin, Red-billed Firefinch, Yellow-fronted Canary, Yellow-throated Petronia, Miombo Grey Tit, Black-crowned and Brown-crowned Tchagra, Amethyst Sunbird, Scarlet-chested Sunbird, Collared Sunbird, Broad-tailed Paradise Whydah, Bronze Mannikin, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Rattling Cisticola, Violet-backed Sunbird and Arrow-marked Babbler. This meant that lunch took slightly longer than usual but we were happy for the diversion from what was a long day's drive. About 40 minutes outside of Lusaka we stopped at Ibis Lodge for another bit of birding and picked up the only new bird for the day, a Streaky-headed Seed-eater as well as a number of general birds all seen before. Raptors along the road included Black-shouldered Kite, Lizzard Buzzard and a suspected Shikra but there were no eagles for the day.

We finally arrived at our lodge in Lusaka where we settled in and after sundowner drinks we completed the birdlist for the day. It had not been an exciting day as far as new birds went but we had done alright considering how much travelling had to be done.

All in all the trip was a great success and all of us would take from it our own special memories of the amazing places we had visited. Across the board I think Shoebill Island and seeing the Shoebill took

the cake for everyone but there was so much more. By the end of the trip we had virtually forgotten the spectacular sights of the Chobe which had started off our trip and there was so much seen in the seventeen days that it seemed we must have been travelling for months. Unfortunately tonight was our last dinner and we didn't even have Chris and his team to prepare the meal.

15 June 2009 – The long road home

Everyone was off in different directions today with Steven and Ann catching a flight to Johannesburg, Charlotte and Jane were staying an extra night at Pioneer Camp whilst the Letaka crew and I were heading down the long road back to the Okavango where our families and the rising flood waters awaited us.