

MATOBO



SOCIETY

PO Box FM 648, Famona. Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

www.matobo.org

Welfare No: W/O 30/94

NEWSLETTER 76 / NOVEMBER 2011

1 – ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

As I put this newsletter to bed, on a hot Saturday evening in the Matopos, an almost full moon is shining on the dwalas. But the streams are quiet – their flow reduced to a mere trickle. Whilst the trees are brilliant fresh green, the grass remains dry and brittle. Some orchids have come into flower in the wetlands, but we are in need of rains. It's that time of year again – the end approaches and we start to prepare for Christmas, but don't quite think ahead to the next year. But, it's also the time for our Annual General Meeting, and we do need to think ahead. We have had a busy year, but a successful year. We need to build upon this, and to do so we need a committed committee in place. We hope that our members have given this some thought so that fresh nominations may be received on Sunday 27th November when we meet to review the year past, and consider the year ahead. At least we hope our members will support their committee by attending the AGM!

2 - HEAT WAVES!

The week around October 25th and 11th November proved to be scorchers. New record temperatures were set across the country, and the appropriate ones are recorded below.

The Meteorological Services Department says Zimbabwe yesterday (Monday 24th October) experienced extremely high temperatures with some places recording up to 42 degrees Celsius, breaking the October record of 1962. The highest temperatures were recorded in Lupane at 42 Degrees Celsius from 41 Degrees Celsius recorded in October 1962. Rusape and Harare maintained their record of 35 degrees. Plumtree surpassed its October 1962 record of 38 degrees and recorded 39 and Tsholotsho had 42 degrees up from 39 recorded in 1962. Met Department director Amos Makarau attributed the temperatures to a middle level high pressure center that developed on Sunday. The high temperatures, he said, were expected to continue for the next "few" days – *Herald*, Tuesday October 25, 2011.

Station	Last Record	Year	New Record
Matopos	37.7	1962	38.2
Byo Airport	38	2011	38.2
Byo Goetz	38	2011	38.2

3 - RAINFALL FORECASTS

Zimbabwe expects normal rainfall during the 2011/12 summer cropping season with weather experts urging farmers to plan carefully. The first half of the season which covers October, November and December is expected to have normal rains with a bias towards below normal rains. The 2010/11 season was predicted to be normal to above normal throughout the season. Presenting the seasonal rainfall forecast for the forthcoming cropping season in Harare yesterday, Meteorological Services Department senior forecaster Jephias Mugumbate said regions 1 and 2 were expecting normal rains with a bias towards below normal rainfall – *Herald*, Wednesday September 7, 2011.

The Met Department says the hot spell affecting most parts of the country will not change the forecast of a normal rainy season, which normally commences in mid-November. Senior meteorological officer Jonathan Chifuna said the temperatures dropped slightly yesterday with some areas receiving light showers. Harare recorded 33 degrees Celsius, Bulawayo 32, Gweru 35, Mutare 31, Kwekwe 37, Kadoma 38 and Masvingo 34. All these places had recorded higher temperatures on Wednesday. Chifuna said Masvingo, Bulawayo, Chivhu and Plumtree received light showers – *Herald*, Friday October 28, 2011.

4 - NEXT EVENT

Date	27 November 2011
Venue	Matopo Mission and Camp Dwala
Meet	8:15am to leave by 8:30am, Churchill Arms Hotel
Travel	All vehicles but trucks preferred (Old Gwanda Rd)
Details	Provide own chairs, tables, meals and drinks. Don't forget your hat!

The Annual General Meeting of the society will be held at Camp Dwala, which is adjacent to the Matopo Mission. We will endeavour to keep the formalities brief, and so have more time to spend at the Mission. Established in 1898 it is one of the oldest schools in the country, and today serves over 750 students from primary school to A-level. We will visit the Mission church, cemetery and museum. The school conservation clubs will also be available. This is an historic site, and has had a profound impact on the local community and nation at large.

Bring your costumes to swim in the streams and pools at Camp Dwala.

5 – REPORT BACK

On the 18 Sept 2011 a rather small party of 20 members met at Whitewaters to travel into the game park. There to meet us on the banks of the Mpophoma Dam was Dr Nicky Lunt and staff from Dambari Wildlife Trust (formerly Marwell Zimbabwe Trust). The topic for the outing was to understand wildlife sampling and population census techniques, and demonstrate a practical game count transept. It was a fun exercise – but was followed by an interesting discourse given by Nicky. From the theory, and the exercise, we moved onto actual sampling and research work being undertaken in the Matopos. At present there are about three different teams at work, and as always, they are revealing not just interesting data, but some fascinating new information. Of course, the topic of rhino populations was discussed – with some encouraging, and some shocking news.

One could be forgiven for thinking it was an ornithological outing, as we visited by a pair of Purple Crested Lourie's, then a pair of Fish Eagle (who commented on proceedings) and finally a pair of Black Eagle, amongst a variety of other birdlife.

After lunch the party went onto to search for the orbicular granite site in the game park – but alas it was not to be. Some challenging track was overcome, but the search party failed to find their objective – but did enjoy a real ramble in the game park. Special permission had been obtained to walk in this part of the park. After tea, the members left to meander around the game park, and drifted home as the sun sunk to the western horizon – another perfect (and for us a fascinating) day.

Special thanks to Nicky, her team and Dambari who made the outing so particularly interesting and topical.

6 – MTB EVENT; THE MATOPOS CLASSIC

The annual two-day mountain bike event (from Bulawayo to the eastern Matopos, and then onto the western hills) was held on 16 and 17 September. On Day One riders passed (and had to stop for 15 minutes) Fort Mtshabezi, which despite being one of the least known of the forts, is in many ways one of the best preserved. In riding to the Fort, the cyclists followed the old Fort Usher to Fort Rixon road, that once linked Fort Mtshabezi and Fort Umlugulu. However, the ride started at 12 noon, and the riders battled the heat as much as the terrain.

On day Two, the riders followed the traditional route west, but with an early start, the riding was very pleasant, with a water stop about two thirds along. The finish this year was at the newly reopened "Homestead" with a welcome pool!

7 – DRUMS OF PEACE

The drums of Peace played at Granite Ridge on the 17th September, to coincide with the Matopos Classic MTB Ride. The cyclists were joined by a number of other interested persons, who enjoyed interactive drumming overlooking the Matopos, and graced with a rising full moon!

8 – www.matobo.org

We continue to upgrade our website, and are adding new material, so be sure to log in and follow the progress of the Society. Please give us news, views and links to other useful sites.

9 - RHINO POACHERS SHOT DEAD

Chiredzi-THREE men were shot dead after a pre-dawn shoot-out with game rangers at a rhino park in Chiredzi, officials said. The trio, believed to be poachers, were in a group of six when they were surprised by game rangers who had advance warning of their arrival, the Parks and Wildlife Management Authority said.

The alleged poachers, who were travelling in two cars, are said to have shot at the rangers after refusing to surrender, triggering a shoot-out.

The well-prepared rangers killed three men and arrested two others while a third escaped in a Toyota Corolla. A 306 rifle fitted with a silencer, 18 rounds of ammunition, two knives and two bags were among the items recovered. A vehicle was also impounded.

Parks spokeswoman Caroline Washaya-Moyo named the dead men as Sakhile Ncube, Nicholas Tswami and Million Chauke – all from Beitbridge.

Washaya-Moyo said rangers at Chipangayi Safari Area were tipped off about poachers planning to kill rhino on the park.

Washaya-Moyo told the Herald: "Information was received by officers based at Buffalo Range Airport, working with a reliable informer that an organised armed poaching group wanted to enter Chipangayi Safari area for the purposes of poaching rhinos. This information was communicated to Chipangayi and they were ready when the poachers got there."

Zimbabwean courts have handed out stiff sentences on poachers in recent months. Poachers have killed at least 14 rhino in Zimbabwe's nature reserves so far this year, principally for their horn, which is believed to have magical, cancer-curing properties in some Eastern countries – *New Zimbabwe Monday 19 September*.

10 - RAINFALL

The month of October saw some good falls over Bulawayo, and some heavy hail, but this did not reach Matopos. As a result, as at 11th November 2011, the following amounts were recorded:

Bulawayo 76mm (Burnside), Eastern Matopos 32mm, Western Matopos 21mm.

The main rainy season is yet to break – it is hoped that this will occur before our AGM so that we can enjoy a soaked Matopos!

11 - FIRES AND REBIRTH

Once again, the country side suffered devastating fires, and the late start to the rainy season did not help matters. However, with permission from Norman Scott we reproduce below "a fire and rebirth" story for you, which we know you will find interesting.

GORDON PARK NEWS 13 Sept 2011

Tuesday was repair day and luckily, I had come well prepared with the right tools and materials to undertake the necessary immediate repairs to secure the buildings that had been broken into. Wednesday and Thursday I had tours to conduct, my clients having the opportunity of visiting 'The Heart of Scouting' and for me to check that no further break-ins had occurred during the nights. Friday night Chris and I spent out at the Park so that on Saturday morning I could continue with added security work by reinforcing the damaged wooden door with steel plate, whilst Chris replaced the smashed widow. Then midmorning on Saturday Chris and I were off to the Game Park to undertake another guided tour of the Matobo hills. In wandering through the hills, I noticed that there was smoke from a bush fire to the east, but did not think much of it as bush fires are common at this time of the year. My tour included World's View from where I was horrified to see clouds of grey to black smoke billowing up from the Mtsheli valley. Leaving my clients in the hands of my companion guide, I rushed off for Gordon Park five kilometres distant to assess the situation. I arrived in time to see the four metre high flames in the vleijump the main road and continue on their way northward up the valley, hungrily devouring the tall tinder dry thatching grass as it went.

I turned into the Park and drove along a charred road, the grass and trees still burning fiercely on either side. Talk about racing through a tunnel of flame as I headed for Headquarters. The buildings had been spared even the thatched "Skipper" Knapman hut where the cut grass had been burnt right to the low foundation retaining wall two metres from the building itself. There were loud explosions coming from the store yard beyond the outdoor kitchen. These I discovered were the result of asbestos roofing sheets and drain pipes objecting to the intense heat of the fire. Also burning were a number of old car tires that we use in fun bases during camps. Then a dash to the Naomi Connolly Lodge and Justine

Ralphs Cottage to check that they were still intact. Thankfully they were, although the fallen tree leaves against the walls had been burnt to ashes. Next a rushed drive to the "Bowl" to check the thatched Duty Hut. Again, the now burnt-out mown grass of the parade ground had saved the hut from being burnt down.

Back at World's View I collected my clients and both vehicles headed back to Bulawayo. We caught up with the front of the fire at the MOTH Shrine. The Arizona Cypress trees of the plantation located here were roman candles. Some had fallen across the road partially blocking our path. "Imadzi" the kopje behind the shrine stood illuminated. A really fantastic sight, despite the devastation that was being caused to the plantation.

On the Sunday morning, Chris and I spent more time in surveying the damage caused by the fire. Large logs were still burning fiercely and two trees still burning had crashed down in the store yard. We were quite surprised to discover that the pump in the vlei at Headquarters was quite warm, only to find that the four-by-four teak timbers on which the pump is mounted had been partially burnt. Although there is a road between the pump and the tall reeds and grass of the vlei, the intense heat generated by the burning reeds and thatching grass had ignited the timbers. First frozen to breaking during our winter and now cooked in the fire, the old Fairbanks Morse pump has really been subjected to tough treatment - and it still works! A few fallen trees burnt in the fire had to be cleared off the road leading into the Park. More work was done in repairing and reinforcing the doors to the rough store until late afternoon.

GORDON PARK NEWS 27 Sept 2011

Thinking back over the past two weeks, we have managed to undertake a fair amount of clearing up and repair work in our fire devastated camping ground. Helping us to do our work cheerfully, is the realization that nature is ever ready to be first to the rescue, for within three days of the fire, green grass shoots were sprouting bravely up out of the blackened ash in the Mtshelili vlei. This week, the *Cassia abbreviata*, are out in full bloom, their yellow flowers adding so much colour to the veldt. Many other trees are just as active and a variety of buck from the majestic Sable Antelope, White Rhino, Wildebeest, Zebra, Bushbuck, Baboon, Klipspringer and Impala are easily sighted feeding on the green flush of the river courses. Our new comer to the pond adjacent to Number Three well is a Fish Eagle who stands lone sentry on a blacked tree branch over-looking the pond. Surely a plentiful supply of delicious fish in the 'larder' and no doubt the fellow who took care of the Cane Rat carcasses at the edge of the pond. High above another new fellow, this time a Black Eagle chick, has left the nest to fly with mum and dad to learn the art of hunting. Cheerful calls ring through the air as they ride the thermals in ever widening circles. Life ebbs back to the Matobo Hills.

12 - GROUND HORNBILL PROGRAMME

(News from Paul Hubbard)

I would like to update you on happenings in the Matobo area with regards the research and conservation project centred on the Ground Hornbills in the Matobo area.

At present the Southern Ground Hornbill (*Bucorvus cafer* or *Bucorvus leadbeateri*; SGHB) has been rated as "vulnerable" by the IUCN, a downgrading from its previous status as "Least Concern". This has serious implications for the long-term survival of the bird as a wild species. The IUCN claims on its website (www.iucnredlist.org) that "*Habitat destruction and persecution are estimated to have caused very rapid population declines in South Africa and there are anecdotal reports that they have caused declines in other range countries. There is a high probability that such threats and subsequent declines will continue into the future.*"

The Southern Ground Hornbill is a bird still revered by the Matabele which will help with its long-term conservation. Nevertheless, habitat loss, indirect poisoning, unintentional snaring and trapping, shooting (for breaking windows) and the rise in the trade of exotic birds has seen numbers decline in Zimbabwe. The exact national population of the birds is unclear although from informal observations it is apparent that the Matobo Hills have a relatively high density of breeding pairs.

The project, which aimed to assess the population and breeding habits of the birds, was originally started by BirdLife Zimbabwe (BLZ) at a date unknown to me and run on an *ad hoc* basis before it was taken over by Elspeth Parry in 2007. In early 2011, the Mother Africa Trust (MAT) agreed to take over the

project and restart it from square one using a model similar to Elspeth's with a few changes. As such this proposal shares many of the same aims and objectives the prime aim being the long-term conservation of this important bird.

As stated in the original project proposal, the long-term aims are:

- To conscientise the rural schools and communities to the benefits of conservation with the emphasis on the preservation of the Ground Hornbill.
- To record accurately all bird sightings, nests and roosts and maintain these records.
- To monitor breeding over a period of time not less than five years.
- Publication of material in scientific journals.
- Keeping all stakeholders informed.
- To maintain a regular, hopefully long-term social contribution to these communities with the desire to bring about social stability and upliftment.

In addition, further long-term aims include:

- Providing artificial nests where necessary
- Collecting and hand-rearing the second chick (which often dies of starvation) for later release into areas where they are currently locally extinct (this is culturally sensitive)

The project is being run out of various primary, secondary and high schools across Matobo and Umzingwane Districts. At present 13 schools have confirmed their participation and where they did not already exist, conservation clubs (or wildlife clubs) started in each. A further 12 have indicated their interest but I have not yet visited them. It is intended to have at least 30 schools involved by the end of 2012, involving hundreds of pupils aged between 11 and 15. The Mother Africa Trust has been given official permission from the council to operate in the district and ward meetings have been held with community members to explain the project, its aims and provide essential information on the conservation of the bird. More meetings will be held as often as possible. In addition, I have met with the administration of each school as well as the heads of the SDC/SDA to inform them of the project and get them involved. To use an NGO phrase, which is entirely true in this case, the response has been overwhelmingly positive and all have expressed a desire to get more involved, some even asking to be part of the survey teams in the clubs!

It was decided to operate out of the schools and surrounding homesteads because it was realised that no project aimed at conservation awareness can hope to achieve much without involving the local community in every way possible. I have realised that no conservation can be achieved without assisting those that live in the area - especially the most vulnerable and under-privileged people, notably widows, orphans and child-headed households. It was also decided to try and assist the schools directly with small but gradual improvements in infrastructure - especially replacing broken windows, the territorial SGHB's favourite pastime during the holidays.

Pupils in the clubs are each given an exercise book and pen and asked to record information about sightings of the birds. The questions they are asked to answer include: Where are the nests? How many birds seen? Can you identify male/female/juvenile? What is the habitat surrounding the birds? The time of day? What were they eating? What was their behaviour? Finally, what stories/myths/legends have you heard about the birds? For the last question, pupils have been encouraged to interview their parents, grandparents and elders. Thus far I have learnt the birds are still revered and are strongly associated with beliefs about rains and weather prediction. They also love to break windows and eat chicks which makes them public enemy number one for many in the community - although killing the birds still seems to be a shocking and rare occurrence. Most people simply vigorously chase them. The clubs are visited by myself once a month and the data collected, evaluated and discussed with the pupils. At the same time, a lesson about different aspects of the environment, conservation or just discussions about different animals/birds/plants/etc are held. In all cases an attempt is made to match lessons with the curriculum to enhance pupil's understanding.

Teaching materials are limited and this is where my begging bowl comes out:

- The schools have a real need for books - novels, children's books, magazines, etc - for their libraries and I am scrounging as many as I can. If you have any you can donate, please contact me. The libraries at the schools also serve the wider community since anyone can borrow from the library.

Books in English or isiNdebele are in high demand. I would love to source shelving for the library rooms since at most schools the books are stored in boxes until they are needed.

- Stationery is a must, both for supplying the books for recording the information about the birds and to give to the pupils in the clubs for their own use at school to reward and encourage them. Exercise books (A5 & A4), pens and crayons, sticki-stuff, chalk, etc.
- I am also asking everyone to give me their old calendars at the end of this year since I can use the pictures and paper to make cheap but effective posters about the environment, animals and the like.
- If anyone would like to sponsor glass and putty for fixing broken windows, please contact me.
- Donations of toys, clothes, medical supplies, etc are always useful.

Finally, anyone who would like to become involved in helping plan lessons and accompany me into the rural areas would be welcomed! I only go out on week days since that is when school is in session and it involves a full day out and about, normally visiting four schools in a day on average. Lunch can be supplied.

Thus far all costs for the project have been met with the Trust's limited funds and myself so it would be great to have help in any form.

One of my long-term but unstated aims to expand the project to include conservation in general since many of the pupils are master observers of their environment. Thus far, I have encouraged them to report on any other unusual sightings of animals and birds but nothing to report yet. Nevertheless, there have been some surprising conversations in the classrooms about diverse topics of great importance such as donga/gully reclamation, not shooting birds, effects of monkeys and baboons on crops and the like, showing the pupils (and their teachers) have a wide-ranging interest and appreciation of their local environment. I hope to build on this and take it even further by doing practical conservation projects including planting indigenous trees, filling gullies, etc. This all lies in the future however, since my aim for the coming year is to focus on the SGBH. The potential is there and it is huge.

I believe this project to be a worthwhile one and the response of the people involved in the Matobo area gives me great hope for the success and viability of the project and in fulfilling its aims.

13 – MCS APPAREL

The Society has received new stocks of hats (at \$10 each) and we are looking into shirts and other apparel.

14 – CALENDAR 2012

The MCS plans to meet with WEZ, Birdlife, MTB and others to set the 2012 calendar. We have a number of outings under consideration – but let us know of any places of interest that you the member may want to visit – or any speaker you may wish us to invite.

15 – SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions for next year (1 October 2011 to 30 September 2012) have been set as:

US\$ 20	Individual/Family
US\$ 5	Special Member (Pensioner/Student)
US\$100	Corporate

Consequently, subscriptions are due as from 1 October, and should be paid before the AGM on the 27 November 2011 (if you want to retain your right to vote!). We are updating our data base and have removed all members with subs outstanding for more than one year.

WE WISH ALL OUR MEMBERS A MERRY CHRISTMAS, HAPPY NEW YEAR AND SAFE TRAVELS!