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Masangoni Birdlife Group treasure their local forests

- By Nick Langley

The 45 members of the Masangoni Birdlife Group have been awarded the status of Nature's Heroes, for their work in protecting the biodiversity of one of Zimbabwe's most rugged and inaccessible Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs).



Masangoni Birdlife Group work to protect the biodiversity of their local Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBA) © BLZ

BirdLife Zimbabwe set up the Masangoni Birdlife Group in 2013, to promote community participation in the management of the Chimanimani Mountains IBA which is also a Key Biodiversity Area. They are one of several groups which the BirdLife Partner established to improve the quality of habitat in the IBAs along the Chimanimani-Nyanga Mountains biodiversity conservation corridor.



The Chimanimani Mountains form the southernmost part of the chain of mountains that marks the Zimbabwe–Mozambique border. This is a landscape of jagged peaks and deep ravines. Most of the Zimbabwean part lies within the Chimanimani National Park (171 km²). The mountains are only accessible by footpaths. The area is popular with hikers and mountaineers, which however has led to problems of path erosion, littering and accidental fires, which can quickly get out of hand in the dry grassland and forest habitats.

The Masangoni group with their traditional leaders oversee the protection of a sacred forest. This 4.5 ha evergreen forest protects one of the watershed areas for the community and is where rain-making ceremonies take place for the community.



The Chimanimani Mountains are Zimbabwe's most rugged and inaccessible Important Bird and Biodiversity Area ©BLZ

As a group, the Masangoni birdlife

members play an active role in providing a community voice to conservation through working closely with relevant authorities. There has been active participation of women in all activities of the group including bird watching, contributing to the success of this group.

BirdLife Zimbabwe provided training in beekeeping to this group, an activity that enables people to earn a living while promoting the conservation of the forest. Women were also



Masangoni members monitoring a bee apiary set up at the forest edge in the community © BLZ

trained in handicrafts design, making table cloths and aprons that use birds and landscapes and other images inspired by the Chimanimani Mountains. This has provided them with greater financial independence.

Members of the group also engage constructively with their traditional leaders, providing advice on matters relating to the conservation

and management of natural resources. The group believes that healthy mountains provide diverse livelihood and ecosystem service opportunities for people on site and off site. The healthy status of these important mountains in Chimanimani depends on the people who are living in this area.

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Women trained in cloth cutting and designing © BLZ

Some members of the Masangoni group have been trained in bird identification and habitat monitoring, and share their knowledge of the birds found in the area with other local people. They have played a leading part in raising awareness of the importance of the birds and biodiversity of the IBA among their community.



Taita Falcon is one of three Globally Threatened bird species found in the IBA © Pete Morris

A total of 186 bird species are known from the Chimanmani Mountains IBA, representing three biomes -Afrotropical Highlands, East African Coast and Zambezan. The mountains support three species of global conservation concern, the Southern Banded Snake-eagle *Circaetus fasciolatus*, Taita Falcon *Falco fasciinucha* and Blue Swallow *Hirundo atrocaerulea* , and two restricted-range species,

Briar Warbler *Oreophilais robertsi* and Chrinda Apalis *Apalis chirindensis*. Recent surveys indicate that there are 50-60 endemic plants, and a number of frog, toad and other amphibian species are similarly found only in these mountains.

The IBA extends on the other side of the border in Mozambique. There are greater extent of the important habitat on the Mozambican side, and is currently partially protected under the [Chimanimani Transfrontier Conservation Area](#).

With the support of BirdLife Zimbabwe, the Masangoni group has networked with the communities across the border to share knowledge of bird conservation and habitat management. They have informally agreed to work together across the border to reduce the incidences of fire.

In 2014, the Masangoni group hosted two other Local Conservation Groups from the Zimbabwe side of the Chimanimani-Nyanga Mountains corridor, the Chirinda and Stapleford IBAs, for a learning and exchange visit. In turn, they visited the Bvumba Highlands site support group, whose members include Peter Magosvongwe, another of BirdLife Zimbabwe's Nature's Heroes. These site exchange and learning visits provided great opportunity for knowledge sharing and networking between Masangoni group and other SSGs in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe.

- [More Nature's Heroes Stories](#)
- [BirdLife Zimbabwe website](#)

