

Trip report: Central Mozambique and Eastern Zimbabwe December 1998

From 28 November to 16 December 1998 we visited central Mozambique and eastern Zimbabwe. We travelled in two vehicles, a Mazda Double Cab four-wheel-drive and a Landrover Defender station wagon. The main purpose of this trip was bird-watching, with the group comprising of two serious twitchers (Werner Sinclair & Helm van Zijl), two professional ornithologists (Mark Anderson & Phil Whittington), an avid birder, naturalist, and Penguin expert (Jan Hofmeyer) and a botanist with a secondary interest in birds (Tania Anderson). Werner doubled as our medic, but luckily he was only needed for minor ailments.

We departed from Kimberley on Saturday 28 November at 06h30. En route, we started ticking birds. The first bird to be added to our list was Lesser Flamingo, where some 16,000 birds were seen on Kamfers Dam. Other species to be seen on the first leg of the journey were an immature Jackal Buzzard (south of Warrenton), Western Redfooted Kestrel (near Bloemhof) and Redchested Cuckoo in Bothaville. Our lunch stop was at the Petroport just north of Pretoria, and we enjoyed our sandwiches under the palm trees, watching the Palm Swifts flying between these trees. Further north, over the Soutpansberg, we saw our first of many Wahlberg's Eagles and a single Knobbilled Duck on a small wetland adjacent to the road. By the time we arrived at the Tshipise camp site we were very weary, but nonetheless enjoyed the call of a Wood Owl while we ate dinner.

The following morning we were treated to many of the bushveld birds, which are so unfamiliar to us in the central and southern parts of South Africa. These included Orangebreasted Bush Shrike, Greybacked Bleating Warbler, Mocking Chat and Lesser Masked Weaver. On the road to the Beit Bridge border post we managed to see many Whitecrowned Shrikes, Purple Roller and three House Martins on the roof of the petrol station at the Limpopo River. Our entry into Zimbabwe was pretty uneventful, despite being harassed by Zimbabwean men offering to "facilitate" our border crossing in exchange for relatively large sums of money.

The road from Beit Bridge to Mutare passes through some of the finest countryside in southern Africa, especially the sections of *Brachystegia* woodland (Miombo). Our first pit stop was at the Bubi River, sight of a photograph of a topless woman that was published in *Getaway* magazine. Here, however, we were only treated to feathered birds, including Broadbilled Roller, Great Spotted Cuckoo and Fantailed Flycatcher. We then pushed on to Mutare, only managing to tick some of the larger and more obvious birds during this portion of the journey. That night we camped at the municipal campsite on the Christmas pass, for a fee of only R20,00 per site. The rain that night

and the following morning did not dampen our spirits, and we were able to tick about 30 species in and around the campsite before breakfast. These included Tropical Boubou, Yellowbellied Sunbird, Streakyheaded Canary, Black Cuckooshrike, Lemonbreasted Canary, Cabanis' Bunting, Northern Grey Tit and Miombo Doublecollared Sunbird. Most of us managed a few lifers before coffee and rusks – quite a treat.

After a brief stop to refuel in the beautiful city of Mutare we passed through the Mutare/Machipanda border post, again very smoothly. In marked contrast to Zimbabwe the countryside in Mozambique is quite degraded, and much of the countryside, adjacent to the roads, has been converted to maize. Also, particularly as a result of the relatively high rainfall in this region, a lot of soil erosion was evident. One thing that did impress us was the very good tar road from Mutare to Inchope. Our first major stop was on the eastern side of Lake Chicamba, which is very accessible via an excellent dirt road. Here we saw Yellowbacked Widow, Shortwinged Cisticola (a lifer for most of the group), Emerald Cuckoo, Lizard Buzzard, Blackbreasted Snake Eagle and many others. We then pushed on to Beira, a journey that took longer than anticipated due to road construction (and endless detours), particularly along the section from Dondo to Beira. That night we camped under some *Casuarina* trees on the beach at Biques "resort", located on the northern side of the town. Here we enjoyed a refreshing dip in the sea, a delicious meal of grilled queen prawns, and a few litres of Manica beer. During our stay in Mozambique we really enjoyed Manica beer, which is only available in 500 ml bottles and with 5% alcohol has quite a kick in contrast to the South African and Namibian beers that we usually drink. The Biques campsite is recommended as it is guarded at night, has relatively clean ablutions, good food and cold beer! However, beware of the mosquitoes – which are almost certain to be carrying the dreaded *Plasmodium* parasite.

The next day we left town shortly after sunrise. Some of us were keen to explore the town, but we were reminded that this was a birding holiday and we were not going to be side-tracked by our latent interest in cultural history. We headed for the mouth of the Savane River, which is located about 22 km north of Beira. The turnoff to Savane is not easy to find on the Dondo-Beira main road (and is marked Chibuka). The turnoff is only accessible if you travel from the west (because of an island in the road) and the signboard is also only visible from this direction. It may be necessary to ask for directions, but beware because you may be pointed in the direction of Savane town (as we initially were) which is located to the west on the Dondo-Muanza road.

The road to the Savane mouth traverses part of the delta of the Pungoe River, an enormous wetland. This area seemed perfect for birds, with lots of water and aquatic vegetation, yet there were very few species to be seen. This is quite surprising and we never came to any firm conclusion for this observation. We did find a few large flocks of Openbill Storks (one flock numbering in excess of 150 individuals), African Jacana,

Great White Egret and Yellowthroated Longclaw. The road passes through one small patch of lowland evergreen forest, in which we spent at least an hour. Here we saw Crowned Hornbill, African Goshawk, Woodward's Batis, Slender Bulbul, Green Coucal as well as (possibly) breeding Woollynecked Stork. More time in this forest patch, during the early morning, will possibly reveal some more of the Mozambique specials. We then drove on, stopping here and there and adding Mozambique Batis, Redbacked Mannikin, Bluecheeked Bee-eater, and Blackbacked Cisticola to our now growing trip-list.

At the Savane River mouth (estuary) the guard on duty (armed with an AK-47 rifle!) radioed across the river to James and Barbara (we never managed to get their surname), a Zimbabwean couple, who run the campsite. The boat was sent to fetch us and for about R8,00 each we were ferried across the river. Here we learnt about the couple's exciting ecotourism plans, the popularity of this site during the Zimbabwean school holidays, as well as something about the area's birds. James has a "concession" for an area of 5,000 ha and birders from Zimbabwe and elsewhere have managed to record many bird species (James will provide a list on request), including many of the Mozambique specials. Here we managed (Greater) Sand Plover (including a flock of 34 at the mouth), a single Terek Sandpiper, and to our great pleasure, not one, but two European Oystercatchers (a lifer for all of the group, except Phil). We also saw Yellow Weaver, Cutthroat Finch at James' bird feeding table (a major range expansion to the east for this finch), Purplebanded Sunbird and Osprey. We also had excellent views of Mangrove Kingfisher, a lifer for many on the trip.

Tania was most fascinated by the mudskippers in the Mangrove Swamp, while Helm was very cautious of the pride of seven lions that frequent the area, even more so when we came across fresh spoor (tracks) on the beach! With James' permission we camped on the southern side of the river, and to our relief an on-shore wind kept the mosquitoes away while we had dinner and attended to our "admin". The Savane River mouth is highly recommended, and will certainly be on our itinerary during future visits to the area.

The following morning we had an early start as we planned to travel as far as Chinizua forest. En route to Dondo we saw Plumcoloured Starling, Fantailed Cisticola (which sound no different to their kin at the Orange River mouth, several thousand kilometres away), a possible Sooty Falcon, Wattled Plover and a few other wetland-associated birds.

In Dondo we managed to change some rands to meticals at a local store, refuel and buy some bread and breadrolls at a very clean bakery which is run by a Portuguese woman who speaks excellent English (learnt when she lived in Zimbabwe). We were

unable to buy Manica beer, as the barmen and “bottle store” owners are not keen to part with their bottles, so we had to settle for some South African beer!

The turnoff to Muanza is located about 4 kms west of Dondo, and was not sign-posted when we travelled through. Look out for a large antenna on the right of the road, and then turn shortly thereafter opposite a tower that is on the left of the road. The road to Muanza turned into a bit of a nightmare, and Werner and Helm were able to test their four-wheel-driving skills on a very wet and muddy road. The road had several huge puddles of water, some almost 1.5 metres deep (maybe that is a bit of an exaggeration!). Because of the danger of landmines adjacent to this road, it was not advisable to by pass the puddles in the veldt, so we were committed to this road. There were several (at least a dozen or so) large trucks stuck, some of them on their axles and some completely blocking the road. A bull-dozer driver had his hands full freeing these trucks from the mud, probably only to see them get stuck again a few hundred metres further down the road. It is not advisable to drive this road in the wet season without the right equipment, which includes a snorkel attached to your vehicle’s air-filter.

What was evident along this road was the number of destroyed trains and carriages along the damaged and overgrown railway line. Never before have we seen so much scrap metal, all waiting to be recycled.

James at the Savane River mouth had mentioned that there was a forest patch on the way to Sengo, which is much closer than Chinizuia. As the road had deteriorated even more and it seemed unlikely that we would ever get to the famous Chinizuia forest, we decided to try and find this “un-birded” forest. The turn-off was at Savane town, but unfortunately as there are many forks in the road (made by the logging and charcoal trucks) from Savane to Sengo, we never got to the forest, and eventually set up camp along the road. We later heard from Roberto Zolho, Warden at Gorongosa National Park, that this forest does not exist anymore, so in retrospect we probably made the wrong decision and should have attempted to push on to Chinizuia. Nevertheless, had we decided to push on we may have found ourselves in trouble as there was lots of rain that night and the condition of the roads deteriorated even further (and we were quite relieved when we managed to get out onto the main Dondo-Muanza road the next day). The birding at our camp site was very poor, and just demonstrated what effect the logging is having on the avifauna of the area. Clearly it was just too soon for the area to be invaded by generalist bird species; we did, however, see Gymnogene, Lizard Buzzard and Livingston’s Lourie. At our campsite north of Dondo Phil, Werner and Helm had excellent views of two European Cuckoos and we all had good views of Stierlings Barred Warbler. But this was about the lowest density of birds we had ever seen in southern Africa, in any habitat (except pure desert, of course).

There was a continual stream of logging trucks, loaded with hardwood logs, and tractors, pulling trailers loaded with bags of charcoal, coming out of the forests. What a depressing sight! The present logging and charcoal-making in central Mozambique must be having more of an effect on the subcontinent's avifauna than any other factor at present. Someone needs to take action, now!

We now decided to retrace our way back to Dondo and then to travel to Gorongosa National Park (*Parque Nacional du Gorongosa*). This was of course quite unfortunate as it meant that we would have to dip out on all the lowland evergreen forest specials, such as Whitebreasted Alethe, Bluethroated Sunbird, Chestnutfronted Helmetshrike, and Gunning's Robin. En route to Dondo, we did manage Brown Snake Eagle and Flappet Lark. The latter species was displaying high in the sky, and it took a while before we saw the first bird.

During a quick stop at the bridge of the Pungoe River we added Common Sandpiper, Peregrine Falcon (three birds), Yellow Weaver and Wiretailed Swallow to our list. The bridge is truly magnificent and crosses one of southern Africa's largest rivers - it is a pity that this structure was damaged during the war. Instead of being repaired, another small steel bridge has been built over the damaged section so effectively you have a bridge on a bridge!

The turnoff to Gorongoso National Park on the Inchope-Gorongosa road is easy to find as it is well sign-posted (1856.031/3407.583). From the turnoff one travels along an excellent dirt-road (approx. 11 kms) along the southern boundary of the Park and then via the gate (approx. 17 kms) to Chitengo (the "rest camp"). The road between the gate and Chitengo was very muddy and slippery, and at times this road must be impassable.

We then spent five glorious nights at Gorongosa National Park. There is a campsite under some large trees, and simple reed-enclosed ablution facilities that have just been built. There are however no seats on the toilets and there was no hot water, not that it was needed! It costs US\$10 entrance per person and an additional US\$10 per person per day for camping fees, which we thought was a little expensive. There are no other facilities (besides the basic ones mentioned above), and visitors have to be self-sufficient in terms of food and fuel. Also, we were advised to boil the tap water before drinking.

The birding in the campsite was excellent and we managed to see well over 100 species in the camp, and on the adjoining aeroplane runway. These included Greyrumped Swallow, Broadbilled Roller, Black Cuckoo, Mozambique Batis, Bateleur, Lesser Blue-eared Starling, Green Sandpiper, Lesser Blackwinged Plover, Sand

Martin, Brownheaded Parrot, Brownthroated Weaver, Yellow Wagtail, Rednecked Francolin and Garden Warbler.

The Park is run by Roberto Zolho, who is fluent in English, and he must rank as one of the most dedicated conservationists in Africa. Roberto was a student in the Park in December 1981 when Frelimo (or Renamo, sorry cannot remember) took over the camp, after ambushing one of the Park vehicles. He, and a few other students, escaped through a window at the back of the classroom when alerted of the danger. They ran for 60 km to Muanza, without stopping; not only for fear of the soldiers but also for the wild animals in the Park (they even swam crocodile-infested rivers to get to safety). Chitengo camp was devastated by Frelimo and Renamo during the subsequent period and it is quite disheartening to see the remnants of this once magnificent camp.

Rob Morley, a British ecologist, is also currently working in the Park and he is very helpful and also interested to learn from southern African biologists. The second-in-command (i.e. after Roberto) is Dr Firmino Nyaonga, a veterinarian who only speaks some English (during 1999 he will be travelling to Tanzania to do a wildlife management course, with the additional aim of learning to speak English). During our stay we were allowed to wander freely in the Park, but we were cautioned about walking in the area of 500 m radius around the campsite which may be land-mined. There are nice walks on the roads and runway that radiate from the park in various directions, and the Pungoe River is only a few minutes walk away. We also travelled extensively by vehicle in the Park and saw some magnificent woodland areas. However, the floodplain area adjacent to the lake in the north, with Gorongosa Mountain in the background, ranked as one of the finest vistas we had ever seen in Africa. Here we also saw many birds, including a pair of Wattled Cranes, several pairs of Crowned Cranes, many Redwinged Pratincoles, a single Capped Wheatear, several Rednecked Falcons, two Montagu's Harriers, and many others.

Other bird species seen in the Park included European and Mozambique Nightjar, Collared Palm Thrush, Greencapped Eremomela, Redbilled Helmetshrike, Firecrowned Bishop, Longtoed Plover, Greyhooded Kingfisher and Redheaded Quelea.

There are very few wild animals left in this Park, which once ranked as one of the prime wildlife areas in Africa. These animals were all shot during the war to provide food for the soldiers; and Roberto and Rob provided us with some startling statistics. During the war more than 40,000 buffalo, 8,000 elephant, and 4,000 hippos were shot, as well as most of the wildebeest, sable, roan and other antelope. Today there are only an estimated 120 elephant, 30 buffalo, 30 sable, 10-12 hippo, and two wildebeest remaining, although the numbers are increasing rapidly (supposedly also through immigration from surrounding areas). During our stay we saw two Lichtenstein's

Hartebeest, about 20 Oribi , about 3 or 4 Common Reedbuck, four Warthog and one Grey Duiker - a total of about 30 antelope in three days of driving in the park! One wonders whether the park will be able to reach its former glory in terms of wildlife populations, without large scale reintroductions (which will probably be unlikely without foreign sponsorship, and an improvement of the access roads). Clearly Roberto, his staff of 170, and other employees of *Fauna e Floresta Mocambique* face enormous challenges in terms of conservation in this area. There is the every present threat of poaching from the densely populated neighbouring communities and the charcoal loggers. We heard that it was recently found that the local governor's wife was running one of the charcoal companies and trees were being harvested in the Park's buffer zone!

Obviously one way in which the Park can succeed is for it to show a revenue in terms of visitors' fees, and also for the communities to benefit, whether through sharing of profits or more simply through the sustainable utilization of the Park's natural resources. We highly recommend a visit to this Park, not only for the birds and the beautiful scenery, but also in order to contribute to the long-term conservation of this area.

During our stay in Gorongosa National Park we travelled to Mt Gorongosa in order to look for the mystical Greenheaded Oriole, the only locality in southern Africa where this species is found. A visit to central Mozambique would be incomplete without an expedition up the mountain to search for this mega-tick. We left the Chitengo campsite at 06h00, travelling back to the Inchope-Gorongosa town tar road. At the intersection we turned right, heading north to Gorongosa town. This tar road must rate as the worst we have ever driven, as it is more pot-holed than even-surfaced, and the going was very slow. The directions to Vunduzi, from where one ascends the mountain are relatively simple. Just north of Gorongosa town there is a bridge, and just beyond the bridge the road forks (1840.101/3404.430) approximately 1 km from the town. Here one takes the right, more well worn, fork. It takes a relatively long time to travel from this fork to Vunduzi town (1828.527/3412.334), a distance of only about 20-30 km (sorry, did not take the odometer reading). The road is very bad, and there are several river crossings; we walked the rivers first to determine the best route. The stops allowed us to do some birding and we added Redbilled Firefinch and Mosque Swallow to our list. There are times of the year when this road must be totally impassable. It seems as if one never gets to Vunduzi, and at times it feels as if you are travelling away from the mountain.

At Vunduzi we reported to the local police station (which was merely a grass hut), where we received a letter of permission from the policeman. He requested unusual information, such as the names of our parents. We then went to the administrator's house with the policeman for further permission, but it being Sunday the administrator

was not available. We then hired a guide (whom we later paid M100000 (about R50.00) for his assistance), parked our vehicles at the police station, and commenced the walk up the mountain. We must have departed at about 10h30. About one-third of the way up the mountain we arrived at the ranger outpost, where the policeman's letter was given to Mr Pereira Maque. He then changed into his *Fauna e Floresta Mocambique* uniform and accompanied us the rest of the way (we also paid him M100000 for his help). We also tipped the policeman, something which (in retrospect) should not be done.

It took about two and a half hours to get to the orioles. The walk is not too difficult, but one has to be reasonably fit. Fortunately we did it on a cool and overcast day, and the walk must be quite difficult on a hot and humid day. It is recommended that one carries 1-2 litres of water, some food, a rain coat (this mountain is apparently the locality with the highest rainfall in southern Africa) and wears good walking shoes.

The forest is magnificent and it was not long before we were hearing the call of the Greenheaded Oriole, not very different to the familiar call of its blackheaded cousin. Seeing the birds was another matter, and it took some time before we got good views of these birds. This was surely the highlight of the trip, and also Helm's 700th southern African species (which was celebrated with several bottles of cold Manica later that evening). Other birds that we saw during our walk were Forest Weaver, Eastern Saw-wing Swallow, Silverycheeked Hornbill, Olive Sunbird, and Croaking Cisticola. The walk back to Vunduzi is naturally quicker than the walk up the mountain, and we were able to descend by about 17h00. It was then a three-hour drive back to Chitengo camp, which included a stop at Gorongosa town to buy Manica, and an equally important stop to collect a female Pennantwinged Nightjar that was unfortunately killed by our Landrover.

In retrospect it was a mistake to try and climb the mountain in one day, especially seen as though we did it from Gorongosa National Park. For future visits it is recommended that one camps near Vunduzi, or even better hires a few porters and spends a couple of nights on the mountain. The afro-montane forests are very enticing, and a fleeting visit does not allow one to do any justice to this potentially rewarding birding spot.

After a wonderful four days and five nights at Gorongosa National Park, we decided to travel to the eastern highlands of Zimbabwe, one of the prime birding areas in southern Africa. We again passed through the Mutare/Machipanda border post without any hassles, refueled and stocked up with food and drinks at Mutare and travelled up to the camping site at the Vumba Botanical Gardens, where we stayed for three nights. What a spectacular camp site, and with beautiful gardens and many eastern Zimbabwe specials, this should rank as one of the prime destinations on a birder's itinerary to the area. We spent our time birding in the botanical gardens, the forest next to the tar road

(which was a bit disappointing), and the area adjacent to the scenic drive (just below the camp site) which produced most of the specials. Here we added Stripecheeked Bulbul, Tambourine Dove, Mousecoloured Flycatcher, Bronze Sunbird, East African Swee, Buffspotted Flufftail, Swynnerton's and Starred Robins, White-eared Barbet, Longtailed Wagtail, Blackfronted Bushshrike and Orange Ground Thrush to our list. With all the ringing activities in the Vumba gardens, we saw few birds without rings – some even with colour-rings. This was also evident at Seldom Seen where Dale Hamner now conducts her ringing activities. We spent an enjoyable few hours with Peter Mwadziwana at Seldom Seen, and for only Zim\$90 per person it was money well spent. We were very impressed with Peter's skills and he pointed out Whitetailed Flycatcher (and a nest with two chicks), Yellowstreaked Bulbul, Barratt's Warber, Chirinda Apalis, Yellowthroated Warbler, Terrestrial Bulbul, Redfaced Crimsonwing and many other species.

We also spent a couple of hours on the Leopard Rock Hotel golf course, birding not playing golf - of course! Here we were able to see only the more common species, but did hear Little Spotted Woodpecker calling from the forest adjoining one of the fairways. Peter Mwadziwana's son, Crispin, is a porter at the hotel and apparently, when he is off duty, he is prepared to take guided walks to look for birds (such as the elusive Spotted Creeper) in the hotel grounds.

We also spent some time birding in the grassland areas, located on the higher areas around the Vumba forests (mainly the Bunga Views area) and we were also able to add Singing Cisticola, Broadtailed Warbler, Grassbird, Crowned Eagle, Mottled Swift, and a couple of others to our list.

We then left for Chimanimani, where we spent the night at Heaven Mountain Lodge. Here the camping fee is Zim\$40 per person per night but as the camping site is close to the main lodge complex (and pub) it is rather noisy and not recommended for the eco-tourist. We spent a few hours in the Chimanimani National Park, but were not able to do any justice to this excellent birding area. During our short 2-3 hour walk around the campsite and on the slopes of the mountain, we saw Rufousbellied Tit (they appear to be breeding in the artificial nest boxes), Northern Grey Tit, Black and Whitebreasted Cuckooshrike, and Redfaced Crombec. We were disappointed to see all the litter around the campsite (there are only a few refuse bins) and many invasive wattles, which really detracts from the objectives of this national park. Also the ablution facilities are not very clean.

We had planned to travel as far as the Rusitu/Haroni forest, but were advised against it because of the poor condition of the roads (after the extensive rains that had fallen in the area during the previous few days). We then decided to spend our last night in Zimbabwe in Chirinda Forest at Mt Selinda. Here we found an excellent camp site

(which also has a few chalets) that is run by the Forestry Commission. Here the facilities were clean, actually surpassing that of the Zimbabwe national parks! In this forest we saw Silverycheeked Hornbill, Narina Trogon, Goldenrumped Tinker Barbet, Green Twinspot, Whitetailed Flycatcher, and African Broadbill, amongst others.

Our trip back to South Africa, including the Beit Bridge border crossing, was uneventful. We spent a hair-raising night camping during a fierce electric storm in Pietersburg, but survived the ordeal, albeit with very wet tents and some wet clothes. During a quick stop at Vogelfontein at Nylsvlei we added a final few species to our list, including African Rail, Lesser Gallinule and Whitethroated Robin. With a trip list of 364 bird species, and despite having dipped out on the many lowland evergreen forest specials, we were satisfied, and headed for home.

Finally, some tips for travel in Mozambique:

1. Take all your drinking water, unless you are prepared to boil river water.
2. Try and be self-sufficient in terms of food, as only fruit and vegetables were freely available. Tinned cold-drinks and beer are available in most towns and villages.
3. A four-wheel-drive vehicle is essential for travel in Mozambique during the rainy season, even on some of the main roads!
4. Travel in convoy, not specifically for safety reasons but in order to provide back-up support when one vehicle gets stuck.
5. Take along a strong 30-40 m rope, high-lift jack, spade, and possibly a winch.
6. A snorkel, fitted to the vehicle's air-filter, will be useful during the rainy season.
7. If you cannot speak Portuguese, take along a phrase book. Also, as we did, take along a brief letter written in Portuguese, explaining that you are a bird-watcher.
8. Also, one would be crazy to travel to Mozambique without taking the necessary precautions against malaria: a combination of prophylactics (consult your GP), tabard and peaceful sleep, suitable clothing for the evenings, a mosquito-proof tent, etc., etc.

Mark & Tania Anderson, Jan Hofmeyer, Werner Sinclair, Helm van Zijl and Phil Whittington

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