



master blaster

48 hours in the Vumba

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **MORGAN TRIMBLE**

Stripe-cheeked Greenbul, Roberts's Warbler, Chirinda Apalis...? Buluwesi Murambiwa reeled off names for the birdsong chorus before we even left camp in the Vumba Mountains, part of Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands. Over the next four hours, the renowned guide led us up, down and around the

above *Chirinda Apalis* is one of several specials confined to the highlands of Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

opposite, above *The woodlands of Cecil Kop Nature Reserve* offer an excellent opportunity to see *miombo* specials.

opposite, below *Buluwesi Murambiwa* whistles to an *Olive Bush-shrike* on one of the forest trails of *Seldomseen*.

forested mountainsides and gardens of the Seldomseen Cottages property. Buluwesi alternated between identifying calls, whistling conversations with the birds and exclaiming, 'Look, look, look! On the branch! Now on the vine! Did you get it?'

Usually the answer was yes for both my partner and me. It's a good morning indeed when Swynnerton's and White-starred robins and Orange Ground Thrush, all lifers, comprise your first three ticks. Buluwesi showed us each of these sought-after species within a hundred metres of our tent on a trail winding through the towering mist-belt forests for which the Vumba is known.

Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands is a 260-kilometre stretch of mountainous terrain hugging the border with

Mozambique. The Highlands comprise three ranges: the Nyanga to the north, the Chimanimani to the south and the Vumba (also spelled Bvumba) in the middle, with its mix of evergreen forests, woodlands and grasslands.

We had arrived the previous afternoon after driving from Gorongosa National Park in Mozambique and crossing the border at Mutare. We'd planned a two-night stopover for a taste of birding the Zimbabwean Highlands before we were due in Gonarezhou. We knew Seldomseen would be a perfect place to seek some of the region's famously shy species. We also knew it had one of the area's most respected guides, Buluwesi Murambiwa.

On arrival at Seldomseen, we checked in at the office, which overlooks a nursery



with neat rows of proteas. Although the area is famous for birds, the office is plastered with posters of all manner of species, from fungi to butterflies and arachnids to amphibians. The Eastern Highlands are a centre of endemism across several taxa, with links to Afrotropical assemblages from the Drakensberg to Ethiopia. The Highlands contain eight Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas.

We drove down the steep driveway past two unoccupied cottages to the campsite on the lawn of Crimsonwing Cottage. During our visit in October, we were the only guests. We erected our tent in a clearing with sweeping views of verdant mountainsides framing a deep valley. The unfurnished cottage provided basic toilet and kitchen facilities and although the power was off for most of our stay – Zimbabwe has struggled with extensive power cuts – the solar geyser kept the shower steaming hot. >





Before dinner, we birded a bit on our own. An Augur Buzzard circled high above. We identified a noisy neighbour as a Stripe-cheeked Greenbul by searching through recordings of likely suspects on our bird apps. Eventually, it emerged for a brief second to eyeball us. We saw Yellow-bellied Waxbills on the lawn and Miombo Double-collared and Olive sunbirds flitted among jacarandas. We heard many other species and saw several unidentified flashes of feathers, so we were excited to arrange a birding walk the next morning with Buluwesi.

After all, the name Seldomseen was inspired by the resident forest birds – frequently heard but seldom seen. The website affirms, ‘Birdwatching here can be hard work, but very rewarding if you are patient. Seldomseen offers the services of an extremely good guide for those who need help!’ We soon discovered that ‘extremely good’ was an understatement.

After Buluwesi pointed out the White-starred and Swynnerton’s robins and Orange Ground Thrush on our morning walk, the pressure was off, but the sightings piled on. Without



Buluwesi, we would have struggled to suss out a tenth of the species on our own. As we climbed the hill through a mix of looping footpaths, we saw Black-fronted and Olive bush-shrikes, Yellow-rumped Tinkerbird, Chirinda Apalis, Striped-cheeked and Yellow-streaked greenbuls. I was starting to

get the hang of the local calls, but frequently got stumped. Buluwesi pointed out that the Olive Bush-shrike has seven different calls. Of course, he knows them all. He’s so familiar with the resident birds that he hasn’t seen a new species since 2001 and that was on a trip to Mana Pools.



Along a particularly thick section of the trail, the chorus turned to alarm calls and Buluwesi suspected that there was a predator in the vicinity. Sure enough, not 10 paces further on we flushed a well-camouflaged owl. It beat its wings powerfully and melted back into the forest.

Among the flowering trees and shrubs in the nursery, we added Bronzy and Variable sunbirds to our list. But Buluwesi didn’t only focus on the specials; we also stopped to admire Collared Sunbird, Red-capped Robin-chat, Cape Batis, Ashy Flycatcher, Bar-throated Apalis and many more. In the forest on the other side of the nursery, we found a group of Roberts’s Warblers in the tangled undergrowth. Then a White-tailed Crested Flycatcher perched just long enough for me to see that it was ringed.

Seldomseen became well known for birding following the early ringing efforts of former owners Alec and Cecilia Manson and guide Peter Mwadziwana. Peter mentored Buluwesi and still helps during the busiest times. Current owners Ken and Sue Worsley see that the research continues.

We descended to a dam where we looked for flufftails, but had no luck. Buluwesi pointed out the holes in a cliff face where Eastern Saw-wings nest and soon we saw one swooping high above. We climbed to a patch of open grassland where we spotted a Dark-capped Yellow Warbler and Brimstone Canary, but failed to connect with the Singing Cisticola that Buluwesi wanted to show us.



After four hours, Buluwesi’s enthusiasm hadn’t flagged. He could go all day, but we needed a rest. ‘You need strong legs to bird here,’ he joked of the unrelenting terrain. His birding muscles are well toned after two-and-a-half decades of guiding at Seldomseen, during which time he estimates he’s helped train 50 other guides.

Birds piqued Buluwesi’s interest early. He has fond memories of BirdLife Zimbabwe presenting programmes at his school when he was young. As a teenager, he became leader of the Manicaland Province bird club. Although people have tried to hire him away over

above *The Vumba is a haven for sunbirds, such as this Variable Sunbird, as well as specials like Bronzy, Olive and Miombo Double-collared.*

opposite, above *A Black-fronted Bush-shrike perches outside one of the cottages at Seldomseen.*

opposite, below *When the mist clears, the camping lawn at Seldomseen Cottages has a stunning view of a Vumba valley.*

the years, he can’t see himself leaving. His home is 10 kilometres up the road where he and his wife have raised three children, the youngest of whom, he >



brags, is a talented artist. She occasionally borrows his bird book and binoculars to render a favourite subject, Livingstone's Turaco.

above *A White-eared Barbet perches in a tree on the lawn of the Vumba Botanical Gardens.*

top *Cabanis's Bunting is one of the many miombo specials to be seen in Cecil Kop Nature Reserve.*

right *The Vumba is one of the best places to see the secretive Orange Ground Thrush, and Swynnerton's and White-starred robins.*

For lunch, we drove to the Leopard Rock Hotel for bream and chips on the terrace. The landmark hotel first opened in 1946. Today, the sprawling pink building overlooks an 18-hole golf course. We saw more samango monkeys than hotel guests, but over the years Leopard Rock has hosted many VIPs. Pictures of Princess Diana on her visit in the 1990s hang outside the bar. The Queen Mother and Princess Margaret visited in 1953. There's no word on whether they had time to do any birding during their stay.

In the afternoon, we explored the most-ly deserted Vumba Botanical Gardens. Buluwesi led us through patches of forest

as sun squirrels scurried along branches. The croaking of Livingstone's Turacos echoed among the prehistoric-looking tree ferns. Soon we glimpsed flashes of green and red and got a quick look as a turaco perched just long enough for us to focus our binoculars. We strained our necks watching a Grey Cuckooshrike skulk through the sub-canopy. We had repeat sightings of Orange Ground Thrush, White-tailed Crested Flycatcher and Stripe-cheeked Greenbul, and witnessed a White-eared Barbet chasing a Scaly-throated Honeyguide.

Among the bushes on the mown lawns we found Red-throated Twin-spot, Bronzy Sunbird and African Goshawk. African Palm Swifts and Eastern Saw-wings swooped over the lake in the middle of the gardens. Buluwesi picked out the call of an Eastern Bronze-naped Pigeon and eventually the bird rocketed over us.

On the way back to Seldomseen, we stopped in an abandoned field to look again for the Singing Cisticola but came up short. Buluwesi told us that this farm had fallen into ruin after 2000 when it was seized by land invaders. Within a few months, the business collapsed and all the employees left. Now the fruit-packing building is crumbling and most

of the trees have been felled for firewood.

Wood-cutting threatens the Vumba's forests. Tree cutters illegally log, often on private property, to sell for small profits in Mutare, where extensive load-shedding and rising energy costs drive people into using firewood. Buluwesi expressed disgust that loggers had recently cut down indigenous trees within the protected Bunga Forest to gain access to a stand of pines. A few times we saw people sawing wood alongside the road and loading it into a bakkie. Climate change is another concern, both for its impact on habitats and because land-hungry migrants settle in the Highlands after fleeing drought conditions elsewhere.

In more prosperous times, the region was a hub for tea, coffee and fruit crops and attracted holidaymakers with golf, fishing and a moderate climate. Birders keep coming, but tourism has slowed. Locals queue for petrol and if they can get US dollars, they cross into Mozambique to buy goods. Many of the shops in Mutare stand empty. 'They say maybe things will get better in 2030,' Buluwesi said. 'That's a long time to wait.'

The next morning, after we'd broken camp, Buluwesi proudly showed off a final Seldomseen delight; while watering the hanging flower baskets, he'd spotted one of the resident Marshall's pygmy chameleons. These peculiar reptiles can only be found in the Highlands.

We crammed into our 4x4 for a final birding session at Cecil Kop Nature Reserve. As we chatted and wound down Bvumba Road towards Mutare, past where Blue Swallows fly in summer, Buluwesi rattled off the birdcalls wafting in through the windows.

Cecil Kop is famous for miombo specials and once again we ticked a flurry of lifers. As we walked the gravel road from the entrance, we noticed Lazy Cisticola and then a bird party of Cabanis's Bunting, Red-faced Crombec, Grey Penduline-tit and Green-capped Eremomela. On footpaths through the tall grass, Buluwesi picked out the whistle of Miombo Rock Thrush and soon three swooped into view. A few bird parties

flocked past, including Southern Hyliota, Cinnamon-breasted and Miombo tits, African Firefinch, Yellow-fronted Tinkerbird, Streaky-headed Seedeater and Brubru. We heard Brown-backed Honeybird and Black Cuckooshrike but couldn't find them. And despite Buluwesi's persistent whistling to the Spotted Creeper, we saw no sign. 'They usually follow the bird parties,' he explained. 'If it was around, we would have heard it.'

On an introductory trip like this, perhaps it's best to leave a few specials for next time. Future visits will certainly help

Marshall's pygmy chameleon blends in with the garden plants at Seldomseen. It is endemic to the Eastern Highlands and Mozambique.

the tourism industry. We'll be back for the Spotted Creeper, Red-faced Crimsonwing, Singing Cisticola and other treasures of the Highlands. No doubt we'll stop in to visit Buluwesi too. ♦

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