



**FANGS & FEATHERS**  
WILDLIFE ADVENTURES

Zimbabwe Birding Tour, 12<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2017

Mashonaland Wetlands, Miombo Woodland and Eastern Highlands



Spotted Creeper

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## Itinerary (February 2017)

12 <sup>th</sup>	Monavale Vlei (Harare)
13 <sup>th</sup>	Gosho Park (Marondera)
14 <sup>th</sup>	Haka Park (Harare)
15 <sup>th</sup>	Harare to Bvumba Highlands
16 <sup>th</sup>	Seldomseen, Bunga Forest and Burma Valley (Bvumba Highlands)
17 <sup>th</sup>	Seldomseen, Cecilkop and Amberfoyle, Honde Valley
18 <sup>th</sup>	Katiyo Tea Estate and Amberfoyle (Honde Valley)
19 <sup>th</sup>	Amberfoyle and Gosho Park
20 <sup>th</sup>	Monavale and Maryborough Wetlands (Harare)



Variable Sunbird

When I developed this tour, I wanted to make sure that I allocated enough time to cover the key areas which were important to me. I was striving for quality views of certain birds and wanted to capture images of them when the circumstances allowed. The areas that I focused on were Harare's local wetlands, miombo woodland patches and the Bvumba Highlands and Honde Valley in the eastern districts of the country.

### Monavale and Marlborough Wetlands – Harare

I visited Monavale wetland on three occasions with my primary goal to obtain views of the highly sought-after Streaky-breasted Flufftail. A section of Marlborough Wetland was also birded, but I was disappointed to find a wetland that has been severely impacted on by development and urban agriculture. The birding at Monavale was however good and I managed to locate nine calling Streaky-breasted Flufftails during my time there. Obtaining views however was a different matter. Even with the help of local guides and conservation officers Jimmy Muropa and Ronnie Chirimuta who assisted me in my efforts to flush one, we were unsuccessful. I must have trudged at least 20km through the "squelch zone" in an effort to obtain a view of this species.

On one occasion, we had a flufftail scurrying around between our feet, only Jimmy being lucky enough to actually see it, and even here surrounded by three

people, it would not take to the air, after much bounding on our part through the high grass, in an effort to flush it. In the end I had to be satisfied with recordings of them calling only metres from me. I plan to tour the area again in January and February 2018 and try again.

While searching for flufftails, I flushed a Lesser Moorhen and saw an African Crane leaving its nest in the damp grass and photographed its beautiful clutch of eggs. Jimmy has an excellent knowledge of Monavale wetland where he also works as a conservation officer for the Conservation Society of Monavale Trust (COSMO). Ronnie works for the Marlborough Environmental Action Group (MEAG) and has very good knowledge of Marlborough wetland's birds.



African Crane's clutch at Monavale Wetland

Excellent views of Dwarf Bittern and Black Coucal where had at Monavale, with the coucal also been seen at Marlborough Vlei. A full bag of Cisticolas included, amazing views of displaying Pale-crowned Cisticola as well as Croaking, Levillant's, Zitting and Rattling Cisticola. Yellow-mantled Widowbird was common and a flock of European Bee-eaters seemed to be present at the wetland on most days. Little Bee-eater, Grey-rumped Swallow and House Martin where also seen.



Pale-crowned Cisticola

Raptors seen at Monavale included, Long-crested and Wahlberg's Eagles, Black Sparrowhawk and Gabar Goshawk. Variable Sunbird was common along the edges of wetland while Great Reed and Little Rush Warblers skulked in the thicker areas. Attempts to locate Rosy-throated Longclaw at Marlborough proved unsuccessful, partly due to ploughing activities that are now taking place there. I did manage to obtain good views of a Greater Painted Snipe, along with a female Western Marsh Harrier and four Marsh Owls.



Marsh Owl at Marlborough wetland

### Gosho and Haka Park

Both of these sites offer excellent miombo woodland birding, without the presence of people. There were a good number of birds which I wanted to find at Gosho Park, a 300ha reserve owned and managed by a private school (Peter House), just outside of the town of Marondera, 60km north of Harare. I birded Gosho Park for a full day and one afternoon.



Miombo woodland at Gosho Park



Boulder Chat was one of species I wanted to see and I was able to obtain brilliant views on both visits. In-flight their white wing bands are spectacular and when they call, their bright yellow mouths standout.



Boulder Chats

Other good sightings included Miombo Rock-thrush, Miombo Double-collared Sunbird, Miombo Tit, White Breasted Cuckooshrike, Tree, Striped and Wood Pipits, Green-capped Eremomela, Southern Hyliota, Amethyst Sunbird, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird and good views of Whyte's Barbet. A brief view of three Quail Finch in-flight while I was walking through a section of wetland left me wanting more of these difficult to see finches.

A pair of perched Crowned Eagles in the “koppies” surprised me and offered excellent views before they spooked and flew off. I also had very nice views of Greater Kudu, Sable Antelope, Impala and Giraffe while on foot as I walked through the woodlands.



Miombo Tit was common in bird parties

Intense thunderstorms in the afternoons would put a halt to birding. What was interesting to observe is how bird activity increased leading up to the cloud burst. This is the typical summer weather pattern on the Mashonaland Plateau.

Haka Park incorporates Cleveland Dam, is another excellent birding sight. I spent the better part of a day here and found some great birds. These included, excellent views of Spotted Creeper, one of the highlights of the trip for me. I was fortunate to see this species again in the Bvumba Highlands, while looking for Cinnamon-breasted Tit.

Birding in the miombo woodlands is all about locating bird parties, usually by sound or detecting their movement as one walks through the woodland. One particular bird party produced a good number of birds, namely: Black Cuckoo Shrike, Red-faced Crombec, Green-backed Honeybird, Southern Hyliota, Green-winged Pytilia and Miombo Double-collared Sunbird.



Southern Hyliota, a regular in the miombo bird parties

I walked the grasslands adjacent to the woodlands and enjoyed very nice views of Senegal Coucal. Amur Falcons were common in the area and Black Crane, African Jacana and White-faced Duck were also seen. Unfortunately, Striped Crane eluded me and was not seen during the trip. I also heard Red-chested Flufftail in a reed-lined stream near Cleveland Dam. My travels then took me to the Eastern Highlands district where I would spend two days in the Bvumba Highlands based at the well-known Seldomseen Guest Cottages and then three nights at Amberfoyle Lodge in the Honde Valley.

### Bvumba Highlands and Honde Valley

The drive from Harare to Mutare, the gateway to the Bvumba Highlands is easy going, taking about four hours to reach. Seldomseen Guest Cottages is another 30 minutes from here. The countryside is beautiful and one is tempted to stop and bird as one goes.

My two main targets while birding in this area were Swynnerton's Robin and Red-faced Crimson-wing. I teamed up with local bird guide Bulawesi Murambiwa who has a phenomenal knowledge of this area's bird and wildlife. Bulawesi helped me a great deal and birding with him on his "home turf" was a lot of fun and very productive.



Bulawesi Murambiwa, Bvumba Highlands, Zimbabwe

Our first day spent trying to locate the stunning Swynnerton's Robin proved unsuccessful. The forest floor was wet and detecting feeding birds was difficult. The robins were not calling and were most likely incubating eggs. The following day while walking slowly through a local patch of forest, we heard its distinct alarm call. The little bird was perched about 20m away from me on a suspended vine that hung between two trees. I was able to get excellent views as it sat front-on, for about a minute before disappearing from view. Seeing Red-faced Crimsonwing was another highlight. I was fortunate to have good views of them on a number of occasions. Both Robert's Warbler and Chirinda Apalis, two localised species were also well seen.



Chirinda Apalis

Another exciting sighting included one of three Silvery-cheeked Hornbills. I only saw this species once during the tour and having them feeding at close range was very satisfying.



Silvery-cheeked Hornbill

Stripe-cheeked Greenbul was common and seen each day on a number of occasions. Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon was heard, and I flushed Lemon and Tamborine Doves along the trails. White-starred Robin was also seen and views of White-tailed Crested Flycatchers where had as they moved about in the canopy above us. We heard Black-fronted Bushshrike, but this beautiful species was not seen until the following day. In the afternoon, we birded the forest edge, in mixed habitat where I saw a stunning Bronzy Sunbird male and female at their nest.



Bronzy Sunbird

Singing Cisticola, another target, showed very nicely amongst the scrub, along with Dark-capped Yellow Warbler. A group of Yellow-bellied Waxbills where another highlight and seen on a number of occasions.





Yellow-bellied Waxbill

Livingston's Turaco, Orange and Olive Thrush and Cape Batis where some of the other species seen during the day.

The following morning we located a calling Eurasian Blackcap about five metres up in the canopy of a tree on the forest edge. Our views were limited and I tried again unsuccessfully the following morning to see it again.

During the afternoon, we travelled into the Burma Valley to look for Zambezi Indigobird. The drive from Seldomseen was scenic and we stopped in the valley at a local farmer's maize field, adorned with dead trees to begin our search. We managed two good sightings of Zambezi Indigobird and also saw a number of Dusky Indigobirds, which was useful for comparative purposes.

The green-sheen which one obviously wants to see, was not as vivid as I had hoped it would be. Apparently they are at their best looking in late March. Despite this we were able to see the sheen at certain angles, and a non-existent pale wing panel, combined with orange legs and pale whitish grey bill were the identification criteria I was after. Orange-winged Pytilia was another standout species, which we located along the road edge feeding in the grass.

A late afternoon session in a patch of miombo woodland produced some great birds. I was very pleased with a good sighting of Cinnamon-breasted Tit, one of the tougher Miombo specials that was in the company of a few Miombo Tits. Other species included Spotted Flycatcher, Spotted Creeper, Chin-spot Batis, Black-backed Puffback, Green-capped Eremomela and African Yellow White-eye. We heard a Collared Flycatcher, but efforts to locate this sought after bird were unfortunately unsuccessful on this tour.

My final morning at Seldomseen resulted in a brilliant sighting of a Swynnerton's Robin in a nearby forest. I spotted the little bird moving through the leaf litter at the base of a boulder and was able to capture a few images of this spectacular forest dweller.



Swynnerton's Robin

### Amberfoyle and Katiyo Tea Estates, Honde Valley, Eastern Highlands

On route from Seldomseen to Amberfoyle, an approximately three and a half to four hour drive, I decided to stop at what was previously known as Cecilkop Nature Reserve. This once managed nature reserve in the hills outside of Mutare, offers accessible miombo woodland birding, but has unfortunately been occupied by people. The birding is still good however and I had about two hours to spend here.

The standout species during this time was Cabanis's Bunting, which I obtained very nice views of. Grey Penduline Tit was also very well seen here and quite common, along with Variable Sunbird and mix of other previously mentioned specials.



Grey Penduline Tit

The drive to Amberfoyle Lodge was beautiful, with views of the impressive Matarazi Falls and the fertile Honde Valley. Amberfoyle Lodge is a fantastic birding destination and species, which more regularly found in Mozambique can be found here. These include birds like Lesser Seedcracker, Pallid Honeybird,

Moustached Grass and Red-winged Warble, Anchieta's Tchagra and Green-backed Woodpecker.



Amberfoyle tea estate and lowland forest

I birded the area around Katiyo, a once productive tea estate, now abandoned which nature has now reclaimed. Here I worked with local bird guide Morgan Saineti. Morgan knows the local area very well and his keen hearing and strategic approach to birding make him an excellent birding partner and guide. We birded the road verges and walked along tracks in the bush between the old tea plantations and had a very productive first morning.

Special birds for me included Red-winged Warbler and Moustached Grass Warbler. Short-winged Cisticola, also seen in the Burma Valley, was common here and I was able to capture some good quality images of this sort after cisticola. Black-winged Bishops were seen in the maize fields, their conspicuous calls giving away their presence as we drove along. Eurasian Hobby was common throughout the valley, along with the exquisite Red-throated Twinspot, Grey Waxbill and Jameson's Firefinch.



Moustached Grass Warbler

Two Blue-spotted Wood Doves were seen while walking along a disused gravel road which offered very good views. Brown-crowned Tchagra, Yellow-fronted Canary, Ashy Flycatcher, Black-collared Barbet were also seen. A pair of Pale Batis was also found and I managed a couple of photos of the female.



Pale Batis female

I had decided to commit the afternoon to locating Anchieta's Tchagra. The strategy here involved positioning oneself on the edge of a wetland where they were known to occur and waiting for them to fly across the marsh as they hunted. After a short wait, a male bird appeared perched in a clump of reeds with a prey item in its beak. It then flew to a dense stand of reeds, disappearing for a while before it resumed hunting again. A female then appeared, also offering good views and returned to the same reedbed with prey. It seemed as if the pair had chicks that they were feeding and we watched the two birds go about their business for about half an hour before leaving them to their business.



Anchieta's Tchagra female

The following day I birded the forests around Amberfoyle Lodge that produced more sought after species. These included Black-fronted Bushshrike and Green-backed Woodpecker, the later, a species that I really wanted to tick while in the



area. White-starred Robin, Square-tailed Drongo, Red-throated Twinspot, Green Twinspot, Yellow-streaked and Stripe-cheeked Greenbul where also seen.



Black-fronted Bushshrike in the forest at Amberfoyle Lodge



Green-backed Woodpecker

Unfortunately, the bird I most wanted to see, Lesser Seedcracker was not found during my time here. A group of these sought-after seedeaters had been seen a month prior to my arrival, but it had since rained, resulting in a change in the local environmental conditions and they had moved on. Pallid Honeyguide was another bird, usually quite common here, that we where unable to locate this time round. The birding was however fantastic and I plan to visit again to try for the Lesser Seedcracker and Pallid Honeyeater again.



Copper Sunbird

### A deviation to twitch a Pied Wheatear

On my last “planned” day in Zimbabwe, news came through on the South African Rare Bird Network, that Southern Africa’s third ever Pied Wheatear had been discovered at Victoria Falls Airport. This was the perfect excuse to re-route via Victoria Falls, on my way back to South Africa.

A five-hour detour found me at the site late the following afternoon, where I bumped into other fellow birders from South Africa who had flown to Victoria Falls to see the “Mega”. The Pied Wheatear was cruising around the airport terminal buildings, catching insects and seemed quite at home. When not feeding, it was seen keeping cool in the shadows cast by the airport buildings or under the motorcars in the airport parking lot. It drew a crowd of airport officials who were amazed that a small bird could attract so much attention. The whole scenario was quite bizarre and a lot of fun to be part of.



Pied Wheatear, Victoria Falls Airport

The next day I met up with some friends who had flown from Cape Town to see the wheatear and enjoyed more views of the special visitor. We then birded the

area around Victoria Falls and saw many good birds which included: Mountain Wagtail, Grey-headed Parrot, Meyer's Parrot, Cuckoo Finch, Broad-tailed Paradise Whydah, Thrush Nightingale, Shallow's Turaco, Trumpeter Hornbill, Dickinson's Kestrel and Lizard Buzzard to name some of the stand-out species.

I'll be returning to Zimbabwe in January 2018, in the hope of seeing some of the birds I missed during this trip. If you would like to join me on this adventure, please register your interest by email at [fangsfeathers@gmail.com](mailto:fangsfeathers@gmail.com) or contact me on mob) +27 60 9838513 to find out more about the tour details.



Red-winged Warbler



Short-winged Cisticola