

THE GHOST IN

THE MAVUNDA

BIRDING NORTH-WEST ZAMBIA



PETER RYAN (2)

Zambia straddles the miombo woodland belt that dominates much of south-central Africa. In addition to miombo birds, southern African semi-arid species penetrate the south-west of the country, and Congolese forest species straggle into the north-west.

This latter group was the target of a recent trip to north-western Zambia by Peter Ryan and Rod Cassidy. Top of their wishlist was the enigmatic White-chested Tinkerbird, known from only a single specimen collected in 1962.

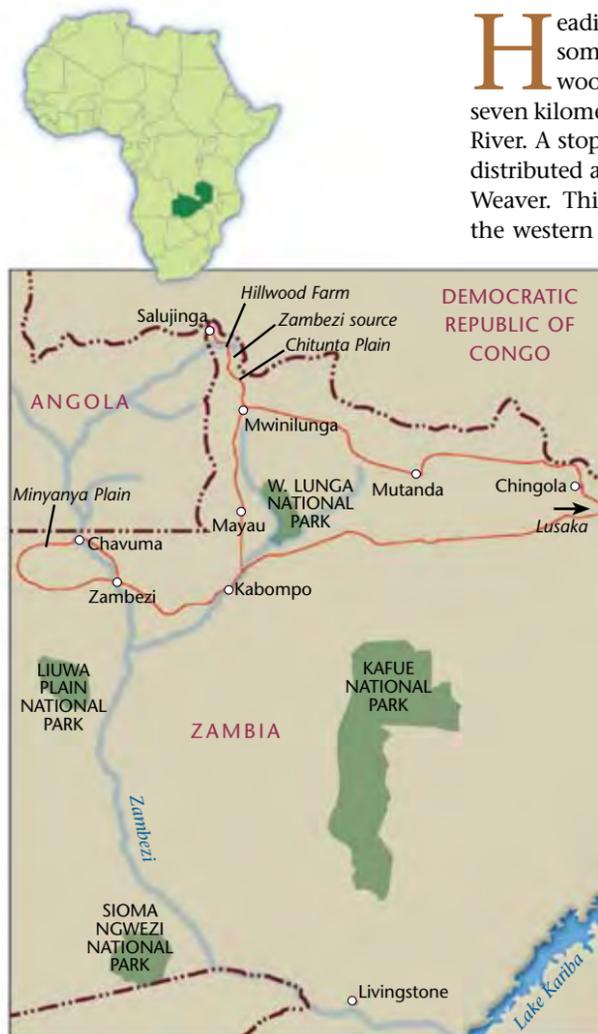
When Con Benson's *Birds of Zambia* was published in the 1970s, it was immediately apparent that for South African birders, Mwinilunga was the most important place to visit. Sandwiched between Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Mwinilunga district is home to numerous species that are found nowhere else in Zambia. It is only in the last decade that Zambia has become accessible to South Africans, but surprisingly few have availed themselves of the chance to visit this great birding area, which is readily accessible by road.

Having previously birded southern and eastern Zambia, we rushed north through

Lusaka and west across the sprawling Copperbelt to start birding at Mutanda, a small village midway to Mwinilunga. Here, the Mutanda River road bridge supports a large colony of Red-throated Cliff Swallows, which are easily observed as they leave the colony at dawn and return at dusk. Their presence is less predictable at other times of day, so it's worth spending a night at the rustic Mutanda Falls Lodge. While waiting for the swallows to put in an appearance, visit the adjacent riparian forest – it supports a selection of interesting birds, including the gaudy Ross's Turacos and Black-backed Barbets, exquisite White-chinned Prinias, and noisy parties of Yellow-throated Leafloves. ▷

Above Dawn breaking over Mutanda Falls. You have to imagine the accompanying chorus of Ross's Turacos and White-chinned Prinias...

Opposite Mavunda – the tall, dry *Cryptosepalum* woodland which is home to Margaret's Batis, Perrin's Bush-Shrike and the only known specimen of White-chested Tinkerbird.



The Chitunta Plain, between Mwinilunga and Hillwood Farm, is the easiest place to see Grimwood's Longclaw. It's also good for Black-and-rufous Swallow, Bocage's Weaver and a host of grassland species.

Heading further west, there are still some patches of tall miombo woodland along the main road, seven kilometres beyond the Mwombezhi River. A stop here produced the patchily-distributed and rather elusive Bar-winged Weaver. This oddly-plumaged weaver is the western counterpart of Olive-headed Weaver, occurring in pairs, gleaning insects from epiphytic lichens on tree branches, and building nests made of old man's beard lichen (*Usnea*). The miombo bird parties are likely to contain several other species not found in southern Africa, such as Böhm's and White-tailed Blue flycatchers, Red-capped Crombec, Chestnut-mantled Sparrow-Weaver and Black-collared Eremomela, as well as Stripe-breasted Seedeater. Tabora Cisticolas are commonly seen in the grassy understorey.

Another few hours' drive brings you to the town of Mwinilunga. Here the road bends north, and the tar peters out. You then pass through another good patch of miombo

woodland which also supports Bar-winged Weavers. After a further 30 kilometres the road crosses the Chitunta Plain, a large grassy dambo with a perennial stream running through it. This is the best known site for Grimwood's Longclaw, a localised species found in Angola and adjacent areas of the DRC and Zambia. We weren't expecting too much from this species but it proved to be a pleasant surprise, and much more attractive than the field guides suggest. It is very large for a longclaw, with a long, deep bill, and rich buff plumage heavily streaked with dark brown. It lacks a neat black gorget, but this doesn't detract from its looks. Several individuals were quite approachable in the wetter grassland close to the river, where they occur alongside the more widespread Fülleborn's and Pink-throated longclaws.

Chitunta also has other jewels to offer. Probably the best is the incomparable Black-and-rufous Swallow. This small, short-tailed swallow is dark indigo above and rich chestnut-red below. Pairs flit low over the plain together with the more abundant Grey-rumped Swallows. They breed during the dry season and leave Mwinilunga during the summer rainy season. The plain's grassland is also home to Black-chinned Quailfinches, Locust Finches, Marsh Widows, White-cheeked Bee-eaters, Swamp (or Natal) Nightjars and numerous cisticolas, including the handsome Dambo (or Black-tailed) Cisticola. Some two kilometres downstream, above the confluence with the Luakera River, trees overhanging the river support a colony of the highly localised Bocage's Weaver (formerly considered a subspecies of Cape Weaver) from the end of July onwards.

North of Chitunta lies the source of the Zambezi River – a small spring arising from within a patch of dense gallery forest or *mushitu*. This forest is home to many of the Congolese birds that reach their southern limit in Mwinilunga. Grey-winged Robin-Chats skulk close to the forest floor and are best located by their slightly mournful, whistled song. Common Bristlebills and Rufous-bellied Paradise-Flycatchers also occur in the understorey or mid-canopy, but by far the hardest bird to see in this habitat is the reclusive Bamboo Warbler, which is almost impossible to locate if it's not calling. Olive Long-tailed Cuckoos and Blue-breasted Kingfishers are also more

easily heard than seen as they call from the forest canopy. Other canopy species include Afep and Western Bronze-naped pigeons and Honeyguide Greenbul, while Rufous Ant-Thrush, Laura's Woodland Warbler, Buff-throated Apalis and Bates' Sunbird are more conspicuous around the forest edge. In the *mushitu* and adjacent dense miombo may be found the localised Bannerman's Sunbird, a small-billed version of Green-headed Sunbird with bluer iridescence on its head.

From its source, the Zambezi flows east and north, before bending west and heading off into Angola. Near its northernmost point, the river flows over a

large granite outcrop, forming a series of shallow rapids. This is the most reliable site in Zambia for Forbes's Plover, the West African version of Three-banded Plover. Dead snags overhanging the river are the haunt of Cassin's Grey Flycatcher, and the remnants of riparian woodland support many of the region's sought-after forest species.

But for the biggest hit of Congolese species, you have to go even further north, past Salujinga, where the lucky birder may find White-spotted Flufftail, Brown-eared Woodpecker, White-bellied Kingfisher, Spotted Thrush-Babbler, Chestnut Wattle-eye, Sooty Flycatcher, ▷



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Above left Grey-winged Robin-Chat is a retiring species of the *mushitu* understorey, best located by its quavering song at dawn and dusk.

Above right Bannerman's Sunbird closely resembles a Green-headed Sunbird, but is slightly smaller with a shorter bill and bluer head. It is restricted to north-west Zambia and adjacent Angola and the DRC.

Left A pair of elusive White-throated Francolins on the Minyanaya Plains.

Birding outside the box...

The burgeoning interest in birding in southern Africa has seen a great increase in birding throughout the region, with impressive spin-offs in terms of our knowledge of the region's birds and the conservation of their habitats. However, relatively few southern African birders venture north of the subregion's boundaries. This is partly due to the geographical limits of the region's field guides, but it is exacerbated by the competitive listing fraternity, which equates one's ability as a birder to the size of one's regional bird list. It seems somewhat trivial to bird frantically along the Zambezi or Kunene rivers in the hope of seeing a vagrant Angola Swallow or Shelley's Sunbird, when these and many more exciting species can be seen by simply crossing the river and venturing a little further north.

We challenge southern Africa birders to broaden their horizons. Start thinking global or Africa-wide. If that's too much, how about expanding southern Africa's boundaries to include Angola, Zambia, Malawi and northern Mozambique? This would close the gap between our region and East and West Africa, and boost the region's list to more than 1 250 species. Forget the 800 club – what about the 1 000 club?



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The Black-collared Bulbul looks more like a bush-shrike than a bulbul, but recent evidence confirms its placement with the bulbuls. It is quite widespread in Central Africa, but can be elusive and is one of the sought-after specials in north-west Zambia.



Laura's Woodland Warbler is a localised endemic, mostly restricted to mushitu forest patches and adjacent woodland in northern Zambia and the southern DRC.

Orange-tufted Sunbird or Compact Weaver in the remaining *mushitu* patches. This is the best area in Zambia to see the stunning Black-bellied Seedcracker, and there is always the chance of turning up a new species for the country; Pete Leonard recently found a female Shrike Flycatcher here.

The most famous birding site in Mwinilunga is Hillwood Farm, a large commercial farm and game reserve east of Ikelenge. It offers a mix of open grassy plains, *mushitu* forest and well-conserved

miombo woodland, and is an excellent base for exploring the region. It is a good place to find the striking, rather shrike-like Black-collared Bulbul, which prefers scrubby thicket vegetation, and is best located adjacent to the airstrip north of Sakeji mission. Another forest-edge species that reaches its southern limit here is the Whistling Cisticola, which skulks in bracken along the edges of *mushitu*.

The open plains in the reserve are well stocked with a variety of game, including



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The source of the Zambezi – a small, dark spring, deep in *mushitu* forest.

sable (which shows affinities to the giant Angolan form), Lichtenstein's hartebeest, Defassa waterbuck, northern plains zebra, puku and oribi. The plains are also home to an array of larks, pipits, longclaws and cisticolas, prime among which is the Angola Lark. Intermediate in size between Rufous-naped and Flappet larks, it has a beautiful trilling call, with no clear affinity to other *Mirafra* larks. In the early morning, when the grass is wet, many birds come out on to the roads, allowing great views of otherwise reclusive species like Locust Finch and Black-rumped Buttonquail.

Zambia's North-western Province has more to offer than just the Mwinilunga area. In the far west, the Zambezi River re-enters Zambia from Angola at Chavuma. Here we crossed the already sizable river by ferry and drove another 35 kilometres along a sandy track to reach the vast expanse of the Minyanya Plain. This is home to an isolated population of White-throated Francolin, a species otherwise confined to the arid savannas of West Africa. Related to Coqui Francolin, it has similar calls and prefers to freeze rather than flush. It lives in much more open terrain, but is remarkably easy to overlook if it's not calling. We spent a frustrating day chasing this species before we finally bumped into a small covey. Other interesting birds include White-bellied Bustard, Sooty Chat, a very different race of Rufous-naped Lark and some very odd pipits. At night the plains ring with the calls of Swamp Nightjars.

Further east there are patches of *Cryptosepalum* forest, known locally as *mavunda*. This dry forest is distinguished from the surrounding miombo woodland by its very tall canopy and dense, almost impenetrable understorey which holds the stunning Perrin's Bush-Shrike. A close relative of Gorgeous Bush-Shrike, it makes a similar 'kong-kong-koit' call and even responds to playback of Gorgeous Bush-Shrike song. The *mavunda* is one of the easiest places to see the localised Margaret's Batis, which co-occurs with Chinspot Batis, but typically is found at lower levels in the forest. The males of the two species are quite similar, but female Margaret's Batises have buffy wing bars, a diffuse buffy breast band and no throat spot.

But the real attraction of birding the *mavunda* is the chance, however slim, of relocating the enigmatic White-chested

OFF YOU GO!

In general, north-west Zambia is not geared for tourism, and visitors should plan to be largely self-sufficient. The best time to visit is from August to October, before the summer rains begin in earnest. The rains generally start earlier in Mwinilunga than elsewhere in Zambia, and the birds are most vocal just before the onset of the rains. Visiting before the rains also means that the roads are still in reasonable condition.

Birders planning to stay at Hillwood Farm should book via the website www.nchila-wildlife-reserve.com or e-mail nchila@compuserve.com. You can fly into Hillwood direct from Lusaka, but most people drive there. The tar road to Mwinilunga from the Copperbelt is potholed in places, but is otherwise fine. The dirt roads north of Mwinilunga and south to the *mavunda* are fine for two-wheel-drive vehicles, at least during the dry season. The main road to Chavuma through Zambezi is heavily-rutted gravel, and needs to be travelled quite slowly. Beyond Chavuma, the track to Minyanya requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

Fuel availability can be an issue, especially if you want to visit Minyanya. There is usually fuel in Mwinilunga town and Kabompo, and occasionally in Zambezi, but



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The name says it all – travelling in the area can be somewhat challenging for the ill-prepared visitor.

take every opportunity to fill up in case the next town is out of supplies.

Bird guides to use include the *Field Guide to Zambian Birds* (Aspinwall & Beel), which illustrates all the species not covered by the southern African field guides, and has distribution maps for these species. It should be used in conjunction with good southern and East African field guides. Van Perlo's *Illustrated Checklist to the Birds of Southern Africa* also covers Zambia. The classic *Birds of Zambia* (Benson *et al.*) is useful, giving information on geographic variation within Zambia.

Anyone wanting information or guidance can contact the Zambian Ornithological Society (www.fisheagle.org, zos@zamnet.zm) or Cassidy Bird Tours (Cassbirds@yahoo.com).

Tinkerbird. Jali Makawa, Con Benson's famous collector, shot the sole specimen near Mayau in 1962. Reports tell that he was attracted by its slightly different call. We birded several patches of *mavunda*, including the largest easily accessible patch, five kilometres north of Mayau. Although there were lots of Golden-rumped and Yellow-fronted tinkerbirds, none sounded odd, or showed a black belly patch and plain black face. Discouraged by the omnipresent sweat-bees, we left the *mavunda* and headed for home. But we couldn't help wondering if somewhere there isn't a thriving population of White-chested Tinkerbirds just waiting to be discovered. There's certainly still plenty of habitat where the ghost of the *mavunda* could be hiding... □