

Highland Low-down

BIRDING ZIMBABWE'S EASTERN HIGHLANDS

Text by Penn Lloyd

Hazy with the smoke of countless wood-fired hearths, the lowlands of Mozambique sprawl from the Indian Ocean to the foot of an escarpment that runs a wavy course from the Drakensberg range of South Africa to the Ahmar Mountains of Ethiopia. Here, punctured and separated from the highlands to the north and south by the mighty Zambezi and Limpopo river valleys, the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe rise up from 300 metres to over 2 500 metres, to form a natural border with its more prostrate neighbour. Associated with this altitudinal range is a diversity of habitats, from lowland evergreen forest to miombo (*Brachystegia*) woodland to Afro-montane evergreen forest, and finally montane grassland. Each supports a unique community of birds all packed within a relatively small area, making the Eastern Highlands one of the subcontinent's premier birding regions. Furthermore, the isolation of the mountains means that a number of species, found otherwise only in distant South Africa or East Africa, survive here as long-isolated populations.

A view over communal lands at the Haroni-Rusitu junction. In the background are the Chimanimani mountains, rising up from lowland evergreen forest on the border with Mozambique.

BRONWYN LLOYD

HARONI-RUSITU JUNCTION

Clinging to the southern foot of the Chimanimani mountains, where the Haroni and Rusitu rivers meet to flow into Mozambique, are Zimbabwe's last fragments of lowland evergreen forest. A birding Mecca, these small but luxuriant forest patches harbour a list of regulars that include Barred Cuckoo, Green Coucal, Eastern Honeyguide, African Broadbill, Angola Pitta, Pel's Fishing Owl, Slender Bulbul, Black-headed Apalis, Vanga Flycatcher, Woodward's Batis and Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrike. Getting there requires some determination though. The track, for it cannot be called a road over the last 20 kilometres, is harrowing at best, impassable at worst. A 4x4 is advisable, but certainly no guarantee that you will make it there (or back again!) should rain set in.

With the forests surrounded by communal land, courtesy requires that you stop off at the local District Administration or the police/military post at Vhimba to announce your presence in the area. There are also no facilities, so if you decide to camp rough, introduce yourself to the closest household and enquire where you might do so.

The people here are poor and live a simple life. The lands they have cleared of forest are highly fertile. A variety of fruits, such as avocados, bananas, papaws, mangoes and naartjies are sold as cash crops to the Zimbabwe Farmer's Union. Sweet potatoes, madumbe (yams) and maize are the staples, with indigenous sorghums and millets extensively cultivated for home-brewing. As the population expands, so the pressure on the remaining forest increases; the people need the land to make a living.

The borders of the Haroni and Rusitu Forest Reserves exist on paper only, and most of the former has already fallen to a banana plantation. Until the locals derive a more direct benefit from the forests, the attrition will continue. A farmer who invited me in to his humble homestead asked me which bird I most wanted to see. I indicated the appearance and proportions of the Silvery-cheeked Hornbill. 'The Gakamira!' he exclaimed a little incredulously. His advice on how to find it: 'When you walk in the forest, look for the pips of my papaws on the ground. When you find them, look up into the tree and the Gakamira will be there'.

Let this take nothing away from the quality of the birding experience though. Wander along the footpaths through the more accessible Rusitu forest into a fairyland of butterflies and birds. The butterflies are simply stunning, bobbing up from the path in a kaleidoscope of colours and symmetries. The birds are a little more elusive, but no less dramatic. Aside from the specials already mentioned, you should at least catch glimpses of forest regulars such as Delegorgue's Pigeon, Tambourine and Cinnamon doves, Livingstone's Lourie, White-eared Barbet and Golden-rumped Tinker Barbet, Scaly-throated Honey-guide, Little Spotted Woodpecker, Stripe-cheeked and Yellow-streaked bulbuls, Gorgeous and Black-fronted bushshrikes, and a bevy of

ing, the weedy tangle in and around the communal fields hosts a multitude of birds, such as Blue-spotted Dove, Broad-tailed and African Yellow warblers, Singing, Red-faced and Short-winged cisticolas, Golden Weaver, Fire-crowned Bishop, Nyasa Seedcracker, Golden-backed Pytilia, and Cabanis' Bunting. In the scattered trees and woodland fragments, the Long-crested Eagle, Southern Banded Snake Eagle, Lizard Buzzard, Dickinson's Kestrel, Swallow-tailed Bee-eater, African Golden Oriole, Mozambique Batis, Red-backed Shrike, Red-billed Helmetshrike and Purple-banded Sunbird may be found.

Over the tricky-to-cross Haroni River a magnificent tract of forest beckons. While deriving better protection as part of the



flycatchers that include Blue-grey, Blue-mantled, Fan-tailed, White-tailed and Wattle-eyed. As in any forest, the real action is in the bird parties, so listen out for the noisy Square-tailed Drongos that normally accompany them. And don't overlook the high-pitched, almost inaudible trilling of Green and Red-throated twinspots as they flit through the thick undergrowth.

The forest fringe is the place to scout for Yellow-spotted Nicator, Barratt's and Red-winged warblers, Blue-throated Sunbird and Grey Waxbill. Unlike the sterile monocultures of advanced farm-

Chimanimani National Park, its virgin status owes much to rumours of unexploded mines. The border with Mozambique is a stone's throw away, and a clearing I came across in the forest was once used as a forward base by Rhodesian helicopter-gunships during the civil war. There is much to be explored and discovered here, including the multi-tiered Mukurupini waterfalls cascading out of the Chimanimani mountains. With the possibility of old ordnance in mind, you would be well advised to hire a local guide who knows the footpaths.

Taking the sting out of Haroni birding are organized trips (on request) leaving from Heaven backpackers' hostel in Chimanimani, or from Kiledo Lodge



SWYNNERTON'S ROBIN PETER STEYN

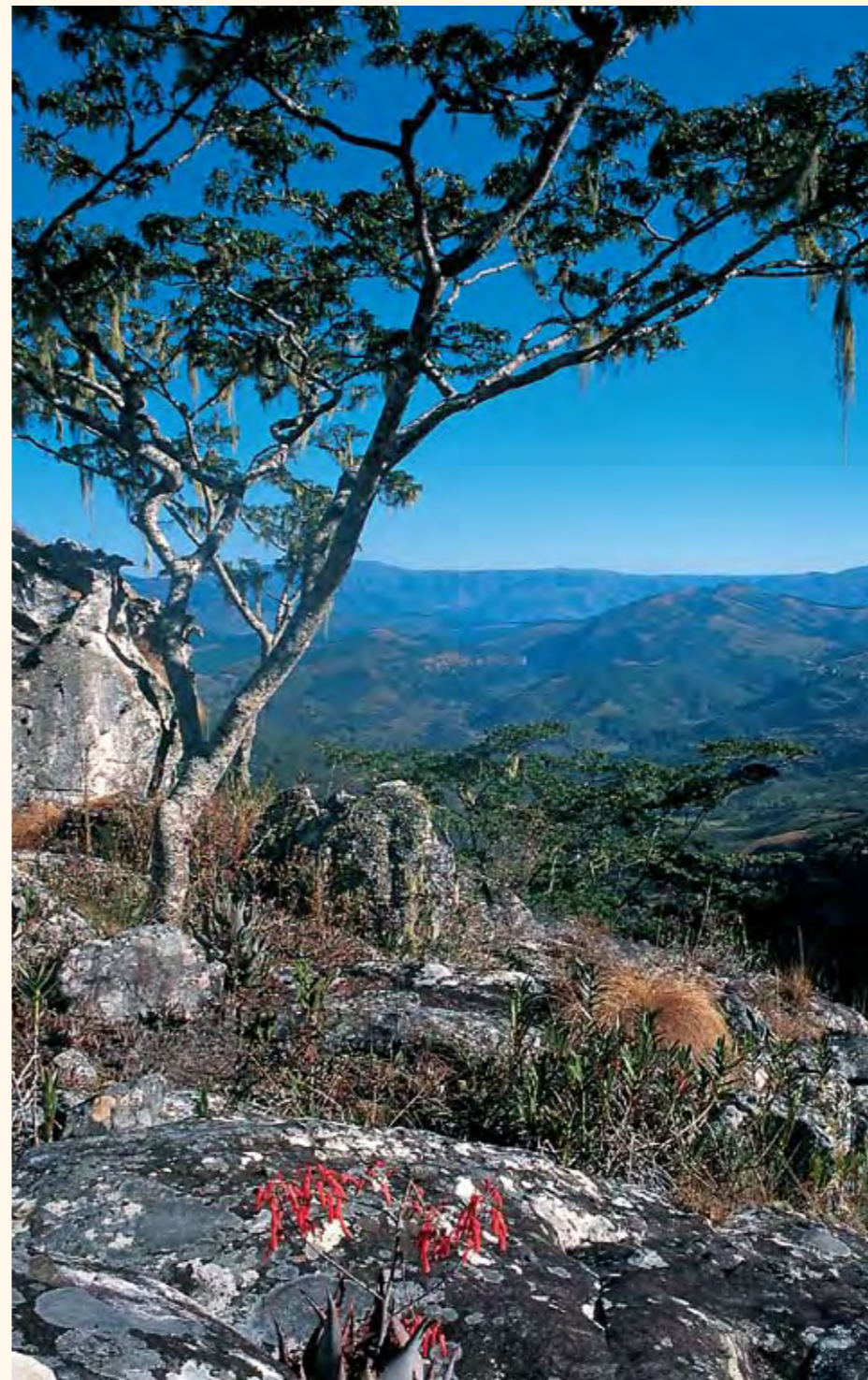
outside Chipinge. The Chipinge area also boasts some impressive forests, including the Chirinda Forest at Mt Selinda (see pages 60-63).

CHIMANIMANI NATIONAL PARK

Perched on a hill, the village of Chimanimani has a sweeping view east to the craggy peaks of the Chimanimani range. With a variety of comfortable accommodation, from the Heaven budget-backpackers' hostel, to the Moriah or Frog & Fern self-catering chalets, the Chimanimani Hotel, and the up-market Muwenji Lodge, it serves as the perfect springboard for excursions into the national park. The park office is only 14 kilometres from the village, but the last seven kilometres are on a dreadful dirt road and take half an hour to negotiate. From here, access to the mountains is on foot along a network of hiking trails. The initial 400-metre ascent through open *Brachystegia/Uapaca* woodland and forested gullies is steep and rocky.

Common birds to look out for while catching your breath are several miombo specials, namely the Miombo Rock Thrush, Miombo Grey and Rufous-bellied tits, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, and Mashona Hyliota. Others include Shelley's Francolin, Freckled Nightjar, Grey and White-breasted cuckoo-shrikes, Mocking Chat, Barratt's Warbler, Chirinda Apalis, Red-faced Crombec, Green-capped Eremomela, Roberts' Prinia, White and Red-billed helmetshrikes, and Yellow-bellied Sunbird.

A two- to three-hour slog gets you to the crest of the Mutserotsero range, >



Above Open miombo woodland on the rocky western slopes of the Chimanimani mountains. PENN LLOYD

often with a rewarding view of Augur Buzzards soaring over the undulating Bundi River valley to the high peaks of the Mawenje range that forms the border with Mozambique. Rocky ridges and outcrops with *Protea* bushes and *Philippia* scrub harbour Gurney's Sugarbird, Malachite and Bronze sunbirds, Streaky-headed and Black-eared canaries, and endemic subspecies of both Bokmakierie (discovered as recently as 1965) and

Cape Bunting.

The large mountain hut, which has incredible views over the Bundi plain, is a great place for hikers to overnight. But the ludicrous 'discounted' fee of Z\$200 per person ensures that most opt to camp *au sauvage* or to doss down in scattered caves, some of which adjoin the waterfalls and plunge-pools dotted along the sparkling Bundi River.

After pausing at the strange Mtseritseri

('the boiling place') pool, where a powerful spring keeps cones of white sand in perpetual motion, I tramped through the marshy grasslands of the Bundi plain and was lucky to flush a Great Snipe. Other birds to look out for here are the Yellow-throated Longclaw, and an uncommon summer visitor, the Blue Swallow. While walking beneath the towering peaks, scan the skies for the elusive Taita Falcon and Scarce Swift; this is one of the few places where these rare species can be seen.

ELAND SANCTUARY

Fringing Chimanimani village, the small Eland Sanctuary reserve offers a peep at what the highlands must have looked like



AFRICAN BROADBILL PETER STEYN

before forestry blighted the landscape, with pristine *Brachystegia/Uapaca* woodland giving way to evergreen forest on the southern slopes. The magnificent Bridal Veil waterfall is an idyllic spot to picnic. While the birding here is superb, the sanctuary suffers from a lack of footpaths.

THE BVUMBA

Just 15 kilometres from Mutare, the capital of Manicaland province, rise the rounded granite domes of the Bvumba, the Eastern Highlands' most popular birding destination.

Humid air rising up from the warm Mozambican lowlands condenses around this massif to produce the *mubvumbi*, Shona for 'persistent drizzle', after >

which it is named. On the lower northern slopes, hidden in high-rainfall miombo woodland, are the Inn on the Vumba and White Horse Inn. The nearby self-catering chalet at Cloud Seven is surrounded by 50 hectares of woodland networked with footpaths. In this lower altitude woodland, Barred Owl, Whyte's Barbet, Lesser and Sharp-billed honeyguides, Little Spotted Woodpecker, Miombo Grey, Rufous-bellied and Grey Penduline tits, Spotted Creeper, Miombo Rock Thrush, African Moustached and Red-winged warblers, Striped, Tree and Wood pipits, Western Violet-backed Sunbird, East African Sweet and Cabanis' Bunting may be seen.



STARRED ROBIN

PETER STEYN

African White-tailed Flycatcher. Yellow-streaked Bulbuls clamored through the foliage, tapping at dry leaves, pausing only to perform their curious habit of flicking open one wing. Chirinda Apalises, easily confusable with the female of the local subspecies of

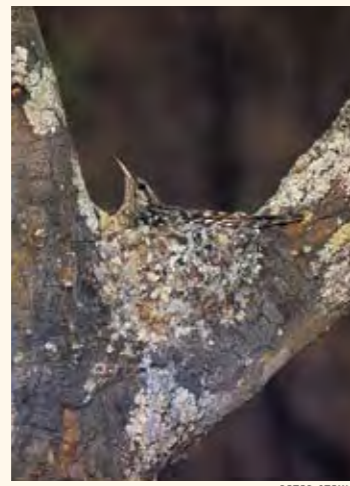
Bar-throated Apalis (which lacks a bar on the throat), hopped through the canopy with Yellow-throated Warblers and a Black-fronted Bushshrike. A Scaly-throated Honeyguide perched unobtrusively on a looping liana, while Collared and Olive sunbirds twittered around a flowering shrub. An Orange Ground Thrush rustled the leaf-litter to one side, and a party of Roberts' Prinias chattered noisily further off. After two hours of pausing and peering hopefully into the gloomy undergrowth, I thought Swynnerton's Robin would remain true to form. But then, with a soft 'prrup' of its wings, it appeared before us, a dumpy, olive-grey shadow hopping busily about and flicking away leaves in search of insects. A confiding little bird, it paid no attention to us, offering only fleeting glimpses of its orange belly and distinctive white collar.

The Bunga Forest is a good spot for Delegorgue's Pigeon, Narina Trogon, Starred Robin and, in grassy clearings, twinspots and Red-faced Crimsonwing. On the forest fringes and in gardens,

look out for White-eared Barbet and Golden-rumped Tinker Barbet, Heuglin's Robin, Bronze, Malachite and Yellow-bellied sunbirds, and the Gorgeous Bushshrike.

A favoured hang-out of the raucous Silvery-cheeked Hornbills is the forest bordering the magnificent 19-hole Leopard Rock golf-course. These huge, eye-catching birds are nowhere common, as they range about in

search of fruiting trees. Vestiges of montane grassland are home to breeding Blue Swallows in summer. With this habitat under no formal protection and ▶



SPOTTED CREEPER

PETER STEYN

Systematic list of bird species mentioned in this article

- Long-crested Eagle *Lophaelagus occipitalis*
- Brown Snake Eagle *Circaetus cinereus*
- Southern Banded Snake Eagle *C. fasciolatus*
- Palm-nut Vulture *Gypohierax angolensis*
- Augur Buzzard *Buteo augur*
- Lizard Buzzard *Kaupifalco monogrammicus*
- Taita Falcon *Falco fasciinuca*
- Dickinson's Kestrel *F. dickinsoni*
- Shelley's Francolin *Francolinus shelleyi*
- Great Snipe *Gallinago media*
- Delegorgue's Pigeon *Columba delegorguei*
- Blue-spotted Dove *Turtur afer*
- Tambourine Dove *T. tympanistris*
- Cinnamon Dove *Aplopelia larvata*
- Livingstone's Lourie *Tauraco livingstonii*
- Barred Cuckoo *Cercococcyx montanus*
- Green Coucal *Ceuthmochares aereus*
- Barred Owl *Glaucidium capense*
- Pel's Fishing Owl *Scotopelia peli*
- Freckled Nightjar *Caprimulgus tristigma*
- Scarce Swift *Schoutedenapus myoptilus*
- Narina Trogon *Apaloderma narina*
- Swallow-tailed Bee-eater *Merops hirundineus*
- Silvery-cheeked Hornbill *Bycanistes brevis*
- White-eared Barbet *Stactolaema leucotis*
- Whyte's Barbet *S. whytii*
- Golden-rumped Tinker Barbet *Pogoniulus bilineatus*
- Scaly-throated Honeyguide *Indicator variegatus*
- Lesser Honeyguide *I. minor*
- Eastern Honeyguide *I. meliphilus*
- Sharp-billed Honeyguide *Prodotiscus regulus*
- Little Spotted Woodpecker *Campethera cailliautii*
- African Broadbill *Smithornis capensis*
- Angola Pitta *Pitta angolensis*
- Blue Swallow *Hirundo atrocaerulea*
- Eastern Saw-wing Swallow *Psalidoprocne orientalis*
- White-breasted Cuckooshrike *Coracina pectoralis*
- Grey Cuckooshrike *C. caesia*
- Square-tailed Drongo *Dicurus ludwigii*
- African Golden Oriole *Oriolus auratus*
- Miombo Grey Tit *Parus griseiventris*
- Rufous-bellied Tit *P. rufiventris*
- Grey Penduline Tit *Anthoscopus caroli*
- Spotted Creeper *Salpornis spilonotus*
- Yellow-streaked Bulbul *Phyllastrephus flavostriatus*
- Slender Bulbul *P. debilis*
- Stripe-cheeked Bulbul *Andropadus milanensis*
- Yellow-spotted Nicator *Nicator gularis*
- Orange Ground Thrush *Zoothera gurneyi*
- Miombo Rock Thrush *Monticola angolensis*
- Mocking Chat *Thamnolaea cinnamomeiventris*
- Heuglin's Robin *Cossypha heuglini*
- Starred Robin *Pogonochila stellata*
- Swynnerton's Robin *Swynnertonia swynnertonii*
- Mashona Hyliota *Hyliota australis*
- African Yellow Warbler *Chloropeta natalensis*
- Barratt's Warbler *Bradypterus barratti*
- Broad-tailed Warbler *Schoenicola brevirostris*
- Yellow-throated Warbler *Seicercus ruficapillus*
- Bar-throated Apalis *Apalis thoracica*
- Chirinda Apalis *A. chirindensis*
- Black-headed Apalis *A. melanocephala*
- Red-faced Crombec *Sylvietta whytii*
- Green-capped Eremomela *Eremomela scotops*
- African Moustached Warbler *Melocichla mentalis*
- Singing Cisticola *Cisticola cantans*
- Red-faced Cisticola *C. erythropis*
- Short-winged Cisticola *C. brachyptera*
- Red-winged Warbler *Heliolais erythroptera*
- Roberts' Prinia *Prinia robertsi*
- Blue-grey Flycatcher *Muscicapa caerulescens*
- Fan-tailed Flycatcher *Myioparus plumbeus*
- Vanga Flycatcher *Bias musicus*
- Mozambique Batis *Batis soror*
- Woodwards' Batis *B. fratrum*
- Wattle-eyed Flycatcher *Platysteira peltata*
- Blue-mantled Flycatcher *Trochocercus cyanomelas*
- African White-tailed Flycatcher *T. albonotatus*
- Long-tailed Wagtail *Motacilla clara*
- Striped Pipit *Anthus lineiventris*
- Tree Pipit *A. trivialis*
- Wood Pipit *A. nyassae*
- Yellow-throated Longclaw *Macronyx croceus*
- Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*
- Bomakierie *Telophorus zeylonus restrictus*
- Gorgeous Bushshrike *T. quadricolor*
- Black-fronted Bushshrike *T. nigrifrons*
- White Helmetshrike *Prionops plumatus*
- Red-billed Helmetshrike *P. retzii*
- Chestnut-fronted Helmetshrike *P. scopifrons*
- Gurney's Sugarbird *Promerops gurneyi*
- Malachite Sunbird *Nectarinia famosa*
- Bronze Sunbird *N. kilimensis*
- Purple-banded Sunbird *N. bifasciata*
- Miombo Double-collared Sunbird *N. manoensis*
- Yellow-bellied Sunbird *N. venusta*
- Olive Sunbird *N. olivacea*
- Collared Sunbird *Anthreptes collaris*
- Blue-throated Sunbird *A. reichenowi*
- Western Violet-backed Sunbird *A. longuemarei*
- Golden Weaver *Ploceus xanthops*
- Fire-crowned Bishop *Euplectes hordeaceus*
- Golden-backed Pytilia *Pytilia afra*
- Green Twinspot *Mandingoa nitidula*
- Red-faced Crimsonwing *Cryptospiza reichenovii*
- Nyasa Seedcracker *Pyrenestes minor*
- Red-throated Twinspot *Hypargos niveoguttatus*
- Grey Waxbill *Estrilda perreini*
- East African Sweet *E. quartinia*
- Streaky-headed Canary *Serinus gularis*
- Black-eared Canary *S. mennelli*
- Cabanis's Bunting *Emberiza cabanisi*
- Cape Bunting *E. capensis smithersi*

threatened by forestry, the spread of invasive alien trees, and general development, their days here must be numbered.

With a checklist of over 250 species, the Bvumba area offers the best of highland birding in comfortable surrounds.

HONDE VALLEY AND NYANGA

Should you fancy some forest birding off the beaten track, wend your way down the Honde River valley to the

The Nyanga National Park, which is not unlike a dull section of the Drakensberg foothills, conserves an expanse of montane grassland particularly important for Blue Swallows, and is one of the few localities where Scarce Swifts may be seen. Unfortunately, extensive areas are suffering rampant invasion by alien pine and wattle trees from the green cancer of forestry that surrounds the park.

A showcase of avian diversity, the Eastern Highlands nonetheless face the all too familiar threats associated with devel-



PETER STEYN

Above Roberts' Prinia, an Eastern Highlands 'special'.

Aberfoyle Tea Estate, whose club operates as a small and rustic hotel. Here, rolling hills of neatly clipped tea-bushes give way to luxuriant montane forest on the eastern slopes of the Nyanga mountains. Paths more often frequented by bushpigs follow rushing mountain streams where Long-tailed Wagtails bob on glistening rocks. A local oddity is Zimbabwe's only Palm-nut Vulture, which has appeared each evening for the past three years to roost in a grove of tall eucalypts.

opment and a burgeoning population. The persistence of many species in habitats that were never very extensive, and are now much fragmented, will depend on the extent to which ecotourism can realize an alternative income from the land they occupy. With its diversity of habitats, natural wonders, large bushveld wilderness areas and healthy wildlife populations, Zimbabwe has immense potential as a tourist destination. The Eastern Highlands are an important component of that diversity and allure. □