

Madagascar

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 October - 8 November 2013

Report compiled by Cathy Harlow



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Participants:	Lynda Cooper Heather Bagg Terry Underdown Jean Underdown Stephen Wild Hilary Wild Tracey Young Paul Young Pam Cranmer John Cranmer	

Day 1

Monday 14th October

UK to Paris

Most of our group were flying from London Heathrow to Paris and we met up at the gate, just before boarding the flight. Arriving at Paris CDG, we collected bags and using the free shuttle train, made our way to the Ibis Hotel. After check in, we met for drinks and dinner at the hotel's restaurant. We were joined by Pam and John, who arrived independently from Manchester. It didn't take long to establish that we would be a group with wide and varied interests and unbounded enthusiasm.

Day 2

Tuesday 15th October

Paris to Antananarivo

We returned to the airport to check in for our Air France flight to Antananarivo. Arriving early, the queues were short and soon we were tucking into a leisurely breakfast in the departures area before boarding the plane. The flight went smoothly, with a good selection of in-flight entertainment on offer. Ten hours later we disembarked to a balmy Tana evening. Once through immigration, there was a long wait for luggage with (somewhat embarrassingly) tour leader's bag last off the carousel. Clearing customs we were met by Tovo, our local guide, whose hard work, kindness, good humour and knowledge would see us through our three-week Madagascar adventure. After a five-minute drive, we arrived at the Orchid Hotel and checked into our spacious rooms.

Day 3

Wednesday 16th October

Tsarasaotra Reserve then Antananarivo to Antsirabe

Cloudy then patchy sunshine; afternoon shower

At breakfast we met up with Heather, our tenth group member, who had already been in Madagascar for a week, visiting Kirindy and the Tsingy independently. The Orchid Hotel's garden and distant rice paddies yielded the first bird sightings of Common Stonechat, Madagascar Fody, Common Myna, Great Egret and Black Egret.

After breakfast, we had a short information meeting and then once the luggage was loaded up, we set off for the short drive to Tsarasaotra, a Ramsar wetland reserve in the suburbs of Antananarivo, once owned by Queen Ranaivalona, the last Merina monarch. While Tovo sorted out tickets, we gathered on the lakeshore. Some of the group photographed the impressive Golden Orb Spiders, while others focused on the lake's small island, where every available space was festooned with Cattle Egret, Dimorphic Egret, Great Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron and Squacco Heron. With a little effort we picked out a few Black Egret and Madagascar Pond Heron as well. On the water, in amongst flocks of White-faced Duck and Red-billed Teal, we found a handful of Knob-billed Duck and a Madagascar Little Grebe. We also noted Common Moorhen, Madagascar Kingfisher, Madagascar Coucal, Common Jery, Madagascar Fody, Madagascar White-eye, Mascarene Martin and Yellow-billed Kite. Around the lake, Jacarandas and purple and white flowered *Brunfelsia* (Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow) bushes were in bloom. A flash of blue in the grass turned up a Brilliant Blue butterfly *Junonia rhadama*, while a tiny Grass Blue *Cupidopsis cissus* flitted around us. A small orange butterfly a white butterfly, a brown dragonfly and Ant Lion were also noted, and we observed a wasp attacking a spider on a tree trunk.

Next we made our way through the crowded streets of Antananarivo to the city centre and lunch at the Station Café, where we ate in the garden. Madagascar Fodys, the males in red breeding plumage, were chattering in the trees overhead and Madagascar Wagtails were foraging on the lawn. A Citrus Swallowtail butterfly flitted above us but wouldn't pause for the photographers. African Monarchs were also noted.

Heading out of the capital on the RN7, a twisting, traffic-clogged street flanked by vendors selling everything from sausages to phone cards, we passed the president's residence, an opulent edifice modelled on the nineteenth century Queen Ranaivalona's Palace. Soon, we were enjoying the sweeping vistas typical of Madagascar's Hauts Plateaux; smooth granite inselbergs rising from the fertile rice paddies, where women were busily engaged in the back-breaking planting of rice seedlings from the nursery paddies. Numerous Cattle Egrets and Dimorphic Egrets were foraging in the paddies and we got a distant view of Hamerkop, Madagascar Kestrel and Pied Crow.

We stopped by a river, where local women have a thriving business making hats and souvenirs from raffia. It's always good to spread the benefits of tourism and while some of our group was observing Common Sandpiper in the river bed, others were trying on and buying colourful sunhats. A little later, we stopped again to photograph the rice paddies, in the glorious golden light of the late afternoon sun. At nightfall, we arrived in Antsirabe, a town noted for its dairy and textile industries and brewery. We checked into the family-run Camellia Hotel, and after dinner we benefited from a restful night in the spacious and comfortable rooms.

Day 4

Thursday 17th October

Antsirabe to Ranomafana

Weather: warm and fairly sunny; cloudy and light rain at Ranomafana

We awoke to a fresh morning and a 6.30 breakfast. As the luggage was loaded onto the roof of the bus, we watched Madagascar White-eye and Madagascar Green Sunbird feasting on the nectar of a Hibiscus in the hotel gardens. We stopped at the monument to the eighteen tribal groups and Tovo told us of the origins of the Malagasy people. We were soon to discover that our primatologist and research scientist guide is also passionate about the history and culture of his people. What a bonus! Today's long but exciting drive along the backbone of Madagascar's mountainous interior was punctuated by ever-changing scenes from village life. Zebu, a humped cattle, play a pivotal role, both in providing transport and in breaking up the hard-baked clay of the rice paddies, which were stacked up in terraces. Stopping for a photograph, we found Madagascar Kestrel, Madagascar Kingfisher, Great Egret and Cattle Egret plus flocks of Mascarene Martins in flight over the paddies. Introduced Common Myna and Feral Pigeon are ubiquitous around towns and villages.

Our next stop was in a pocket of native woodland dominated by *Tapia Uapaca bojeri*. The trunks of these fire-resistant trees are reminiscent of cork oaks, but they are *Euphorbiaceae*. Local people were selling their hard, sour fruits by the road side and Tovo engaged a couple of them to walk with us. This is a courtesy rather than a necessity and it shows the locals that we value their knowledge as well as the wildlife of the area. We observed some of the more common endemics: Common Jery, Madagascar Bulbul, Souimanga Sunbird, Madagascar Fody and Madagascar White-eye. It would be hard to miss the brilliant coloured Rainbow Locust and here too we found Jewel Chameleon, one of the few ground-dwelling species. A pair of Yellow-billed Kites circled in the distance.

Arriving at the attractive historic town of Ambositra, which is known for its skilled wood carvers, we visited a workshop and several of the group bought souvenirs. Continuing south, we got decent views of Madagascar Buzzard, Stonechat and a Greenback Heron. We paused by a fragment of rainforest, where a small pond and marsh looked promising. Here we got a flash of a Madagascar Rail, a decent view of Madagascar Snipe and a wonderful acrobatic display from a pair of male Cuckoo Rollers in flight. Another highlight was a Madagascar Swamp Warbler snatching a blue dragonfly on the wing. On a cluster of granite boulders we witnessed the territorial head-bobbing of some iguanids: Dumeril's Madagascar Swift *Oplurus quadrimaculatus*. We also found one of Madagascar's most widespread frogs Madagascar Grass (or Ridged) Frog *Ptychadena mascareniensis*.

We stopped for a late lunch at Ialatsara, a rustic lodge and restaurant bordering a small private rainforest reserve, where we saw a female France's Sparrowhawk, Short-horned Chameleon and O'Shaughnessy's Chameleon. Stopping for fuel at Ambohimahaso (meaning the place that brings good things!), some of the group jumped out to photograph a tree festooned with nesting Intermediate Egret, Cattle Egret and Black-crowned Night Heron. Soon after, we left the main road, heading east on the last leg of what had been a long, but never dull, journey. Full credit to Danny our careful driver who kept a steady pace on today's endlessly winding road. We arrived at Ranomafana at nightfall and checked into our rooms at CentreEst Hotel, in the village.

Day 5

Friday 18th October

Ranomafana National Park

Weather: warm and sunny

After an early breakfast we were on the bus for the short hop to the main entrance to Ranomafana National Park. The rainforest reserve protects important tracts of primary forest and regrowth areas and was created following the discovery of the Golden Bamboo Lemur *Hapalemur aureus*, which was identified as a new species in 1985, by Malagasy and foreign scientists, among them Pat Wright. Today's plan was to explore the Talatakely (little Tuesday) area of the park in search of the three species of bamboo lemur, the numerous endemic birds and everything else that this marvellous rainforest reserve offers. We were headed by reserve guides Jean-Chrys and Bertain and assisted by spotters Ju and Baku. While Tovo was sorting out entry permits we clocked up a decent selection of birds from the car park. Rand's Tetraka was singing from its perch on a dead branch above the canopy. Meanwhile, Forest Fody, Crested Drongo, Stripe-throated Jery and a lovely pair of Madagascar Starling were visible close up and a female Cuckoo Roller flew overhead. Plunging down a flight of stone steps into the forest, we found a Velvet Asity nest and the huge suspended cocoon of a Comet Moth. We emerged briefly from the dense forest to cross the Namorona River, where Mascarene Martins darted to and fro and Madagascar Black Swifts were seen soaring. While some of the group were admiring an *Oenia oncidiflora* orchid, a pair of Chabert's Vanga flew over.

The spotters meanwhile had located a group of four Golden Bamboo Lemurs and without delay we careered up the trail to find them quietly tucking into stands of bamboo. You have to expect a fair amount of neck-craning when the lemurs are feeding in the canopy and when they're back-lit, they are also challenging to photograph. Next, our guides showed us a diminutive leaf-litter dwelling Stump-tailed Chameleon. Next up were a family of Milne-Edward's Sifaka, one of the largest of the lemurs with dark glossy fur and startling orange-red eyes. We watched from a distance as they fed, but camera lenses jostling for a clear view. Then abruptly, they dropped down to check us out. A second or two of eye-to-eye contact is enough to send shivers down your spine and then in a flash, they've bounded away trunk to trunk at a speed no fit Naturetrekker could match. Tovo explained that having finished feeding, they were off to seek a safe spot for a nap, and we should leave them to it! Next up were two Greater Bamboo Lemurs, alas not a viable breeding pair. If anything, this species is even more endangered than the Golden Bamboo Lemur. We watched them feeding, adeptly grabbing clusters of three to five leaves at a time.

Pitta-like Ground Roller showed well for some of the group. We repeatedly heard the 'Wolf Whistle' call of Red-tailed Vanga but it failed to show. Madagascar Brush Warbler, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Madagascar Magpie Robin and Madagascar Wagtail were more obliging. We stopped to photograph *Eugenia jambos*, a shaving brush white flowered shrub introduced from South-east Asia and an epiphytic yellow-flowered *Kalanchoe* sp. During the morning we also found a Praying Mantis, a stunning *Polybothris* beetle with four white spots and three butterflies: *Papilio oribazus* a striking Swallowtail with turquoise markings, a clearwing *Acraea lia* and a *Satyridae* with striking orange spots, possibly *Strabena tamatave*.

After lunch at the hotel and a rest, we set out at 15.30, taking the coach up the road. We stopped to photograph a sluggish Madagascar Tree Boa *Sanzinia madagascariensis* by the roadside, also observing a pair of Chabert's Vanga and a Madagascar Sunbird.

We stopped again where the River Namorona drops off the escarpment in a series of waterfalls. We soon found Giraffe-necked Weevil on its favourite Melastomaceae bush *Dichaetanthera cordifolia* and two tiny Nose-horned Chameleons. On the damp cliff beside the road, we found two Madagascar Tree Frogs *Boophis madagascariensis* along with an impressive array of plants: purple Dancing Ladies Orchids *Cynorchis purpurescens*, a purple *Streptocarpus* sp, a Sundew *Drosera madagascariensis*, a red-flowered epiphytic *Kalanchoe uniflora*, Mistletoe Cactus *Rhipsalis baccifera* and an orchid *Angraecum* sp. We heard a Madagascar Wood Rail call, but did not see it.

On our way back down the road our guides found us a diminutive Brown Mouse Lemur. With the help of a banana smear, the group got some decent photographs as it darted to and fro along the branches. Once you get into the swing of leaving no leaf unturned it's amazing what you can find in and around the hotel – a cursory glance around the hotel gardens produced a Stick Insect and a White-spotted Frog *Heterixalus alboguttatus*. We reassembled for dinner and briefly met up with the Naturetrek 'Lemurs' group.

Day 6

Saturday 19th October

Ranomafana National Park

Weather: warm and sunny, some thunder and a few rain drops in the afternoon

After an early breakfast we headed for Vohiparara, an area of mid to high-altitude montane rainforest with slightly easier terrain than yesterday's park visit. The day dawned clear and threads of mist hung over the rainforested peaks as we made our way up the winding road. Jean-Chrys stopped for a Blue Coua, perched in the open above the road, warming up in the first rays of morning sun, then a pair of Blue Pigeon flew overhead, landing in a high tree. Common Jeru and Madagascar Bulbul also showed. Once inside the forest, we soon hit the birding jackpot with a morning of excellent sightings. Jean-Chrys and Cathy went with Heather, Steve, Hilary and Paul. Top of their list has to be the five Velvet Asity, including a male perched in sunlight just asking to be photographed. A female Madagascar Flufftail shot across the path ahead of us but too quick for the cameras. We had to put in a bit of effort to see Crossley's Vanga, skulking in a twiggy bush teasing us with its monotone whistle. Forest Rock Thrush did us proud and both Common and Dark Newtonia showed well. Madagascar Cuckoo Shrike, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Forest Fody, Blue Vanga, Long-billed Tetraka, Cryptic Tetraka, Tylas, another couple of Blue Couas, Madagascar Brush Warbler and a stunning Pollen's Vanga rounded off a great morning.

On the mammal front we did well with a cute little Red Forest Rat foraging in the leaf litter, a lethargic Small-toothed Sportive Lemur peering down at us from its tree hole roost, and a family of four Red-bellied Lemurs feeding in the forest canopy. The photographers got good shots of two species of Emerald Day Gecko: *Phelsuma lineata* on the leaves of a *Pandanus* and a Four-spotted Emerald Day Gecko *Phelsuma quadriocellata* at the entrance to the forest. A *Pandanus* also yielded the tiny Madagascar Glass Frog *Guibemantis pulcher*, whose entire life cycle takes place in its leaf axils. We also noted two butterflies: an orange spotted one and a *Saribia tepahi*.

Bertain and Tovo went with Lynda, Jean, Terry, Tracey, John and Pam and also had a rewarding morning. Bird sightings were excellent with Common Sunbird Asity, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Nelicourvi Weaver, Pollen's Vanga, Madagascar Cuckoo Shrike, Madagascar Brush Warbler, Crested Drongo, Pitta-like Ground Roller, Velvet Asity, Spectacled Tetraka, Common Newtonia, Forest Fody and Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher.

They also saw Red-bellied Lemur, Small-toothed Sportive Lemur and Red Forest Rat, a Giant Fire Millipede, Flatid Leaf Bugs, a Solitary Wasp and a Bush Cricket. As we emerged from the forest we observed a pair of Madagascar Buzzard.

Back at the hotel, we had a late lunch and then a short rest before returning to Vohiparara to the third entrance to the park. En route, we stopped by the roadside and Baku and Ju dived into the undergrowth to find a stunning Painted Mantella, a tiny but very colourful frog. Here too we noted several Giraffe-necked Weevils both males and females. Leaving the bus, we walked along a fire-scorched ridge, with open views to both sides and dominated by regrowth shrub species Tree Heather *Erica sp* and *Vaccinium madagascariensis*. Jean-Chrys pointed out a Red-fronted Coua and we saw Madagascar Turtle Dove in flight. A highlight of the afternoon was Tracey's Lowland Streaked Tenrec by the side of the path. This was a fantastic sighting and everyone got good views as it nosed around probing for food. At a viewpoint over the river, we found Red-billed Teal and in the marshes nearby, we got a flash of Grey Emutail, a tiny warbler with a ridiculous long shaggy tail. On our way back to the hotel, we took another look at the Brown Mouse Lemurs along the roadside and also found several Nose-horned Chameleons.

Day 7

Sunday 20th October

Ranomafana to Isalo

Weather: hot and sunny

I think we're all getting used to the early starts – today is no exception as we have a long journey ahead. As we gathered outside the hotel while the luggage was being loaded up, Lynda spotted our first Madagascar Mannikin. Climbing the winding road out of the valley we passed herds of zebu cattle and their drovers, en route to the coast. The morning sun lit up the pink blooms of *Dichaetanthera cordifolia* along the roadside. Madagascar Kestrel, Crested Drongo and Madagascar Fody flew over. Arriving in the regional capital Fianarantsoa, we tanked up with fuel and bought fresh fruit for lunch at a market stall. Meaning 'Place of Good Learning' Fianar sprawls over several hills, surrounded by rice paddies, many of which have been turned into brick works to supply the rapidly expanding city. Local people in their Sunday best, bedecked by a wonderful array of showy hats, thronged the streets and gathered outside the churches. Continuing our journey south, the road deteriorates into a mosaic of potholes, filled by enterprising children, who brazenly line the road with hands outstretched in hope of a tip. We passed Hamerkops in flight and foraging in the rice paddies, along with a succession of egrets predominantly dark morph Dimorphics. Common Jery and Madagascar Cisticola were also noted and when we stopped for a Madagascar Hoopoe, a Painted Lady fluttered by.

We made a short stop at a viewpoint over distant vineyards, then dropped down to the town of Ambalavao. Visiting the paper factory, we watched the flower-impregnated paper being made, using the pulp of the Avoha shrub. Some bought gift packs of cards and other items made here. In the gardens, we admired a pinkish-white *Bauhinia sp* and the large yellow cup-shaped flowers of *Solandra grandiflora*, introduced from Mexico. We collected our sandwiches from the café and drove for a further 30 minutes to the community reserve of Anja, sited at the foot of a magnificent granite dome. Anja's pocket of dry deciduous forest is home to several groups of Ring-tailed Lemurs.

In the heat of the day, many were lethargically draped over branches of introduced *Melia sp*. or wedged in the

fork of a tree. Several of the females had babies, the older ones riding on their mother's back but from time to time daring to venture away and explore their surrounds. The local guides led us on a circular tour of the reserve, taking in the territory of a second Ring-tailed group, whose members were engaged in hopping from boulder to boulder. On some of the larger boulders we witnessed the head-bobbing territorial displays of *Oplurus quadrimaculatus* iguanids. Our guides also pointed out three Oustalet's Chameleons, largest of the dry-forest chameleon species.

After our picnic lunch we continued the drive, pausing at a panoramic viewpoint, overlooking some stone tombs of the Bara people. Walking among the scorched vegetation, we found pink and yellow-flowered *Euphorbia millii* and Elephant's Foot *Pachypodium densiflorum*. Everywhere we were greeted by the scorched savannah, burned off by zebu herders to stimulate regrowth of the tender shoots preferred by the cattle. We noted a succession of Pied Crows, Yellow-billed Kites, Madagascar Bush Larks, Madagascar Kestrels and the occasional egret. We passed the imposing granite outcrop known as the Bishop's Hat, on the approach to Ihosy, the regional centre for the cattle-herding Bara people. Here we made took a short stop for fuel and refreshments before tackling the last stage of the drive, over the featureless Horombe Plateau to the foot of Isalo's sandstone massif. We arrived at the splendid Relais de la Reine hotel at sunset and checked into our comfortable rooms. Madagascar Nightjar called around the hotel.

Day 8

Monday 21st October

Isalo National Park

Weather: very hot and sunny

We were up at dawn for a stroll around the hotel grounds. Benson's Rock Thrushes were singing from their perches on the bungalow roofs and rocky outcrops. Pied crows and Yellow-billed Kites were warming up, together with a Madagascar Kestrel, lit up by the morning sun. Crested Drongo, Madagascar Bee-eater, Common Myna, Madagascar Cisticola and Madagascar Hoopoe all showed well as we walked along the track to a small lake, where we observed a small flock of White-faced Duck and a juvenile Purple Heron. Walking back by the gallery forest, we found Broad-billed Roller, Common Newtonia, Souimanga Sunbird, Common Jery, Madagascar Fody, Madagascar Wagtail, Madagascar Mannikin, Madagascar Bulbul and Madagascar Coucal. White-throated rail called but did not show. Over breakfast, three Grey-headed Lovebirds flew over outside the restaurant.

We collected our National Park permits and local guide Nirina at Ranohira, a town whose name means 'Ring-tailed Lemurs' Water'. Driving along the bumpy trail to the steep-walled sandstone canyon at Namaza, Nirina explained the importance of cattle rustling to the Bara people and told us of their burial customs. He also explained how 50% of Isalo's 1200 plant species have medicinal properties. Leaving the coach, we began to walk up the canyon on an easy and mostly level trail. We paused to photograph a pink-flowering shrub *Pemphis madagascariensis* and a red-flowered *Pyranthus tulearensis*. The habitat was good for insects: a Green Lynx Spider *Pencetia madagascariensis* on a guava leaf found by Jean, a Stick Insect, numerous butterflies including Citrus Swallowtail, Madagascar Swallowtail, African Monarch, Orange-tip and a scorpion *Opisthacanthus punctatus*. Nirina produced an impressive Oustalet's Chameleon and we also photographed a Spiny-tailed Iguanid *Oplurus cyclurus*.

While Nirina went to search for sifaka, we sat quietly observing a group of ten Ring-tailed Lemurs. The birders

spotted Common Jery, Madagascar Cisticola, Yellow-billed Kite, both male and female Benson's Rock Thrush, Namaqua Dove, Crested Drongo, Madagascar Bulbul on the nest and Souimanga Sunbird. We continued up the canyon on a rocky path following the riverbed, in the shade of Isalo's endemic Feathery Palm *Dypsis isaloensis* and a fragrant but toxic red-flowered *Landolphia sp.* We passed a beautiful white orchid *Aerangis modesta*. Arriving at the idyllic Cascade des Nymphes, some had a swim under a refreshing waterfall, while others paddled. Pink and Blue dragonflies flitted over the water and a male Rock Thrush posed for the cameras. Returning to the campground, we stumbled on a pair of Verreaux's Sifaka, who 'danced' along the path for the cameras. The group of Ring-tailed Lemurs had stirred and now moved off in convoy through the forest. On our way out of the forest we found *Heterixalus luteostriatus* on a *Pandanus* – this common frog is easily recognized by its yellow lateral stripe.

With the heat intensifying, we made our way out of the park and got good views of Madagascar Kestrel enjoying a dust bath and African Palm Swift in flight. After lunch, there was time to relax and some of the group enjoyed the hotel's swimming pool. Later in the afternoon we set out on foot to explore the sandstone formations behind the hotel. A White-throated Rail launched into its call but the undergrowth was too dense for a sighting. The bare rock is favoured by several endemic plants: *Aloe isaloensis*, *Pachypodium rosulatum gracilis* and *Kalanchoe synsepala*. We also noted Madagascar Rosy Periwinkle *Catharanthus roseus*, and the white-flowered Salotse *Ichnolepis graminifolia*, after which Isalo is named. Here too we found shrubs and small trees festooned with large numbers of Plataspid Bugs, both nymphs and adults. We also noted several Green Lynx Spiders, which are ambush predators and do not spin webs. Just before sunset, we climbed to a viewpoint to watch the sandstone glow yellow, orange and finally pink.

Day 9

Tuesday 22nd October

Isalo to Toliara and Ifaty

Weather: very hot and sunny

The restaurant staff arranged for us to take breakfast in our room to allow for a 5.00 departure from the hotel at first light. Leaving Isalo, we crossed open grassland, punctuated with fire-resistant *Medemea nobilis* palms, to the boom and bust sapphire mining town of Ilakaka, just beginning to stir with the rising sun. Stopping at a small river, Tovo pointed out a pair of White-throated Rails and everyone got good views of these secretive birds. A flock of Grey-headed Love Birds, Madagascar Coucal and African Palm Swifts were also seen here.

Soon we arrived at Zombitse National Park, a transitional forest with elements of both dry deciduous and southern Euphorbia scrub and a rare fragment of native forest in an otherwise denuded landscape. The birding is often very good here and for our group, the dry forest brings with it the possibility of several 'new' species. With reserve guides Lucien and Remila, we set off to explore the grid of easy, flat trails after notching up Crested Drongo, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Madagascar Coucal, Common Jery and Madagascar Hoopoe from the parking area. Here we also found a spiny bush festooned with Flatid Leaf Bug nymphs and adults. Once inside the forest we got good views of a Madagascar Cuckoo Shrike, Rufous Vanga and a Cuckoo Roller in flight, followed by Coquerel's Coua spotted by Paul, a Common Newtonia, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher and a splendid Blue Vanga, gleaning for insects in the foliage. Local speciality Appert's Tetraka showed readily in the understorey.

Zombitse is home to several lemur species but they are often shy as the park receives few visitors. Easiest to observe are the nocturnal Hubbard's Sportive Lemurs in their daytime roosts in the V of a tree or hole in a trunk. Our guides pointed out two, one of which had been micro-chipped on the ear by researchers. Terry was first to spot a group of Verreux's Sifaka, warming up in the morning sun. On the reptile front we admired the locally abundant Standing's Emerald Day Gecko *Phelsuma standingi*, between the twin trunks of a baobab *Adansonia za*. We also found, but with some effort as it is so well camouflaged, a tiny Bark Gecko *Lygodactylus tolampyae* and an Oustalet's Chameleon. A bright orange butterfly was also noted. It was a little early in the season to see this deciduous forest in full leaf but several shrubs were in bloom including a yellow flowering *Uncarina leandri* (Pedaliaceae). We also noted *Leptadomia madagascariensis*, *Euphorbia integrifolia*, *Euphorbia millii*, *Aloe vahombe* and *Pandanus xerophyta*. Our guides also pointed out a beautiful orchid *Aerangis articulata*, the peeling bark tree *Commiphora aprevalii* (Bursuraceae), which is used for musical instruments and photosynthesises on its trunk, and *Baudinia madagascariensis*, a tree used by kings to make walking sticks.

Continuing the journey we traversed savannah punctuated with *Adansonia za* baobabs to reach the market town of Sakaraha. Crossing the coral rag plateau and its thorny scrub, dominated by the locally endemic *Alluandia comosa*, we dropped to the coastal plain and town of Toliara. We arrived at the arboretum in time for lunch and in the heat of the day. Local guide Faly showed us around the impressive collection of endemic trees and shrubs from the region, including over 100 different Euphorbia species and many unusual plants bearing bulbous water-storing trunks. We marvelled at the huge *Pachypodium geayi* with its crown of white flowers and swollen trunk, that loses its spines as the tree matures; a yellow-flowering *Delonix floribunda* (Fabaceae), used to make musical instruments, *Rupellina bovini* (Apocynaceae), *Cyphostemma montagnacii* (Vitaceae) and the bulbous base of a *Ficus megapoda* (Moraceae) used to make a beauty mask. The leaves of *Aloe vahotsanda* (Liliaceae) are bitter and used to wean babies or stop nail-biting. *Pluchea grevei* (Asteraceae) has medicinal properties and is used to cure colds and its essential oil is a tonic for bad circulation. *Jatropha mahafalensis* is being cultivated for biodiesel but its red sap is also an antidote to poisonous Euphorbia sap. As we progressed through the arboretum, we noted Crested Drongo, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Chabert's Vanga nesting in an Elephant's foot tree *Pachypodium geayi*, Common Jerry, Madagascar Bee Eater, Sakalava Weaver and a pair of delightful Magpie Robin chicks. We could just make out a sleepy Reddish-grey Mouse Lemur peering down at us from its roost among a tangle of twigs. A Big-eyed Grass Snake *Mimophis mahafalensis* was spotted in the leaf litter by the side of the car park.

Stopping at a pond just outside Toliara, we got good views of four Black-winged Stilt, Kittlitz Plover, Three-banded Plover, Painted Snipe and Common Sandpiper. Lynda saw Hermit Crab. We made our way north on the main coast road, a dirt track often made impassable by drifting sand. Arriving at the Paradisier Hotel at Ifaty, we checked into our luxurious beach-front chalets. At dusk around the hotel gardens Reddish-grey Mouse Lemurs were stirring and began to scuttle along the branches of the *Euphorbia stenoclada* trees.

Day 10

Wednesday 23rd October

Ifaty to Anakao

Weather: very hot and sunny

A very early start again! We assembled at 4.30 for the drive north to Reniala Private Reserve, a protected area of spiny forest, where we hoped to see Long-tailed Ground Roller and Sub-desert Mesite, two local rarities confined to this corner of the island and both under threat.

With plenty of dry leaf litter, this is perfect habitat for these ground-dwelling birds. Also typical of this forest are the red-barked *Adansonia fony* baobabs and we noted that several of the larger trees had hand-holds cut into their huge swollen trunks so that locals can climb to pick the fruits. While the spotters went off to look for Mesite and Ground Roller, our reserve guide Dabe pointed out Chabert's Vanga, White-headed Vanga, Lafresnaye's Vanga, Hook-billed Vanga on its tree-hole nest and a pair of Sickle-billed Vanga. Greater Vasa Parrot flew overhead and a flock of Madagascar Turtle Doves landed in a tree. We also got varied views of Stripe-throated Jery, Madagascar Magpie Robin, singing from a tree-top perch, Running Coua, Green-capped Coua and Thamnornis Warbler. A highlight of the morning were seven Sub-desert Mesites lined up on a branch – a great photo opportunity. We then made our way through the thorny undergrowth (long sleeves and trousers essential!) to catch a reasonable view of Long-tailed Ground Roller, a splendid bird with long blue tail feathers.

On our way back to the hotel we saw Great Egret and a Rainbow Locust. We picked up Hilary and Steve, who had elected for a lie in, and set off for Toliara. We loaded onto zebu carts for a short ride over the mudflats to the boat. It's an exhilarating cruise across the Onilahy estuary across the broad reef lagoon, marked by a line of surf. The lagoon was dotted with dug-out canoes fitted with sail and outrigger, some fishing out on the reef, others loaded with goods to shuttle from village to village.

Arriving at Anakao, we cruised out to the offshore coray cay bird sanctuary Nosy Ve. A colony of several hundred Red-tailed Tropicbirds breed here, year round. Adults and chicks were huddled in the shade of the island's low-lying bushes while a dozen or more birds graced the sky above us. We strolled along the desert island beach, enjoying a succession of birds: White-fronted Plover, Grey Plover, Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone, Dimorphic Egret, Grey Heron and a distant view of Crab Plover. Climbing to the island's high point, we saw the distant blows of Humpback Whales en route to their Southern Ocean feeding grounds. Madagascar Cisticola and Common Myna were the only land birds on the island's arid interior.

After a quick swim and snorkel, we headed back to the hotel for a fresh fish lunch and a siesta. Walking to our bungalows, a succession of Three-eyed Lizards scuttled to and fro. Emerging from our beachside bungalows late in the afternoon, we strolled through the Vezo fishing village, whose brightly painted dug-out canoes were lined up on the beach. In the scrub behind the hotel, we observed Littoral Rock Thrush and Sub-desert Tetraka – because of the fierce afternoon wind, most of the birds were keeping low. Paul and Tracey also found Madagascar Buttonquail.

Day 11

Thursday 24th October

Anakao-Toliara and Sarandrono Cave

Weather: hot, sunny and windy in the afternoon

Leaving Anakao we cruised back to Toliara, via the cliff at the mouth of the Onilahy River. Here we noted three Grey Heron, a Humblot's Heron and Caspian Tern. Due to rescheduling of our flight, we needed to overnight in Toliara so spent the morning exploring the coastal area south of the town. On a pond near Toliara's airport, we found a pair of Three-banded Plover, Kittlitz Plover, Ringed Plover, Black-winged Stilt and Greenshank. Driving through scrub, we noted Madagascar Bee-eater, Yellow-billed Kite, Namaqua Dove, Madagascar Fody, Madagascar Kestrel and an Orange-tip Butterfly.

We stopped at the Sarandrono Cave, where freshwater emerges from under the limestone forming a refreshing pool, teeming with fish. This was a good spot for a swim and a picnic lunch. Sakalava Weavers and Mascarene Martins were nesting inside the cave, while numerous crabs scuttled about on the rocks. On the shore we noted Grey Heron and Greenback Heron. Continuing the drive a little further, a tantalising flash of grey in a tree was a possible Verreaux's Coua. From a viewpoint, we looked down over mangroves and distant flocks of waders but the heat was too oppressive so we did not linger. Stopping by some mangroves we got down to the sea, where we spotted Madagascar Bee-eater in flight, Whimbrel, Greenshank, Dimorphic Egret and many crabs. Stopping again at the pond by the airport, we saw Painted Snipe, Kittlitz Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Three-banded Plover, Ringed Plover, White-fronted Plover and Black-winged Stilt – not a bad haul for a tiny stagnant pool. While most of the group went straight to the hotel, Heather, Cathy and Tovo decided to take a look at the mud flats, where Whimbrel, Greenshank and Ruddy Turnstone were foraging on the incoming tide.

Day 12

Friday 25th October

Toliara-Andatapo Reserve-Taolognaro (Fort Dauphin)

Weather: hot and sunny but rain in Taolognaro

This morning Tovo arranged for us to visit Andatapo Reserve sited on the Table Mountain just inland from Toliara. The reserve is a sacred site and has many endemic medicinal plants, and offers a chance of finding the local rarity Red-shouldered Vanga. Guides Joseph and Pascaline escorted us on a well-hewn path to the summit, where we enjoyed sweeping views of the reef and coast. Here we photographed a pink-flowering *Uncarina stellulifera*, (Pedaliaceae) whose leaves are used to prevent dandruff. The plant is also believed to be a powerful love potion, used to snare a victim against his will. The guides pointed out a yellow-flowering *Delonix floribunda* (Fabaceae), a sacred tree whose grated bark can draw out abscesses. A *Tracheloptychus madagascariensis* plated lizard darted over the rocks here. A few common bird species were visible, including Madagascar Bee-eater, Namaqua Dove, Crested Drongo and Madagascar Fody, though no sign of any Red-shouldered Vanga. The guides showed us a sacrificial site by a small cave, where local people leave offerings of sweets, tobacco and rum to the *Kokolampo* spirits. The spirits are revered and feared as they can interfere in the affairs of the living. We noted an orange tip butterfly at rest.

Back in Toliara, we took another look at the pond in the hope of finding a Madagascar Plover – the one that so far has eluded us. No luck. Over lunch at Victory Hotel, we found Madagascar Bulbul and Common Jery and two Day Geckos *Phelsuma lineata lineata* and *Phelsuma modesta*. Our flight to Fort Dauphin was on time and we arrived at dusk in the pouring rain, with a sudden drop in temperature. It was a short transfer to the Hotel Croix du Sud and most of the group took advantage of an early night.

Day 13

Saturday 26th October

Taolognaro (Fort Dauphin)-Berenty

Weather: rain in the morning, then hot and sunny with thunder in the afternoon.

We awoke to a light drizzle and after an early breakfast we ambled down to the ocean-front to look for humpbacks on their migration southwards but we were thwarted by poor visibility. We loaded onto the coach and met local guide Benoit, who primed us on the bumpy journey ahead.

Benoit pointed out a poisonous red-flowering pepper vine *Poirrea coccinea* (Combretaceae), the sensitive plant *Mimosa pudica* (Mimosaceae) that plays dead when you touch it, Elephant's Ear *Tymphonodorum lindleyanum* (Araceae), whose huge leaves are used to wrap fruit in to ripen naturally, Raffia Palm *Raphia farinifera* (Arecaceae). Jackfruit, Mango and Lychee were fruiting and on one Mango tree Benoit spotted a Warty Chameleon *Furcifer verrucosus*.

We stopped at a fruit market to buy lychees, pineapple, bananas and jackfruit – always good to see local people benefit from the tourist traffic. At a bridge, we observed men and boys hauling sand from the river bank to sell by the roadside. Such back-breaking work is the only way for some country people to earn hard cash. Cattle Egrets were foraging in the paddies, Yellow-billed Kites soared overhead and a flock of six White-faced Duck flew over. We noted a stand of cenotaphs, erected in memory of the dead, the size of each in proportion to the age of the person. Three more Warty Chameleons and Grass Yellow and Madagascar Swallowtail butterflies lightened the journey. At Ranopiso, the vegetation changed and in a Flame Tree *Delonix regia*, we found Sakalava Weaver nests. Benoit pointed out a blue-flowered Butterfly Pea *Clitoria terneata* (Fabaceae). We broke the journey again to look at a Three-cornered Palm *Dypsis decaryi* in a pocket of protected transitional forest that marks the boundary between the humid forest and the dry Spiny Forest. We stopped at a stall of woodcarvings, a community-based project where locals harvest timber to make souvenirs for the tourists in return for replanting the Spiny Forest. We observed Crested Drongo, Madagascar Coucal and Namaqua Dove in the boughs of *Alluaudia procera* trees.

On the approach to Berenty, the forest has been felled to make way for sisal plantations stretching to the horizon. Crossing the almost dry River Mandrare by the new bridge, we left the main road on the approach to Berenty Reserve. Over lunch, we were entertained by a group of cheeky Ring-tailed Lemurs, who were intent on sharing our lunch. After a short rest, we set off to explore the reserve with Benoit. Once the heat had subsided, we set off with Benoit to explore the Ankoba section of gallery forest, which is shaded by huge stands of *Tamarindus indica*, whose fruits and leaves are an important food source for Berenty's lemurs. We got good views of Hook-billed Vanga, Common Jery, Madagascar Turtle Dove, Madagascar Hoopoe, Helmeted Guineafowl and Paradise Flycatcher and it did not take us long to find the first of several Giant Coua, foraging on the forest floor and one of Madagascar's most spectacular endemic birds. We paused to observe the antics of a group of Ring-tailed Lemurs close to the path.

Peeling back a piece of bark, Benoit found a reluctant Giant Hissing Cockroach *Gromphadorhina portentosa* – the hissing is produced by squeezing air through pores in their abdomen to scare off predators. As things began to cool down diurnal lemurs like Verreaux's Sifaka started feeding again and soon we ran into a group tucking into the flowers of *Rinorea sp* (Violaceae). A young male Sifaka was collecting a female's urine but rubbing his neck where she had urinated. Nocturnal White-footed Sportive Lemur are another of Berenty's treats and are easy to find when the guide knows their day time roost in a tree-trunk hole. As the light faded Crested Couas began their bedtime chorus of parrot-like squawks in competition with a White-browed Owl, also calling. Another highlight of the afternoon was a roosting Scops Owl, which everyone could easily photograph though the light was poor. As darkness fell we reassembled and took the bus to a pocket of spiny forest adjacent to the gallery forest. Night walks are often very good at Berenty and this evening we did well, with several White-footed Sportive Lemurs leaping bought to bough or peering down from the spiny Didieraceae.

Grey-Brown Mouse Lemurs are also locally abundant here and most active just after dusk - we clocked up several individuals. We saw several Warty Chameleon *Furcifer verrucosus* typically perched on the end of a thin branch at night to evade predators. Later, back at the bungalows, some of our group got good views of White-browed Owl.

Day 14

Sunday 27th October

Berenty Reserve

Weather: hot and sunny in the morning, then cloudy and very windy, with thunder in the afternoon.

At sunrise we set off to explore the easy level trails of Malaza, the gallery forest along the banks of the Mandrare. We witnessed mating pairs of Crested Coua and Madagascar Hoopoe, then cackling Broad-billed Rollers, Madagascar Kestrel and Crested Drongo perched in the open and a pair of Madagascar Coucal hopping furtively in the understorey foliage. A noisy flock of Madagascar White-eye were busily attacking a flowering *Crateva* sp. A family of Verreaux's Sifaka sat huddled on a branch, then stirred and spread their limbs to the sun to warm up.

From a viewpoint overlooking the almost dry riverbed, we noted two very distant Madagascar Sandgrouse, a Helmeted Guineafowl and a pair of Hoopoes. A flock of restless Grey-headed Lovebirds landed briefly in a bare tree. Back in the forest, the peace of early morning was broken by the melodious call of Lesser Vasa Parrots. We witnessed some of the night shift at rest: a White-footed Sportive Lemur peering down at us from a tree-hole and a very photogenic White-browed Owl perched outside his roost site. Madagascar Paradise Flycatchers are common at Berenty and we noted males of both colour morphs en route to the Madagascar Fruit Bat colony. From a respectful distance we observed hundreds of roosting bats decorating a Tamarind tree. Though protected at their roost site, they feed over a wide range and are hunted for food by locals. A tiny Bark Gecko was identified as *Lygodactylus tolampyae*.

Returning for breakfast, we were lucky to witness one of Madagascar's most iconic sights, a group of Sifaka 'dancing' across the path ahead of us. Their short forelimbs make it impossible for them to move quadrupedally so when they need to cross open ground they do it by skipping sideways on their hind legs, a movement that is both comical and graceful. After breakfast there was free time and Heather, Lynda and Cathy visited Berenty's excellent Ethnographic Museum, while others in the group made their own discoveries. At Berenty, visitors are allowed to explore at leisure, without a guide, a perfect opportunity for photographers.

We reassembled later in the afternoon for a short drive to a newly opened section of spiny forest, Analalava, meaning 'Long Forest'. Benoit introduced us to some of the endemic flora: *Kalanchoe beharensis* (Crassulaceae) with its huge crinkle-edged velvet leaves, *Alluandia dumosa* (Didieraceae) finger-like branches, the tall spine-laden trunks with heart-shaped leaves of *Alluandia ascendens* and the emblem of the spiny forest and *Cedrolopsis greveii* (Rutaceae), a shrub used as firewood or for charcoal production and whose essential oil is good for rheumatism and back-ache. We found a couple of scorpions *Opisthacanthus madagacariensis*, numerous Three-eyed Lizard *Chalaradon madagascariensis*, and a Day Gecko *Lygodactylus tuberosus*. The small tract of forest turned out to be quite a lemur hot spot for us. The strong winds were troubling a group of seven Verreaux's Sifaka, who took refuge in a group cuddle on a branch, posing beautifully for the cameras.

Another lone Sifaka, most likely a juvenile, came to take a close look at the visitors and began to forage on fruit right by us. Nearby was a further group of four Sifakas. We spotted a White-footed Sportive Lemur tucked among a cluster of spiny boughs and with quite some craning of necks, we picked out three Grey-brown Mouse Lemurs in a tangle of *Euphorbia*. To top it all we then ran into a group of foraging Ring-tailed Lemur, looking overall in much better condition than those of the gallery forest. Because of the wind, the birds were subdued but we admired a Madagascar Kestrel on its nest, a roosting Scops Owl and a pair of Grey-headed Love Birds in flight.

At nightfall, Benoit took us into the gallery forest where we found a Grey Mouse Lemur, a White-footed Sportive Lemur, two species of Big-headed Gecko: *Paroedura bastardy* and *Paroedura picta* rustling in the leaf litter at the foot of mature trees and a splendid striped tree-snake *Stenophis carleti*.

Day 15

Monday 28th October

Berenty-Taolognaro

Weather: very windy, dry and dusty, then heavy rainfall

After breakfast we set off for the 15km drive to Anjapolo, another area of spiny forest managed by the De Heulme family. Along the way we saw a flock of Grey-headed Love Birds and a colony of Sakalava Weavers nesting in a baobab. Walking through the spiny forest we found Green-capped Coua, Madagascar Magpie Robin, Madagascar Bulbul, Common Jery, Scops Owl and a Madagascar Nightjar roosting on the ground. A highlight of the morning was a very cute pair of White-footed Sportive Lemurs roosting one on top of the other – it's mating season Benoit explained. A couple of Verreaux's Sifaka were hiding among the sausage-shaped branches of an *Alluandia dumosa*. A Spider Tortoise ambled across the dry forest floor and a Three-eyed Lizard emerged from a bout of underground egg-laying. We also noted two skinks: *Trachylepis aureopunctata* and *Trachylepis gravenhorstii*, a Rhinoceros Beetle and a striking red clearwing butterfly.

On the way back we stopped in a field to look for Madagascar Sandgrouse and found a pair taking shelter by a sisal plant. After an early lunch we loaded the luggage onto the bus and set off back to Taolognaro. The winds were still fierce, whipping up dust devils around us. At Ankazofotsy, we stopped to admire a plated lizard *Opulurus quadrimaculatus* on some rocks at the side of the road. Within minutes it started to rain and the deluge continued for the rest of the journey. From the shelter of the bus we saw Hamerkop, African Palm Swift, Great Egret, Cattle Egret and Red-billed Teal. On arrival, we checked into our rooms at the Dauphin Hotel.

Day 16

Tuesday 29th October

Taolognaro

Weather: cloudy with outbreaks of rain

With a morning to kill in Fort Dauphin, a visit to the Nahampona Garden and Lemur Park had been arranged for us. This is a small private reserve just north of Fort Dauphin, where visitors can observe Collared Lemur, Grey Bamboo Lemur, Verreaux's Sifaka and Ring-tailed Lemur, albeit not in a totally natural setting but at least free to roam.

Flitting among the pools of intermittent sunlight, we found a striking Eyed Pansy *Junonia orithya*, a blue Damselfly, a red Damselfly, a Mascarene Rocket Frog *Ptychadena mascareniensis*. The guide pointed out an epiphytic orchid *Paralophia palmicola* fallen from its palm host in a storm. Yellow-billed Kite and Madagascar Bee-eater were noted. After lunch we returned to the hotel to freshen up only to discover that our flight was delayed. This gave us time to stop at the ocean viewpoint, where we saw a Great Crested Tern and a Sub-polar Skua. Hilary saw a distant Humpback Whale blow. Arriving at the airport we checked in and waited for our flight, which was to depart at 18.35. Only it didn't. By 19.00, it was officially cancelled and we returned to the Dauphin Hotel for a further night. That's Air Madagascar (aka Mad Air) for you.

Day 17

Wednesday 30th October

Taolognaro to Ankarafantsika, via Antananarivo

Weather: Very hot and humid, a few rain drops in the evening

As it turned out we hadn't really lost out by over-nighting in Fort Dauphin as we would have had to stay in the capital instead. After a 5am breakfast we were off to the airport again and enjoyed a spectacular take-off with dramatic views up and down the coast. Arriving at Tana, there was a short wait before we boarded the onward flight to Mahajanga, where a new bus crew of Lala and Yves were waiting for us. After stocking up with drinking water we were on our way, heading southwest above the wide Betsiboka estuary. We paused at the Dinosaur Panels where Black Swifts circled overhead. Pied Crow, Madagascar Cisticola and Helmeted Guineafowl and Cattle Egret were also noted. Lining the roadside were families selling mangos and the air was heavy with their pungent scent as baskets of the fruit were loaded onto trucks lined up to transport them to the capital.

At Lake Amboromalandy, we stopped to scan the lake, where we found Hottentot Teal and White-faced Duck. In the rice paddies there were flocks of Black Egret, Squacco Heron, Glossy Ibis, Great Egret, Dimorphic Egret and Cattle Egret, with a few Black-winged Stilt and Greenback Heron. Arriving at Ankarafantsika National Park, we checked into our bungalows, located by the reed beds overlooking Lake Ravelobe, and met reserve guides Amade and Olga. Now that night walks are no longer allowed inside the park, Amade and Olga took us along a dirt track bordering the reserve. These more open areas are actually better for observing nocturnal lemurs and chameleons. After a succession of Grey Mouse Lemurs bent on a high-speed escape through the undergrowth we were treated to a pair of Mongoose Lemurs, quietly feeding and infinitely more rewarding to watch. Our guides found both Oustalet's and Rhinoceros Chameleon for us and Hissing Cockroaches were out and about on the ground, following a light shower. A highlight of the night walk was a Henkel's Leaf-tailed Gecko, out hunting on a thin branch. Over dinner we had a good show of moths and a mole cricket, attracted by the restaurant lights.

Day 18

Thursday 31st October

Ankarafantsika National Park

Weather: Hot and sunny; windy in the afternoon with some rain

At last the bungalows are equipped with fans and what a huge difference it made to how we slept. At first light we assembled in the car park where Sickie-billed Vanga, White-headed Vanga, Broad-billed Roller and Green Pigeon were foraging, collecting nesting material and calling from perches.

We made our way to the Botanic Garden B section of the park at the west end of the lake for a pre-breakfast walk. The trails are flat and a helpful grid of paths makes it easy to search for wildlife. The original Ampijoroa Forestry Station now forms part of the much larger Ankarafantsika National Park and is one of the biggest tracts of dry deciduous forest remaining in Madagascar. At this time of year, the forest is starting to come into leaf but many trees are still bare making wildlife watching easy and rewarding. After overnight rainfall, the air was fresh and scented. A Purple Heron flew over as we entered the forest and Long-billed Greenbul was gleaning for grubs along the tree branches. Soon our guides found a pair of White-breasted Mesite, who obliged the photographers by crossing the path ahead of us. These impressive ground-dwelling birds are very vocal and we could hear their strident whistle from a distance. Souimanga Sunbird, White-headed Vanga, Chabert's Vanga, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Common Newtonia, Madagascar Magpie Robin, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher and Madagascar Cuckoo-shrike were all easy to spot. We found a group of Common Brown Lemur feeding on the fruits of a *Landolphia gommiphora* (Apocynaceae) vine. Returning to the coach, we observed a male Lesser Vasa Parrot feeding his female a mango. By now the heat was mounting and we were more than ready for breakfast back at the bungalows.

After breakfast, Terry, Jean, Hilary, Steve, Heather and Tovo took the boat trip around Lake Ravelobe., a relaxing cruise which offers outstanding bird-watching opportunities. In just one hour, we observed Madagascar Fish Eagle, Purple Heron, Humblot's Heron, Squacco Heron, Black Egret, Dimporphic Egret, Green-backed Heron, Little Bittern, African Darter, Black-winged Stilt, Madagascar Kingfisher, Madagascar Bee-eater, Madagascar Coucal, African Palm Swift, Madagascar Buzzard and Madagascar Cuckoo-shrike. The lake supports a population of Nile Crocodiles, which are 'fady' to the local people. Such taboos in effect protect the crocs against hunting.

The morning also allowed some free time to explore independently around the lake. John and Pam spent time observing a group of Coquerel's Sifaka; Heather found Common Brown Lemur, Namaqua Dove, White-faced Duck, Madagascar Magpie Robin and Broad-billed Roller; Paul noted Lesser Gallinule, Turtle Dove and Yellow-billed Kite. Later Cathy and Heather walked to the watch-tower overlooking the lake and photographed some very lethargic Common Brown Lemurs, spread-eagled over the branches of a tree. Searching for roosting bats, Cathy found a female France's Sparrowhawk, perched under one of the tent shelters. A large Brown Hog-nosed Snake *Leiobeterodon modestus* was seen around the bungalows along with a Cat-eyed Snake *Madagascarophis colubrinus*.

After lunch we took a siesta and waited for the heat to subside. Mid-afternoon brought a rumble of thunder and a few drops of rain, along with a welcome gusty breeze. At 4pm, Paul, Tracey, Hilary, Steve, Lynda and Heather, with Tovo and Cathy assembled in the car park, where Coquerel's Sifakas were cavorting in the canopy, hanging upside-down to feed. A pair of Chabert's Vangas was perched overhead, while a Sickle-billed Vanga probed for insects on a tree trunk. Olga and Amade took us to the plateau area behind the bungalows. Climbing gently to the plateau we noted Madagascar Flycatcher and Crested Drongo, and stopped to photograph a Madagascar Buzzard on its twig nest high in the canopy. The recent rain had brought out several green Pill Millipedes. A pair of Coquerel's Coua ambled along the path ahead of us and everyone got good photographs. Red-capped Coua also showed well. Along the path we noted some unusual flora: the striking snowflake-shaped blooms of a *Diplicteria sp*, and a white shaving-brush flower *Tiliaceum sp.* (Caparidaceae) Some of the group photographed a striking Citrus Swallowtail butterfly, spotted by Lynda.

Returning to the bungalows we observed a family of Mongoose Lemurs move through the canopy. We then

picked up torches and Heather, Jean, Terry, Pam and John set off with Tovo and Cathy and guides Amade and Olga for a night walk down the road from the bungalows. Tonight's sightings were excellent including Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur, a dozen or more Grey Mouse Lemur, a species of Cricket eaten by locals, Hissing Cockroach, two Rhinoceros Chameleon, a huge Oustalet's Chameleon and two tiny *Lygodactylus tolampyae* Bark Geckos.

Day 19

Friday 1st November

Ankarafantsika National Park

Weather: hot and sunny

We woke to a fresh morning. A group of bouncy Coquerel's Sifaka were up and about, cavorting in the trees overlooking the reception area, sniffing one another and pulling tails. We divided into two groups and set off to explore the Jardin Botanique - a section of the park. Tracey, Paul, Heather, John and Pam went with Amade and Cathy. We paused briefly to admire the compact nest of a Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher. A Turtle Dove zoomed by at high speed and a couple of Long-billed Tetrakas were gleaning for insects on the branches while a Magpie Robin pair posed by the path. Climbing to the plateau we caught sight of more Coquerel's Sifaka through the foliage, a group of four with a baby. A Crested Coua showed well on a branch and everyone got good views of a Rufous Vanga. Van Dam's Vanga played hard to get, but with persistence we got reasonable but fleeting views of two adults and two chicks. A roosting Woolly Lemur was a delight to photograph and a group of Common Brown Lemurs dashed across the path as we made our way back. A Madagascar Buzzard posed for the cameras on a dead branch. We also noted Souimanga Sunbird, Common Jery and Chabert's Vanga and heard though did not see Schlegel's Asity. Jean, Terry, Lynda, Hilary and Steve set off with Olga and Tovo and had a productive morning with Rufous Vanga, a pair of Frances Sparrowhawk, Van Dam's Vanga, mating Broad-billed Rollers, a pair of White-breasted Mesite, Lesser Vasa Parrot and a pair of sleepy Western Woolly Lemurs in their roost.

After breakfast, Lynda, Paul, Tracey, John and Pam went with Amade and Cathy on the boat and enjoyed a morning of marvellous birding: a flock of 20 White-faced Duck in flight with Dimorphic Egret, Purple Heron and Humblot's Heron foraging among the water hyacinth beds fringing the lake. Highlight were two Madagascar Fish Eagles perched on a branch overhanging the lake and a juvenile Madagascar Harrier Hawk. We also noted African Darter, Madagascar Kingfisher, Grey Heron, Great Egret and Green-backed Heron. Back at the bungalows Collared Iguanids *Oplurus cuvieri* and Lined Plated Lizards *Zonosaurus laticaudatus* were darting to and fro in frenetic territorial disputes, in spite of the midday heat. We identified a large brown snake hunting in the leaf litter as a Cat-eyed Snake *Madagasdecarophis colubrinus* and also found both Malagasy Hog-nosed snake *Leiobeterodon Madagascariensis* and Brown Hog-nosed Snake *Leiobeterodon modestus*.

After lunch and a siesta, we set out to explore the north shore of the lake following the board walk and crossing the river by a rickety bridge. Here Lynda found a Madagascar Kingfisher and Heather a Swamp Warbler, while overhead we witnessed a Madagascar Kestrel mobbing a Madagascar Buzzard. Heading into the forest, we were distressed to see that the famous baobab cluster of *Adansonia madagascariensis* had been wrecked by a tornado that struck the park in February 2013. We stopped to photograph the distinctive arum *Amorphophallus hildebrandtii* (Araceae) in bloom.

In the shady understorey Amade's amazing eyes picked out a perching Pygmy Kingfisher, and some of the group got outstanding photographs of this obliging bird. We also noted a small Bark Gecko *Blaesodactylus antongilensis*.

Day 20

Saturday 2nd November

Ankarafantsika to Mahajanga and Antananarivo

Weather: hot and sunny, cooler in Antananarivo

Today I had an upset stomach so regrettably I ducked out of the morning's trip into the forest of Jardin Botanique B. And what a morning it was! Two male and a female Schlegel's Asity – a stunning bird with a distinctive rising and falling call. Though not confined to Ankarafantsika, the reserve is one of the easier places to see this near-threatened species. Blue Vanga, Rufous Vanga, Hook-billed Vanga, Souimanga Sunbird, Crested Drongo, Crested Coua, Coquerel's Coua, Sakalava Weaver, Common Newtonia, Madagascar Magpie Robin, Long-billed Greenbul, Madagascar Bulbul, Madagascar Green Pigeon, Broad-billed Roller, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Madagascar Turtle Dove, Madagascar Coucal, White-faced Duck, Cattle Egret, Yellow-billed Kite and Common Brown Lemur. Pam and John witnessed a *Zonosaurus laticaudatus* Plated Lizard devour a Hissing Cockroach.

There was a little time to explore independently after breakfast and Heather, Paul, John and Pam observed Three-banded Plover, Madagascar Fish Eagle, Common Sandpiper, Madagascar Buzzard, and Nile Crocodiles at various points overlooking the lake. A France's Sparrowhawk was seen perched by Bungalow no. 5. After an early lunch we said goodbye to our very able guides Amade and Olga and set off back to Mahajanga, with a brief stop at Lake Amboromalandy where Glossy Ibis, Cattle Egret, Dimporphic Egret, Namaqua Dove, Black-winged Stilt and Grey Heron were noted.

Day 21

Sunday 3rd November

Antananarivo to Andasibe

Weather: warm and sunny

After a night in pleasantly cool temperatures we were rested and ready for the last chapter of our epic Madagascar journey. During the scenic drive through rolling hills and valleys dotted with rice paddies we observed Hamerkop, Green-backed Heron, Madagascar Fody, Common Stonechat, Madagascar Wagtail, Feral Pigeon, Common Myna and Madagascar Kestrel. We passed plantations of coppicing Eucalyptus, used for making charcoal and then on the steepest slopes of the eastern escarpment, a belt of native forest. Once past the town of Moramanga the road straightened on the approach to Andasibe, a small town built around the railway station of Perinet. Here we stopped for lunch at Feony Ala, a restaurant overlooking the rainforest.

After lunch we met reserve guides Maurice and Lalaina and after arranging park permits, we set off into the rainforest reserve of Analamazaotra, now part of the huge Andasibe-Mantadia National Park. Created to preserve Indri habitat, Analamazaotra contains some original forest cover, but much of it is re-growth. Still there's an impressive variety of wildlife on offer here. Stopping to view a pair of Common Brown Lemur, news of a sighting of Indri came in and we headed off to observe the species that is the emblem of this 810 hectare reserve.

Cute teddy-bear faces, luxuriant black and white fur and their long hind-limbs can propel them into leaps of up to 10 metres from trunk to trunk. This family group of Indri, consisting of an adult pair and a three-year-old juvenile, came down to eye-level, stopped to groom and forage, then once we'd all had a chance to take photographs, bounded off into the distance. How lucky is that?

Next, Maurice took us to a Collared Nightjar's nest in an *Asplenium*, a camouflage so perfect that this secretive bird was all but invisible. This was the first time in three or four years that I've seen Collared Nightjar. What a privilege, but there was yet more to come. Not one, but two Crested Ibis nests, one with a chick that had been born on 15th October. Crested Ibis are notoriously difficult to see and are becoming scarce in the wild. During the walk, we also saw Greater Vasa Parrot, Madagascar Mannikin, Blue Coua and Madagascar Brush Warbler. Next up were a Rainforest Scops Owl and three Grey Bamboo Lemurs feeding on a stand of bamboo by the bridge. To cap it all Maurice produced a brown frog *Mantidactylus opiparis*, Forest Lined Snake *Bibilava lateralis* and a stunning Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko *Uroplatus sikoriae* whose body fringe blends perfectly with the tree trunk to cast no shadow. Also worthy of mention were a Skipper butterfly and a Green Dragonfly. After this exciting afternoon of wildlife, we headed for Vakona Lodge, and checked into our hotel for the next few nights. Around the hotel, Heather found a roosting Pygmy Kingfisher.

Day 22

Monday 4th November

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park

Weather: misty start to the day, then warm and sunny

Mantadia excites me more than any other reserve in Madagascar. It's wild and full of surprises with majestic buttressed tree trunks, gin-clear streams and a fighting chance to see the beautiful Black and White Ruffed Lemurs. Oh and mobile phones don't work there. It does however take a bit of effort to get there. We set off after an early breakfast on the bumpy track forged by a mining operation to access graphite deposits deep inside the rainforest. The journey was punctuated by good views of Madagascar Starling, Mascarene Martins in flight, a male France's Sparrowhawk, a pair of Blue Pigeon perched on a branch and two Red-bellied Lemurs who leaped across the road ahead of us. Maurice pointed out some of the flora including an orange Tassel Flower *Emilia citrina* (Asteraceae), yellow-flowered shrub *Psiadia altissima* (Asteraceae), whose essential oil is used as an insect repellent and *Dianella ensifolia* (Xanthorrhoeaceae), whose blue flowers produce startling mauve-blue berries. We also found a Kite Spider hitching a ride on the bus windscreen.

Arriving at the car park, Lalaina went off to look for lemurs, while Maurice showed us two Madagascar Tree Boas *Sanzinia madagascariensis* and a Madagascar Plated Lizard *Zonosaurus madagascariensis*. From the car park area we observed Madagascar Starling and a furtive White-throated Oxylabes in the undergrowth. Nuthatch Vanga and Tylas showed beautifully by the bridge over the stream. Maurice went to check for Ground Rollers, we enjoyed another encounter with Nuthatch Vanga, probing tree trunks upside down and got a half-decent view of Red-tailed Vanga. We found a snake, presumed by Maurice to be a species of *Liopholidophis*, a splendid red Millipede and a colourful frog Baron's Painted Mantella *Mantella baroni*. By now it was time for a lemur fix, and soon we found ourselves craning necks to make out three Black and White Ruffed Lemurs feeding in the canopy. Lucky again! Maurice pointed out a green orchid *Aeranthes ramosa*.

As to be expected, the rainforest birding here was as challenging as elsewhere, but we enjoyed good views of Pitta-like Ground-Roller, Ward's Flycatcher, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Souimanga Sunbird and Madagascar White-eye. In a pool of sunlight, we found a green and black butterfly. Emerging from the forest, we walked to a small lake for our picnic lunch. Over lunch Broad-billed Roller cackled from a perch on the branch of a dead tree, Madagascar Spinetail flew overhead and two delightful Madagascar Little Grebes paced to and fro on the water. Skulking at the edge of the pond was a single Meller's Duck, and Nelicourvi Weavers were nesting over the water. Swamp Warblers were grabbing insects from the surface of the pond and a Common Moorhen made an appearance at the back of the lake. In this idyllic spot we observed a Plated Lizard *Zonosaurus madagascariensis*, and several Dragonfly species flying to and from their perches, including a Blue and Black Saddlebag Dragonfly. We also got excellent views of White-throated Rail at the water's edge and later crossing the path. Back in the forest by the car park, we tried once more for Scaly Ground Roller without success but got good views of Blue Coua, and encountered a mixed feeding flock of Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Nuthatch Vanga, Tylas, Blue Vanga and Crested Drongo.

Returning to the hotel there was time for a short rest before heading off for our night walk in the Andasibe Community Reserve, a visit recommended by Tovo, our local guide. We were accompanied by reserve guide, Christophe, who found us a splendid showcase of nightlife, including three different chameleons: Nose-horned Chameleon, Stump-tailed Chameleon and a young female Parson's Chameleon. Equally impressive was a stunning Marbled Frog *Scaphiophyrne marmorata*. On the lemur front, we were lucky to see two Goodman's Mouse Lemur, and three Furry-eared Dwarf Lemurs. A sleepy Paradise Flycatcher and Collared Nightjar in flight and a Lowland Streaked Tenrec completed the line-up on this very rewarding night walk.

Day 23

Tuesday 5th November

Analamazaotra Reserve

Weather: partly cloudy, warm

We had a 7 o'clock start in the Indri Reserve, dividing into two groups. The morning started well with finally a decent view of a Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo, perched on top of a Eucalyptus at the entrance to the reserve. Here too we found a pair of Cuckoo Rollers and Blue Pigeon. Just off the path Maurice heard Red-breasted Coua and had us down on hands and knees crawling through the undergrowth in the hope of a sighting of this 'difficult' endemic species. Cathy's fleeting glimpse was the best we got but in the process we enjoyed decent views of a pair of Madagascar Wood Rail. By the bridge, Grey Bamboo Lemurs were tucking into the fast-growing young bamboo shoots and Tracey got an eye-level view of them, just 4 ft away. We craned necks to look at a Madagascar Sparrowhawk's nest in the canopy and could just make out the tail of the bird. Another lemur highlight of the day were the family of Diademed Sifaka we encountered by the river. In playful mood, they hung upside down, grooming, cuddling and then moved off to forage. We also got good views of Common Brown Lemur with a youngster.

Returning to the hotel for lunch, we said farewell to Heather whose flight was leaving a day before ours. Heather's boundless energy for searching out wildlife was an inspiration! Paul and Tracey opted for down time, while the rest of the group went to Lemur Island for an 'in your face' experience with a lively bunch of Black and White Ruffed Lemur, Red-fronted Brown Lemur and Grey Bamboo Lemur, rescued from the pet trade.

We then walked to the Crocodile Reserve where we also viewed a caged Fosa. From there we walked over the hill back to the hotel, in time to set off for the night walk at the Mitsinjo Reserve in Andasibe. Paul, meanwhile, had found a juvenile Madagascar Harrier Hawk.

Mitsinjo is an association of guides, who manage a tract of rainforest, running conservation education projects as well as tourism and tree nursery ventures. Guides Lucy and Pierre took us into the forest for another rewarding night walk, showing us Nose-horned Chameleon, Stick Insects, a sleeping Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Parson's Chameleon, Pygmy Kingfisher (that's number 3 for the trip and a personal record for me!), Stump-tailed Chameleon, a Brook Frog *Guibemantis grandidieri*, Furry-eared Dwarf Lemur, a pair of Eastern Woolly Lemur and a White-bellied Chameleon, which unlike other species does not change colour.

Day 24

Wednesday 6th November

Maromizaha Reserve

Weather: hot and sunny

Thanks to his network of contacts Tovo arranged for us to visit Maromizaha, a rainforest reserve near to Andasibe that is not yet fully open to visitors. Tovo had been involved in the setting up of the reserve some years earlier and as we had an extra day in hand because of the change in flight schedule, it was an opportunity for our group to visit a different reserve. We were accompanied by reserve guide Zafyson, who introduced the reserve and the attempts to involve local people in economic projects, like honey production, essential oils and sakay (chilli sauce). Our visit began with a gentle climb through degraded scrub to a viewpoint. This open terrain allowed us views of Madagascar Kestrel, Brown-throated Sand Martin, Madagascar Bulbul, Common Stonechat, Souimanga Sunbird and Common Newtonia. A Madagascar Nightjar flushed and flew up ahead of us. We paused to look at numerous plants: a Club Moss *Leucopodium sp*, the yellow-flowered shrub *Psidium altissima* used for essential oils, a purple Melastomaceae, a small tree fruiting from its trunk (Areliaaceae), a stunning vine with a red pea flower (Fabaceae), Wild Coffee (Rubiaceae) and numerous other plants in flower that we did not manage to identify.

We continued the walk climbing to a ridge, which afforded beautiful views over the valleys below. We found several bird species in the rainforested slopes leading to the ridge, including Paradise Flycatcher, Spectacled Greenbul, Dark Newtonia, Blue Coua and Madagascar Buzzard. We also noted Nose-horned Chameleon and Malthe's Chameleon, an Emerald Day Gecko *Phelsuma lineata*, a giant grey Weevil. We stopped for our picnic lunch by a small stream after descending from the ridge. We had hoped to find lemurs in this area, but they are still not very habituated and were up a steep slope beyond our reach. After lunch we took a look at the renovated visitor centre, which will provide accommodation to researchers.

We enjoyed a bit of action when a *Liopholidophis sp* snake grabbed a frog *Aegyptodactylus madagascariensis* but subsequently released it, perhaps because of our presence. It was now time to make our way down the valley to where the bus was waiting. We saw some fine examples of Dragon Tree *Dracaena reflexa*, a tiny green frog on a *Pandanus* leaf was a *Guibemantis pulcher*. As we got to the exit of the park we noticed slash and burn culture to both sides of the park. Tovo explained that not all the villagers agreed to the exclusion zone created by the park and some families believe they still have the right to exploit the forest and refuse to abide by the no-burn zone.

Day 25

Thursday 7th November

Andasibe to Antananarivo and depart

Weather: warm and mostly cloudy

For our last morning in the area and our last chance to see, we opted to visit Analamazaotra Reserve again. Steve and Hilary decided to have an easy morning and met up with us later, having observed Green-backed Heron, Mascarene Martin, Crested Drongo, Madagascar White-eye, Madagascar Bulbul, Ward's Flycatcher and Madagascar Kingfisher around the hotel grounds.

We made our way into the park and found Spectacled Greenbul, Blue Coua, a pair of Red-tailed Vanga, White-throated Rail and finally (!!!) a Madagascar Flufftail and a male on the nest to boot. This was a bird that we'd heard on several occasions but had never managed to see. Thank you Maurice! After a long search for Indri we struck lucky and heard and saw them call. Terry got some good video footage. The Grey Bamboo Lemurs were back by the bridge chomping on the fast-growing new bamboo shoots. After a quick lunch at Feony Ala, it was time to depart.

During the drive back to Tana, we saw Cattle Egret, Great Egret, Greenback Heron, Common Sandpiper, Common Myna, and Mascarene Martin. We made a short stop at the Lisy Craft Market for some last minute souvenirs and then made our way to the Orchid Hotel to freshen up before dinner at the Savannah Café. It was then time to head out to the airport where we said goodbye to Tovo, our wonderful local guide, friend and mentor on all matters of conservation in Madagascar. Tovo, it was a privilege to have you as guide – your enthusiasm and professionalism were exemplary. The flight left on time and soon we were in the air en route to Paris and finally home to the UK.

It was great to share the adventure of Madagascar with you all and I hope this report will help to re-ignite some of the experiences and wildlife we enjoyed together. Special thanks to Heather, Paul and John for supplying photographs to help identify some of the butterflies and other invertebrates and extra special thanks to Heather for a fantastic job on identifying the butterflies.

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	Common Name	Scientific Name	OCTOBER / NOVEMBER																											
			16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7					
21	Four-spotted (Peacock) Emerald Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma quadriocellata</i>				1																								
22	Changeable Emerald Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma mutabilis</i>																												
23	Standing's Emerald Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma standingi</i>																												
24	Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko	<i>Uroplatus sikoriae</i>																												
25	Henkel's Leaf-tailed Gecko	<i>Uroplatus henkeli</i>																												
26	Collared Iguanid	<i>Oplurus cuvieri</i>																												
27	Spiny-tailed Iguanid	<i>Oplurus cyclurus</i>																												
28	Dumeril's Madagascar Swift	<i>Oplurus quadrimaculatus</i>																												
29	Three-eyed Lizard	<i>Chalarodon madagascariensis</i>																												
30	Broad-tailed Plated Lizard	<i>Zonosaurus laticaudatus</i>																												
31	Madagascar Plated Lizard	<i>Zonosaurus madagascariensis</i>																												
32	Elegant Skink	<i>Trachylepis aureopunctata</i>																												
33	Gravenhorst's skink	<i>Trachylepis gravenhorstii</i>																												
34	Dumeril's Ground Boa	<i>Acrantophis dumerili</i>																												
35	Madagascar tree Boa	<i>Sanzinia madagascariensis</i>																												
36	Cat-eyed snake	<i>Madagascarophis colubrinus</i>																												
37	Malagasy Giant Hog-nosed Snake	<i>Leioheterodon madagascariensis</i>																												
38	Brown Hog-nosed Snake	<i>Leioheterodon modestus</i>																												
39	Lined Snake	<i>Bibilava lateralis</i>																												
40	Lined Snake	<i>Liopholidophis sp.</i>																												
41	Nocturnal Tree Snake	<i>Stenophis carleti</i>																												
42	Big-eyed Grass Snake	<i>Mimophis mahfalensis</i>																												
43	Nile Crocodile	<i>Crocodylus niloticus</i>																												
44	Radiated Tortoise	<i>Geochelone radiata</i>																												

Amphibians

1	Mascarene Grass Frog	<i>Ptychadena mascareniensis</i>																											
2	Madagascar Bright-eyed frog	<i>Boophis madagascariensis</i>																											
3	Green Bright-eyed frog	<i>Mantidactylus grandidieri</i>																											
4	A frog	<i>Mantidactylus opiparis</i>																											
5	Madagascar glass frog	<i>Guibemantis pulcher</i>																											
6	Madagascar Mantella	<i>Mantella madagascariensis</i>																											
7	Baron's Painted Mantella	<i>Mantella baroni</i>																											
8	White-spotted Frog	<i>Heterixalus alboguttatus</i>																											
9	A frog	<i>Heterixalus luteostriatus</i>																											
10	Marbled Frog	<i>Scaphiophryne marmorata</i>																											

