

# 2011

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Ken Logan  
Author



**BIRDING ZIMBABWE FEBRUARY 2011**

I have always enjoyed birding in Zimbabwe but I had yet to go there as a photographer so on this trip there was lots for me to shoot and I was chasing five potential lifers. It was a private tour with our friends the Lovells and Lears and our first ever trip with that remarkable pair Gary Douglas and Jono Francis. We had long heard their praises sung on the net and at end of a brief nine day trip we had to concur. They are two of the finest bird guides around, filled with boundless enthusiasm and an encyclopaedia like knowledge of the Zimbabwean flora and fauna.



We chose February because that is the start of season for the rallids in the wetlands and marshes around Harare and there were several flufftails, crakes and quails on our respective lists.

Our flight to Harare was uneventful and we were met by Gary and Jono in their new double cab bakkies and soon were drinking afternoon tea at Jono's Mums place at Flufftail Cottage.. No time to linger though for we needed to leave for Christon Bank and some miombo birding.



It was late afternoon when we arrived but we managed to find Spotted Creeper, and Southern Hyliota before dusk started to draw in.

The following morning we birded the vleis- We headed for a small corner of Borrowdale which had plenty of water and within 20 metres we could hear Streaky-breasted Flufftail calling and suddenly it appeared, crossing a grass tussock not two metres in front of us. We eventually surrounded the bird as it looked up at us not a

metre away. And there was I with a 400 mm lens which was totally useless to me. Lifer number one- what a brilliant way to start the day. We then drove round to the top end of Borrowdale Vlei which was much drier and spent some time looking for Black Coucal to no avail. A Marsh Owl lifted from the reedbeds and floated past looking a little annoyed at the disturbance, and whilst trying to get a little closer, what should flush from our feet but a Striped Crake. Wow- lifer number two. We tried desperately hard for number three- a Blue Quail but that was pushing my luck a little too far- our guides said they had not yet seen one this season. There were plenty of widowbirds around including Yellow-backed and all three longclaws – Cape, Yellow-throated and Rosy-breasted.

The latter part of the morning was spent at the Harare Botanical gardens but we could not track down the Green-backed Honeybird we were searching for. Late afternoon we tried Rainham dam for Black Coucal but again with no luck.



The following day we tried Christon Bank once again and despite the drizzly conditions picked up Whyte's Barbet and Collared Flycatcher- two of our big targets. The afternoon was spent around the agricultural areas and sewerage ponds of Harare. At Mpingwe Dyke we had nice views of Copper Sunbird and Miombo Blue-eared Starling .



We were on the road early next morning heading for Mtaraazi in the Nyanga National Park but not before a scheduled stop at Goshu Park just outside Marondera.

A spectacular park in miombo woodland set amidst huge red sandstone boulders. . Here we found a number of Miombo specials- Miombo Rock-Thrush, Wood Pipit, Stierling's Wren-Warbler, Southern Hyliota, African and Eurasian golden Orioles to name but a few .

Then on to Nyanga where we stopped for Blue swallow among the rolling hills and picked up Augur Buzzard, Bronzy and Malachite Sunbirds, along with Barratt's Warbler in the bushes along the stream.



An early morning walk from our "Far and Wide" chalet took us to the view point where Scarce Swifts swooped down below us and the roadside bush produced Red-faced Crimsonwing and Cape Batis. Lesser Seed-cracker proved as elusive as it normally is!

Then it was on to Aberfoyle in the Honde Valley, our home for the next two nights. Singing Cisticola was doing just that on top of a tea bush as we made our way up to the Lodge whilst a Black-winged Bishop perched

in a mealie field across the road.

Our first target today was Anchieta's Tchagra in the Nwamba swamp and after several attempts round the marsh good views were had by all. Plenty of warblers were seen- Dark-capped Yellow, Little Rush, African Reed, and Lesser Swamp.

We stopped in a small remnant patch of lowland evergreen forest for lunch. Jono prepared lunch as we birded with Gary finding our target Pallid Honeyguide and an obliging Narina Trogon. Returning half an hour later we heard the depressing news that an Elenora's Falcon had just flown across the track never to be seen again- would have been lifer too!!



Yellow-streaked Bulbuls were little consolation as we made our way back to the lodge.

On our departure after breakfast we took the road towards Mutare heading for the Cecil kop reserve just outside the town. A great miombo birding spot which quickly gave us Cinnamon breasted and Miombo Tit.

More birds quickly followed in the form of Green – capped Eremomela, Grey Penduline Tit, Striped Pipit and good views of Canabis’s Bunting.

We lunched in Mutare before heading into the Vumba mountains and a two night stay at Seldom Seen. The gardens here are always full of birds and it didn’t take long to chalk up Miombo Double-collared and Variable Sunbirds along with an obliging Chirinda Apalis and a retiring Livingstone’s Turaco.



The forest walk was good too, giving us Orange Ground-Thrush, Swynnerton’s and White-starred Robin, Black-fronted Bush-Shrike, Robert’s Warbler, White-tailed Crested-Flycatcher and Stripe-cheeked Bulbul. On the hillside the Proteas were full of Gurney’s Sugarbirds, Olive and Malachite



sunbirds, and just as we were meeting for a sundowner after a long days birding, a pair of Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeons flew into the canopy above us.

Our final full day on the trip under grey leaden skies was devoted to driving the loop road through the Burma Valley. We were hoping for Broad-tailed Paradise Wydah but it was a little early in season to find them in full breeding plumage and we lucked out on this bird. We did better with another main target finding Zambezi Indigobird without too much difficulty- lifer number three!! A familiar call brought us to a halt in front of a

thick tangle and after much effort and clambering we emerged with a Thrush Nightingale under our belt.

We were flying out on the afternoon of our last day but we still had a little time to bird the Vumba Road before we left. We found a Mottle Swift from a look out point, more Bronzy sunbirds in the Gardens and Yellow-bellied Waxbills feeding by the roadside.

A short trip by our standards but these guys, great though they are , know how to charge for their services.

Still I don’t complain at three lifers on a trip to Zim these days and the group all had many more. Looking forward to another trip one day- still have lots of birds to photograph up there



