

Eastern Zimbabwe & Central Mozambique by Pat Nurse

Mozambique Again

As planned, after my excellent 2008 Mozambique trip, I went on the Eastern Zimbabwe and Central Mozambique trip with Grahame Snow (Reach Africa Birding Safaris) in July. This time there were seven birders, plus Grahame and John Bradshaw from the Inkwazi Club, as the drivers of the two Combis. The first day was spent heading north up the N1 to Beitbridge. The border crossing was four hours of chaos amongst a seething mass of overloaded vehicles heading back to Zimbabwe. We overnighted at Three Way Safaris on the Bubi River. The early morning walk there gave us a nice selection of bush birds, including a delightful pair of Barred Owlets cuddling up together. We carried on to Masvingo, stopping en route at some granite kopjies to tick off Boulder Chats. I was very sad to see the deteriorating state of the town, where I spent the first twenty-one years of my married life. En route to Mutare we saw a pair of Bateleurs on a nest and were stopped by fifteen Police road blocks, looking for illegal diamonds, that we had earlier been offered at the roadside.

The next three nights were at Seldomseen, a well-known self-catering birding destination in the Bvumba mountains. Here we were guided by Peter Madziwana (who has been there for at least 20 years) and the younger Buluwesi Murambiwa. After only one day there, I had notched up 13 lifers. In the wonderful montane forests we saw Swynnerton's Robin, Chirinda Apalis, Robert's Warbler and both Stripe-cheeked and Yellow-streaked Greenbul. We saw the spectacular Bronzy Sunbird, also the Olive, Amethyst, Collared, Variable, Malachite and Miombo Double-collared and around the very well maintained golf course at Leopard Rock Hotel, Eastern Saw-wing, Eastern Bronze-napped Pigeon, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher and Red-faced Crimsonwing among others. It was very sad to see so many magnificent properties that had been taken over by "war vets" and were now neglected and overgrown. The following morning we drove through the very scruffy city of Mutare to Christmas Pass, where we accessed Cecile Kop Nature Reserve and some good miombo woodland. We were now faced with the challenge of miombo bird parties, fast moving groups of up to fifteen species which are both very rewarding and incredibly frustrating!! In one party we saw three Tits (Southern Black, Miombo and Cinnamon-breasted) as well as Southern Hyliota and Cabanis's Bunting. In other parts of the reserve we saw Miombo Rock-Thrush and the stunning Red-throated Twinspot. The following morning we made a quick trip down to the Burma Valley where we had great views of thirteen very large and impressive Silvery-cheeked Hornbills. By now I had 19 lifers!

Late morning saw us make a very quick border crossing into Mozambique, where we headed for Chimoio, to fill up with fuel as the supply in Zimbabwe was both unreliable and expensive. Unfortunately, there was a temporary shortage and we had to join a long queue but luckily got both vehicles filled and were most amused by Grahame's negotiations with some very slick and persistent money changers. We spent that night at Envirotrade Camp, run by the very enterprising Van Zyl family. We had an excellent dinner of "boerekos" cooked by Ria and I had a 2M beer on the house, as it was my birthday!

We made a 5 a.m. start to Mt. Gorongosa (1863m) in two vehicles belonging to the Van Zyls. One vehicle broke down, so there were eleven of us (our group plus young Sakkie van Zyl and a Japanese/American backpacker) in the Landcruiser. It was no wonder it couldn't make it up some of the very wet and muddy slopes to the "Renamo Hut". These last 18 kms took two hours as it was no more than a muddy footpath that Sakkie was busy rebuilding with some local contract labour. On one section, where we had to get out and walk to lighten the load, I saw my 700th species for my "life list" a Moustached Grass-Warbler. We parked at the Hut and then started up the mountain, which was a steep scramble and walked for nearly two hours, through very tall 'elephant' grass and patches of subsistence agriculture with three fast flowing stream to cross. We were all very happy to reach the montane forest, near the summit, where we sat down on logs and rocks to look and listen for the birds. There were many birds up in the canopy of the very tall trees, and then finally I saw **THE BIRD**, the object of our trip, the Green-headed Oriole. What an awesome bird and this is the only place south of the Zambezi, where ardent 'listers' can tick it off. We watched as two or three moved around feeding in the canopy and while I was still in a state of euphoria, I saw another yellowish bird in the canopy. Yet another new one, a Black-fronted Bush-Shrike, also a stunning bird. We positively flew back down the mountain, although the descent was more treacherous than the ascent and most of us had a fall or two on the way.

We had a quick departure from Envirotrade, as we had to get through the gate into Gorongosa National Park before 6 pm. I was very impressed with all the rehabilitation taking place in the Park. A 20 year Accord for the Joint Management of the Park between the Ministry of Tourism and the Carr Foundation from the U.S. took effect in January 2008. Chitengo Camp was badly damaged during the civil war but the old chalets have been fixed up and 18 semi-detached double en suite rooms with aircons have been built. There is also an excellent restaurant. Most of the large animals were killed but restocking has taken place and the Gorongosa Restoration Project is working with local communities to develop tree nurseries and replant cleared areas.

We were up at dawn the next morning to look for birds in the camp. I love days which start with two lifers before breakfast! ... the Collared Palm-Thrush and the Black-and-White Flycatcher (I strongly disagree with this new name for the Vanga Flycatcher, as the female is russet and white). After an excellent buffet breakfast, we drove into the game area of the Park, where we had excellent birding, both bush birds and water birds and we saw some of the biggest crocodiles we had ever seen. The game drives are on the flood plain between the Sungue and Pungue Rivers, so the whole area is inaccessible in the rainy season.

On Sunday 12th July, we drove back to the EN1 to carry on further north, on the way finding a good bird party that included two more 'lifers'. The Red-faced Crombec and the Western Violet-backed Sunbird. We also saw the local subspecies of the Red-necked Spurfowl *swynnertoni*, which has very handsome markings. We turned off the main road just after Gorongosa town, as that area was our best chance to find the Blue-spotted Wood-Dove, which duly obliged, as most of Grahame's birds did! Once that was ticked off and we had also seen a soaring

Ayres Hawk-Eagle, we carried on to Mphingue Camp, which is in a timber concession at Catapu, 20kms south of the Zambezi. Again we were well housed and catered for.

Yet, another pre-dawn start as we headed for Coutada 12, one of the hunting concessions.

Near Chupanga Mission where David Livingstone's wife, Mary, died. It was not the hunting season, and we did see some small antelope and fantastic birds in the mixed and miombo woodland and lowland forest. We had good views of a large group of Grey-headed Parrots, also Black-headed Apalis, Livingstone's Fly catcher, Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrike, Plain-backed Sunbird (not a good description of a very colourful bird) and Green-backed Woodpecker. By now I had 33 'lifers' but Grahame wasn't satisfied with our lists so we returned to the Coutada even earlier the next morning and we were amply rewarded when Wally managed to find an African Broadbill, sitting motionless and very well camouflaged in the middle of a small bush. Most of us got brief views of a bird that is very difficult to find out of breeding season. Other noteworthy birds were Woodward's Batis, Stierling's Wren-Warbler and a pair of Black-eared Seedeaters. Murphy's law came into play in the afternoon, when the only two who opted out of a drive, choosing to sit near the bird bath in the garden, were the ones to see a pair of Green Twinspot.

The following morning we drove up to Caia to see the 2km long new bridge that has been recently built over the Zambezi by an international consortium.

Grahame's stakeout here for the Anchieta's Tchagra was in rank grass next to some floodplain lagoons. We got stunning views of a female and two immatures, as well as a Red-necked Falcon, but the surprise of the day was a Sooty Falcon on a leisurely fly-past. After collecting our stuff from Mphingue, we set off and had wonderful views of a Crowned Eagle in a dead tree right next to the road.

We were now headed for Msasa Camp, so we traveled on the shocking gravel road that is the shortest route from Beira to Caia, and runs alongside the Malawi bound rail line. The war damage in the town of Inhaminga was terrible, as were the remains of wagons and rail lines blown up. We saw a group of three very noisy Racket-tailed Rollers in the miombo woodland as we approached the Levas Flor timber concession, which is owned by the Church of Sweden. Here they only harvest msasa trees in a sustainable manner, which are exported to Scandinavia for parquet flooring. The timber chalet camp was well served by chef Edward, who produced a divine chocolate cake.

Another early start was called as we were driving 60kms to the birding area of Chinizua in time for the dawn chorus. The area of forest and woodland is being very heavily exploited by the locals as they clear the beautiful trees for marginal agriculture and charcoal making. In spite of the heavy human impact, we had soon seen Red-winged Warbler, Green-backed Eremomela, Grey Waxbill, Slender Greenbul and Miombo Starlings. With some very quiet and stealthy creeping into a thick forest patch and the use of a PDA, we had crippling views of an East Coast Akalat (Gunning's Robin, which is a notoriously tricky bird to find. We met the local "guide" Antonio (recognizable by his Bugs Bunny teeth) whose English is limited to Angola Pitta and 3000 Mts (R1000). Grahame and he appear to get on very well, even though they don't understand each other and Antonio does find the Pitta near the village in spite of the degraded vegetation.

After a final night at Msasa Camp, an excellent three course dinner and meeting with the charming young Guatemalan manager, we set off for the coast. Grahame's next stake-out produced a Short-winged Cisticola to order. Once we joined the main tar road from Beira to Zimbabwe, there were few birding opportunities but we did check out all the marshy areas for the Malagasy Pond-Heron, the only bird that John Bradshaw needed for his list. At Manga market, we turned off for the final 30kms to Rio Savane. This is a very marshy area, so our lists greatly increased with the addition of species such as Rufous-bellied Heron, Yellow-throated Longclaw and Woolly-necked Storks. We were all amazed as to how much the locals could load on one bicycle, such as a husband, wife and two kids or 5 huge sacks of charcoal! We crossed the estuary to the resort by boat, which required some rolling up of trousers and deep wading. That night we all feasted on prawns and patatas fritas.

As we went for an early morning walk, after a cold and wet night, along the estuary I felt quite at home seeing Whimbrel, White-fronted and Grey Plover but it was good to see some Lesser Crested Terns. The first bird I saw in the mangroves after the boat crossing was a magnificent Mangrove Kingfisher, a bird I have long searched for. All nine of us then spent the rest of the morning criss-crossing areas of short marshy grass in a grid pattern, hoping to flush four specials two of which we saw, the Quail Finch and the Short-tailed Pipit. We also saw lots of Senegal Lapwing, Temminck's Coursers and Collared Pratincole. We then drove to the large ponds at the Chinese owned prawn farm to see which birds enjoyed prawns as much as we did. We only saw one species of duck, the White-faced, but there were Pink-backed Pelican, Whiskered tern, African Fish Eagle, Osprey, Common Greenshank, Curlew Sandpiper, and large numbers of Flamingo, predominately immature Lesser. On the way back we had good views of Green-backed Heron and Dickinson's Kestrel.

Our last morning was cold and wet, but we managed to see Magpie Mannikin, Black-bellied Starling, Lemon-breasted Canary and Purple-banded Sunbird around the chalets before we had to pack up and head for Beira airport and our flight home. Although we looked carefully, we couldn't find the Malagasy Pond-Heron or the Mascarene Martin.

This was undoubtedly one of the best trips I have ever been on. Grahame Snow really knows where to find the birds and he is very relaxed and laid back as a guide, as well as being an excellent and knowledgeable birder. My personal tally for the trip was 322 species of which 48 were 'lififers'. The total trip list was 341.