

Bird Survey: CATAPU CONCESSION.

Conducted : Nov 04 to Feb 06

Summary:

An ongoing bird survey has been conducted in a hardwood logging concession, Catapu. The current directors aim to diversify their interests in the concession, by conducting thorough surveys in all the natural history disciplines. The non-scientific birding survey has been undertaken by a five member team: A Cheesman, J Clegg, B Gibson, B Holland and C Kitcat. (Contact details provided.) This report concentrates on this survey.

Catapu lies principally in the Zambezi lowland forest system. As a large percentage of these areas are in the hands of hunting coutadas, much of the ecosystem is somewhat maintained. Responsible timber exploitation could extend this principle, and hopefully a large block of natural resource could be preserved to include tourism as a money earner and area of employment growth for Mozambique.

The estate is about 25,000 hectares in extent, and lies in the region south of the Zambezi River, and north of the village of Inhaminga. The average rainfall is 540mm per annum based on 4 years' records. (Director's own records.)

The property extends east and west of the main access road to the north of Mozambique, between the Nchope crossroads and Caia, a village that services the ferry crossing over the Rio Zambeze. The Rio Zangue, to the West, is outside of the boundary of the concession, but forms part of the southern boundary, and the rail line (in process of resuscitation) is along the eastern limit. Heading North from Nchope, as you cross the Zangwe, you have reached the Catapu Concession.

A thorough vegetation inventory of this property is already well underway.

The Directors have undertaken a long term project to identify the woody species, led by Meg Coates-Palgrave. They have also established an on site herbarium.

Introduction:

This report will concentrate only on the birding activities.

From an ornithological perspective, the ecology appears fairly well maintained. Discreet logging areas are encountered, and the directors defend their methods of sustainability. As far as we could see, and we covered many miles of the area on our three visits, we encountered no very recent large scale cleared land. Newly felled trees are accessed on narrow tracks, and removed totally for utilization. There are some areas that were harvested earlier on that are ecologically compromised, but they are recovering under the commitment by the Directors to more environmentally sound practices.

Several of the best birding wish list can be found at Catapu, so the combination of easy access, areas of pristine vegetation and topnotch birding, must add up to a location worth visiting in its own right. Add to that, good gameviewing, (visitors have a very good chance of seeing Suni antelope and Red Duiker, both fairly scarce in southern Africa), secure camping and chalets, hot showers and a good restaurant, and excellent adjacent properties to extend the diversity, and you have a tourist destination that stands in its own right as worthy of visiting.

Objectives:

- To do a full inventory of the bird life at Catapu, encompassing all seasons and migrations.
- To create an awareness of the region as a birding destination. This is a very accessible, safe place to see such specials as Gunning's Robin, Whitebreasted Alethe, Madagascar Cuckoo, Specklethroated Woodpecker, Southern Banded Snake Eagle, Mangrove Kingfisher and Angola Pitta, to name a few.
- To identify key areas for birdwatching on the property, thereby facilitating future visits by enthusiasts.
- To create an awareness in visitors of the biological diversity of the region.
- To introduce local and even regional school children to birds and birding, dovetailing with other planned activities in bush craft and environmental awareness.
- To endeavour to use the quality of the birds and the nesting records as an indicator of the health of the ecosystem.

Methods:

The wet season, winter and very dry seasons were covered in an interrupted, sixteen month long survey. The survey was extended from one year to sixteen months as the anticipated rains in late 2004 to early 2005 failed to arrive.

The five member team bird watched from first light to the early night for approximately week long episodes, using visual and auditory identification. Any rarities or unusual observations were confirmed by both methods. Every macro-habitat was regularly visited in each season. The concession's roads for access, but many of the observations were made either walking or sitting still, often using the car as a hide.

Findings for the first survey: Week 30th October to 5th November, 2004.

At Catapu, there are stands of mature woodland, drier sparse island woodland with grassland, forest re-growth, riparian and closed canopy forest. Some dry, sand river courses cut through the region. Invariably these are lined with promising lush riparian vegetation. As mentioned earlier, a thorough inventory of the woody species is being conducted and should be used in conjunction with this report.

At the turn off from the main road to the campsite, (Accommodacao : M'pingwe Camp) we listed Mosque Swallows nesting in the large Baobab on the left. The entire tar road, as it bisects Catapu, is worth birding thoroughly. Many raptors use the road and its verge for hunting. We often saw groups of Broad-billed Rollers hawking insects over the road at dusk.

M'pingwe is the campsite and restaurant area. Surrounded by well developed woodland, it is always a good birding site. The owners have kept as much shrubby vegetation as possible, carving the campsites between bush clumps. Apart from the privacy and extra shade, this allows cover for the skulking species to approach. Time spent in the heat of the day watching the shallow birdbath is always productive. Here we listed Pale (Mozambique) Batis, Stierling's Wren, White-browed Scrub Robin, Eurasian Bee-eater, Red-faced Crombec and more.

The roads behind the campsite quickly change from woodland to forest, with good under canopy cover. Walking along the track we saw Eurasian Golden Oriole, Crested Guineafowl, Eastern (Yellowspotted) Nicator, Livingstone's Turaco and had previously seen Livingstone's Flycatcher. Here it is worth mentioning, perhaps, that bird dialects can be a bit confusing initially, and even the Puffback had us excited until we became familiar with his new and improved (if reversed) song.

A sand riverbed, (of the Rio Tissadze), well emarginated by spreading trees and tangled shrubs, was very promising and it was here we saw our first (of three) Southern Banded Snake Eagles.

Nearby, there was a recently burned grassland area where, in November, after only a brief spell of rain, several ephemeral pans, on clay, filled where we found our only ducks for this trip, three female and one male Comb Ducks. In the same area, on another butterfly-enlaced pan, we saw a Common Sandpiper and Hadeda Ibis. We have high hopes for this area after more rain. Driving further, where the woodland becomes fairly dense, we stopped to admire a large Erythrina livingstonia, and here we heard the call of the Madagasgar Cuckoo, which was also confirmed visually with some determination from the team.

On one day, we drove west to the Rio Zangue. Here, the vegetation is very different for the most part. Initially, passing through an area where the larger trees have been harvested, we were kept occupied with Green Malkoha, (Natal or) Red-capped Robin-Chat and several Sunbirds.

Later still in a recently burned open, grassland and pan area, we saw Golden-breasted Bunting. Closer to the river, we found Red-billed Firefinch, Green-winged Pytilia, Blue Waxbills, Striped Kingfisher and in the reeds, Malachite Kingfisher and African Jacana.

One of the most productive sections of the concession is just after the Rio Tissadze, where over a few kilometers, the vegetation changes from riverine to forest, woodland then to open dambos. Here we ran the gamut of Mangrove Kingfishers, African

Broadbill, Livingstone's Flycatcher, Verreaux's Eagle Owl, Blackbellied Starling, Eastern Bearded Robin, Purplebanded Sunbird, Collared and Variable Sunbirds.

In forest where Panga Panga (*Millettia stuhlmannii*) trees dominate, we saw Narina Trogon, Yellowbreasted Apalis, Lesser Honeyguide and more Nicators, and in a nearby, more open wooded area we saw Retz's Helmet-Shrikes on a neat nest in the high, sturdy fork in the main trunk of an enormous *Acacia nigrescens*.

We had also seen them earlier in the week, but the young in this group were already out of the nest and following their parents, soliciting for food. They had rufous fronts, looking for all the world like Chestnut Fronted Helmet-Shrikes, which have been found at Catapu before.

Findings for the second survey: Week 22nd to 28th FEBRUARY, 2005.

Again, the five member team gathered for some serious birdwatching at Catapu. The weather was extremely hot, temperatures reaching the forties most days. There was also a severe drought, which made for dry pans. As we had hoped to time the trip for full pans and consequent water birds, we were a bit disappointed. However, in the last two days, rains fell, but it was a bit too late for many birds to arrive timeously.

Also, we suspect that because of the heat, birds were somewhat inactive, and certainly not calling much. However, by the end of the trip we had a respectable total with, as usual, some quality birds to add to our original list.

On the first day, we drove roughly southward along a track for about eight kilometers, towards some old fields. Catapu has very varied vegetation and we encountered forest, pans and open woodland on this drive. The birding was as varied. We saw African Goshawk, Mangrove Kingfisher, Carmine Bee-eaters, Broad-billed Rollers, Spotted Flycatchers, (not seen on the previous visit, but now the commonest flycatcher,) and Red-backed Shrike, also a new migrant, and we heard Stierling's Wren.

We visited and also camped (on a full moon) at the open cotton clay area where we had been hoping for inundated pans, and at this spectacular spot such birds as a solitary Woolley-necked Stork, Hadeda Ibis, Black Widow-finch, Bearded Wood-pecker and Black-bellied Starling, among others, were identified.

Walking away from the pans, in wooded islands in the savanna, we saw Pygmy Kingfisher, Grey-headed Bush-shrike, Melba Finch, Red-throated Twinspot and Forest Weavers.

On the well-used road that leaves the mill and heads East, we came on a bird party that was easily the best on the trip. We listed Livingstone's Flycatcher, Square-tailed Drongo, Yellow White-eye, Yellow Spotted Nicators, and more. It was amongst these birds we heard the whip-cracking call of our first Black-headed Apalis and we also believe we saw the Blue-throated Sunbird, female. Our immediate reaction was that it was a Collared

Sunbird, but it did not quite fit, as the size of the beak had us wondering if it belonged to the Warblers, and the bird was not lustrous. So that one is not listed as we hope to see identify it conclusively next time. It has, however, been seen by Vincent Parker on his visits to Catapu.

In November, we looked hard for the Bohm's Spinetail, to no avail, but this time we saw them with often, (seven separate times), along the main road mostly, but also overflying open patches on Catapu.

We had two very wet days, and on the first of these we saw our first Lesser Spotted Eagle. Peter Steyn's *Birds of Prey of Southern Africa* (p. 760 states in the section on general habits: "It moves about a great deal following the rain fronts, seldom remaining in for long in one locality." Our first sighting seems to bear this out.

Heading North on the tarred Gorongosa/Nchope road there are large expanses of rank grassland where we had quality birding, mostly seedeaters. Pin-tailed Whydahs, Fire-crowned Bishops, Red-billed Quelea, Red-faced Cisticola and Yellow-rumped Widows were all found here, and it promises to be an interesting spot for further visits.

The drier south eastern boundary, which has entirely different birds, gave us Golden-backed Pytilia and many Swallows and Swifts. Interestingly, this is the only place where we saw *Brachystegia* (Miombo) trees.

We kept the birdbath in the M'pingwe camp filled and here saw Red-backed Mannikins, yellow-eyed canaries, several doves and again the Spotted Flycatcher. Here, we also had a bit of sport as the camp African Grey Parrot gave us an endless repertoire of birdcalls, which he can only have heard locally and could have extended our list enormously!

On the western boundary, along the Zangwe River, we found Yellow-throated Longclaws, and fresh hippo spoor. Hippo should be encouraged as the river is becoming overgrown with reeds and it would be ideal to have some more open areas on the water's edge, especially for birding.

So to the differences between the two trips:

In November, many more birds were calling, as might be expected. Very vocal were all the cuckoos, more varieties of owls, the Mangrove Kingfisher, the "backwards" dialect of the Puffback, francolins, the Nicator, more doves and so on. In February, there were times when the bush was silent. It was very hot, a possible contributing factor. For us, two of the most interesting features of the second excursion were firstly, the very large groups (up to about 35) of Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrikes, and secondly, the many sightings of Bohm's Spinetail.

The first trip and second had a marked difference in the species numbers: 126 in November and 107 in February. Grass birds are better represented in February for 2 reasons. The team lacked some confidence with immature /cross plumage birds in

November, and also we found a productive area of rank grasses with flourishing seedheads that made things easier in February 05.

No vultures were seen on the February trip, and no Southern Banded Snake Eagles, but we did add Lesser Spotted and Martial Eagles. In February, we heard on 2 occasions, Bataleurs calling at passing Bataleurs. We also saw two Steppe Buzzards and a single Dickinson's Kestrel.

No Helmeted Guineafowl were seen, or heard, on the second trip, barring some feral birds at the mill, which we did not list. But this trip we got full house on the Woodhoopoes, and added the Grey-hooded Kingfisher just before our departure.

In February, Carmine Bee-Eaters were exchanged for Swallow-tailed Bee-Eaters, which may have just been overlooked on our first trip.

The Flycatchers were different, too with November having Pallid and Bluegrey, while in February we saw the Paradise and Spotted. Both times we saw the Livingstone's Flycatchers.

The migratory Red-backed Shrike was seen only in February.

A remarkable feature was the lack of Sunbirds on our second excursion. We only listed the Collared, (although we are fairly confident we saw the Blue-throated) in February. In November, every tree seemed to have a Purple-banded Sunbird in it, and we also saw the Scarlet-chested, Black and Variable.

In conclusion, the time of year does make a difference to the species listed, which can be expected. The migrants were well represented, and sadly we missed the pans filling, which I think would have added hugely to our list, and we will try to cover them in another rainy season. The heat of February may have also made for less activity in general. Finally the pairing of birds may have also reduced the February count. However, it was well worth the effort (and heat) to visit during the migrant influx.

Findings for the third survey: Week 19th to 23rd February 06.

Catapu had good rains from November, prompting us to try visit the area when the pans were full. We timed our trip for late February, and found the pans full but the roads passable. We unpacked quickly on the first afternoon headed for a close pan. It was very late afternoon, and the sun set on the western rim of the pan behind a tall *Sterculia appendiculata* in which we had identified our first Mangrove Kingfisher pair active at an arboreal clay antnest. The pan was straining with at least six different frogcalls competing with the active birds. We saw Black Crake, Squacco Heron and African Jacana and overhead the skies were busy with many Broadbilled Rollers hawking small insects in the evening light.

Early the first morning at a wooded pan no more than three metres from the road, we breakfasted with a Dwarf Bittern.

We later saw a young African Hawk-Eagle, Crested Francolin, Crowned Eagle, Collared Sunbirds and Livingstone's Flycatcher.

Most of the pans are well vegetated, set into fringing woodland. There is an area of plains, grasses and acacias where there are deeper pans, some of which retain water for a good part of the year if the rains co-operate. We had to walk a good distance towards the pans and we may have frightened birds, as we did not get the birdlife we had hoped for. Still, it is a very beautiful place and we picked up Crowned Hornbills, Bronze Mannekins, Lesser Honeyguide, African Green Pigeon, and more Jacana and Crakes here.

The biggest pan is very lovely, framed in almost encircling woodland, but with an adjoining extensive open area of scattered Combretum imberbe in grassland. Here we saw Spurwinged Goose, Whitefaced Ducks and Comb Ducks. Time was short, but this area promises some of the best birding on an already quality birding property.

The Tissadze River cuts through Catapu and the water was flowing when we walked part of its course on the South Western section of the concession. In a bird party we saw Diederik's Cuckoo, heard Emerald Cuckoo, saw Forest Weavers, a Woolleynecked Stork, Tambourine Dove, Yellow Spotted Nicators and a pair of Pale Batis amongst others.

An overview of the three visits to Catapu.

It was well worth visiting the area over the extended sixteen month period. In a way the initial failed rains worked in our favour as in February 2005 we witnessed a dry, hot season, and had the luck to be there when a refreshing rain front came through. In the February of 2006, the property had had a relatively good rain season, and we were able to find many more of the water associated birds. Early Summer is an excellent time to go there because the bird calling for pairing and territory establishment makes birding easier. Our final bird lists were rather different between the two Februarys.

There is no bad time to visit Catapu, although it can get very hot in Summer.

There is now a bird guide to accompany novice birders. Experienced birders who book a resident bird guide who is familiar with the "megatick" bird habitats will have some quality birding for less effort.

Keen birdwatchers will find good quality, safe campsites and chalets. The long walks and interesting drives makes the region worth visiting as a destination in its own right. It is an extensive property with little compromise of its wilderness, which is a fairly rare thing in such an accessible place.

Conclusions.

Catapu is a worthy birding destination.

Some of the birds we were very excited to identify included the Madagascar Cuckoo, Livingstone's Flycatcher, Mangrove Kingfisher, Great Reed Warbler, Chestnut-fronted Helmet-Shrike, Pale or Mozambique Batis, European Cuckoo, Brown-throated Weaver, and Bohm's Spinetail.

There are plenty of other top quality birds identified by Vincent Parker during his extensive study of Central Mozambique.

As to be expected, we found the period when one might expect the coupling of birds and the associated bird calling was the peak period. (See totals of birdlists.) Rather different birds were seen on each trip, even though two of the trips were in the same month, albeit in one dry and one wetter time.

The attached birdlist of each trip makes for interesting reading. I have roughly grouped the birds by species, separating them with a bold line. The first group illustrates the role rain can play. In February 2005 we saw 3 species in this water associated group, and after the wetter start to 2006, we saw 10 different species in February 06.

We saw more species of raptors in November, but more quality in the two Februarys. The Southern Banded Eagles and Lesser Spotted Eagle were the highlights.

All the exciting cuckoos, woodpeckers, flycatchers and kingfishers are to be found at Catapu. Other more experienced birders have had even better luck than ourselves.

The surrounding areas have vastly different ecosystems, from river floodplain with its associated pans and reedbeds at the Zambezi, to mature stands of *Brachystegia* for the Miombo specials, the Panga Panga woodlands and the well developed, closed canopy forest at Coutada 12, where we saw Painted Hunting (or Wild) Dogs.

The Zambezi Delta is not a long drive away, and on your way there you can visit Mary Moffat Livingstone's grave in an established and very interesting church graveyard of a vast mission complex at Chapangu. The area is steeped in history, tribal and colonial.

The observers wish to thank the director's for the opportunity to bird, extensively, on their property. It was well worth the effort for all of us. The original team wish to thank Bridget Gibson of Marrameu and Bronwen Heath for their input at various times.

Observer details:

Ann Cheesman chessman@zol.co.zw

Jane Clegg bjcleggzim@yahoo.com

Tel: 00 263 20 65510 (Zimbabwe) or 00 258 82 5926400 (Mozambique.)

Bridget Gibson <bgibson@uplands.mpu.co.za>

Bronwen Heath birding@zol.co.zw

Note: This is also the email address for Seldomseen accomodation in the Bvumba Mountains of Zimbabwe, a renown birding destination for the eastern district specials of Zimbabwe.

Tel : 00 263 20 62837 (Zimbabwe.)

Bridget Holland holland@zol.co.zw

Tel : 00 263 20 61369 (Zimbabwe.)

Chrissie Kitcat toronto@mutare.mweb.co.zw

Tel : 00 263 20 63274/62443