

Madagascar

Naturetrek Tour Report

13 October - 5 November 2009



Grey-brown Mouse Lemurs – by Phil Sharp



Ring-tailed Lemurs – by Cathy Harlow



Indri – by Cathy Harlow



Cocquerel's Sifaka - by Cathy Harlow

Report compiled by Cathy Harlow

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Day 1

Tuesday 13th October

From UK to Paris and overnight

Flying into Paris from Bristol and London, most of the group assembled for an overnight stay at the Ibis Hotel, an easy five-minute journey by shuttle train from the terminal.

Day 2

Wednesday 14th October

From Paris to Antananarivo

Taking the shuttle back to the airport, we checked in and met up with the rest of our group at the departure gate. The Air France flight was a little late leaving but the pilot made up some of the time en route. Immigration formalities and luggage delivery were slow as usual but finally we got through, to be met by our local guide Claude. After changing money, it was a 10 minute bus ride to the Relais des Plateaux Hotel, where we were greeted by a calling Madagascar Nightjar. After check in, most were ready for bed.

Day 3

Thursday 15th October

Antananarivo to Antsirabe

Weather: warm & sunny in the morning; heavy thunder showers in the afternoon

We awoke to a bright morning. Some of the group were up and about early in the grounds of the hotel and spotted a Madagascar Hoopoe perched on a wire with nesting material in its mouth. Madagascar Fody, Madagascar Mannikin, Madagascar Kestrel, Feral Pigeon, Madagascar Wagtail and Madagascar Coucal provided a good introduction to some of the birds more readily observed in the generally species-poor high plateau region.

After breakfast and a briefing from tour leader Cathy, we set off by coach through the city, which was bustling with morning activity. Thronging the streets, market stalls were doing a brisk trade in anything from spare parts to spare ribs. We took a short walk around Tsimbazaza Zoo, a cornerstone of the island's public awareness campaign on local conservation issues, which offered a useful introduction to Madagascar's wildlife. A special feature is a noctarium, with reverse lighting, where we hoped to see Aye-aye but they were not in residence. Fosa, the island's largest carnivore was surprisingly active and we were able to photograph it and Red-fronted Brown Lemur, Crowned Lemur and Black Lemur, in their respective enclosures. Tsimbazaza's trees and ponds are an important urban sanctuary for wild birds and provide a nesting site for Black Egret, Squacco Heron, Dimorphic Egret, Cattle Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron. We also observed White-faced Whistling Duck and Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher, somewhat eclipsed by the discovery of a gargantuan female Golden Orb Spider on her web, and beside her, doing its best to be tiny, was her male.

Leaving the capital, we drove south on highway 7, passing a string of typical highland villages of the Merina people. The denuded hillsides of this densely populated region are a stern reminder of the effects of ongoing deforestation and soil erosion. A number of Madagascar Kestrels, Pied Crow and Stonechat were noted. As we drew in at the Rendezvous des Pecheurs in Ambatolampy, we hit a thunderstorm. Heavy rain continued after lunch so a planned stop in the rice paddies by a river was abandoned. Arriving in the city of Antsirabe, we checked into the Arotel and taking a walk around the town, saw Black-crowned Night Heron in flight and in the garden of the nearby Hotel des Thermes, a flock of 50 or more Madagascar Fody coming in to roost in a *Boinia* sp. Madagascar Brush Warbler and Madagascar Nightjar were heard. We paused to photograph the imposing railway station building and monument to the eighteen different ethnic groups on the island. Some of the group indulged in the offerings of the *chocolaterie* next to our hotel.

Day 4

Friday 16th October

Antsirabe to Ranomafana

Weather: warm with clear skies

Yesterday's rainfall cleared the sky and we set off in sunshine for the long but very scenic day's drive on a winding, roller-coaster road that meandered over a landscape punctuated by granite inselbergs. Climbing to a low pass through a cluster of native *Tapia* trees, we paused to buy their fruit at a roadside stall. Madagascar Bush Larks were plentiful along the roadside, while in the rice paddies Great Egrets, Cattle Egrets and Hamerkop were busy foraging. A photo stop by a village gave us the opportunity to engage with local children, who were fascinated by the digital images we took of them. Here we also witnessed teams of zebu harrowing the paddies and women busy planting out rice seedlings from the nursery. The Merina people are of Indonesian origin and brought with them their tradition of rice-growing.

Our next stop was to view a colony of Bee-eaters, their tunnel nests excavated in the cliff face of a road cutting. This stop also produced a Madagascar Kestrel mobbing a Yellow-billed Kite and our first Long-billed Green Sunbird, investigating a pine cone. A little further on, our driver's assistant Kajy found a Madagascar Little Grebe on the Fatihita River, which Claude translated as 'the place where the corpse was found!' Mascarene Martin, Green-backed Heron and two more Hamerkop were also noted.

After an early start we were more than ready for our picnic lunch which was enjoyed from a vantage point overlooking a pond and wetland area adjacent to Ambatofitorahana, a fragment of rainforest. Here Joan's keen eyes picked out a Barn Owl on a log, while Claude and other group members went after a Madagascar Pond Heron, easily distinguished from the more common Squacco by its blue bill and paler plumage. Madagascar Cisticola, Madagascar Brush Warbler, Madagascar White-eye, Long-billed Green Sunbird, Souimanga Sunbird, African Black Swift and Yellow-billed kite were also present at this rewarding site, together with two spectacular Millipedes marked with longitudinal red and black stripes. The botanists were interested to photograph a Madagascar Periwinkle *Catharanthus roseus* a useful member of the Apocynaceae family containing some 70 alkaloids and used to treat diabetes and leukaemia.

Our next stop was at a bridge, where a boisterous herd of zebu were being washed in the river after working in the muddy rice paddies. Shortly before the road junction for Ranomafana, we bought bush honey from a roadside stall. The last 30 km of the journey were on the newly upgraded road to the coast, which cuts through the rainforest and though the light was fading fast, we got a few species from the bus, including Nelicourvi Weaver, Madagascar Magpie Robin, Common Jery and Madagascar Bulbul. We checked into the very pleasant Setam Lodge, where accommodation is in bungalows stacked on the hillside behind the restaurant and reception area. Within minutes, we were plunged into darkness by a power cut, a fairly regular occurrence in the region. After a very pleasant candle-lit dinner, some of the group took a stroll along the road in search of night life, which seemed to congregate on one bush festooned with stick insects.

Day 5

Saturday 17th October

Ranomafana

Weather: hot and sunny in the morning; cloudy in the afternoon

We were up just before 5.00, the air fresh and sky clear. With reserve guide Jean-Chrys, we focused our birding along the road which winds up the side of the valley and offers open views of the area. Rand's Warbler was soon identified by its call and as expected was found perched on the top of a tree. Several Madagascar Brush Warblers were heard 'rattling' in the undergrowth and with a little patience, spotted too. Most got a reasonable view of a Blue Coua, which flew clear of the trees several times, gliding above the road, and in close succession a Blue Vanga. More obliging for the photographers were a Forest Rock Thrush perched on a bare branch above the road and Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo, the latter readily heard in most forest sites but not often seen.

Returning to the hotel at 6.30 for breakfast a beautiful Emperor Moth was found on the dining room terrace and Tony showed us how the bright red hind wings open when alarmed to reveal prominent spots that mimic a large predator. Re-grouping after breakfast a Madagascar Wood Rail was heard and our second reserve guide Fidy spotted a female Belted Chameleon *Furcifer balteatus*, perfectly camouflaged on a bush. This species is confined to rainforests in the region of Ranomafana.

Driving up the road to the park entrance, a Red-fronted Coua ran across the road in front of the bus. The focus of the morning's visit was to find and observe Golden and Greater Bamboo Lemurs, two species which the park was established to protect. First up was Golden Bamboo Lemur which we were lucky to encounter near the main trail. Usually active until around 9.00 in the morning this individual was feeding, tearing off a strip of bamboo sheath to reach the tender base shoot.

We then moved off the main trail and deeper into the forest, climbing steadily to a bamboo thicket, where two Greater Bamboo Lemurs were resting rather high in the canopy so difficult to observe and photograph. Our third species of lemur was Red-bellied Lemur, found in small family groups of parents and their young. We were able to clearly distinguish the male with his white eye-patches from the paler fronted female. No baby was visible but the young are born around this time. Next we were distracted by the call of a Velvet Asity but it did not show readily. Nelicourvi Weaver, Souimanga Sunbird, and Spectacled Greenbul were also spotted and a Tylas, the orange belly of the eastern race clearly visible from below. A 6 inch-long stick insect was also spotted – a female as they are significantly larger than males.

Several unusual plants kept the botanists busy this morning including a terrestrial orchid *Calanthe sp.* with a greenish flower on a long stalk and the epiphytic mistletoe cactus *Rhipsalis baccifera*. The viewpoint at Belle Vue did not disappoint with numerous brilliantly coloured Four-spotted Day Geckos *Phelsuma quadriocellata* on the timber-framed shelter and a stunning black and blue *Papilio oribazus* butterfly, flitting among the flowers of a *Lantana sp.* Taking a different route Tony, Phil and Fidy found a Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko *Uroplatus phantasticus*, two Grey Bamboo Lemurs and Giraffe-necked Weevil *Trachelophorus giraffa*.

In the afternoon we headed for the newly opened section of montane rainforest beyond Vohiparara, with a stop at the Namorona Falls to admire the Dancing Ladies orchid *Cynorchis purpurea*, purple flowering *Streptocarpus sp.* Madagascar Sundew *Drosera Madagascariensis*, growing on the cliff face by the falls. Further upstream, our guides found an exciting showcase of frogs: Baron's painted mantella *Mantella baroni*, the leaf-litter frog *Aghyptodactylus madagascariensis*, *Mantidactylus melanopleura*, the 'dark-sided' frog, and a diminutive *Anodontophora moramora*, barely a centimetre and a half in length. While the group were busy photographing these, they produced a few more surprises: a Short-horned Chameleon *Calumma brevicorne* juvenile female and an assassin bug. At this point our driver Lala pointed to movement in the canopy, which turned out to be a Milne Edwards Diademed Sifaka, quite away off but feeding on leaves.

Leaving the bus, we walked along a ridge, which looked out over a river, marshland, and ponds. Here, the canopy is low and in exposed places we noted species like *Vaccinium* and *Erica*. Fidy called the Madagascar Flufftail, an endemic rail-like bird, which showed well. On the marshes we found the Swamp Warbler easily but the Grey Emutail failed to show. Surprisingly, the small lake where Mellers Duck roost was empty – normally they arrive just before nightfall. On the way back we heard a Madagascar Nightjar.

Now that night walks are no longer permitted within the National Parks, we focused our efforts on night-spotting in the scrub adjacent to the road, where we found two chameleon species: Short-nosed Chameleon *Calumma gastrotaenia*, and O'Shaughnessy's Chameleon *Calumma oshaughnessyi*. When resting at night, chameleons choose thin spindly branches, which will vibrate and alert them to predators landing nearby. Around the hotel, a number of moths were attracted by the lights along the hotel paths.

Day 6

Sunday 18th October

Ranomafana National Park

Weather: hot and sunny

Another five o'clock start and we headed for the high altitude rainforest at Vohiparara, where we hoped to find one or more of the endemic Ground Rollers. We soon crossed paths with a mixed feeding flock, which included White-headed Vanga, Pollen's Vanga, Tylas, Blue Vanga and Ashy Cuckoo-shrike. Jean-Chrys called the Pitta-like Ground Roller but most of the group got only a glimpse. The Short-legged Ground Roller was heard but not seen. A Madagascar Wood Rail crossed the path. A highlight was a Spectacled Greenbul on its nest, a tiny cup-shaped structure just a few feet off the ground.

After breakfast, the group split and the birders with Jean-Chrys and Claude went back to Vohiparara in the hope of locating another endemic rarity, Yellow-bellied Sunbird *Asity* on an exposed ridge where the nectar of a red-flowering vine attracts this hard to see bird. Unfortunately high winds and torrential rain two days earlier had removed all the flowers and though the bird was heard calling, it was not seen. Most, however, got good views of Ashy Cuckoo-shrike, Grey-crowned Greenbul and Red-tailed Vanga. A Milne-Edwards Diademed Sifaka was found resting near the entrance to the park, offering a rewarding encounter. Three Red-bellied Lemurs crossed the trail but moved off to feed at a pace.

Fidy, Cathy and the generalists found Golden Bamboo Lemur, again located near the river. While our lemur spotter went off to look for other groups, we were drawn to a distinctive soft whistle identified by Fidy as the call of Hook-billed Vanga. This large endemic is armed with a powerful bill adorned with a tiny hook and preys on reptiles and amphibians. We were lucky to see it in action as it seized a tree frog and returned to its perch to consume it. It appeared to be a bit of a mouthful as it was regurgitated and the bird then flew off. Our next lemurs were Red-fronted Brown Lemurs, a group of eight, including a young one clinging to its mother's back. After a bout of feeding and travelling, they settled down into a grooming huddle on a branch. We were then distracted by Fidy beckoning us to a pair of Stump-tailed Chameleons *Brookesia superciliaris* in the leaf-litter, both male and female perfectly camouflaged, though the male paler than the female. White-throated Oxylabes flitted silently through the understorey. A beautiful epiphytic Lemon-scented Orchid *Aerangis citrata* and an epiphytic *Kalanchoe* sp. were photographed by the bridge as we made our way back out of the park for lunch.

We returned to the lodge for lunch, then moved to accommodation further down the valley in a beautiful riverside setting at the improbably named Christ Hotel. Phil, John, Jo and Cathy elected to swim in the natural pool in the river, where a large spider had spun its web overhanging the water. Extraordinary white markings on its body gave the impression of a jagged row of teeth and large eyes. Others in the group rested prior to setting out for a final afternoon session in the park.

This time we focused on finding Grey Bamboo Lemur, which some of the group had not yet seen. Luckily our spotter Bako found a pair within a few minutes, which we were able to quietly observe them feeding on the base shoots, while discarding the tougher leaves of the bamboo. Good views were also had of Pitta-like Ground Roller on the path, while Rufous-headed Ground Roller was heard but failed to show. One of Madagascar's larger tree frogs *Boophis madagascariensis* was photographed in the stream near the exit to the park.

As dusk fell, we made our way along the road, where Brown Mouse Lemurs were lured by some of the local guides to a tree trunk by smears of banana – ironically, this was what led to the banning of night walks in the reserve itself! Both Short-horned Chameleon *Calumma brevicorne* and Short-nosed Chameleon *Calumma gastrotaenia* were also photographed.

We made our way to the hotel for dinner, where a surprise wildlife encounter was in store – on our plates! The very amenable couple running the hotel had proposed duck on the menu, which most of the group welcomed as a change from zebu and chicken. When the plates arrived, the owner proudly announced “Ce n'est pas domestique, c'est sauvage!” (It's not domestic, it's wild duck – which for French people would be an enormous treat). Thoughts immediately turned to the endangered Meller's Duck we'd failed to find yesterday (!) so to clarify things the bird book came out and yes it was a new species for us, but Knob-billed Duck rather than Meller's! This anecdote illustrates the pressure from hunting that so many wild bird species are faced with unfortunately.

Day 7

Monday 19th October

Ranomafana to Isalo National Park

Weather: hot and sunny; heavy showers in the afternoon

With a long drive ahead of us today it was another early rise. Around the hotel and along the river several birds were observed: Common Myna, Common Sandpiper, Green-backed Heron, Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher, Madagascar Mannikin, Madagascar White-eye, Madagascar Bulbul, Madagascar Fody and Madagascar Wagtail. Driving through the park, we came across a pair of mating Buzzards and courting Blue Couas. In just over an hour we were in the University town and regional centre of Fianarantsoa, where several of the group indulged in coffee and cakes at the Patisserie, while the bus took on fuel. We continued south through vineyards to the country town of Ivoamba, where the local weekly market was in full swing and worth a stop for the photographic opportunities. Livestock, fruit and vegetables, local straw hats and medicinal herbs all made appealing and colourful subjects.

We crossed several herds of zebu on the drovers' route north to the capital from Toliara, a journey of five weeks! Sleek and fit, the healthiest animals have large humps that store fat. In the south of Madagascar, zebu are as good as currency and play an important ceremonial role for many ethnic groups. We began to see more dark and intermediate phase Dimorphic Egrets, and Madagascar Bush Lark, Purple Heron and Bee-eater were also noted on the journey. The scenery became ever more spectacular as the pinnacled Andringitra range came into view on the approach to Ambalavao, an important cattle market town. Here we stopped for lunch and a tour of the paper factory, where flower-impregnated paper is made following a tradition brought in by Arab traders on the coast.

South of Ambalavao, the community reserve of Anja is a success story for how preserving wildlife can benefit local people. A lush pocket of gallery forest at the foot of a granite massif supports a healthy population of around 1000 Ring-tailed Lemurs and is run by the villagers as a private reserve. Most of the entrance fee goes directly back into the community and since the reserve was set up 10 years ago, the village has become markedly more prosperous. Local guides accompanied us on a hot and dusty trail that led into the welcome shade of the gallery forest. Almost immediately, we were surrounded by a group of 15-20 Ring-tailed Lemurs with at least five babies, some very young and still clinging to their mother's front, rather than riding piggy-back, which they do once they are two weeks old. Ring-tail Lemur groups are female led and scent-mark to define their territory, using glands in the genital area. What made this encounter exciting was that we were smack in the middle of a territorial dispute between alpha females of two groups.

After a vocal confrontation, staring duels and a scuffle or two, the defending female saw off the intruder and the group then moved off to the dried up lake bed, where they were observed eating earth. Everyone had the chance to get good photographs of the lemurs, especially photogenic as they leapt amongst the granite boulders. As our visit coincided with the hottest part of the day, other than a Madagascar Buzzard there were rather few birds around but our guides found an Oustalet's Chameleon *Furcifer oustaleti*.

Continuing the drive south we passed bush fires, which are deliberately started by the locals to burn off the coarse dead grass, allowing new tender shoots to grow for the zebu herds to graze on. Several Yellow-billed Kites and Pied Crows were feasting on the insects and reptiles trying to escape the flames. We passed the prominent granite inselberg known as the Bishop's Hat and Claude explained how several thousand Betsileo people had taken refuge on its rocky summit after refusing to submit to domination of the expanding Merina tribe. Facing hunger and thirst, they chose mass suicide rather than submission, dancing blindfold until they fell from the cliffs.

After a short stop at Ihosy we climbed in a series of hairpin bends to the Horombe Plateau, with storm clouds threatening rain. We failed to find Reunion Harrier, which are often spotted during this stage of the journey but enjoyed a spectacular sunset. Arriving at the Relais de la Reine, we checked into our very comfortable rooms.

Day 8

Tuesday 20th October

Isalo National Park

Weather: very hot and sunny, cloudy in the afternoon

Most of the group joined Cathy and Claude for a early morning stroll in the surrounds of the hotel, where Benson's Rock Thrush were easily seen, perched on the sandstone outcrops. Madagascar Hoopoe were active on the ground, probing for insects and Bulbul, Broad-billed Roller, Common Jery, Souimanga Sunbird, Crested Drongo, Namaqua Dove, Pied Crow, Madagascar Kestrel, Madagascar Coucal and Yellow-billed Kite were also spotted. Continuing to the small lake, we found Red-billed Teal and White-faced Whistling Duck and a Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher was also noted.

After breakfast we made our way to the entrance to Isalo National Park, picking up our guide Nirina in the town of Ranohira (meaning the drinking place for Ring-tailed Lemurs!). Already the heat was building up and the lush stands of pandanus and palm lining the river courses offered invaluable shade. We decided to focus our visit on the Namaza area of the park because it offers the best chance to see lemurs, a variety of birds, reptiles, amphibians and plants as well as sample the dramatic sandstone gorges for which Isalo is famous. Nirina introduced some of Isalo's unusual flora: the pink-flowering shrub *Pemphis madagascariensis* whose roots are used in an infusion to treat diarrhoea and a Club Moss *Licopodium sp.* We did well for reptiles today, with Oustalet's Chameleon *Furcifer oustaleti*, Jewel Chameleon *Furcifer lateralis*, Lined Plated Lizard *Zonosaurus laticaudata* and Elegant Skink *Trachylepis elegans*, also adding two new frog species *Heterixalus betsileo* and *Heterixalus luteostriatus*, the latter distinguished from the former by the dorsolateral stripe continuing onto the hind limbs. Claude explained that an identifying feature of this tree-frog genus is the vertical rhomboid shape of the eyes. We were also treated to a variety of invertebrates including Stick Insects, yellow and black Ladybugs, crimson Dragonfly and the highly unusual Flatid Leaf-bug *Phromnia rosea*, whose nymphs excrete a white waxy substance that gives them a curious feathery appearance but also provides defence against predation.

Both Souimanga and Long-billed Green Sunbirds showed well and most got a close view of Grey-headed Lovebird perched on a *Pandanus* stump, Cisticola, Stonechat, Madagascar Fody and Madagascar Kestrel. The star performer today was a Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher on the nest, just yards from the path. The shady Namaza camp site is often a good place to find lemurs and we crossed a group of eight Ring-tailed Lemurs, including a very young baby, still on its mother's belly. With perseverance, our guide also found a Verreaux's Sifaka, resting in the boughs of a tree. From the camp site we walked along the boulder-strewn course of the stream to a narrow gorge, where the Cascade des Nymphes forms a refreshing bathing pool and several of the group took the opportunity to cool off.

Returning to the hotel for lunch, there was time for a rest in the afternoon before Jo set off on horseback while others in the group opted for a sunset walk in the sandstone massif behind the hotel with Claude and Cathy. Here we found several endemic Elephant's Foot plant *Pachypodium rosulatum* whose fragile yellow blooms and tender rosette of leaves are protected by thorns above a bulbous, water-retaining stem base. *Aloe isaloensis* and *Kalanchoe sp* were also noted growing in crevices in the sandstone. Sunset was particularly memorable as the sandstone went from orange, through yellow to shades of pink and purple. At this point a Yellow-billed Kite returned to its perch on a sandstone pillar to eat its prey. In preparation for a pre-dawn departure, we arranged an early supper.

Day 9

Wednesday 21st October

Isalo to Zombitse and Toliara

Weather: very hot and sunny

It was still dark when we left the hotel at 4.30 to reach Zombitse National Park just after 6 a.m. Zombitse is a transitional forest with elements of both dry deciduous and south Euphorbia scrub and is a threatened fragment of native forest in an otherwise denuded landscape. We started by checking out the open area around the car park, where we found two Madagascar Starlings and three Lesser Vasa Parrots. Claude suggested exploring the trails on the south side of the road to search for the endemic Appert's Greenbul, a terrestrial species confined to the region, which we soon found hopping among the leaf litter. Later we found four other individuals, along with Common Jery, Madagascar White-eye, Long-billed Greenbul, Grey-headed Lovebird and Madagascar Kestrel. Cuckoo Roller was repeatedly heard, but not seen. Because the park sees few visitors, its lemurs are predictably less habituated and whilst we could hear Red-fronted Brown Lemur, they moved off before we had time to see them. Claude's keen eyes picked out a nocturnal Gecko *Blaesodactylus sakalava* in a tree hollow and a male Oustalet's Chameleon *Furcifer oustaleti*, added variety on the reptile front.

Back at the park entrance we ate our packed breakfast and Phil spotted a Madagascar Nightjar roosting on the ground, which we had seen fly in earlier. By 7.30 the park staff had turned up so we crossed to the northern parcel of the forest on a level and easy trail. Everyone was scanning the tree trunks for roosting Hubbard's Sportive Lemurs but we were no match for our guide Flaubert's trained eyes. Soon one and then a second of these endearing, nocturnal lemurs, whose expression is slightly 'grumpy' peered out from their tree-hollow daytime roosts. Another new species was Standing's Day Gecko *Phelsuma standingi*, a dry forest species that is less brightly coloured than the rainforest day geckos but intricately marked. A Crested Ibis nest was seen but appeared not to be occupied.

Next, Flaubert showed us *Commiphora appressa*, the so called “vazaha” tree because its peeling bark resembles the skin of a sunburned foreigner. Like many dry deciduous trees it drops its leaves at the onset of the dry season but the trunk continues to photosynthesise and remains green during the dry season. An infusion of the bark is used by local people to treat asthma. Today we saw our first large baobab, an impressive *Adansonia za* with nesting Crested Drongo's on a branch. On this rewarding walk, several more new bird species were seen: Giant Coua and Madagascar Buttonquail and a roosting White-browed Owl. Back on the bus we continued our journey over a barren and inhospitable landscape, with a brief stop at the town of Sakaraha to buy some biscuits to stave off the inevitable hunger in the wake of such an early breakfast. We passed a wild fire – again deliberately lit to burn off the old tougher grass that zebu cannot eat. Many Yellow-billed Kites swooped down around the fire to grab the fleeing insects.

After lunch at the Paille en Queue Hotel there was time for a short rest before we headed off to the Botanic Gardens. Here we were introduced to an exciting range of endemic *Euphorbia*, *Didieraceae*, *Kalanchoe* and other trees and plants typical of the south-west's spiny forest, many used by local people: *Ficus megapoda* the bark is ground, then mixed to a thick yellow paste, which is used by women as a beauty face-mask; *Folotsia floribunda*, which produces a sticky glue; *Alluandia montagnacii*, known as the compass tree, which points due south against the prevailing wind; *Uncarina stellulifera*, the 'shampoo tree', the same family as allamanda; *Jatropha mahafalensis*, which bleeds red sap from its trunk; Elephant's Ear *Kalanchoe beharensis*, which has velvet leaves that form a cup to catch rainfall; and *Aloe divaricata*, whose bitter-tasting juice is used to stop children biting their nails.

The gardens are also a good place for reptiles and both Spiny-backed Chameleon *Furcifer verrucosus* and Grey Day Gecko *Phelsuma mutabilis* were seen and photographed. For the birders, Green-capped Coua showed well on the ground, along with Sakalava Weaver and Madagascar Buttonquail. A Grey-brown Mouse Lemur *Microcebus griseorufus* was spotted roosting in the thick crown of a *Euphorbia stenoclada*. We ended the afternoon by heading up to the tablelands and coral rag scrub to look for the often difficult Red-shouldered Vanga, which we called but to no avail.

Day 10

Thursday 22nd October

Anakao & Nosy Ve

Weather: very hot and sunny & very windy

After breakfast, we were on board the bus by 6.30 for the short ride to the mud flats where zebu carts were lined up to take us to the boat, moored just offshore. It was high tide and there were no waders to be seen. The wind was already getting up even though it was only seven in the morning so we expected a bumpy ride. The early morning light was beautiful and the temperature was still pleasantly cool. The boat crossed the estuary of the Onilahy River before briefly skirting along the base of the cliffs where three Grey Herons were perched on a ledge and a number of Black Swifts flew overhead. Arriving at Anakao fishing village and the Safari Vezo Hotel, located on a stunning stretch of beach, we checked into our rooms and then returned to the boat for the short ride to Nosy Ve, an offshore coral cay. Landing on the southern tip of the island we picked our way carefully through the Red-tailed Tropicbird colony, where we could observe and photograph newly-hatched chicks, older juveniles as well as adults on the nests, which are concealed in the shade of the low-lying island scrub. Numerous Dimorphic Egrets (both dark and white phase) were in flight.

On the beach, we noted Kittlitz's and White-fronted Plovers, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling and Whimbrel, as well as *Cisticola*. Strolling to the end of the beach, two sandbanks hosted a number of Lesser Crested Terns and in amongst them two Caspian Terns and a Grey Heron but the star attraction were 23 Crab Plovers. The wind was so fierce that it was all we could do to keep scopes and binoculars steady while seated on the ground. Five of the group elected to go snorkelling and the boat took us offshore to a coral outcrop, where we saw clams, sea stars, wrasse, parrot fish and damselfish.

Back at the Safari Vezo Hotel, we had lunch and a rest before setting out again at 4.30 for the spiny forest behind the hotel. Here the wind again made birdwatching challenging but we managed to get good views of Littoral Rock Thrush perched on the tops of the bushes and well lit by the afternoon sun, Bush Lark, Buttonquail scuttling on the ground and two Hoopoes, one devouring an insect. Subdesert Brush Warbler was also heard and seen, but neither Lafresnays Vanga nor Running Coua showed up. A curious "bulldozing" beetle was admired and photographed. After sunset over the ocean, we tucked into a dinner of fish and potatoes au gratin.

Day 11

Friday 23rd October

Anakao to Ifaty

Weather: Very hot, sunny & windy

The birders were up at dawn for another crack at Lafresnaye's Vanga but it was still pretty windy. The Vanga again eluded us but we saw Bush Lark, Yellow-billed Kite, numerous Littoral Rock Thrush, Madagascar Hoopoe, Pied Crow, Common Myna, Subdesrt Brush Warbler and Madagascar Fody. We departed by boat straight after breakfast as another windy day was expected. In the event, the journey was smoother than on the way out. Drivers Lala and Kaja were there to meet us off the boat. We made a brief stop for shopping and to use the post office in Toliara, before heading north to Ifaty. Named RN9 this 'route nationale' is little more than a rutted, dusty dirt track and it often takes several hours to travel the 30km route.

Stopping at a brackish pond, we got scopes out and with the help of wader experts Phil, Tony and John identified Curlew Sandpiper, Whimbrel, Black-winged Stilt, Greenshank and Ringed Plover. Madagascar Bee-eater, Pied Crow, Namaqua Dove, Madagascar Kestrel and Madagascar Coucal were also noted along the route. About 18km out of town, the road neared the coast and a Vezo fishing village, where an assortment of trucks and cars were getting bogged down in loose sand, preventing others from passing. The main culprit was a heavily-laden drinks truck but after a lot of hanging around it pulled clear and a convoy of vehicles surged forward. When our bus then got bogged down, we called for help and a 4WD soon arrived to shuttle some of the group the last few kilometres to the Paradisier Hotel, the rest arriving in due course with the bus.

After lunch, we settled into the very comfortable bungalows and some of the group enjoyed the beautiful infinity pool. By 4.30 with the heat draining out of the day, we explored the hotel grounds, which include a tract of spiny forest, where we enjoyed good views of a Chabert's Vanga and a Madagascar Coucal perched on top of a bush. A juvenile Big-eyed Snake *Mimophis mahafalensis* was spotted by the side of the track. Beyond the hotel we paused by a brackish pond where Common Sandpiper, several Three-banded and Kittlitz's Plovers and a Greenshank were picked up. Whimbrel, Grey Plover, Sanderling and Greenshank were observed along the beach.

Day 12

Saturday 24th October

Ifaty

Weather: very hot and sunny

The Reniala Private Reserve is sited a 30-minute drive from Paradisier, which meant an early rise to get there for dawn. At the entrance a flock of Madagascar Turtle Doves flew overhead and several Grey-headed Lovebirds chattered from their perch on a *Didieracae* spike. The level sandy paths at Reniala make for easy walking as they weave through a forest of *Adansonia za* baobabs and thorny scrub. A Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo showed well and most of the group got a glimpse of Archbold's Newtonia. Both Running and Green-capped Couas obligingly posed for the photographers. Local guide Dabe and his assistants had meanwhile located a pair of Long-tailed Ground Rollers, a local endemic confined to the narrow strip of forest on the south-west coast and again most of the group were able to snap a pair of these spectacular ground-dwelling birds. Common Jery, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Crested Drongo, Black Swift and Madagascar Buttonquail also showed well. A nesting Hook-billed Vanga was followed by good views of Sickie-billed Vanga, White-headed Vanga, and Thamnornis Warbler was sighted fleetingly. As we were returning towards the reserve entrance a Madagascar Harrier Hawk flew overhead. Several Three-eyed Lizards *Chalarodon madagascariensis*, the island's smallest iguanid, were very active on the forest floor and a Hissing Cockroach was seen on the path. Even though we missed the Sub-desert Mesite, Reniala rarely disappoints with the variety of species it offers and this morning was no exception.

Back at the hotel it was a quick breakfast for those who were off by glass-bottomed boat to the 'Rose Garden', a protected coral bommie in the reef lagoon, about a 30 minute boat ride north. The snorkelling proved better here than at Nosy Ve, with a good variety of fish, including Sergeant Major, Chocolate-dip Chromis, Angelfish, Butterflyfish, Trumpetfish, Squirrelfish, Wrasse and Parrotfish. Lettuce and mushroom corals were abundant but the staghorn corals were badly damaged, though showing signs of regrowth. Those who elected to relax around the hotel enjoyed the swimming pool and a procession of waders on the beach with several Greater Sand Plover, a flock of Sanderling, two Madagascar Plovers, Whimbrel, Grey Plover, Greenshank, Curlew Sandpiper and Ringed Plover.

After lunch there was time for a short rest and swim before the afternoon excursion to Ifaty's salt pans, where Kittlitz's, Ringed, Three-banded and White-fronted Plovers were all viewed in the scope, together with Swamp Warbler, Greenshank, Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher, Common Sandpiper and a pair of agitated Black-winged Stilts. At nightfall, we gathered around Tony and Ian's bungalow, where a Grey Mouse Lemur had been spotted the previous night. It wasn't long before our torch beams picked up a pair of eyes emerging from the rafters. Quadripedal and fast moving, mouse lemurs are also agile jumpers and capable of leaps of several metres. Mouse lemurs also have one of the highest population densities in suitable habitat and in the spiny forest along the path between the bungalows, a further 14 individuals were observed that evening!

Day 13

Sunday 25th October

Ifaty to Toliara and flight to Antananarivo

Weather: hot and sunny, rain in Antananarivo

As we had failed to find the Sub-desert Mesite yesterday, some of the group were keen to go to Reniala again and with an afternoon flight we were able to fit in a second visit to the reserve. However, in spite of our best efforts and those of our guides, this often elusive bird failed to show. Claude spotted a Long-tailed Ground Roller, which we all got good views of when it froze on the ground for a few minutes. Good views were had of Magpie Robin, Sickle-billed Vanga, and Lesser Vasa Parrot, all perched in the open and easy to photograph. Common Jery, Namaqua Dove, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher and Souimanga Sunbird were also seen.

Back at the hotel for breakfast there was some free time before setting off for Toliara mid-morning. The road proved easier this time with no hold-ups but we had to allow extra time just in case. We stopped by the mangroves, where a sand spit looked promising. A flock of White-faced Whistling Duck circled and landed, and Turnstone, Whimbrel, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Greater Sandplover, Ringed Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Sanderling, and Grey Plover were all present in varying numbers. In the distance we picked out three Grey Herons and seven Flamingo, but they were too far away to determine if they were Lesser or Greater. We stopped again by a pond where Madagascar Little Grebe, Black-winged Stilt, Kittlitz's and Ringed Plovers and a flock of Madagascar Mannikins were observed. Continuing the drive a Madagascar Harrier Hawk flew over the road. One of the villages we passed specialises in 'kit' houses, made of local materials including reeds and bamboo and we were interested to see them being transported by zebu cart.

We had lunch in a bustling Italian restaurant in Toliara before heading to the airport for the flight to Tana. Our overnight stay was at the newly built Orchid Hotel, close to the airport. Sadly tonight we parted company with Lars-Olof and Anita, who unexpectedly had to return home to Sweden.

Day 14

Monday 26th October

Antananarivo to Fort Dauphin and Berenty

Weather: very hot in Fort Dauphin & Berenty

After a very early flight, we were met at Fort Dauphin by local guide Benoit and set off by coach on the very bumpy and pot-holed road 'main' road. From the lush, humid coastal zone, rice paddies and lychee and mango orchards gave way to a transitional forest. Here we stopped to look at the unusual Triangle Palms *Dypsis decaryi*, now protected within a section on Andohahela National Park. A Spiny-backed Chameleon and several Four-spotted Iguanids *Oplurus quadrimaculatus* were spotted by the side of the road here. Within a few kilometres, we were in the spiny forest, dominated by *Euphorbia* sp and Madagascar Ocotillo *Alluaudia procera*. The tall, straight trunks of this deciduous, thorny tree are used for building village houses and a reforestation project in the area allows for sustainable harvesting.

Arriving at Berenty, we checked into our bungalows and had lunch, followed by a short rest, awaiting a respite from the oppressive heat. Late afternoon we set off to explore the gallery forest along the banks of the Mandrare River. The forest is dominated by introduced deciduous Tamarinds, which were not yet in full leaf allowing plenty of light into the forest and facilitating wildlife viewing. Berenty's network of broad, level trails are ideal for exploring at a relaxed pace, both in a group and on your own and the opportunities to observe and photograph lemurs are excellent. Berenty's three species of diurnal lemur were all easy to find: the Ring-tailed Lemurs are as at home on the ground as in the trees and as the babies are born in September and October, many of the females were carrying their young.

One group views the bungalow complex and car park as their territory, and are always at the ready to jump through an open window in search of bananas or snatch jam from the breakfast table. With creamy-white pelage and black faces, Verreaux's Sifaka are very striking, not least when they 'dance' sideways on their hind-limbs to cross open spaces. The first group we encountered 'danced' for the cameras, crossing the path in front of us. Later we found a second group feeding in the canopy, which seemed as curious about us as we were about them.

Next we found several nocturnal White-footed Sportive Lemurs, just beginning to stir and emerge from their daytime roosts in the V or hollow of a tree trunk. Red-fronted Brown Lemurs, though introduced to Berenty are also readily seen and we found a group feeding on the flowers of a *Rhynorea grevei* tree. Berenty is particularly rewarding for Crested Couas and ground-dwelling Giant Couas and several of each were seen in the forest, while on the river, which was exceptionally dry even for this time of year, we observed Greenshank, Kittlitz's Plover, Cattle Egret, Pied Crow and Yellow-billed Kite. Three Comb Ducks flew over while we were enjoying the view and a flock of Madagascar Sandgrouse took flight. Returning to the bungalows, John pointed out several dozen *Danaus sp* Monarch butterflies jostling for roosting space on a low-lying branch.

We then proceeded to the spiny forest for a night walk in which the star performers were White-footed Sportive Lemurs – no fewer than eight observed, several of them feeding on *Didieraceae* flowers. Usually subsisting on an energy-deficient diet of leaves, these sluggish lemurs are far from sportive, but are capable of leaps of several metres. In contrast only a single Grey-brown Mouse Lemur was seen but the evening had other surprises in store: Claude was very excited to find an Orange Tree Snake *Stenophis variabilis*, a nocturnal and arboreal colubrid, noted for its large head. Grey Day Gecko *Phelsuma mutabilis* was photographed on a tree trunk and a Hawk Moth was picked out as well.

Day 15

Tuesday 27th October

Berenty

Weather: very hot and sunny

When the De Heulme family felled the spiny forest for sisal plantation in the 1930s, they thankfully left a few tracts of this unique habitat untouched, among them the Anjapoly Forest, located a 20 minute drive from Berenty and for which a special permit is needed. It is well worth the extra drive, because of the opportunity to see healthy populations of both Ring-tailed Lemur and Verreaux's Sifaka in their natural surroundings. Anjapoly was the focus of our early morning walk and almost immediately, we found a group of a dozen Ring-tails feeding on *Didieraceae* flowers, beautifully illuminated by the early morning sun. The agility with which they move from spiny branch to branch, without injuring themselves on the inch-long thorns, is astonishing. Several individuals were spread-eagled, limbs extended to warm up in the sun. Here too we found a group of four Sifakas and two roosting White-footed Sportive Lemurs. Grabbing the birders' attention was a pair of Hook-billed Vanga devouring an insect and a Crested Coua, wings outstretched to warm up in the sun.

Over breakfast, the 'Breakfast Bandits', a group of audacious Ring-tails were soon to arrive, ever at the ready to grab, jam, fruit and anything else from an unwatched table. After breakfast some of the group chose to explore independently while the others reassembled for a second visit to the gallery forest, where a male France's Sparrowhawk was heard calling and soon gave itself up, perched on a branch with the remains of its 'breakfast'.

Benoit found us two roosting White-browed Owls and we also got good views of Lesser Vasa Parrot, Giant Coua and Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher. Peering into a hollow tree trunk, we saw two gecko eggs – several species of gecko lay as few as two eggs, though we were not sure which one this was. We crossed a team of researchers from Antananarivo University who were conducting a census of lemur populations in the reserve and the mouse lemur trap we had noted earlier forms part of this survey. We ended the morning's visit at the Madagascar Flying Fox colony, where several hundred bats roost, jostling for hanging space and generally restless and vocal when disturbed by the arrival of new individual. We observed them fanning their wings and licking the membranes to keep cool. At night they leave the roost and fly several kilometres to feed elsewhere.

Some of the group chose to visit the ethnographic museum before lunch, after which it was time to sit out the heat of the day and catch up on some sleep. By 4 o'clock temperatures were again bearable and we set off for Rapihy, another section of spiny forest. Here Benoit showed us a Torotoroka Scops Owl, roosting in a *Euphorbia stenoclada*, whose latex is used as glue by boat-builders. This tree is often favoured by mouse lemurs as well because the dense crown gives both shade and protection from predators. Mouse lemurs sometimes choose an unoccupied nest as a roost, and while they may opt to sleep communally, they are usually solitary when feeding at night. We found first a group of two, and then three together. This last group were very obliging for the photographers, three pairs of disproportionately large eyes peering down at us from their roost.

Another interesting plant alongside the path was the Elephant's Ear Kalanchoe *Kalanchoe beharensis*, whose fallen leaves are eaten by tortoises. Our guide also produced a scorpion for us, sheltering under a stone. As we made our way back at sunset, we stopped to view four Madagascar Sandgrouse in a field, where curiously we also saw a lone Sifaka, – an unusual sight as they normally avoid lingering on exposed, open ground.

Our night walk in the gallery forest brought us two nocturnal geckos – a Ground Gecko (also known as Pictus or Big-headed Gecko *Paroedura picta*) and *Hemidactylus mercatorius*, a species commonly found around habitation.

Day 16

Wednesday 28th October

Berenty to Antananarivo

Weather: hot and windy in Berenty; showery in Fort Dauphin; heavy rain in Antananarivo

There was time for a final morning walk in the gallery forest before breakfast. After checking for the nesting Hook-billed Vangas near the car park we headed down to the river. Here 26 Madagascar Sandgrouse were joined by a flock of Grey-headed Lovebirds, coming down to drink. Several Greenshanks were also noted on the sandbanks, which were busy with local women fetching water. Many do not have standpipes or wells in their villages and are dependent on the river for all their water. The women carry it in buckets on their heads, with bamboo leaves floating on top to stop the water spilling over.

This morning we were up and about before the lemurs – we came across a group of Red-fronted Brown Lemurs huddled on the branches of a Tamarind tree. It was a privilege to stand quietly, watching them awaken, groom and then set off to feed. A little further on a group of Sifakas were warming up in the first rays of sun, their limbs outstretched. Birds were more in evidence this morning with excellent views of White-browed Owl, Crested Coua, Madagascar White-eye, Ashy Cuckoo-shrike, Crested Drongo and a Madagascar Coucal combing the undergrowth for chameleons. Green Pigeon were finally seen, feeding on the fig tree by the car park.

Arriving at Fort Dauphin, most of the group were keen to see if any Humpback Whales were in the bay so we made our way to the headland viewpoint. Unfortunately, it was so windy that it was practically impossible to tell a white-cap from a whale spout but on the far side of the bay we could just pick out a couple of whale spouts and a breach. A single Greater Crested Tern was noted. After a sandwich and drink at the Dauphin Hotel, where two Day Geckos *Phelsuma modesta leiogaster* and *Phelsuma lineata* were seen, we were taken to the airport, where some of the group checked out the wetlands by the bridge. Arriving into Antananarivo, it was pouring with rain, and we returned to the Orchid Hotel. Squacco Heron, Cattle Egret, Green-backed Heron and Great White Egret were observed by Tony from the hotel balcony.

Day 17

Thursday 29th October

Antananarivo to Ampijoroa

Weather: cool in Antananarivo; very hot in Mahajanga and Ampijoroa

Our early morning flight to Mahajanga left on time and a clear sky gave us sweeping views of Madagascar's tree-denuded landscapes, pockmarked by erosion gullies, known as *Lavaka*. Huge soil-laden rivers, draining off the mountainous spine of the island, were stained red, like giant bleeding arteries – in all a depressing sight. Arriving at Mahajanga, the heat was already building up and we were grateful for the air-conditioned coach that had driven down from the capital to meet us. After stocking up with drinking water, we set off on the RN4, a well-surfaced route that climbed steadily to a limestone plateau, so barren and dry it seemed improbable that anyone would eke out a living there. Yet there were houses and plantations of cassava and papaya that suggested the contrary. Dotting this desolate landscape were a few fire-scorched Doum Palms *Hypphaene coriacea*, an African species whose flower juice is fermented to make an alcoholic drink.

Descending from the plateau to the floodplain of the Betsiboka and its tributaries, we began to see more variety than the Madagascar Bush Larks and Pied Crows that had hitherto been the only birds on view. Broad-billed Roller, Namaqua Dove, Yellow-billed Kite and Purple Heron were followed by a memorable view of a Madagascar Harrier Hawk, perched close by in the foliage of a fig tree and ably spotted by our driver's assistant Kajy. A little further on by Lake Amboromalandy by Ankazomborona, we observed large numbers of Black Egret – in typical feeding posture with wings outspread to form a shady canopy – and Great White Egret and Cattle Egret also foraging in the rice paddies. Here too were large numbers of Glossy Ibis – under threat now because of over-hunting - and several Green-backed Heron and Squacco Heron.

Arriving at Ampijoroa, we were delighted to find that everyone had been allocated bungalows, though as it was still early in the day, not all of them were ready for us. Over a relaxing lunch in the restaurant, we could start to appreciate the assemblage of wildlife that Ampijoroa offers. The large mango tree shading the car park is a favourite resting place for Coquerel's Sifaka during the heat of the day and sure enough they were there, draped lethargically over the boughs. But this is not a place to linger when the lemurs are feeding on the fruit as once they have devoured the skin, they appeared to reject the rest of the fruit, sending it down on anyone standing below! Broad-billed Rollers cackled from their tree-top perches and several Collared and Spiny-tailed Iguanids and Lined Plated Lizards scuttled to and fro on the ground, unperturbed by the soaring temperature, which topped 35°C. Sickle-billed and White-headed Vangas were also noted nesting in the camp site area, where Madagascar Hoopoe and Green Pigeon also showed.

After a siesta, we set off into the park with reserve guides Amadé and Justin. The Forestry Station of Ampijoroa comprises roughly one-third of the Ankarafantsika National Park, which protects an important remnant of the once extensive but now greatly threatened dry deciduous forests of the west of Madagascar. Of its 129 species of breeding bird, 75 are endemics. Ampijoroa's grid of mostly level trails make for easy exploration of the park and in early spring, most of the deciduous trees are not yet in full leaf so birdwatching can be very rewarding here.

Local specialities are Rufous Vanga and White-breasted Mesite, both species found with ease this afternoon along the ridge behind the park entrance and reception. Another highlight was a pair of Cuckoo Rollers and for many in the group this was the first chance to see them in detail. Crested Coua and Long-billed Greenbul were also observed and a Red-capped Coua was heard. Our guides expertly found a Scops Owl roosting in a tree hollow, just a few feet off the ground.

Thanks to Claude we also got good views of two snakes: the Big-eyed Snake *Mimophis mahfalensis* and the much-feared but generally harmless opisthoglyphous snake *Ithycyphus miniatus*. The Malagasy believe this arboreal snake drops tail-first from trees while stiffening its body like a spear to stab people or Zebu cattle below. On the lemur front, we got good views of Common Brown Lemurs as they crossed above the path in front of us and Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur was seen stirring from its day-time roost. At the end of the afternoon's walk, but in rapidly fading light, we found a family group of Mongoose Lemurs right by the restaurant. This was a lucky find as these lemurs are not always easy to locate.

Collecting torches we then drove a short distance along the road to the start of the night walk, which took us back into the forest along a broad track, leading to a camping site. After a few false starts we got a good view of Grey Mouse Lemur and two Madagascar Nightjars both perched and in flight. Oustalet's Chameleon and several moths added interest. Returning to the bus, Joan spotted eye-shine from a tree overhanging the road and this turned out to be a Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur, a species that must have recently emerged from its dry-season dormancy period, in which it lives from the fat stored in its tail. Special mention should also be made of the Madagascar Toilet Frog *Boophis doulioti*, which some members of the group found in an inappropriate habitat, though apparently thriving on it!!

Day 18

Friday 30th October

Ampijoroa

Weather: very hot; breezy in the afternoon

We awoke to a clear morning and before breakfast headed for the forest at the west end of the lake, where we found the rare endemic Schlegel's Asity. First the brightly-coloured male was seen perched on a branch just above head height, soon joined by the female at which point their nest was identified, a globe-shaped structure hanging from an adjacent tree. Hook-billed Vanga, Magpie Robin, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Madagascar Coucal, Long-billed Greenbul and Red-capped Coua and a pair of Ashy Cuckoo Shrike were also noted in the forest, while by the lake we observed Mascarene Martin, Glossy Ibis, White-faced Whistling Duck, African Darter, Green-backed Heron, Madagascar Pond Heron and Madagascar Hoopoe, and our first Nile Crocodiles. Coquerel's Sifaka, Common Brown Lemur and Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur also showed well.

After breakfast we decided to continue our exploration of the ridges, which yielded good views of Red-capped Coua, Coquerel's Coua, Crested Coua, France's Sparrowhawk, nesting Rufous Vangas and Madagascar Buzzard and another local speciality, Van Dam's Vanga, which is only known from Ankarafantsika and one other location. Reptile highlights of the morning included a Collared Iguanid digging its nest and laying eggs on the sandy path, a Kock's Giant Day Gecko and a huge 55cm long male Oustalet's Chameleon. Our guides also helped identify several unusual plants and shrubs including the *Landolphia* sp vine, whose fruits are eaten by lemurs, a 'shaving brush' flower *Tylacum angustifolium* and the white-flowering *Ajunta modesta*. Several groups of Coquerel's Sifaka were observed during the morning with wonderful photographic opportunities, as one group were right by the path. At one point a female and her baby came down to the ground and began eating the bark of a rotting tree trunk. Last year we observed similar behaviour from a mother and baby and a researcher commented that the wood may have medicinal properties.

After lunch and a siesta, the group were split for the boat trip on the lake, both parties getting good views of a pair of the rare and endangered Madagascar Fish Eagle, Humblot's Heron, Purple Heron, Green-backed Heron, Glossy Ibis, Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher, Knob-billed Duck and Allen's Gallinule. Several Crocodiles were observed – they are sacred to the people in this region - and the first group also saw White-throated Rail.

During the afternoon the breeze got up, just taking the edge of the heat. Cathy and those who had missed the White-throated Rail, tried calling it by the edge of the lake near the bungalows and though it called back willingly, it stubbornly refused to come out from the tangle of reeds. Local children gathered around us in some puzzlement as to what we were up to, let alone why!

Day 19

Saturday 31st October

Ampijoroa

Weather: very hot in the morning; heavy rainfall in the afternoon

Due to a change in flight schedules we were lucky to have a second full day at Ampijoroa though by now we were getting a little blasé, having already found most of the target species in the park. This morning the birders were after Madagascar Crested Ibis and we started by calling and looking for this shy species behind the small pond near the restaurant but without success. A surprise addition to the mammal list was a Western Tuft-tailed Rat, an arboreal species that we got a fleeting glimpse of as it ran up the trunk of a tree. Next up was a Coquerel's Coua with nesting material in its beak and both Red-capped and Crested Couas again showed well. We were also keen to see White-breasted Mesite again and our guides went to considerable effort to encourage them into the open for the photographers. As memorable was their insistent, repetitive whistling call, quite unlike any other forest sound in Madagascar! Both Common Brown Lemur and Coquerel's Sifaka were again readily observed this morning and several spectacular Koch's Giant Day Geckos and an Assassin Bug also put in an appearance.

After breakfast, we made our way to the forest on the opposite shore of the lake for the 'Baobab Circuit', which involved crossing a Himalayan-style bridge. Looking over the lake we could see Humblot's Heron, Purple Heron, Madagascar Pond Heron, Cattle Egret, Knob-billed Duck and White-faced Whistling Duck. Climbing through the forest, we arrived at a clearing and a spectacular baobab *Adansonia za boinensis*, where a Sickle-billed Vanga showed willingly and a Lined Plated Lizard *Zonosaurus laticaudatus* obligingly posed for the photographers.

Two further tree species aroused excitement among the botanists: *Sorindeia madagascariensis* whose pink flowers and fruit grow off a stalk directly from the trunk of the tree; *Adenia fringalavensis*, a vine and member of the *Passifloraceae*, that stores water in a bulbous trunk. At the base of the former's trunk several dozen ladybugs and their nymphs were clustered.

Returning to the restaurant for lunch, the skies clouded over and rain seemed imminent. Back at the bungalows for a siesta, the skies opened and several inches of heavy rain fell over the next hour or so. By the time we reassembled for the afternoon's walk, the temperature had dropped to the low twenties Celsius, making for very pleasant conditions. In anticipation of increased invertebrate activity following the rain, we came across a Mole Cricket – good to meet at last the culprit responsible for all the little burrows in the sand! Just as we finished admiring it and returned it to a 'safe' place on the ground away from the road, a Sickle-billed Vanga swooped down and grabbed it...

The afternoon's walk was to focus on the far side of the lake, where we hoped to try and catch some of the nocturnal lemur species, as well as have a final stab at the Madagascar Crested Ibis. White-throated Rail emerged at the edge of the lake. We also had good views of Allen's Gallinule as it flushed out of the dense water hyacinth and Purple Heron and Green-backed Heron, whose 'sneezing' alarm call was audible. A Fish Eagle was spotted perched on a branch above the path and heard calling and Hoopoe and Green Pigeon were also viewed. There was great excitement when a France's Sparrowhawk swooped down from its perch to bag a young Turtle Dove, just yards from us! The path was crawling with black beetles newly emerged after the rain, many engaged in mating. A Warty Frog *Mantidactylus ulcerosus* was picked out among leaf litter near the edge of the lake.

On the botanical side, the afternoon was dominated by the prolific Aroid *Amorphophallus hildebrandtii*, reaching several feet in height and endemic to the west of Madagascar. On the mammal front we encountered Common Brown Lemurs feeding on mangos and as the light began to fade, the hoped-for Golden-brown Mouse Lemur put in a brief appearance. This species is only found around Lac Ravelobe though it is locally common. Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur and Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur were also seen but as night walks are no longer allowed within the park boundaries, we were not able to linger over these sightings. Many Commerson's Leaf-nosed Bats were active along the path at nightfall.

Day 20

Sunday 1st November

Ampijoroa to Antananarivo

Weather: hot and sunny again

The birders were keen to have a last stab at birds of prey, which had been rather disappointing in Ampijoroa in terms of species. In the car park the nesting Sickle-billed and White-headed Vangas were up and about along with Magpie Robin, Broad-billed Roller and Lesser Vasa Parrot but still no confirmed sightings of Greater Vasa Parrots! We made our way to the forest at the western end of the lake, where Coquerel's Coua, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Long-billed Greenbul, Long-billed Green Sunbird, Madagascar Coucal, Namaqua Dove and Madagascar Turtle Dove all showed readily. The morning's star performance was from a Henst's Goshawk, which our guides heard calling. After watching it fly over several times, it settled near the top of a tall tree, but conveniently on an exposed branch so we could observe and photograph it. Our guides remarked that they had never seen this lemur predator in the reserve before!

Leaving Ampijoroa, we stopped by Lake Ambaromalandy (meaning tree with many birds!) and walked along the east side of it past a plantation of *Jatropha curcas*, a euphorbia used experimentally as bio-fuel. On the lake itself several hundred Red-billed Teal were gathered in flocks. The temperature was already rising as we made our way towards the rice paddies where Claude hoped to show us Madagascar Jacana. At a distance we picked out two, along with several Black-winged Stilt, Humblot's Heron, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, Green-backed Heron, Great White Egret, Black Egret and Common Sandpiper. Pied crow, Yellow-billed Kite, Palm Swift, Madagascar Fody, Coucal and Bee-eater were also noted.

Passing through the nearby town, we saw great mountains of rice-chaff set alight to produce fertiliser. By the road side locals were selling cashew nuts, which grow in the area. We made a brief stop at Berivotra, where seven different kinds of crocodile fossil were unearthed by researchers from Stony Brook University in 1993. Arriving in Mahajanga we ordered lunch at the Piscine Hotel, then went to the beach in search of birds but the tides were wrong. After lunch it was straight to the airport for our last domestic flight of the tour, which was on time. Well done Air Mad, five out of five flights on time! It was a relief to get back to Tana and out of the heat.

Day 21

Monday 2nd November

Antananarivo to Andasibe

Weather: warm and sunny, cloudy later on

Leaving at 7.30, we made our way out of the capital on a winding road that links the capital with the main port of Toamasina. Meandering along ridges and through valleys, the road plunges through the Mandraka Forest (where we saw Madagascar Buzzard and Madagascar Kestrel), down the eastern escarpment to the plain of Moramanga, where we stopped by the Mangoro River. Common Sandpiper and Mascarene Martin were observed here but the Pratincoles that used to frequent the sandbanks have not been observed for some time now Claude told us.

Over lunch at Feo Ny'Ala we got a distant view of Diademed Sifaka feeding in the canopy and a Common Moorhen was noted on the lake. After lunch we had time for a short visit to Analamazaotra Reserve, where we divided into two groups Desi taking the generalists to look for Indri, while the birders went with Julien. Desi's group got good views of Ward's Flycatcher, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo and (finally!) Greater Vasa Parrot, while Brush Warbler and Stripe-throated Jery were heard but not seen. We also found a Short-horned Chameleon *Calumma brevicorne* and a Madagascar Tree Boa by the old fish farm. It's not always easy to see Indri in the afternoon as they are often high in the canopy, less active and less vocal but on hearing them call Desi was able to locate a group of four. After a lot of neck-craning, we made our way out of the park, meeting up with the birding group en route, whose sightings included Greater and Lesser Vasa Parrots, Blue Pigeon, Red-fronted Coua, Blue Coua, Velevet Asity, Ashy Cuckoo Shrike, White-throated Oxylobes, Spectacled Greenbul and Chabert's Vanga.

Leaving the reserve we had a 20 minute drive to reach Vakona Lodge, located close to the edge of the rainforest and more importantly just within earshot of Indri calls! The lodge complex is set around a small lake and soon we had checked into our very comfortable bungalows. Just before nightfall we reassembled for the short drive to the start of the night walk, in an area of forest opposite the reserve. It often strikes me how different one visit can be from the last and there is no telling what is going to show up on a given day. My last night walk here had been in torrential rain and had been a little disappointing I remembered.

Tonight's could hardly have been bettered! We started with two new tree-frog species: *Boophis guibei*, with a characteristic red iris, and *Boophis pyrribus*, whose flame-red colouration is unmistakable. A third frog photographed on the bridge was not identified at the time because it lacked the spines on the elbow and heel of a *Boophis madagascariensis* but after further research I believe it to be *Boophis goudoti*, one of the larger tree frogs and one often taken as food. We were also treated to no fewer than four chameleon species and a Leaf-tailed Gecko – seen in this order: Short-nosed Chameleon *Calumma gastrotaenia*, small and with no occipital lobes (!); Parson's Chameleon juvenile *Calumma parsoni*; Short-horned Chameleon *Calumma brevicorne*; Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko *Uroplatus sikoriana*; Broad-browed Stump-tailed Chameleon *Brookesia superciliaris*.

For everyone in the group a highlight of the evening's walk were four Woolly Lemur sightings– this was a species that had eluded us everywhere else in Madagascar, so to find four plus a baby was definitely a lemur jackpot!

Day 22

Tuesday 3rd November

Mantadia National Park

Weather: cloudy with sunny spells and light drizzle

Up at 6.00 for an early breakfast, we were soon on the bumpy dirt road leading into Mantadia National Park, a large tract of relatively undisturbed primary rainforest and home to several key species of lemur and a host of endemic birds, reptiles and amphibians. Along the road, we saw several Broad-billed Rollers, Purple Heron, Madagascar Fody, Ashy Cuckoo-shrike, Rand's Warbler, Stripe-throated Jery and Madagascar Harrier Hawk. We stopped to view a group of Common Brown Lemurs, but they were shy and moved out of range quickly. Next, a Pygmy Kingfisher shot across the road in front of the bus and we observed its nest site in a cutting in the roadside. Several Giraffe-necked Weevils were spotted on a *Melastoma* bush and a Short-horned Chameleon was also noted.

Arriving at the car park the birders set off with guide Julien and Cathy in search of Ground Rollers and others and had a rewarding morning thanks to Julien's skills at locating some of the more elusive species. First we looked for Scaly Ground Roller by the stream but without luck though we had good views of a second Pygmy Kingfisher, Velvet Asity female and Ward's Flycatcher. Walking along the open road, rather than inside the forest, brought sightings of three Greater Vasa Parrots, Tylas, Madagascar Spinetail, a pair of Madagascar Starlings, Red-tailed Vanga, Dark Newtonia, Blue Coua, Blue Pigeon, Wedge-tailed Jery and Cryptic Warbler, foraging for insects on the underside of a branch. A large raptor flying overhead was identified as a Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk, another new species for us. For Short-legged Ground Roller, Julien took us deeper into the forest, scrambling up a steep slope, to where a pair of this rare endemic and least terrestrial of the family posed for the cameras on an exposed branch off the ground. Later, we also found Pitta-like and Scaly Ground Roller, though less easily photographed.

As lemurs are less habituated in Mantadia, they are not always easy to observe. Hearing Indri call right by the road, we then sighted Black and White Ruffed Lemur feeding on a red-flowering *Sapponia* sp and easily spotted from the road. Adding further interest were a Baron's Mantella several large red Millipedes, Praying Mantis, Jewel Beetles and Giant Land Snails. The generalists with Desi and Claude went in search of lemurs, climbing high to the ridge, where Diademed Sifakas are often found, but not today! In fact all lemurs seemed to be playing hard to get though Indri, Common Brown Lemur and Grey Bamboo Lemur were observed at a distance.

Among the leaf axils of a *Pandanus* Jo found a *Guibemantis pulcher* frog, whose entire life cycle is centred on the plant, while John spotted a *Heterixalus betsileo* tree frog. The generalists also found a Skink *Trachylepis madagascariensis*, Red Millipede, Emperor Moth and a Lined Day Gecko *Phelsuma lineata*. On the bird front, useful contributions to the day's list included Swamp Warbler, Nuthatch Vanga, White-headed Vanga, Chabert's Vanga, Red-Tailed Vanga, Tylas, Ward's Flycatcher, Madagascar Little Grebe, Greater Vasa Parrot, Nelicourvi Weaver and a Souimanga Sunbird on its nest.

Returning to Vakona for a late lunch, some of the group then opted to visit 'Lemur Island' for a closer look at some of the animals rescued from the pet trade, which include Black and White Ruffed Lemur, Grey Bamboo Lemur and Red-fronted Brown Lemur. Just before nightfall, we went back to Andasibe Village for a night walk along the road, where we got good views of Goodman's Mouse Lemur, one of the smaller of the mouse lemurs and currently only known from Andasibe. We also spotted Furry-eared Dwarf Lemur, another species with a very restricted distribution.

Day 23

Wednesday 4th November

Andasibe to Antananarivo

Weather: mostly cloudy, sunny spells

After an early breakfast we headed back to Analamazaotra for a last morning in the reserve. Phil, Tony and Desi went off in search of birds, finding Nuthatch Vanga, Tylas, Spectacled and Long-billed Greenbuls, Common Newtonia, Madagascar White-eye, Madagascar Fody, Madagascar White-eye, Madagascar Buzzard, Nelicourvi Weaver, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher, Pygmy Kingfisher and Magpie Robin. Nose-horned Chameleon *Calumma nasuta* and a frog *Gephyromantis asper* were also seen.

The rest of the group, together with Cathy and Claude, were keen to catch the Indri calling so made our way onto the ridge, where after some effort, our reserve guide found the group of four Indri we had seen on the first day. We watched as they dexterously fed in the canopy, and then descended in a series of spectacular backward leaps, landing on trunks just above where we were assembled. The photographic opportunities could hardly have been better and moreover we were the only spectators there to start with, making the encounter all the more of a privilege. As others joined us, the Indri moved on and at that point they began calling just above where we were standing. Their haunting call, which carries over several kilometres, is strangely reminiscent of whale song and is used to define territories.

Our guide meanwhile was liaising with the research teams to try and locate the family of Diademmed Sifaka, who were moved into the reserve two years ago, following destruction of their habitat during mining operations. We were just about to leave the reserve when news of them came in and we headed off-trail to where we had a clear view of the two adults and baby. Arguably, the most striking in colour of all lemurs, they are also among the largest and are able to live sympatric with Indri as they do not compete for the same foods.

Today's lemur sightings were a fitting climax to the holiday but all too soon it was time to get back on the bus and depart for Tana. Along the way we stopped for a picnic lunch by the river at Mandraka Forest.

Arriving in the capital, there was time for shopping at the craft market before darkness fell and we had our last dinner and time to freshen up at the Orchid Hotel before transferring to the airport. Then it was time to say goodbye to Claude, who we had been very fortunate to have as local guide throughout the tour. Claude's professionalism, knowledge and enthusiasm for his country and its wildlife were a true asset to the tour.

Day 24

Thursday 5th November

Antananarivo to Paris and on to the UK

After a smooth check in and several very thorough security checks, we were on board the Air France flight and soon air bound in the early hours of the morning. Arriving in Paris, we said our goodbyes and the group dispersed to their various regional flight departures...

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Leaf-tailed Gecko - by Cathy Harlow



Short-nosed Chameleon – by Cathy Harlow

Species Accounts

Mammals

Indri *Indri indri*

Two habituated groups seen at Andasibe and two further groups at Mantadia.

Diademed Sifaka *Propithecus diadema diadema*

The group introduced into Andasibe was seen on two occasions, one adult on the first sighting and two adults and a baby on the second.

Milne-Edwards Diademed Sifaka *Propithecus diadema edwardsi*

One seen at Vohiparara feeding in the canopy. Another (possibly the same one) seen near the park entrance at Vohiparara next day.

Coquerel's Sifaka *Propithecus verreauxi coquereli*

Several groups numbering 4-8 seen daily at Ampijoroa, including some babies.

Verreaux's Sifaka *Propithecus verreauxi verreauxi*

One individual seen at Namaza at Isalo, five at Zombitse and numerous groups at Berenty.

Woolly Lemur (Avahi) *Avahi laniger*

Four seen on the night walk in the Mitsinjo reserve at Andasibe.

Ring-tailed Lemur *Lemur catta*

Twelve seen at Anja Community Reserve, eight at Namaza at Isalo and numerous groups of 8-15 or more at Berenty in both gallery forest and spiny forest. Many young babies.

Black & White Ruffed Lemur *Varecia variegata variegata*

Heard at Ranomafana and Vohiparara. One seen feeding in canopy at Mantadia.

Mongoose Lemur *Eulemur mongoz*

One group of four seen several times near the restaurant at Ampijoroa.

Red-bellied Lemur *Eulemur rubriventer*

A pair seen at Ranomafana and three at Vohiparara.

Common Brown Lemur *Eulemur fulvus fulvus*

Several groups observed at Ampijoroa, Andasibe and Mantadia.

Red-fronted Brown Lemur *Eulemur fulvus rufus*

A group seen several times at Ranomafana, including some spotted by Joan at Setam Lodge. A group heard but not seen at Zombitse. Several groups observed daily at Berenty.

Greater Bamboo Lemur *Hapalemur simus*

Two seen at Ranomafana.

Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur *Hapalemur griseus griseus*

Four (two and two) seen at Ranomafana and one at Mantadia.

Golden Bamboo Lemur *Hapalemur aureus*

Three (two, then one) seen at Ranomafana.

Grey Mouse Lemur *Microcebus murinus*

One seen roosting in the botanic gardens at Toliara. Fifteen seen in the spiny forest around Tony and Ian's bungalow at Paradisier. One seen at Berenty on the night walk in the spiny forest and several groups roosting – including the group of three very photogenic ones.

Grey-brown Mouse Lemur *Microcebus griseorufus*

Seen in the botanic gardens at Toliara.

Brown Mouse Lemur *Microcebus rufus*

Three seen along the road at Ranomafana and one at Perinet.

Golden-brown Mouse Lemur *Microcebus ravelobensis*

One seen briefly at Ampijoroa at nightfall. This small species is only known from this lake-side location, from which its scientific name is taken.

Goodman's Mouse Lemur *Microcebus lehilahytsara*

Our second night walk gave us good sightings of this newly described species.

Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur *Cheirogaleus medius*

Good views of this species, which was seen twice at Ampijoroa.

Furry-eared Dwarf Lemur *Cheirogaleus crossleyi*

Several seen at Andasibe on the night walk along the road. Some confusion with *Cheirogaleus major* is possible but most individuals seen at this site are assumed to be *Cheirogaleus crossleyi*.

Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur *Lepilemur edwardsi*

Several individuals seen peering out of their tree-hollow roosts during the mornings at Ampijoroa.

White-footed Sportive Lemur *Lepilemur leucopus*

Very common at Berenty where at least 10 of this nocturnal species were seen in the spiny forest, and in the gallery forest.

Hubbard's Sportive Lemur *Lepilemur hubbardi*

Two were found by our reserve guide in Zombitse National Park on our early morning walk there.

Lowland Streaked Tenrec *Hemicentetes semispinosus*

Only a fleeting glimpse of one at Perinet. No other tenrec species were observed during the trip, which I consider unusual, given the time of year.

Eastern Red Forest Rat *Nesomys rufus*

Often readily seen, this species proved strangely elusive and only one was noted by some of the group.

Western Tuft-tailed Rat *Eliurus myoxinus*

One noted at Ampijoroa, climbing up a tree trunk.

Commerson's Leaf-nosed Bat *Hipposideros commersoni*

Probably a dozen or more were noted flying over the path by the lake at Ampijoroa at nightfall.

Madagascar Flying Fox *Pteropus rufus*

Several hundred seen roosting at Berenty.

Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Two, possibly three seen from the headland at Fort Dauphin, where through binoculars they could just be picked out on the far side of the bay.

Birds

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Two seen on a pond between Ifaty and Toliara

Madagascar Little Grebe *Tachybaptus pelzelni* E

One seen on the river Fatihita en route from Antsirabe to Ranomafana and another on the small lake at Mantadia National Park.

Red-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon rubricauda*

Up to 30 seen in the breeding colony on Nosy Ve, plus young on the nest.

African Darter *Anhinga rufa*

One seen on Lac Ravelobe at Ampijoroa

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Two seen by the lake at Tsimbazaza zoo in Antananarivo

Common Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*

Several noted in the mixed heronry at Tsimbazaza zoo in Antananarivo and from the balcony at Orchid Hotel. Most abundant between Mahajanga and Ampijoroa where a dozen or more seen at a time.

Madagascar Pond Heron *Ardeola idea* E

One noted at our lunch stop by the pond between Antsirabe and Ranomafana. Several seen at Ampijoroa.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Common and widespread in rice paddies, roosting on trees and at wetland sites

Green-backed Heron *Butorides striatus*

Fairly common in wetland but most abundant in the west, especially at Ampijoroa. A total of 25 noted.

Black Egret *Egretta ardesiaca*

Three seen at Tsimbazaza. Locally very abundant in the west between Mahajanga and Ampijoroa, where up to 30 seen in flocks.

Dimorphic Heron *Egretta dimorpha*

Locally abundant in highland rice paddies.

Great Egret *Egretta alba melanorhynchos*

Seen in highland wetland and rice paddies but most numerous in the west.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

Isolated individuals seen perched on trees or in flight near Fianarantsoa, at Anja Reserve, at Ampijoroa and Mantadia.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea firsas*

Three seen on the cliffs by the Onilahy River and one on Nosy Ve and between Ifaty and Toliara.

Humblot's Heron *Ardea humbloti* (E)

Several individuals seen on Lake Ravelobe at Ampijoroa. Another noted in rice paddies at Lake Amboromalandy at Ankazomborona, between Mahajanga and Ampijoroa.

Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta*

Nowhere abundant but individuals and pairs seen in highland rice paddies and en route to Berenty from Fort Dauphin. Total of 14 observed.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus falcinellus*

Locally abundant at Lake Ravelobe and between Ampijoroa and Mahajanga where up to 40 observed at a time.

Madagascar Crested Ibis *Lophotibis cristata cristata* (E)

Two were seen at Andasibe.

Flamingo *Phoenicopterus* sp.

Seven noted on the sand banks between Ifaty and Toliara but unconfirmed.

White-faced Duck *Dendrocygna viduata*

Flocks of 20-40 seen at Tsimbazaza zoo, on the lake at Jardin du Roi at Isalo, on the sand banks between Ifaty and Toliara, and in the west at Ampijoroa and Lake Amboromalandy.

Knob-billed Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotus melanotus*

Three seen in flight by the Mandrare River at Berenty and 10 on Lake Ravelobe at Ampijoroa.

Red-billed Teal *Anas erythrorhyncha*

Several seen on the small lake by Jardin du Roi at Isalo. Several flocks of up to 150 seen on Lake Amboromalandy in the west.

Madagascar Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus vociferoides* (E)

A pair of this rare and critically endangered bird was seen at Lake Ravelobe at Ampijoroa.

Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk *Aviceda madagascariensis* (E)

Though rare in evergreen forest, one was seen in flight at Mantadia.

Yellow-billed Kite *Milvus aegyptius parasitus*

Common and widespread, especially in the highlands and in the south.

Madagascar Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides radiatus*(E)

Four individuals seen – in flight at Reniala Reserve Ifaty, in flight between Ifaty and Toliara, perched in a tree en route between Mahajanga and Ampijoroa and perched over the road at Mantadia.

Henst's Goshawk *Accipiter henstii* (E)

One of these near threatened raptors seen in flight and later perched at Ampijoroa.

France's Sparrowhawk *Accipiter francesiae francesiae*

Seen at Berenty and Ampijoroa, where it was witnessed hunting a young Turtle Dove.

Madagascar Buzzard *Buteo brachypterus* (E)

Fairly common at most forest sites but not observed at Berenty.

Madagascar Kestrel *Falco newtoni newtoni*

Seen on most days and in total 40-50 individuals.

Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*

Seen from the bus between Zombitse and Toliara and at Berenty in small numbers.

White-breasted Mesite *Mesitornis variegatus* (E)

A pair of this very vocal bird seen on three occasions at Ampijoroa.

Madagascar buttonquail *Turnix nigricollis* (E)

Pairs seen in Botanic Gardens in Toliara, at Anakao and Ifaty.

Madagascar Flufftail *Sarothrura insularis* (E)

Called out by Fidy at Vohiparara.

Madagascar Wood Rail *Canirallus kiolooides* (E)

Heard but not seen at Ranomafana and Perinet.

White-throated Rail *Dryolimnas cuvieri cuvieri*

Several seen from the boat and from the shore at Lac Ravelobe at Ampijoroa.

Allen's Gallinule *Porphyryla alleni*

Five seen at Lac Ravelobe, Ampijoroa

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus pyrrhorrhoa*

One seen on the lake at Feo Ny'ala restaurant at Andasibe.

Madagascar Jacana *Actophilornis albinucha* (E)

Two seen in the rice paddies by Lake Amboromalandy.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus himantopus*

Between 10 and 15 were observed on ponds between Toliara and Ifaty and at the salt pans at Ifaty. Around Lake Amboromandy between Mahajanga and Ampijoroa, several were also noted.

Crab Plover *Dromas ardeola*

23 seen on a tidal sandbank at Nosy Ve, off Anakao.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Several observed by ponds and on the shore between Toliara and Ifaty, as well as on the beach at Ifaty.

Kittlitz's Plover *Charadrius pecuarius*

Common on the shore, ponds and salt pans at Anakao and Ifaty and often in association with other plovers.

Madagascar Plover *Charadrius thoracicus* (E)

Two spotted on the shore at Ifaty.

Three-banded Plover *Charadrius tricollaris*

Three seen on the salt pans and ponds at Ifaty

White-fronted Plover *Charadrius marginatus*

A few individuals seen at Nosy Ve and on the salt pans at Ifaty.

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

Small groups of 3-6 seen from the beach at Ifaty and by the mangroves en route to Toliara.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Individuals and small groups seen on the beach at Ifaty and by the mangroves en route to Toliara.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Groups of 2-5 seen at Nosy Ve, on the beach at Ifaty, on the ponds, salt flats and by the mangroves.

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Groups of 2-5 seen on ponds and beaches between Toliara and Ifaty, at salt pans at Ifaty and on Mandrare river at Berenty.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Observed by river at Christo Hotel, on ponds at Ifaty and near Toliara and on Mangoro River near Moromanga.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Several noted on the beach at Ifaty, near the mangroves and salt pans.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Large flock seen on the beach at Ifaty and small numbers elsewhere on the coast.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Small groups of 5-10 noted on the ponds and beaches between Toliara and Ifaty.

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*

Two seen on the sandbank at Nosy Ve among a flock of Crab Plover.

Greater Crested Tern *Sterna bergii*

A single bird seen in flight at Fort Dauphin.

Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*

Several birds noted in flight along the south west coast between Anakao and Ifaty.

Madagascar Sandgrouse *Pterocles personatus* (E)

Several groups of 4-26 birds seen on the Mandrare River sand banks and in the fields at Berenty.

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*

Widespread in towns and villages

Madagascar Turtle Dove *Streptopelia picturata* (E)

Abundant at most forest sites.

Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis aliena*

Apart from a single bird seen near Antananarivo, most abundant south of Isalo and in the west.

Madagascar Green Pigeon *Treron australis*

Ssp. xenia seen at Berenty and *Ssp. australis* at Ampijoroa.

Madagascar Blue Pigeon *Alectroenas madagascariensis*

7 seen at Andasibe and Mantadia

Greater Vasa Parrot *Coracopsis vasa vasa*

Only confirmed sightings at Andasibe and Mantadia.

Lesser Vasa Parrot *Coracopsis nigra*

Ssp. libis observed in west and south and nominate *Ssp.* in east. Total of around 50 birds observed.

Grey-headed Lovebird *Agapornis canus*

Abundant in small flocks from Isalo onwards and at Berenty.

Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus rochii*

Heard at most forest sites but less readily seen. A breeding endemic that overwinters in Africa.

Giant Coua *Coua gigas* (E)

One individual seen at Zombitse but abundant at Berenty

Red-breasted Coua *Coua serriana* (E)

Heard at Mantadia but not seen.

Red-fronted Coua *Coua reynaudii* (E)

Individual birds seen at Ranomafana, Analamazaotra and Mantadia.

Runing Coua *Coua cursor* (E)

One seen at Reniala Reserve, Ifaty.

Red-capped Coua *Coua ruficeps* (E)

Several noted on the paths at Ampijoroa

Green-capped Coua *Coua olivaceiceps* (E)

Single birds seen in the botanical gardens at Toliara and at Reniala Reserve at Ifaty.

Crested Coua *Coua cristata* (E)

Several seen at Zombitse but more abundant at Ifaty, Berenty and Ampijoroa, in total 35 seen and most common of coua species observed.

Blue Coua *Coua caerulea* (E)

Seen several times at Ranomafana, Andasibe and Mantadia.

Madagascar Coucal *Centropus toulou*

Very common and widespread and seen and heard most days.

Barn Owl *Tyto alba*

Seen perched on a log at our picnic spot between Antsirabe and Ranomafana and at Berenty.

Torotoroka Scops Owl *Otus madagascariensis* (E)

Seen roosting at Berenty and Ampijoroa and heard calling at both locations.

Rainforest Scops Owl *Otus rutilus*

Heard at Analamazaotra.

White-browed Owl *Ninox superciliaris* (E)

Roosting birds were found at Zombitse and Berenty, where they were also heard calling at night.

Madagascar Long-eared Owl *Asio madagascariensis*

Heard calling at Analamazaotra.

Madagascar Nightjar *Caprimulgus madagascariensis madagascariensis*

Seen or heard at most locations except Perinet.

Madagascar Spinetail *Zoonavena grandidieri*

Seen en route to Berenty and at Mantadia.

African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus*

Seen at Isalo, at Mahajanga, Antananarivo, Mahajanga and Andasibe

Alpine Swift *Apus melba*

Seen in the highlands and between Mahajanga and Ampijoroa.

Madagascar Black Swift *Apus barbatus balstoni*

Numerous at Isalo and several sites in the south west.

Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher *Alcedo vintsioides vintsioides*

Seen at most locations where suitable habitat provided, totally around 20.

Pygmy Kingfisher *Ceyx madagascariensis* (E)

Two seen at Mantadia and one at Andasibe.

Madagascar Bee-eater *Merops superciliosus*

Common in a variety of open and forest habitats. More than 100 observed.

Broad-billed Roller *Eurystomus glaucurus*

Common at Isalo, Berenty, Ampijoroa and Andasibe and Mantadia.

Short-legged Ground Roller *Brachypteracias leptosomus* (E)

Heard at Ranomafana and a pair showed well at Mantadia.

Scaly Ground Roller *Brachypteracias squamigera* (E)

Seen once only at Mantadia

Pitta-like Ground Roller *Atelornis pittoides* (E)

Two seen at Ranomafana, one at Vohiparara and a further one at each of Mantadia and Andasibe.

Rufous-headed Ground Roller *Atelornis crossleyi* (E)

Heard at Ranomafana

Long-tailed Ground Roller *Uratelornis chimaera* (E)

Two seen at Reniala on first morning and one on second visit.

Madagascar Cuckoo-roller *Leptosomus discolor*

Heard at Ranomafana, Ifaty and Mantadia but good sightings at Isalo, Zombitse and Ampijoroa.

Madagascar Hoopoe *Upupa marginata* (E)

One seen in the grounds of the Relais des Plateaux Hotel at Antananarivo Airport then several at all dry forest sites, totalling around 30.

Velvet Asity *Philepitta castanea* (E)

Two seen at Ranomafana and two at Mantadia and Perinet.

Schlegel's Asity *Philepitta schlegeli* (E)

A nesting pair observed on an early morning walk at Ampijoroa, giving excellent photo opportunities.

Common Sunbird Asity *Neodrepanis coruscans* (E)

Heard at Ranomafana.

Madagascar Bush Lark *Mirafra hova* (E)

Common on open ground and in degraded habitat in drier areas.

Mascarene Martin *Phedina borbonica*

Common and widespread.

Madagascar Wagtail *Motacilla flaviventris* (E)

Widespread out of dry areas and commonly seen around habitation.

Ashy Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina cinerea*

Ssp *cinerea* seen at Ranomafana, Ampijoroa, Mantadia and Andasibe, often in mixed feeding flocks, totalling around 10 birds.

Madagascar Bulbul *Hypsipetes madagascariensis*

Very common and widespread.

Littoral Rock Thrush *Monticola imerinus* (E)

Very common at Anakao, where up to 12 observed at a time.

Forest Rock Thrush *Monticola sharpei* (E)

One perched in the open above the road at Ranomafana.

Benson's Rock Thrush *Monticola bensoni* (E)

Six observed at Isalo, mostly around Relais de la Reine.

Madagascar Magpie Robin *Copsychus albospectularis* (E)

Commonly seen at all forest sites.

Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*

Observed in highlands south of Antananarivo, at Ranomafana and Andasibe.

Madagascar Brush Warbler *Nesillas typica* (E)

Commonly heard. Seen at Antsirabe, Ranomafana and Andasibe.

Sub-desert Brush Warbler *Nesillas lantzi* (E)

Very common at Anakao and also seen at Ifaty

Madagascar Swamp Warbler *Acrocephalus newtoni* (E)

Seen at Vohiparara, Ifaty and Mantadia.

Thamnornis Warbler *Thamnornis chloropetoides* (E)

Two seen at Reniala at Ifaty.

Rand's Warbler *Randia pseudozosterops* (E)

Seen perched in the canopy at Ranomafana and Mantadia.

Common Newtonia *Newtonia brunneicauda* (E)

Heard or seen at most forest sites.

Dark Newtonia *Newtonia amphichroa* (E)

Seen once at Mantadia.

Archbold's Newtonia *Newtonia archboldi* (E)

One pair seen at Reniala at Ifaty.

Madagascar Cisticola *Cisticola cherina*

Widespread and common.

Ward's Flycatcher *Pseudobias wardi* (E)

6 seen at Andasibe and Mantadia, where fairly common.

Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone mutata mutata*

Regularly encountered at all forest sites, probably 35 in total, several on the nest.

Common Jery *Neomixis tenella* (E)

Very common at all forest sites.

Stripe-throated Jery *Neomixis striatigula* (E)

Heard at Andasibe and two seen at Mantadia.

Wedge-tailed Jery *Neomixis flavoviridis* (E)

One seen at Ranomafana and at Mantadia.

Cryptic Warbler *Cryptosylvicola randrianasoloi* (E)

Heard at Vohiparara and one seen at Mantadia.

White-throated Oxylabes *Oxylabes madagascariensis* (E)

One seen at Ranomafana and one at Perinet.

Appert's Greenbul *Berniera apperti* (E)

Six seen at Zombitse.

Long-billed Greenbul *Berniera madagascariensis* (E)

Several seen at Zombitse, common at Ampijoroa and Mantadia, probably 20 in total.

Spectacled Greenbul *Berniera zosterops* (E)

A few seen at Ranomafana, Perinet and Mantadia.

Grey-crowned Greenbul *Berniera cinereiceps* (E)

One seen at Vohiparara

Souimanga Sunbird *Nectarinia sovimanga*

Widespread and common throughout.

Long-billed Green Sunbird *Nectarinia notata*

A total of 12 seen at Ranomafana, Anja, Isalo, Ampijoroa and Mantadia.

Madagascar White-eye *Zosterops maderaspatanus maderaspatanus*

Widespread but missing from south-west and south.

Red-tailed Vanga *Calicalicus madagascariensis* (E)

One seen at each of Vohiparara and Mantadia.

Rufous Vanga *Schetba rufa* (E)

Heard at Ranomafana, eight seen at Ampijoroa

Hook-billed Vanga *Vanga curvirostris* (E)

One seen catching a tree-frog at Ranomafana, then on the nest at Reniala at Ifaty, at Berenty and Ampijoroa. A total of around 16 seen.

Van Dam's Vanga *Xenopirostris damii* (E)

Several seen at Ampijoroa.

Lafresnaye's Vanga *Xenopirostris xenopirostris* (E)

One recorded at Reniala at Ifaty.

Pollen's Vanga *Xenopirostris polleni* (E)

One seen in a mixed feeding flock at Vohiparara.

Sickle-billed Vanga *Falcoelea palliata* (E)

After hearing it at Zombitse, several were seen at Ifaty and more at Ampijoroa, in total around 25.

White-headed Vanga *Artamella viridis* (E)

Seen sporadically in both humid and dry forest, nowhere abundant. Nesting birds at Ampijoroa.

Chabert's Vanga *Leptopterus chabert* (E)

Seen at most sites, though not Berenty or Ampijoroa. At most, 10 sighted.

Blue Vanga *Cyanolanius madagascarinus madagascarinus*

One observed at Ranomafana

Nuthatch Vanga *Hypositta corallirostris* (E)

Only seen at Mantadia and Andasibe

Tylas *Tylas eduardi* (E)

Seen at Ranomafana, Mantadia and Andasibe, four in total.

Crested Drongo *Dicrurus forficatus*

Very widespread, seen on most days.

Pied Crow *Corvus albus*

Very common everywhere except Ranomafana and Andasibe

Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*

Abundant and seen everywhere except at in forest at Ranomafana

Madagascar Starling *Saroglossa aurata* (E)

Two pairs seen at Zombitse and Mantadia

Nelicourvi Weaver *Ploceus nelicourvi* (E)

Several birds seen at Ranomafana, Mantadia and Andasibe.

Sakalava Weaver *Ploceus sakalava* (E)

Common in drier areas but not noted at Ampijoroa.

Madagascar Fody *Foudia madagascariensis* (E)

Very common in disturbed areas, fields, paddies and in drier areas.

Madagascar Mannikin *Lonchura nana* (E)

Fairly common in flocks at most sites, though not noted at Ampijoroa and Andasibe.

Reptiles

Stump-tailed Chameleon *Brookesia superciliaris*

A pair of these were seen in the leaf litter at Ranomafana and a third at Andasibe.

Short-nosed Chameleon *Calumma gastrotaenia*

Seen twice at Ranomafana and once at Andasibe.

Short-horned Chameleon *Calumma brevicorne*

Seen several times at Ranomafana and Andasibe and once at Mantadia.

Parson's Chameleon *Calumma parsonii*

One female seen at Andasibe.

O'Shaughnessy's Chameleon *Calumma osbaughnesyi*

Seen on night walk along the road at Ranomafana

Belted Chameleon *Furcifer balteatus*

One female seen at Ranomafana by the hotel.

Oustalet's Chameleon *Furcifer oustaleti*

Around 20 seen in dry forest areas including Anja, Isalo, Berenty and Ampijoroa, including some large 40cm long specimens. Along with Parson's, this is the largest chameleon in the world.

Spiny-backed Chameleon *Furcifer verrucosus*

Several seen at and en route to Berenty.

Jewel Chameleon *Furcifer lateralis*

One seen at Namaza Canyon in Isalo.

Lined Day Gecko *Phelsuma lineata*

Seen at Vohiparara at Ranomafana and at Fort Dauphin

Four-spotted Day Gecko *Phelsuma quadriocellata*

Males distinguished from females by bluish tail. Many of these geckos congregate on the wooden-framed sun shade at Belle Vue viewpoint.

Koch's Giant Day Gecko *Phelsuma madagascariensis kochi***Modest Day Gecko** *Phelsuma modesta leiogaster*

Seen at the Dauphin Hotel in Fort Dauphin

Grey Day Gecko *Phelsuma mutabilis*

Seen in the botanic gardens in Toliara and in the spiny forest at Berenty, the species can change colour rapidly.

Standing's Day Gecko *Phelsuma standingi*

Well camouflaged and with intricate markings, this species was found at Zombitse.

Sakalava Bark Gecko *Blaesodactylus sakalava*

A nocturnal species found in a hollow on a tree trunk at Zombitse.

Hemidactylus mercatorius

A nocturnal gecko found in the leaf litter at Berenty

Big-headed Gecko *Paroedura picta*

A nocturnal gecko found on the bark of a tree at Berenty

Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko *Uruplatus phantasticus*

Seen by some of the group at Ranomafana.

Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko *Uruplatus sikoriae*

Seen on the night walk at Mitsinjo Forest at Andasibe.

Four-spotted Iguanid *Oplurus quadriomaculatus*

Seen along the road between Fort Dauphin and Berenty, in the transitional forest.

Spiny-tailed Iguanid *Oplurus cyclurus*

Abundant at Ampijoroa – one was observed digging a nest and laying eggs.

Collared Iguanid *Oplurus cuvieri*

Noted on several days at Ampijoroa.

Three-eyed Lizard *Charalodon madagascariensis*

Seen at Anakao, Ifaty and Berenty and abundant at all three sites.

Lined Plated Lizard *Zonosaurus laticaudata*

Found at Isalo and Perinet but especially abundant at Ampijoroa.

Elegant Mabuya Skink *Trachylepis elegans*

Observed at Isalo, Mantadia and Andasibe

Madagascar Skink *Trachylepis madagascariensis***Madagascar Tree Boa** *Sanzinia madagascariensis*

Seen twice – in a wall along the road at Ranomafana and by the fish farm at Andasibe.

Lined Snake *Liopholidophis lateralis*

Seen at Anja Community Reserve.

Big-eyed Snake *Mimophis mahfalensis*

Seen twice, a juvenile at Ifaty and an adult at Ampijoroa.

Opisthoglyphous Snake *Ithycyphus miniatus*.

Arboreal snake seen at Ampijoroa.

Orange Tree Snake *Stenophis variabilis*

This nocturnal, arboreal snake was found by Claude in the spiny forest at Berenty

Nile Crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus*

Half a dozen crocodiles were seen on Lake Ravelobe at Ampijoroa.

Amphibians

Mantidactylus ulcerosus

Seen close to the shore of Lake Ravelobe at Ampijoroa

Boophis doulioti

Tree frog found in the toilets at Ampijoroa

Guibemantis pulcher

Frog found by Jo in a *Pandanus* at Mantadia.

Baron's painted mantella *Mantella baroni*

Seen at Vohiparara and in Mantadia

Leaf-litter frog *Aeghyptodactylus madagascariensis*

Seen at Vohiparara

Dark-sided Frog *Mantidactylus melanopleura*

Seen at Vohiparara

Tiny frog *Anodonthyla moramora*

Seen at Vohiparara

Madagascar Tree Frog *Boophis madagascariensis*

Seen in the stream near the entrance to the park at Ranomafana.

Boophis guibei

Tree frog with a characteristic red iris from Andasibe found on first night walk.

Boophis pyrhus

Tree frog from Andasibe whose flame-red colouration is unmistakable. Found on first night walk.

Boophis goudoti

Tree frog on the bridge at Andasibe, during the first night walk.

Heterixalus betsileo

Seen on the way into the Namaza Canyon at Isalo and in Mantadia.

Heterixalus luteostriatus

Seen on the way into the Namaza Canyon at Isalo

Gephyromantis asper

Found in Perinet.

Other wildlife

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|---|---|
| Golden Orb Spider <i>Nephila madagascariensis</i> | Skull-marked Spider (at river by Christ Hotel) |
| Flatid Leaf Bug <i>Phromnia rosea</i> | Giant Lubber Locust <i>Phytacus saxosus</i> |
| Mole Cricket | Stick Insect (order <i>Phasmatodea</i>) |
| Giant red and black millipede | Hissing cockroach (genus <i>Gromphadorrhina</i>) |
| Scorpion <i>Grospus palpator</i> | Water Scorpion (<i>Nepidae</i>) |
| Lady Bug (<i>Coccinellidae</i>) | Praying Mantis (<i>Mantodea</i>) |
| Giraffe-necked Weevil <i>Trachelophorus giraffa</i> | Hairy weevil (<i>Curculionidae</i>) |
| Shield Bug (<i>Pentatomidae</i>) | Click Beetle (<i>Coleoptera</i>) |

Various other beetles included 'bulldozer' beetle and 'manic mating' beetle at Ampijoroa, which came out after the rain.

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| Swallowtail (birdwing type butterfly) <i>Atrophaneura anterior</i> | Monarch butterfly (<i>Danaus sp.</i>) |
| Citrus swallowtail butterfly <i>Papilio demodocus</i> | Blue and Black butterfly <i>Papilio oribazua</i> |

Various moths: hawkmoth, emperor moth, comet moth larvae

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|------------------|----------------|------------|
| Dragonflies | Damselflies | |
| Giant Land Snail | | |
| Freshwater Eel | Sea star | Clam |
| Butterflyfish | Angelfish | Parrotfish |
| Wrasse | Cleaner Wrasse | Clownfish |
| Pipefish | Chromis | Sea urchin |
| Sea Slug | | |