

# Familiar Chat



Newsletter of BirdLife Botswana

March 2011

## Hi Members,

This quarter's Chat features two articles by Peter D'Arcy and one from Nicky Bousfield on bird ringing - a fascinating and hugely challenging activity. If anyone is interested in learning more about this or would like to join a ringing session, please contact Peter at [darcybotswana@yahoo.com](mailto:darcybotswana@yahoo.com)

Also don't miss Mike Brook's interesting item on herons in Notwane and Bob Izzett's delightful piece inspired by watching the goings on at his bird table at SSKA site office.

**An important request - If you are reading this, please drop me a line at the email below, sms me on 75652974. We need to know.**

Eugenie Skelton – editor  
[skelton@home.co.bw](mailto:skelton@home.co.bw)

IF ANYONE CAN

**Canon**

CANON CAN

## BirdLife Botswana Shop has moved

After several years working with 'And Crafts' at the Craft Centre in Broadhurst, BLB has formed a partnership with Rocket Fashions and moved its retail outlet to 'Creations for Africa' the gift shop near Kgale Spar. This shop will act as our window to the world selling a variety of goods, including CD's of Common Bird Calls, clothing, gifts and the outstanding range of products from Kalahari Canvas. Smart spare tyre covers printed with the BLB logo are available on request. Membership forms are available and subs can be paid.

Members are asked to be patient with the shop staff as they learn more about us and sell us to the outside world.

Any suggestions to improve our marketing operations are most welcome. Contact the purchasing Officer, Mary Webb on 75595400 or [webb\\_mary@yahoo.com](mailto:webb_mary@yahoo.com) or Dikabelo at the BLB offices on 319 0540

## Flickr: Birds of Botswana

We encourage anyone interested in photography to register and submit photographs of birds in Botswana to our Flickr site.

It is an excellent way for us to build a library of photographs and for Members to display their talents.

Please go to the site and look at some of these outstanding bird images.

Access via [www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw](http://www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw) and click on 'Flickr'

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## Barberspan - 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Ringers' Conference

Peter D'Arcy

Last year Peter and Dominic D'Arcy (qualified ringer & son) attended a conference at Barberspan Nature Reserve, just over the border in South Africa. This was the tenth ringers' conference and significantly two of our 'big' Botswana birders and ringers, Stephanie Tyler and Nicky Bousfield, attended. Ringers from all over South Africa congregated to share research information and do some ringing together. The basic structure of the conference was ringing in the mornings and late afternoons and lectures around midday and in the evenings over a three day weekend.

Barberspan reserve is centred around a 2 km<sup>2</sup> pan of perennial water, fed intermittently by the Harts river. It is surrounded by a flat grassland with a few thickets of hardy Acacia species dotted from place to place throughout the reserve. It is an important reserve because it is one of few permanent water bodies in an area of South Africa that is otherwise dominated by seasonal water bodies. Therefore the number of water birds, in particular, that it accommodates is very important especially during the dry season.

The opportunity to ring with other experienced ringers is not common for Botswana ringers, given that there are currently only about 3 qualified ringers in all Botswana, compared to around 250 in South Africa. Some of the attendees at Barberspan were not only very experienced but have written extensively. The Raimakers brothers, for example, have studied warblers in great detail and have provided valuable information to other ringers in Southern Africa as well as all over the world. Identifying some groups of birds, such as Warblers and Cisticolas, is



*A beautiful and fun shot taken at an earlier ringing session in Kasane*

sometimes very difficult when they are in the hand. Mind you that is one of the joys of ringing. Things are not always easy and it can be challenging. Having said that, keeping a bird in the hand for as short a time as possible is a priority. With deft measurements and the odd photo (where it might be handy) the bird is released as quickly as possible.

To qualify as a ringer one needs to have ringed about 2000 birds of around 50 different species with a qualified ringer. This is not easy given that one session may result in only 10 or 20 birds being caught. The whole business is also extremely antisocial as the best time to catch birds is around dawn. If the place where one is ringing is not going to be disturbed by humans or animals (such as cows) nets are prepared the night before, otherwise before sunrise on the morning of ringing. Special nets have to be bought ('mist nets') as well as the rings themselves from the ADU (Avian Demography Unit), part of the Statistics Department at the University of Cape Town.

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A record of every bird that is ringed is sent to the ADU at least once a year. Each ring has a specific Omang number on it so that if the bird is caught again (a 'retrap') it can be traced back to where it was first ringed through the ADU. Ringing adds significantly to our knowledge of various aspects of birds. The movement of birds from one place to another is the most obvious, but age, morphology, breeding information etc are all learnt through this process as well.

Barberspan brought together about 50 ringers and trainee ringers from all over Southern Africa, many being academics working in various research institutes and places of higher education. Others were from all walks of life, some are retired and have the freedom to ring when and where they like. Sadly the ethnic demography of the participants is biased towards the minorities and not enough black Africans are yet involved in this field of research.



*The fun and games of birdringing*

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## *Ringing a young Lappet-faced Vulture*

*Nicky Bousfield in Francistown*

On Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2010, Samuel Motsamai and I drove out to Ant Johnson's farm 60 km from Francistown. Ant, in his absence, had left instructions with his staff to give whatever assistance was needed. He had cautioned that I must bring my double-decker aluminium ladder as the active Lappet-face Vulture nest was singularly high.

We bush crashed for 7 km from Ant's house, fortunately in a farm vehicle and not in my trusty Isuzu pick-up! We then hiked for 3 km carrying ladder, table, chair and ringing gear. It looked for all the world like a lost mission. However, Tabaku climbed up and gave the thumbs up sign. Taking the attached picture of the bird in the nest was the bravest thing I have done in a long time. I was teetering on the top rung of the extended ladder, propped up against a swaying thorn tree. Daft actually!!!

As you can see, the chick was very close to fledging. Certainly October is a good month to ring these guys.

Specs as follows:

weight 2.51 kg, wing 38.63 cm,  
ring G 21988, pattagial tag D017



# Ringing at Kasane December 2010 - with Pete Laver et al

Peter D'Arcy

106 birds were caught over a five day period between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 2010. Twenty five of those birds caught were Southern Brown-throated Weavers. The total number of species caught was 43 which is a phenomenal variety given the small number of birds caught over the period. Not all the species were well photographed. All were weighed and measured (length of wing, tail, culmen (bill), tarsus and head). A record was made of the state of moult, particularly of the wings. Additional information was used such as the state of the plumage, its colour and whether the bird had a brood patch (and therefore was sitting on eggs) to determine the sex and age of each bird - where possible, using available references where necessary.

*Reed / Marsh Warbler (Acrocephalus baeticatus or palustris)*. Not an easy species to identify, even in the hand. It is one of three warblers, two of which may be conspecific. (These being the Eurasian and African Reed-warblers. They even have the same song). What is clear is that it is different in a number of subtle and not so subtle ways from all the other warblers. This is a similar looking but smaller bird than the Icterine warbler. Note for example its leg colour compared to the Icterine. It has a more mousey colour and a narrower longer head with different bill and eye colours.



*Garden Warbler (Motacilla borin)*. A fairly easy warbler to identify in the hand. The short mostly dark brown bill, above and below is one pointer. The single band of creamy white feathers creating its eye ring, and its overall grey brown even wash on its back and wings are others. Note that this bird is a Palearctic migrant. It breeds only in the Northern hemisphere. and has a complete moult in the Southern. In the photograph this is apparent on its primary wing feathers and also the greater coverts (along the top ridge of its wing). The new feathers have a darker tinge while the older feathers are somewhat bleached and worn at the extremities - not surprising given that it may have flown from as far as Siberia.



*Icterine Warbler (Hippolais icterina)*. A very difficult bird to identify in the field, and even in the hand. Easily identified by its voice (but its difficult to get it to sing when it is in the hand!) This bird clearly has very worn plumage. It will moult while in Southern Africa, but it had not started by the time I caught it. From this picture the most diagnostic feature is the blue-grey legs. Icterine warblers are known to be greenish brown to olive above and yellow below in fresh plumage. However there is a common pale phase with the upper parts lacking the greenish tone and the underparts being almost white. This is one such specimen. The most similar bird is the Olive-tree Warbler, but this species is larger and greyer.



*Thrush Nightingale (Luscinia luscinia)* A bird that is said to be one of the last migrants to arrive in Southern Africa from Europe and Asia. Perhaps the good but scattered early rains in Southern Africa brought this bird earlier than the usual peak in late December / January. This bird has many of the classic features of this species. It has a rust coloured tail (not visible in this photo), breast with dark cloudy mottling and underparts dull white, dark brown eyes and a slightly red tinge to the upper parts. Rarely seen in Botswana but known to frequent the Chobe River valley.



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*White-browed Coucal* (*Centropus superciliosus*). Formerly conspecific with Burchell's Coucal (i.e. used to be classified as the Northern race of the Burchell's Coucal). It has a very clear white supercilium (eyebrow/eye stripe) visible from a distance, hence the derivation of its scientific species name. When alarmed it raises up a magnificent fan of streaked feathers on its nape. With its sharp curved beak adapted to its carnivorous appetite and its deep red eyes it is a striking bird to handle. Only found in the delta and along the northern borders of Botswana.



*Grey backed Camaroptera* (*Camaroptera brevicaudata*). A very common bird throughout the North and East of Botswana. This photograph shows neither of the two most typical diagnostic features: the yellow socks at the top of the legs and the grey back. The olive coloured wings are very clear, as are the pale pink legs, the almost white chin and the hazel / orange coloured eyes. This bird is highly sedentary, meaning that if I go back to Chobe in a year or two and put up the nets where I caught it there is a high chance that I will catch it again at the same place.



*Adult male Little Sparrowhawk*, (*Accipiter minullus*) most obviously identifiable in the hand by its yellow eye and eye ring plus the yellow cere (fleshy covering at the base of the upper part of the beak). This bird was very submissive in my hand, looking perhaps frightened but to me I felt it was actually very relaxed and unstressed, following the lens of the camera as I manoeuvred to take photos from different angles. However, whenever handling a bird of prey I prefer not to take any chances. One aggressive stab at my hand could lead to stitches so I always wear thick gloves. Note the white throat and the narrowly barred chest, supposedly a brown colour - most visible under the bird's wings - but here the barring appears to be grey.



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## *Upcoming Event - World Migratory Bird Day Celebration 2011*

### *Promoting Indigenous Knowledge of Bird Conservation*

*Yukiko Maki-Murakami*

This year BirdLife Botswana will celebrate World Migratory Bird Day with approximately 500 school children, teachers, members of the Otse community and our stakeholders at the Otse village kgotla from 8:00 to 13:00 on 9<sup>th</sup> of April. The theme of this year's celebration is "Promoting Indigenous Knowledge of Bird Conservation in Botswana". The celebration will be kindly sponsored by the Embassy of the United States of America.

The main objectives of the celebration are

- to raise awareness and promote conservation of migratory bird species,
- to develop an interest and knowledge of birds among children,
- to promote Botswana's indigenous knowledge on conservation at the grassroots level.

School children will be showcasing Botswana's diverse culture - various schools will perform choral singing, dancing and drama depicting conservation issues.

The World Migratory Bird Day was established by the African-Eurasian Water-bird Agreement (AEWA). It is a global awareness-raising campaign day, highlighting the need for the protection of migratory birds and their habitats. Initiation of this day was influenced by the negative media coverage migratory birds received as a result of the false belief that they were the main cause of the spread of avian influenza around the world.

BirdLife Botswana has the pleasure of inviting our members to join the society in celebrating.

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## *Is It A Bird..... ?*

*Bob Izzett*

I erected a small bird table at the site office at Sir Seretse Khama Airport and was amazed at the variety of birds that came together with some other visitors, as recounted in the tale below.

*A bird seed table was erected  
High up in a tree  
With seed distributed there upon  
For all the birds to see*

*Little mouse upon the ground  
Was left out low and dry  
To hear birds eating up above  
Was enough to make him cry*

*So how to get amongst the seed  
He had to make a plan  
I'll have to climb high in the tree  
And I really think I can*

*So up he clambered, up and up  
It really was so high  
Then to the table top he reached  
The effort caused a sigh*

*Now there surrounded by the birds  
Was lots of seed to eat  
Lets hope they're not offended  
As I scratch between their feet*

*What have we here the weaver said  
As some seed he tried to pinch  
I know what the blighter is  
It's a mouse bird said the finch*



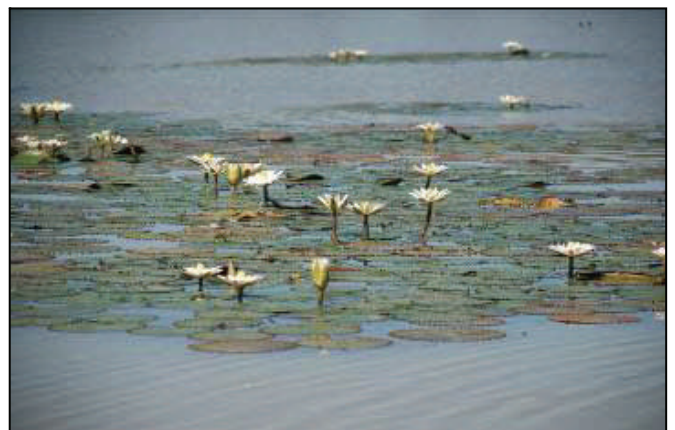
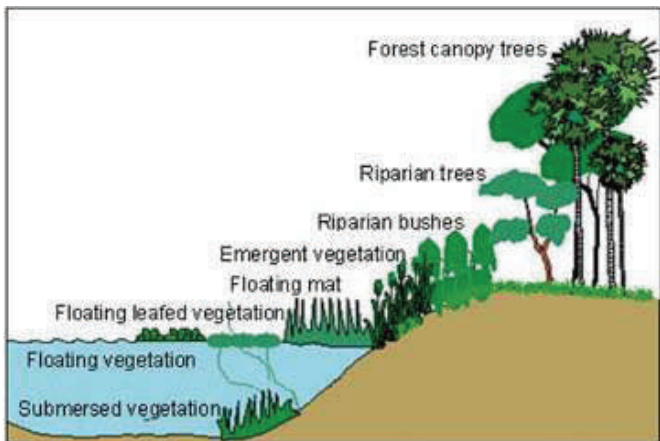
# A Heron's Life in Notwane

Mike Brook

The Notwane Dam is located a 20 minute drive south of Gaborone, on the road to Lobatse. It is at the very headwaters of the Limpopo River and is fed by the Notwane, Taung and Schuinsdam Rivers, the Notwane River partially forming the international border between Botswana and South Africa.

The Crocodile Pools and Notwane areas are of particular interest to ornithologists. The different combined habitat types make the area one of the best bird-watching sites in Botswana. Approximately 230 (about 40%) out of a possible 593 total bird species in Botswana occur in the general area either as residents or migrants. The range of bird species is diverse since habitats provided - high and low woodland, rocky koppies, river-side woodland, riverine forest, river islands, lakeshores and reed swamps - are favourable for numerous species, many of which breed throughout the year.

Alongside the dam and the riverine forest both papyrus (*Cyperus papyrus*) and bulrush (*Typha capensis*) sway in the summer breezes, but it is the common reed (*Phragmites australis*) which dominates the water's edge and islands with heights of over 5m. Less common is the Miscanthus grass (*Miscanthus junceus*) which prefers harder substrate. Swamp Fern (*Thelypteris interruta*) and the edible Woolly Caperbush (*Caoaris tomentosa* - 'Motwana' in Setswana), also grow along the banks. The reeds and grasses are expanding in area, using more and more water in the dam for their rapid growth.



Components of the Notwane Riverine Forest Habitat

In deeper water of up to 2m, Water Hyacinth (*Eichornia crassipes*) of Brazilian origin and Night (*Nymphaea lotus*) and blue Day Waterlily (*Nymphaea nouchali caerulea*) thrive in summer, but their floating surface vegetation is killed off at the first signs of frost. Water chestnut (*Trapa natans*) grows in the more sheltered embayments of the dam.

Hérons belong to the family *Ardeidae Scopidae*. Globally there are 64 species, of which 24 occur in Africa south of the Sahara. Some are called egrets or bitterns instead of herons. Eight of the nine herons found in Botswana are to be seen on the dam and along the riverine forest which backs up to Ramotswa. The only missing heron species here, but which is found in north-west Botswana, is the Rufous-bellied Heron.

Almost twice the size of the Grey Heron, the Goliath Heron is the giant of the species. Standing almost 1.5m tall, it is the world's largest heron. It flies very slowly with slow ponderous wing beats and feeds on the barbel (sharp tooth catfish) and carp in the dam. According to the records of the International Game Fish Association, the largest species of catfish caught in the Notwane Dam weighed 4,31kg, caught by Bill Staveley in 2008.

The other less popular species found are common Carp (*Cyprinus carpio carpio*) and, even less common, African Bream (Three Spot Bream) or Mozambique Tilapia (*Oreochromis mossambicus*). Downstream there are known to be fifteen fish species in the clearer waters of Gaborone Dam. Eighty-five fish species occur in Botswana, of which seventy-one are found in the Okavango delta.

The Black-crowned Night-Herons rest in groups amongst the leaning Syringa trees (*Melia azedarach*) which spill over into the Notwane River upstream of the dam. They are shy during the day and feed at dusk, mostly on fish, frogs, aquatic insects and young birds in heronries.

The smallest heron seen in the area is the Green-backed Heron. They mostly eat dragonflies, water-beetles, locusts, spiders, small crabs, molluscs and small fish.

The smallest member of the Ardeidae family is, as its name suggests, the Dwarf Bittern and is only 25cm tall. They are solitary, but not necessarily shy, and are always found within the reeds and bulrushes at the dam water's edge.

At dusk, hundreds of Yellow-billed Egrets flock to roost on 'Egret Island' in the middle of Notwane Dam. They eat fish and small animals and are common residents in the area.

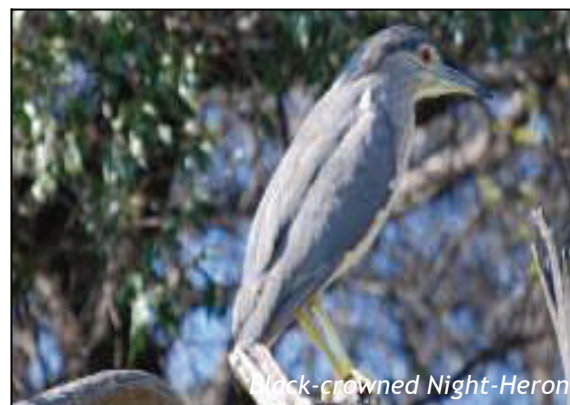
The Notwane Dam and River area is a great destination if you are keen to see many members of the water-associated family Ardeidae - the Herons.



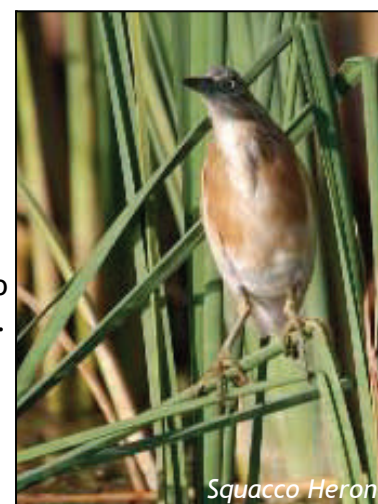
Grey Heron



Goliath Heron



Black-crowned Night-Heron



Squacco Heron

*Members of the family Ardeidae found at Notwane*

Name	Common name	Scientific name
Black Heron (Egret)	Black Heron	Egretta ardesiaca
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Black-crowned Night-Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax
Black-headed Heron	Black-headed Heron	Ardea melanocephala
Squacco Heron	Squacco Heron	Ardeola ralloides
Goliath Heron	Goliath Heron	Ardea goliath
Green-backed Heron	Striated Heron	Butorides striata
Grey Heron	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea
Purple Heron	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea
White-backed Night-Heron	White-backed Night-Heron	Gorsachius leuconotus
Cattle Egret	Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis
Dwarf Bittern	Dwarf Bittern	Ixobrychus sturmii
Great Egret	Great Egret	Egretta alba
Little Bittern	Little Bittern	Ixobrychus minutus
Little Egret	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta
Yellow-billed Egret	Yellowbilled Egret	Egretta intermedia



*Yellow-billed Egrets prepare to roost on 'Egret Island', Notwane Dam*



*Notwane River and dam with 'Egret Island' in the middle and Gaborone Dam and Kgale Hill in the background*

## Kids For Birds

compiled by Doreen McColaugh

Dear Kids,

This issue of the Kid's Page looks at some things you can build that will help attract birds to your home or school. Some birds such as doves and weavers will make their own nests in the trees, especially thorn trees, near your home or on your school grounds. A few birds that live in urban areas sometimes use interesting and unexpected man-made items to make their nests in. Flower pots, old shoes, chimneys, clothes lines and even wire clothes hangers have been used by birds to construct their nests with, in or on these items. If you see an unusual nest or nesting site, please take a picture of it and send it to the Editor of the Familiar Chat so it can be shared with others through this newsletter.

Other birds can be encouraged to nest near home or school by providing them with artificial nest boxes or nest sites where they can build their nest inside. These artificial nests could be nesting logs made from the trunk/stem of a sisal plant after it has "poled" and flowered. (After the sisal plant sends up a pole and flowers on the end of it, the plant will die and can then be harvested to make nesting logs for birds.) The trunk/stem of trees or large limbs from trees that are solid or that have been hollowed out also make good nesting logs for birds that have strong beaks. Calabashes are useful for some small birds and all that is needed is to make a small entrance hole so they can get inside. If you know a potter, he or she could make a clay bird house. You could, of course, buy a ready-made bird house and while these may be cute and brightly painted, birds don't look at them in the same way people do and it is not too important to the birds how cute it looks or how much it costs - and they can cost quite a lot! It is much more fun to make something yourself either from found or reused materials. A variety of nest boxes can be built out of lumber following plans for making different kinds of boxes that are suitable for different kinds (species) of birds. The next Kid's Page will feature some plans for those types of nest boxes.



*Thorn trees are specially popular*



*a sunbird nest in a cactus plant*



*A pottery bird house*



*A calabash bird house*



*A nesting log from the sisal plant*



*A sisal plant with its 'pole'. After it has flowered and died down you can use the base to make a nesting log*

Different birds have different requirements and they can be choosy as to what they will accept as the entrance to a nesting log or box. If the entrance is too small some birds can't get in, but if it is too large some of the smaller birds don't feel safe and so they won't nest there.

If you do choose to put up a nesting log think about what birds you want to attract. Barbets and woodpeckers, for instance, prefer to do the hollowing out of the log themselves. Be sure your sisal log or tree log is big enough for those birds to make a nest inside and then just start the beginnings of a hole - about 40 mm in diameter - and they will finish making the hole and the room they need inside the log for their nest. The wood hoopoe, hornbills and many of the starlings do not have as strong a beak as the barbets and woodpeckers and so they can't hollow out the wood themselves. In the wild they use a natural hollow in a tree or use a nest that some other bird has hollowed out. They will use sisal log nests sites people provide too.

When using a tree trunk or large branch that you want to hollow out, first cut the section of the log you are going to use - about 60 cm long. Then it is easy to saw it in half the long way. That gives you access to dig out the middle of the log. Then put the two halves back together with glue and wire. Afterwards drill an entrance hole in one side that will let the bird in. It is advisable to cover the top of the logs with metal or plastic to keep the rain from seeping in.

Nesting logs should be attached to a tree, at least 2 metres above the ground. It is best to position them under a limb so that rain water doesn't get into the entrance hole. It is said that different birds prefer the entrance holes to face in different directions as some like the west, others the north or south. I don't know if this is true but if your nest log has been up for awhile and no bird has used it, you might turn it to another direction and see if that makes a difference. Good luck with your nest boxes and sites.



*Some birds prefer a small entrance*



*A nest log with a large hole and a cover to keep out the rain*



*A roller hollows out a nest in a tree*



*A roller makes use of a wall for its nest  
photo - Warwick Tarboton*



*A natural nest hole  
photo - Warwick Tarboton*

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### *BirdLife - Kasane*

This branch plan to meet on either the last Saturday or Sunday of the month.

Contact Phil Zappala [phil@sgsafrica.com](mailto:phil@sgsafrica.com) or check the website [www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw](http://www.birdlifebotswana.org.bw) for details

### *BirdLife - Ghanzi*

Contact Kevin Grant [tiisakalahari@gmail.com](mailto:tiisakalahari@gmail.com)

### *BirdLife - Maun*

Field outings on weekends, contact Pete Hancock

Additional activities may be scheduled depending on demand.

Contact Pete Hancock at BirdLife Maun office for further information - 6865618.

Maun office address - P O Box 1529, Maun

### *BirdLife - Jwaneng*

Contact Kabo Ditshane for details [kditshane@debswana.bw](mailto:kditshane@debswana.bw)

### *BirdLife - Francistown*

The Francistown branch hold their meetings on the second Wednesday of each month, starting at 19h00 at the Supa-Ngwayo Museum, located at the corner of the first turn to the left as you travel from the Bulawayo roundabout towards the light industrial area. If you have any questions please call Mike Soroczynski on 7410080 or email him at [mikes@africancopper.co.bw](mailto:mikes@africancopper.co.bw)

### *BirdLife - Gaborone*

Bird walks 1st Sunday of the month, start at 06:30, September to April and 08:00 May to August, inclusive. Meet in the southern car park of Molapo Crossing.

We have discontinued the monthly talks. Members will be informed should a talk be arranged.

For any queries contact Harold Hester at [haroldh@accelerate-it.co.bw](mailto:haroldh@accelerate-it.co.bw) or Mike Goldsworthy [mgg@accelerate-it.co.bw](mailto:mgg@accelerate-it.co.bw)

# Committee of BirdLife Botswana 2011

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