

MATOBO



SOCIETY

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Welfare No: W/0 30/94
www.matobo.org

NEWSLETTER 91 / APRIL 2015

1 – COMMENT

It's a hot March evening, unusually warm as I sit at my desk and pen our 91st Newsletter. It's a cloudless sky, a gentle breeze that's trying to cool the evening air, whilst above, Jupiter, Orion and the other stars blaze down. A little rain fell in the last week, a brief relief to what has been a disastrous rainy season. The rivers never really got flowing; the little streams are just trickling along, but not for much longer. The crops in the fields must be a total failure – maize is barely knee high - and the grass is sparse before winter even starts. And it's been extraordinarily warm for this time of year; warm and dry. We are in for a long dry spell before any chance of rain later in the year.

2 – MATOBO PARK NEWS

Your Society was represented at the recent Matopos National Park Stake Holders meeting, which proved to be useful and beneficial. Some changes that are on the way include an electronic ticketing system at the main gate – the Matopos will be amongst the first Parks to be placed onto this system which is reaching its final evaluation – which should reduce the time it takes to enter the Park, ongoing road rehabilitation, and the preparation of fire breaks. The Matopos achieved a net growth rate in excess of 5% in its Rhino population, and the herd is well protected. Water is being more reliably supplied to certain camp sites, whilst solar geysers have been installed at Maleme dam, Toghwana and Mtshelili. Tour operators complained about illegal tours being conducted in the Park – if you are aware of such practices or encounter such tours, please report them to Parks, or to our Secretary. Your representatives were able to raise a number of environmental issues for deliberation and action.

Illegal Off-Road Driving In The Park

Your society has received complaints of vehicles being driven up Itali Hill, opposite Efifi, with some folk posting pictures on Facebook. A site inspection has been carried out, and in collaboration with Parks, barriers and signage are being erected, and officers appointed. There is a second site in the Mtshelili valley.

Why are we so opposed to this practice? Our ancient hills are covered in lichen, some of which can be many hundreds of years old. Studies in the park suggest that a large portion of these lichens have yet to be described scientifically, and that it takes up to fifty years for the scars left by car tyres to grow over. The lichens of the Matopos are one of its most striking features – the hills would quite literally be grey without them. We also don't visit the hills to see tyre tracks over every dwala! None of us want to leave a legacy of damage across the hills that will be there for generations. We must protect our floral heritage, and that definitely includes the fragile lichens which survive in the extreme environments of the exposed rock. Whilst we can work with Parks to take action in this protected area, we need to be vigilant in the areas outside the Park. So please;

- i. Discourage any form of off-road driving as it not only damages the rocks and lichens, but can also crush the life out of our fragile environment and lead to erosion.
- ii. Report offenders to the Park Authorities (we are working on getting vehicles banned) or to our Secretary, if the offence is outside the Park.
- iii. Encourage motor-bikes and rally drivers to go elsewhere, and at least to keep to existing tracks. Motor Bikes are not permitted within the Park, and off road driving is banned.

3 – MUSEUM NOTES

The Museum held its Fun day at the Natural History Museum on 28th March and your Society was ably represented. Without being too biased, the MCS stand appeared to be the most impressive so special thanks to Gaynor, Cindy and Howard. It was a well-supported event and again reminds us all of the wonderful treasure we have in the form of the Natural History Museum. Well done to Moira and her team.

4 – www.matobo.org

The Matobo Conservation Society also has a Facebook page. So, go to <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Matobo-Conservation-Society/234544749928841> and see what's happening

5 - NEXT EVENT

Date	12 th April 2015
Venue	Camp Dwala
Meet	8:15am to leave by 8:30am, Churchill Arms
Travel	All vehicles, trucks preferred
Details	Provide own chairs, tables, meals and drinks. Don't forget your hat!

The Old Gwanda Road was recently graded, and whilst not perfect, its considerably improved from what it was before-hand. So, make the most of it and attend this interesting field trip. Dr Jane Browning and our Cathy Sharp will be visiting Camp Dwala to carry out research into the sedges of the Matopos – and with the vast wetlands in the area, what better place to start.

Those wanting to travel out on the Saturday afternoon and enjoy a week-end out are asked to liaise with Adele (0712 366 917 or 09 280 029, or admin@dambari.com) who will coordinate the accommodation at the camp for the week-end.

6 – REPORT BACK

Visit to the London Missionary Society White Waters Mission Site

A good number of members, accompanied by even more friends, travelled out on the Matopos Road for a varied day in the western hills. First stop was down a track to the old DC's Camp, now a Red Cross centre, beyond which we found a pleasant field for tea. Hordes of small children debouched from the vehicles and soon the glen was full of laughter and calls, whilst the more sedate enjoyed their tea. A short climb followed – challenging but rewarding. The return was made more interesting by a light shower of rain which saw some folk sliding down the rock surfaces – fortunately no injuries were sustained!

We then travelled onto the Whitewaters National Park Office, where Rob gave us a fascinating history of the unique mission station, and its ultimate demise. It does live on in the relocated Whitewaters School, but the mission station per se never reopened.

At the office were the 13 rhino skulls from all the poached animals in the Matopos. Quite sobering! Our Chairman also gave the members and guests an update on Society projects and efforts. Lunch was had down the Khumalo West Road, at the site of the start for the Matopos Heritage Ride. It proved to be a fascinating place, with a real beauty. All in all, a varied, but interesting day was enjoyed by all.

7 – MATOPOS WORLD HERITAGE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETS

The new Management Committee for the Matobo Hills World Heritage Site met in early March. A number of resolutions were adopted, and the Committee will meet again in July to provide feedback. Applications for funding are being prepared, and this should enhance the research and preservation work that is ongoing in the Site.

8 – CALENDAR 2015

Herewith the proposed dates for the 2014 field trips –make a note in your diary!

Sun 12 th April	Sedges, with Dr Jane Browning, Camp Dwala
Sun 17 th May	Stone Ruins (Lumane)
Sat 06 th June	World Environment Day (MCS Park Clean Up)

Sun 23 rd Aug	Stone Hills
Sun 29 th Nov	AGM (venue to be advised)
Other dates	
12 th April	Matopos 33 Miler
28 th – 30 th August	Matopos Classic MTB

9 – MALEME ABLUTION BLOCK

Your Society refurbished the shower block at Maleme Rest Camp. Whilst this was done in advance of the Heritage Ride, so as to accommodate the increased numbers, it will remain as an asset for the camp going forward. The building was completely gutted, and totally rebuilt.

This was made possible by the assistance of John Knight, and generous donations from Halsted Brothers, Howard and Cindy Sellick (T/A as CMS Electrical), Bathroom Boutique and CH Naake, whilst National Parks contributed additional materials to extend the tiling. Solar geysers have been installed. The toilet capacity was increased by 30% and the bathing from one bath to 4 showers – a vast improvement. Paint and Allied painted the facility which was ready just days before the big race. It is now a modern ablution block, fully refurbished, and National Parks awarded the Society a Certificate of Appreciation for the work done.

10 – NEW SIGNS

We have continued to erect signage within the Park, and at the time of writing, most signs had been installed. Additional signs have been arranged and these will be erected before Easter, so look out for them on your next visit! This brings the total to twenty signs.

The erection of the new signs was made possible through the generous donations of Market Force, National Fencing (Vernon Hammond), and Stray Dogs Furniture (Mark Swannack and Elton Lightfoot).

11 – THE MATOPOS GAME PARK FENCE

The new fence was completed in mid-February – a tremendous achievement.

12– MATOPOS HERITAGE CHALLENGE

The annual Matopos Heritage Challenge MTB event was successfully held from 11th to 15th March. The conditions were totally different to last year – instead of gushing streams, flowing rivers and extensive bog, the route was dry and sandy, indeed the hottest event yet held. But it did not detract from the course, and the field of riders enjoyed the event enormously, again claiming the 200km ride to be the finest in the country. Appreciation is noted for the numerous Society members who volunteered for water points, or acted as marshals. There were strong contingents of riders from Harare, Bulawayo, Botswana, South Africa and one rider who travelled all the way from Denmark! Next year it will be difficult to turn away the riders as there is no intention to go above the 100 riders that were registered this year. The changes to the route were well received.

The new race logo was unveiled for the first time. Once again, the real winner was our magnificent Matobo Hills!

The next MTB event is the Matopos Classic from 28th to 30th August. Contact the Secretary if you need more detail.

13 – THE MATOPOS 33 MILER ULTRA-MARATHON

The Matopos 33 Miler has stepped up a pace or two! In February it received accreditation from the IAAF (International Athletics Federation) and so is now an internationally approved route. In March, the Comrades Marathon Association recognised the event as a qualifier for the Comrades. So, in its third year of renewal, the race has reached key goal's that were originally set out. And we believe that it will be carried in part by Supersport! So it's not too late to participate in either the 33 miler (53,1km's) that starts at the MOTH Shrine at 5:30am on Sunday 12th April, the Half-Marathon (21,1km's) that starts at 7:00am on the Matopos Road, near the Woolandale Road, the relay (five runners each running 10.6km's, starting with the Marathon) or the Fun Run which starts at 8:00am at Hamilton High School. All the events finish at Bulawayo Athletics Club (BAC), so if you can't run, get down to the finish line to cheer the athletes home!

Your Society will again be assisting, as it is the promoter of the event which seeks to enhance both the Matopos and the City of Bulawayo.

14 – MCS APPAREL

You are reminded that the Society has a stock of fleece sleeveless jackets, in olive green with orange MCS logo. They are ideal for the cool mornings and evenings. These are available at \$20 each. We still have stocks of hats and caps (at \$10 each). CD's are also available.

15 – RAINFALL

HARARE, March 16 (Newsday) Zimbabwe's rainfall season has ended prematurely with no respects of rainfall throughout the country, with most crops in Midlands and Matabeleland provinces written off. The country requires 1 384 000 tonnes of grain for human consumption and 350 000 tonnes for livestock and other uses and has to import if the harvest is below these requirements. The Meteorological Services Department confirmed that no prospects of rainfall were to be expected in all the provinces in the country. Senior meteorological Tichaona Zinyemba said Matabeleland, Masvingo, Midlands and the southern part of Manicaland might experience light showers up to the first week of April. Agriculture minister Joseph Made recently said an Arex team was on the ground carrying out a rapid assessment programme which would bring out the real food needs ward by ward.

At the 25th of March, rainfall figures were as follows – Eastern Matopos 445mm (54% of average), Western Matopos 326mm (54% of average), with Bulawayo (Burnside) at 580mm (or 97% of average). (At the time of going to print good rains, as much as 55mm, had been reported across the Hills, but we are unable to update our records in sufficient time. We hope that this late wet spell continues through Easter, and whilst it won't save the crops, perhaps it will preserve the water sources for the long hot dry spell ahead)

16 - ABRIDGED REPORT ON THE 51ST BLACK EAGLE BREEDING SURVEY – MARCH–DECEMBER 2014

Cecilia Hubbard

The 51st consecutive year of monitoring had 12 volunteer teams from BirdLife Zimbabwe – Matabeleland Branch who submitted 243 report forms during the course of the survey period.

26 territories within the Matopos National Park and its immediate surrounds were found to be occupied by Black Eagles.

Of these 26 occupations, 12 pairs made a breeding attempt which resulted in 9 chicks being confirmed as fledged, giving a replacement rate of 0.35 per pair of birds. This result is considered to be within the norm.

Of particular interest is the recording of the first known alternate nest site within a territory where the eagles have used the same nesting site since the start of the survey.

The annual rainfall figures recorded from July 2013 to June 2014 at Maleme was the highest recorded for the same period since the 2008/09 season. At Whitewaters, it was the highest total for the same period since the 2002/03 season. From the current rainfall records, rainfall was recorded in average showers over a 5-month period, unlike the previous season when, 72% of total rainfall for Whitewaters, and 65.7% of total rainfall for Maleme was recorded during January 2013.

17 – SUBSCRIPTIONS

You are reminded that subscriptions for the year 1 October 2014 to 30 September 2015 are now overdue and payable. There has been no change from last year.

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

18 – UPDATE ON THE MATOBO BIODIVERSITY MONITORING PROGRAMME

Dambari Wildlife Trust, Cedric Maforimbo, Field Education Officer

Since 2012, we have monitored the natural resources of the Matobo Hills in and near five secondary schools located within a 10km radius of the Matopos National Park boundary. We appoint and train form 3 pupils as the environmental monitors and 516 pupils have participated in the project to date. The first term is themed “vegetation”. During this term we collect tree dominance and density data using the Point Centre Quarter Method and make herbariums. In the second term, which is the birding term, we monitor populations of seven threatened, invasive or culturally significant birds. Insects are the

focal group of study in the third term where we operate pitfall traps and come up with insect species inventories of the different areas. The Natural History Museum's Ornithology and Entomology departments assist us in the second and third term themes respectively. The pupils also make recordings of ad-hoc sightings of various living organisms. We also produce awareness material, screen environmental DVDs for the pupils and get them to play biodiversity games. Detailed information on the data collected on the programme and the other activities is available in our 2014 annual report. If you would like to receive a soft copy of this report please email education@dambari.com. All the work we do is made possible by generous sponsors such as the Matobo Conservation Society, whose support both we and the schools are extremely grateful for.

19 – FICUS GLUMOSA

It has been observed that an increasing number of fig trees (*Ficus glumosa*) are dying, possibly from a bug that burrows into the stem.

We intend to follow this up with our botanical experts to see if there is any information on this, but if any members have noticed the same occurrence, please let us know.

20 – HAPPY EASTER

We wish all our members a blessed Easter and please travel safely!

If you are at home, we hope you'll enjoy our special hills!