

Madagascar's Lemurs

Naturetrek Tour Report

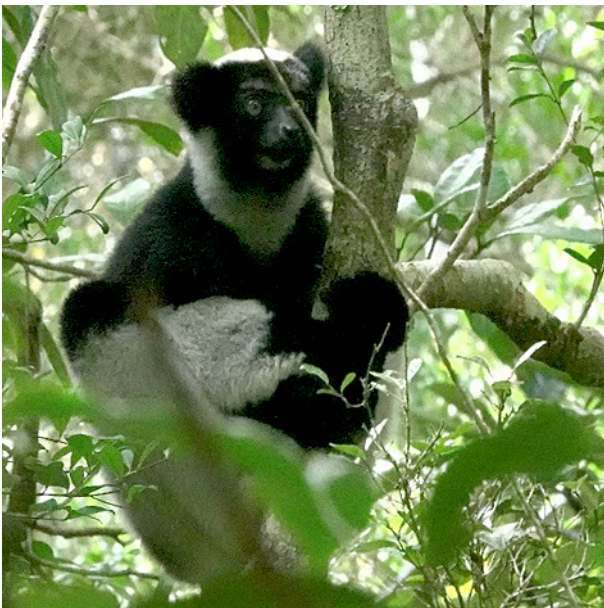
15th – 30th August 2025



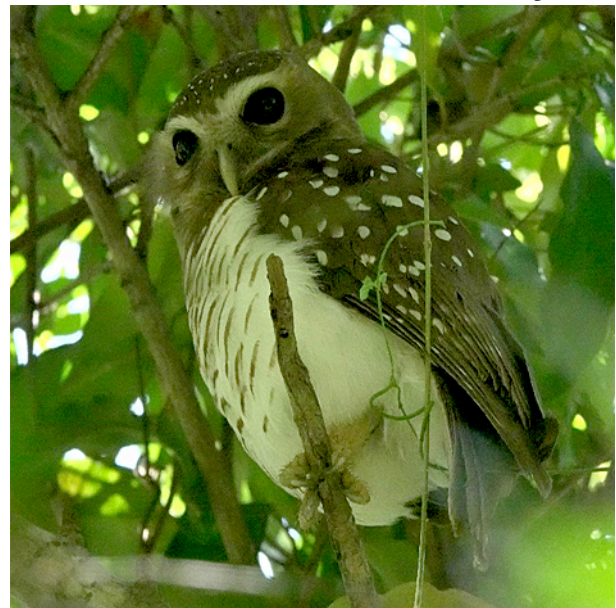
Diademed Sifaka



Torotoroka Scops Owl



Indri



White-browed Owl

Tour report by Claude Rabeloson
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Summary

The charismatic lemurs were mesmerising, and we had great sightings on both day and night excursions on their island home. Among many others, we observed the rare, endangered Golden Bamboo Lemur, the miniature Rufous mouse Lemur, and those prodigious leapers (and arguably the most beautiful lemurs) the Diademed Sifaka, which moved rapidly by propelling themselves from tree to tree on their elongated hind legs. We saw a host of beautiful and endemic species (and families) of birds, such as Giant Coua and its relatives, Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher and various owls. The experience was unforgettable when the mongoose-like Ring-tailed Vontsira put on a good show foraging among the leaf litter.

On our walks, we marvelled at the rare and quirky Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko, as well as the world's largest species of chameleon (Parson's) and an array of weird invertebrates such as the Snout Bug, Giraffe-necked Weevil, gigantic stick insects, and diverse, colourful butterflies. The incredible diversity of plant life, from the rainforest flora to the unique spiny forest and baobabs made this tour a very memorable, enjoyable and exciting experience for everyone. But success such as ours doesn't come without tremendous hard work on the part of many people. Our thanks and admiration go to our local guides and spotters, including Jean-Chris and his team in Ranomafana, Rolland in Isalo, and Maurice in Andasibe. Thanks must also go to our careful and helpful drivers, especially to Hughes on journeys in the south, and Tiana in the east.

Thanks go to all the clients, too. This is a demanding tour and you attacked it, uncomplaining, with energy and enthusiasm throughout. You clambered up hills during the day and strode through the forests at night in search of flora and fauna, smiled through long, hot journeys, were always on time (!), and brought much laughter and lightness to our tour. All in all, the tour was a great success.

Day 1

Friday 15th August

London Heathrow to Addis Ababa

The group left London on an overnight flight to Addis Ababa.

Day 2

Saturday 16th August

Addis Ababa to Antananarivo

The flight from Addis Ababa landed on time in Antananarivo (better known as Tana), the capital of Madagascar. Group members completed immigration and visa formalities, and the collection of the luggage, and soon met up with Claude, the leader. After changing some money to the local currency (Ariary) at the airport, we then transferred to the pleasant Hotel Le Combava on the outskirts of the town.

The gardens were alive with the calls of Red Fodies, Malagasy Brush Warbler flitting among bush and a group member spotted Madagascar Hoopoe. A Brown-throated Martin was noted over the paddies. Most of the group were tired from the overnight journey, so we took a few hours to settle in and relax. The group was finally

completed when we met the final client in reception that evening. Before a delicious dinner, Claude held an introductory briefing about the days ahead, and some of the extraordinary fauna and flora that we hoped to see in the coming weeks. All retired to bed early to catch up on some sleep.

Day 3

Sunday 17th August

Antananarivo to Antsirabe

We started the day early after a comfortable night in the Hotel Combava. Before eating, we had a brief scan in the hotel grounds, finding a number of Red Fodies, Malagasy Bulbul, Madagascar Wagtail and roosting Black-crowned Night Heron. The bags were loaded as we all enjoyed a good breakfast.

On the way to Tsarasaotra Lake, we passed through the capital's rice paddies, which provided us with our first views of some widespread waterbirds, including Great, Cattle and Dimorphic Egrets, and Squacco and Black Herons. Here, too, were Malagasy Black Swifts.

This would be mostly a day of travel, as we began the two-day journey to Ranomafana National Park. However, before setting off properly, we were able to spend a few hours at the delightful Park Tsarasaotra. In spite of the roaring traffic outside the walled reserve, inside we found a peaceful haven teeming with wildfowl; it is a protected Ramsar wetland site, and it gave us our first serious opportunities for wildlife-watching. Birds were most in evidence, with thousands of Red-billed Teals and White-faced Whistling Ducks coating the lake surface, alongside smaller numbers of Knob-billed Ducks, Blue-billed Teals and Common Moorhens, although the real prize was the rare endemic Meller's Duck. Also noted were Malagasy Black Swift and Mascarene Martins.

Black, Little and Black-crowned Night Herons, as well as Cattle, Dimorphic and Great Egrets, were also abundant. We achieved glimpses of female Malagasy Green Sunbird and Lesser Vasa Parrots. As we progressed on our walk around the lakes, we had splendid views of a Malagasy Kingfisher perched on a stake in the pond, while Olive Bee-eaters hawked for insects overhead and regularly came back to the nearby trees. Red Fodies were flitting around in flocks. The distinctive rattle of a Malagasy Brush Warbler and Common Jery was heard. Madagascar Swamp Warbler, Malagasy Bulbul and Madagascar Wagtail were all noted. Along the path around the lake, we saw a Red-legged Golden Orb-web Spider (*Nephila inaurata*) and spotted dragonflies such as Orange-winged Dropwing. The morning sun warmed up sufficiently to produce a few butterflies, although they were not numerous: Madagascar Brown Pansy, Blue Pansy, Brilliant Blue, African Monarch and Tiny Grass Blue. At the end of our visit to the reserve, we got excellent view of Robust Day Gecko on a tree, basking in the sunshine. Among the plants were Madagascar Butterfly-bush, Blood Sage, Lantana, Black Nightshade, Goatweed, a bulrush, Water Hyacinth, Black-eyed Susan, Papyrus and *Canna indica* in bloom.

We boarded our bus again and travelled through the outskirts of Tana to La Verdure restaurant for a lunch stop. We then drove south on a winding, rollercoaster of a road, which meandered over a landscape punctuated by granite boulders. The road took us past vegetable fields and rice paddies, and we saw a distant soaring Yellow-billed Kite. We noted garden hedging of *Spiraea*. The journey provided views of largely treeless countryside.

Antsirabe means 'place with lots of salt', which is sometimes thought to be a reference to the occasional frosts that coat the ground of this high-altitude city. It took about four hours before we arrived at the comfortable Arotel Hotel. We had another excellent dinner, and retired to bed.

Day 4

Monday 18th August

Antsirabe to Ranomafana via Ankazomivady Reserve

After breakfast, we boarded our bus at 7.30am for the next leg of the journey to Ranomafana. A Madagascar Wagtail was noted at the car park as we left the Arotel Hotel. We had another long journey today, of at least ten hours. We rejoined Route 7 and pressed further south through Madagascar's central highlands. The road was rutted and potholed in places. But we were never bored, as the countryside was stunning, comprising fertile terraces and flood plains, interspersed with huge granite rocks. As we went, we saw many people working in the rice paddies, with men doing the preparation, and women the planting and tending the crops. Muscovy Ducks and geese waddled around all the villages. The houses were solidly built of red adobe plaster, and often had two storeys.

Ever-changing scenes of village life unfolded as we navigated the busy road, watching the seemingly endless chaos of the lively markets lining the roadsides of many villages and towns. People were selling everything from staple foods to engine parts, vegetables, meat, charcoal and clothes. Yellow-billed Kites were seen soaring over the vehicle or in the distance, as well as the ubiquitous Pied Crows.

There was a stretch of indigenous woodlands amid the rocky outcrops as the road ran through native Tapia (*Uapaca bojeri*) forest, which is not only a critical player in the ecology of Malagasy woodland, but is also highly valued within Malagasy culture: the tree plays host to a moth known as Landibe (*Borocera cajani*), which produces silk to weave burial shrouds, used in the Malagasy funerary tradition known as *famadibana*. It is now found only in few scattered, isolated stands. They have a high ecological value and are of economic and cultural interest to the local population for the collection of the endemic wild silkworms.

The first moment of wildlife excitement came when we stopped to observe a Marsh Owl perched on a half-built building at very close range. It was regarded as one of highlights on the tour! Dimorphic, Great and Cattle Egrets were all seen during our day's journey, and there were some Brown-throated Martins among the Mascarene Martins hawking for insects over the paddies. Olive Bee-eater was sighted from the vehicle, and a single male Souimanga Sunbird was also seen; a Malagasy Green Sunbird flew across in front of our vehicle. Along the roadsides we recorded Lantana (*Lantana camara*), Popcorn Senna (*Senna didymobotrya*) and Bourbon Rose.

We now approach the town of Ambositra, renowned for its wood-carving tradition. We dropped in on a marquetry workshop, where we were shown how it is done, and took a comfort stop.

At 10.30am we arrived at the small, community-managed Ankazomivady Reserve, where we paused to have lunch. Before eating our meal, we set off with the forest wardens to explore the immediate area around the ponds, which proved to be a very good site for Madagascar Snipe; local guides flushed a pair which flew across the marshland, and unexpectedly they flew just over our heads, providing excellent views. While observing African Stonechat and Madagascar Mannikin at both ponds, a delightful Malagasy Kingfisher perched obligingly on a stake and on the vegetation over the pond, providing great photo opportunities. Mascarene Martins hawked for insects, and we also

noted Malagasy Kestrel; in addition, we achieved glimpses of two small brown skulkers, namely Malagasy Brush and Madagascar Swamp Warblers. Along the path we found Goat Weed (*Ageratum conyzoides*).

Having left the local reserve 1.00pm, we made our next stop in the town of Ambohimahaso, where a number of trees scattered around the town had been colonised as heronries. We stayed in the car (as it was drizzling) and carefully observed Cattle Egret, Little and Black-crowned Night Herons, and both colour morphs of Dimorphic Egret, all congregated here at their nesting site, noisily jostling alongside one another.

We headed off for the last stage of the journey; we turned off the main road and suddenly started seeing the forest. We were excited to see tree ferns, bamboos, and classic trees of the mid-altitude montane rainforest. We wound our way down the escarpment towards the village of Ranomafana (which means 'hot water'), and were amused to see people freewheeling down the road on their handcarts.

We arrived at our destination, the pleasant ecolodge Thermal Hotel, our base for the next three nights, at 5.00pm and in heavy rain. We were welcomed with lemongrass tea. After we had settled into our rooms, the group met in the restaurant for a briefing from Claude about the next few day's walks in the rainforest, before sitting down to dinner. On the restaurant walls, we found the nocturnal Common House Gecko. We made our way back to our rooms, very much looking forward to the coming two days in the forest.

Day 5

Tuesday 19th August

Ranomafana National Park

After heavy rain overnight, it was our first full day in Ranomafana National Park. Ranomafana is a substantial area of rainforest and home to some very interesting and rare wildlife. We awoke to the distant calls of Malagasy Coucal, before having our breakfast at 6.30am. We left the hotel at 7.15am, and our driver dropped us at the main gate of the National Park, Talatakely (the name translates as Little Tuesday). We met up with our local guide, Jean-Chris, trainee guide Nilaina, and Bako and Tojo, our two spotters.

From the car park, we recorded Malagasy Palm and Malagasy Black Swifts, before making our way into the National Park. We crossed the bridge over the Namorona River and admired the scenery and the rushing water below us. We entered the forest, and our guide spotted a cryptic, small Bignose Chameleon at an end of a spindly branch. It was not long before we bumped into an indigenous Madagascar rodent, the Eastern Red Forest Rat, confidently foraging among fallen branches and leaf litter.

While negotiating up-and-down trails, we picked up species of birds such as Madagascar Magpie-Robin and Madagascar Cuckooshrike, and we were very fortunate to see Tylas Vanga. The dazzling Blue Coua was spotted occasionally, always revealed by its distinctive call. But the most exciting species this morning was Scaly Ground Roller, one of the most spectacular of all Malagasy birds, and we lingered over the views and its colour details at very close quarters. Furthermore, a loud, ground-level call alerted us to the presence of another sought-after species: Pitta-like Ground Roller. Initially we achieved only a brief glimpse, but we later relocated the bird and managed to see it well. We could regularly hear the Madagascar Cuckoo, but it eluded our eyes. At a dip in the path, as we followed the edge of the river, another first showed up: an obliging Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher was found at low level in the understorey in front of us.

Our first lemur encounter was with a group of rare Golden Bamboo Lemurs, and we spent some time watching them feeding and moving around the tree tops. This lemur is endemic to Ranomafana, and was only discovered in the park in 1986 by American scientist Dr Patricia Wright. Walking the paths through the forest, we soon encountered a troop of beautiful Milne-Edwards's Sifakas on the relatively steep slopes. This is another of the specialities of Ranomafana; we noted one female with a small baby, and it was a joy to watch them, eyeball to eyeball, interacting in the tree tops. Then we were back watching another new lemur, as the spotters had called in with a fresh sighting. It was not long before we saw a small group of Red fronted Brown Lemurs.

We made our way to the Belle Vue, where we could look out over the forest. Standing on the platform, it looked as if the trees went on forever, and the view gave some hope for the future of this forest. We paused, and a pair of confiding Ring-tailed Vontsirias unexpectedly emerged from the undergrowth and allowed a great observation of these mongoose-like Malagasy carnivores. We soon realised we had to make a descent down a steep hill, just off the main path.

On our way back to the gate, we found a beautifully-camouflaged and very curious Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko which lay motionless on the trunk of a sapling. It was positioned nicely on a dead leaf, demonstrating the horn-like spikes above the eyes from which they derive their name. With that, it was time to return for an al fresco lunch, which delivered yet more birds: first a pair of Madagascar Buzzards, then a Malagasy Kestrel, and then Malagasy Palm Swifts hunting insects overhead.

After lunch, Jean-Chris led us to a Litchi tree, where the hotel gardeners pointed out a Parson's Chameleon, stealthily hunting insects. We got good photo opportunities of the creature blending in among the green leaves, and 'shooting down' an insect with its long tongue. The nearby river also provided us good views of Olive Bee-eaters, and a soaring Pied Crow. We noted some vanilla plants climbing the trees, and Claude later took the opportunity to explain the process of vanilla extraction and preparation.

After a quiet afternoon, we met up again at 3.00pm, to visit another area of the National Park at Vohiparara, a thirty-minute drive from the hotel. Birding in rainforests can be challenging, but we had good views of Spectacled Tetraka, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, Common Newtonia, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher (a white-morph male) and Crested Drongo. A Tylas Vanga perched out on an emergent rainforest tree: the vanga family is a near-endemic group of birds which has radiated to fill a wide variety of ecological niches in Madagascar. We were also fortunate enough to find another group of Milne-Edward's Sifakas. Amphibians were represented by some arboreal Pandanus Frogs, and Ivohimanitra Madagascar Frog, a brook frog species.

As the light began to fade, we made our way out of the forest. One of the main objects of the evening was to see Rufous Mouse Lemur: there is a place where these tiny primates are attracted to banana which has been rubbed on the trees. This activity takes place outside the National Park, as night walks are now no longer permitted within it. Sure enough, the banana attracted the lemurs, so we could watch them with a low-powered light that would not damage their eyes.

The drizzle had stopped, so we continued on a roadside night walk, which was very productive, with some close views of several chameleons, including Blue-legged Chameleons of different ages roosting on overhanging branches. We had walked seven-and-a-half miles today, so after the night walk it was time to return to Thermal Hotel. We were ready for some dinner and some much-needed rest!

Day 6

Wednesday 20th August

Ranomafana National Park

We woke up to a magical view of mist covering the rainforest. Mascarene Martin and Malagasy Palm Swift were flying over the hotel as we enjoyed an early breakfast. From the dining room window, we got great views of a Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher. Undeterred by the rain, some of the group chose to return to the National Park. We met up with our guide, Jean-Chris, and the spotters ran ahead of us to see what they could find. We descended a steep trail to the Namorona River, and crossed the torrent by the footbridge. A flock of Malagasy White-eyes and Common Newtonias was feeding in an avocado tree, and Souimanga Sunbird, a white-morph male Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher and a Nelicourvi Weaver were also noted before we made our way to an area full of bamboo.

While we awaited news from the lemur spotters, we stopped to take photos of a stunning Forest Rock Thrush perched at eye-level in front of us, and we were very lucky to see a female Common Sunbird-Asity perched on a tree branch: this was yet another endemic Madagascar species, and family. A forest-dwelling Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher also showed well, and our guide spotted an Eastern Red Forest Rat scurrying around. Then we set off to see a very rare and indeed Critically Endangered species, the Greater Bamboo Lemur, our target species for the day. After a bit of scrambling on our part, a single female was seen munching bamboo shoots in a thicket. This is the largest of the bamboo lemurs, recognised by its prominent pale grey or white ear tufts, and they have a more protruding snout compared to other members of the family. Not far away, our spotter took us to a roosting Totoroka Scops Owl, blending in with the dead leaves over our head.

We continued our walk, past memorial stones: Jean-Chris explained the local rituals. Other lemurs such as Red-fronted Brown and Red-bellied were seen, and swung right over us! We picked up birds such as Tylas and Blue Vangas, and Blue Coua. Claude spotted another Ring-tailed Vontsira along the footpath ahead of us. The morning had been a tough, but very rewarding walk, which had a few steep moments; we covered about two miles in four hours. We now made our way along the undulating paths back to the car park, where we rejoined our bus for the return journey to the hotel for lunch.

All made a return visit to Vohiparara Forest from 3.00pm. During that short drive, a Ring-tailed Vontsira crossed the winding road, and we saw a couple of Madagascar Wagtails hopping around.

We walked the paths through the forest, but the birds were very quiet. As we went, we encountered the troop of beautiful Milne-Edwards's Sifakas, and we were lucky enough to get good views of them feeding in the trees. While we struggled through the undergrowth and observed them, one made an explosive sneezing sound, the sound which gives the animal its Malagasy name, *Simpona*. We watched them using their long hind limbs for grip, and stretching out their forelimbs to snatch clusters of leaves as they foraged. Then, exhausting the potential of one tree, they would bound to the next, in acrobatic leaps of many metres, sometimes over our heads and landing vertically on the next trunk. It was a real treat!

Later on, two small, quite active families of Red-bellied Lemurs were observed. This was a great encounter, made all the more special by the fact that we were alone in the forest with the lemurs. A number of butterflies were recorded, including Citrus Swallowtails and Banded Blue Swallowtail, plus Golden Orb-web and Thorn Spiders, and a Large Black Millipede on the path.

At dusk, we focused our efforts on observing the nocturnal Rufous Mouse Lemurs. These tea-cup sized primates are among the smallest on earth, but are one of Madagascar's most abundant lemurs. Yet they can be difficult to observe, as they scurry at speed along the branches of the understorey and are capable of spectacular leaps. Our night walk was productive, and we saw more chameleons: O'Shaugnessy's, Glaw's Flap-necked and Blue-legged Chameleons were seen roosting on overhanging branches. And frogs were represented by some Madagascar Bright-eyed (*Boophis madagascariensis*) and White-lipped frogs (*B. albilabris*).

It was now time to say goodbye to our guide Jean-Chris and spotters Bako and Tojo, who had done a marvellous job for us over the last two days. We made our way back to the bus for the return journey to our hotel, in good time to pack for our onward journey tomorrow, and dinner.

Day 7

Thursday 21st August

Ranomafana to Isalo via Anja Reserve

Following breakfast at 5.45am, our bags were loaded onto the bus. We had an early start 6.30am to make the long drive down to Isalo. We had a quick stop at the Chute Andriamamovoka waterfall on the Namorona River, and visited the wet roadside cliffs west of Ranomafana. As we explored, we found 'Dancing Lady Orchid (*Cynorkis lowiana*), club moss ferns (*Selaginella kraussiana*) and sundew (*Drosera madagascariensis*) plants growing on the rock face by the roadside, as well as Darwin's Bark Spider.

Our first scheduled stop was in the city of Fianarantsoa, where we filled up the bus with fuel and stretched our legs. The next leg of the journey took us to Anja Reserve, 14km south of Ambalavao. Along the way we saw female Malagasy Green Sunbird, African Stonechat and a Hamerkop in the paddies.

We visited the Anja Reserve from 11.45am, best known for its Ring-tailed Lemur population. The community reserve is a success story, showing how preserving wildlife can benefit local people. Part of entrance fee goes directly back into the community, and since the reserve was set up, the village has become markedly more prosperous. A lush pocket of gallery forest at the foot of a granite massif supports a healthy population of around a thousand lemurs. Almost immediately, we were surrounded by a group of ringtails. What made this encounter exciting was that we were smack in the middle of a territorial dispute between the alpha females of two groups. After a vocal confrontation, staring duels and a scuffle or two, the defending female saw off the intruder and her 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, which were especially photogenic as they leapt among the granite boulders.

As our visit coincided with the hottest part of the day, there were rather few birds around, other than Yellow-billed Kite, Pied Crow patrolling the sky, several Mascarene Martins and many Common Mynas; a flock of Grey-headed Lovebirds flew across, and a Malagasy Coucal skulked about in the bush. Our guides found a Mahafaly Sand Snake (*Mimophis mahfalensis*) and large Oustalet's Chameleons (both males and colourful females). By the nearby lake, we picked up Cattle, Dimorphic and Great Egrets.

We ate our picnic lunch in the shade and then got back on the road again at 2.30pm. There was a notable change in the scenery as the highland rice paddies were left behind and lowland grass savannah took over, fringed by massive granitic rock formations called inselbergs.

We stopped in Ihosy (the centre for the Bara people) for fuel, and we then tackled the long climb onto the bleak Horombe Plateau (with lots of roadside Madagascar Larks) and noted Helmet Guinea-fowls by the roadside. We crossed dry grassland dotted with red termite mounds, where we got a view of a Malagasy Harrier gliding over the grassland steppe, before dropping down into Isalo town. Traditionally, the herders burn the grass at this time of year to encourage new shoots, and some of the trees have evolved to be fire-resistant. We arrived at 6.30pm at the comfortable and well-appointed Hotel Relais de la Reine, where we checked into spacious rooms and enjoyed an excellent choice on the dinner menu. Madagascar Nightjars on the rocky outcrops around us were calling as we took the path to our rooms.

Day 8

Friday 22nd August

Isalo National Park

An early morning bird walk in the hotel grounds was arranged for 6.15am for some of the group, but unfortunately there was not much to see other than Crested Drongo, Malagasy Bulbul, Olive Bee-eater, Common Myna, Malagasy Palm Swift and Souimanga Sunbird, but we were fortunate enough to see some Grey-headed Lovebirds and Malagasy Turtle Doves at close quarters. Captive Radiated Tortoises were seen on hotel lawn.

After breakfast, we set off at 7.45am to pick up our guide, Rolland, at Ranohira. On the way, our guide explained about the peculiar traditions of the local tribe and how the Bara people would prove their manhood by stealing cattle from farmers. Zebu cattle are still of great importance and represent wealth. Then we started our walk into Namaza Canyon. This park was traditionally inhabited by the Bara people.

Isalo National Park consists of sandstone massifs which have been eroded by wind and rain, creating bizarre ridges, impressive gorges and tiny stalagmite pinnacles, and has been referred to as something out of the 'wild west'. It was another very hot day, and there was very little shade available, so we took our time ambling about, and took advantage of any tall tree offering shade.

The sedate pace allowed us to take in our surroundings, and it turned out to be an enlightening guided walk, starting with seeing a Thicket Day Gecko (*Phelsuma mutabilis*) basking on a Pandanus palm. A number of interesting invertebrates were seen along the trail, including a master of camouflage in the Fulgorid Planthopper (*Zanna madagascariensis*), and an incredible stick insect (*Archioptera impennis*) that looked just like a twig or branch. In the surrounding scrub were large colonies of Flatid Leafbug nymphs (*Phromnia rosea*), really strange creature which look like snowflakes, the colourful Plataspid Shield Bug (or stink bug, *Lybyaspis coccinelloides*) as well as a praying mantis and a Malagasy Net-casting or Ogre-faced Spider (*Deinopis madagascariensis*), a nocturnal hunter which uses a unique method to capture prey, using a rectangular net made of silk. We observed Crimson Dropwing (*Tritthemis selika*), Broad Scarlet (*Crocothemis erythraea*) and Blue Emperor (*Anax imperator*) dragonflies. Also, we found an excellent range of butterflies, such as Cream-lined Swallowtail (*Papilio delalandei*), Grass Yellow (*Eurema hecabe*), Brilliant Blue (*Junonia rhadama*), Madagascar Green-veined Charaxes (*Charaxes antambouloui*) and African Migrant (*Catopsilia florella*). Meanwhile, Rolland picked up a scorpion (*Opisthacanthus madagascariensis*) to show us.

Bird sightings included Yellow-billed Kite, Malagasy Kestrel, Hamerkop, more Grey-headed Lovebirds, Malagasy Turtle Dove, Namaqua Dove, Malagasy Bulbuls and Souimanga Sunbirds. Rolland took off to look for other

wildlife, returning with news of a roosting Torotoroka Scops Owl in a tree; we found it, and further away had an excellent view of the rare White-browed Owl. A gigantic, male Oustalet's Chameleon was picked up too.

We arrived at the picnic area, which had a relatively large group of Ring-tailed Lemurs feeding on a fig tree. A few females had babies that were beginning to venture off their mothers' backs, but not going too far! The lemurs made a loud alarm call when a Hamerkop flew across the campground. And unexpectedly, very obliging Verreaux's Sifakas demonstrated their famous, unique dancing, bouncing, leaping style of locomotion: we were highly entertained by their antics. We also saw a third lemur species, in the form of a single Red-fronted Brown Lemur.

Some attractive plants were noted: an orange-flowered endemic shrub *Chadsia flammea* attracted Souimanga Sunbirds to its nectar, and we saw the purple-flowering shrub *Koebneria madagascariensis*, the *Clotaria grevei* vine locally called Parrot's Beak, and the rusty *Hibiscus ferrugineus*. On the way back to the car park, we found a Mascarene Ridged Frog (*Ptychadena mascareniensis*).

It was intensely hot, so the decision was made to return to the hotel for a late lunch. We found Duméril's Madagascar Swifts (an iguanid lizard), basking in the sun along the rocky margins of the path at our hotel and scurrying around the outcrops by the dining room. We then had time for a rest, and a swim for some of us.

We then set out again at 4.30pm to explore the hotel grounds and the network of canyons and sandstone bluffs behind the hotel. Grey-headed Lovebirds and Madagascar Hoopoes were observed on the lawn of the hotel next door. We admired the bulbous water-storing trunks and delicate yellow flowers of Elephant's Foot (*Pachypodium gracilis*), an endemic aloe (*Aloe imalotensis*), Rosy Periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*) and Salotse (*Ichnolepis graminifolia*), the plant that gives Isalo its name. We found many thousands of orange-and-black Plataspid Shield Bugs (*Libyaspis coccinelloides*) gorging on the sap of *Albizia gummifera*.

We all met up for a good dinner, and then headed back to our rooms ready to get up early the next day.

Day 9

Saturday 23rd August

Isalo to Ifaty via Zombitse National Park

We set off for Ifaty at 4.30am, having had a breakfast which had been delivered the previous night. We were on the road at first light, heading west over savannah grassland, and reached the wonderful Zombitse Forest by 6.10am, recording a Madagascar Lark, Common Mynas, and the ubiquitous Pied Crows and Yellow-billed Kites on the way. At the park entrance, we were met by our local guides, Lucien, Zafy and Toussaint.

We were lucky enough to watch a pair of Giant Couas feeding on the path in front of us by the car park as we arrived; they were very obliging and everyone enjoyed good views. Also, alongside the road, we saw Lesser Vasa parrots and Malagasy Kestrel. We moved to the forest compartment on the west side along a network of easy, flat trails, and immediately found a large male Oustalet's Chameleon. The walk around the trails here, in the company of an excellent team of local guides, proved exciting and productive. During an action-packed couple of hours, we admired a wonderful group of Verreaux's Sifakas and enjoyed excellent views of Zombitse Sportive Lemur, a nocturnal species which could be seen resting in a tree hole. A mixed flock of Long-billed Bernieras, Souimanga Sunbirds, Common Newtonias and Common Jeries fed in the low canopy. We also had a lovely sighting of the

White-browed and Mad. (Torotoroka) Scops Owls, followed by a superb range of birds including male and female Rufous Vangas, male and female Cuckoo-rollers and the terrestrial Coquerel's Coua, plus common species such as Malagasy Bulbul and Crested Drongo.

Our guides were actively seeking the elusive Appert's Tetraka; eventually, this localised endemic was located and showed well as it hopped from branch to branch in the understorey. The whole group had good views of this secretive bird. A large Standing's Day Gecko, Grandidier's Dwarf Gecko and Thicktail Day Gecko were seen during the walk, as well as a number of interesting butterflies including Madagascar Swallowtail, Brilliant Blue, African Migrant, African Monarch, Cream-lined Swallowtail, Broad-bordered Grass Yellow, Spotted Sailer and Common Zebra Blue.

We re-joined our bus at 9.30am for the next leg of our journey to Toliara, featuring some of the worst potholes seen so far! At last, the sea appeared over the brow of the hill. Little new was added during the next two hours, apart from some good examples of *Alluaudia comosa* (an Octopus Tree) and *Delonix floribunda*, before we arrived on the outskirts of Toliara, the principal town of the south-west, where we made our way to the Antsokay Arboretum for lunch at 1.30pm.

We spent an hour or so taking an excursion around the Arboretum with our guide, Nancy. The forest here is a botanical treasure house, with 92% of the spiny forest's species endemic to Madagascar. Many of the species growing here have always been here, and many others have been added, but the plants only represent the species found in the spiny forest, associated with south-west region of Madagascar. Genera seen included *Aloe*, *Euphorbia*, *Moringa*, *Delonix*, *Commiphora*, *Didierea*, *Alluaudia*, *Adenia*, *Pachypodium* and *Kalanchoe*. Nancy explained many of the local uses for the various species. While we were there, we also saw two different iguanid lizards: Merrem's Madagascar Swift (*Oplurus cyclurus*) and Three-eyed Lizard (*Chalarodon madagascariensis*). As it was overcast, quite a few birds were sighted: Sakalava Weavers, Souimanga Sunbird, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Common Jery and Namaqua Dove.

After our walk, we returned to the bus for the last leg of our journey, passed the bustling city of Toliara, then headed north on the road to Ifaty. We arrived at 5.15pm at the seaside Hotel Paradisier, and checked in. At 6.30pm, some of us met with some of the hotel guardians for a nocturnal walk in the adjacent spiny forest, and saw a Grey-brown Mouse Lemur peering through a slit of a pole, and several Hermit Crabs before our dinner.

Day 10

Sunday 24th August

Ifaty and Reniala Reserve

Today we had an early start at 5.00am, joining our bus for the short drive to the village of Mangily, and the Reniala Spiny Forest Reserve, where we were met by the local guide, Bebé. As we began our walk, Malagasy Bulbul, Common Jery, Souimanga Sunbird and a large flock of Sakalava Weavers were noted. At this point, Bebé and his assistants located a pair of Subdesert Mesites, perched motionless on a tree branch. This secretive bird is not easy to see, but on this occasion all of us had clear views. As we walked around the spiny forest, we were lucky enough to see Long-tailed Ground Roller, the other of our two main target birds, ambling among the leaf litter, showing its splendid blue feathers and incredibly long tail. Again, everyone had good views of the bird. Later on, we unexpectedly came across a pair of roosting Madagascar Nightjars on the ground, and we also got a stunning view

of Madagascar Hoopoe. There is also a project for Ring-tailed Lemurs rescued from the pet trade at Reniala Reserve, and we noticed a group of them sleeping on the top of their enclosure; some have now been released into the park.

The sun was shining, and as the morning progressed it became hotter, eventually reaching around 33°C. There were some spectacular red-barked baobab trees (*Adansonia rubrostipa*) in the reserve, with one individual stem aged at 1200 years, some of them festooned with Sakalava Weaver nests. Also typical of this forest were *Givotia madagascariensis*, used to make dug-out canoes, Octopus Trees *Didiera madagascariensis*, tree-sized Aloes *Aloe divaricata* and statuesque Elephant's Foots *Pachypodium geayi*. We enjoyed a busy and productive morning, with good views of a pair of Yellow-billed Kites perched on the top of a Baobab tree, and a pair of Malagasy Kestrels mating on the top of an Octopus tree. We had several sightings of Red-tailed Vanga and Malagasy Turtle Dove before we found three species of coua: Running, Olive-capped and Crested. Rounding off the morning's sightings, we had a llok at a roosting Torotoroka Scops Owl in a shrub. As the morning heated up, we returned to the hotel for a late breakfast and a day at leisure. One client did some snorkelling.

After lunch at 1.30pm, it was time for a siesta: it was very warm. Lizards were common around the hotel: we saw species such as Three-eyed Lizard (*Chalarodon madagascariensis*), Peters' Keeled Plated Lizard (*Tracheloptychus petersi*), which occurs sympatrically with Madagascar Keeled Plated Lizard (*T. madagascariensis*), and Gravenhorst's (*T. gravenhorstii*) and Gold-spotted Skinks (*T. aureopunctata*).

Two clients followed Claude's recommendation to visit the unique spiny forest in the afternoon, as they had opted for a relaxing morning. After it had cooled down, we drove to back to the Reniala Reserve. It was a rewarding visit, as we saw additional species that we failed to see in the morning: a pair of Madagascar Buttonquails, Red-tailed and Chabert Vangas, Subdesert Brush Warbler, Lesser Vasa Parrots and Spiny-backed (or Warty) Chameleon. We also saw some species found on the morning excursion, such as Olive-capped and Running Coua, in addition to Namaqua Dove, Souimanga Sunbird, Common Jery and Malagasy Bulbul. Thicktail Day Gecko was sighted during the afternoon walk too. Another client went exploring the small ponds outside our hotel, and saw Madagascar Cisticola, Kittlitz's and Three-banded Plovers, and Whimbrel and Curlew Sandpiper along the beach.

Over dinner, we were treated to a performance by a local folklore band; they had so much energy and really put on a show.

Day 11

Monday 25th August

Fly back to Antananarivo

It is not uncommon to experience Madagascar Airlines' tendency to change domestic flight times at the eleventh hour! Claude rushed to inform the group in time, following successive delays of our flight back to Antananarivo. We first planned to leave the hotel very early in the morning at 1.30am, since the original flight was scheduled for 4.30am; it was then postponed to 10.30am. Claude had to stay in the hotel lobby awaiting any updated information about the day's flight; clients went around the hotel forest and picked up some more birds: Thamnornis and Stripe-throated Jery, plus Madagascar Harrier-Hawk and Kittlitz's Plover on the shore.

We had our lunch at the Paradieser Hotel. Eventually, we it turned out that weren't flying until the evening: take-off from Toliara was postponed again to 7.30pm. Finally returning to the capital city, we boarded the bus in Tana, where we stayed at the Louvre Hotel in the centre of town, rather than the familiar Le Combava.

Day 12

Tuesday 26th August

Drive to Andasibe National Park

We had our breakfast at 6.30am at the Louvre Hotel and set off at 7.30am on our journey east to Andasibe. Needless to say, we saw Great, Cattle and Dimorphic Egrets along the way, as well as Squacco Heron in the paddy fields. There were Common Mynas and Feral Pigeons wherever there were human settlements. We witnessed extensive forests of coppiced Eucalyptus being cut for charcoal production. Many Malagasy are dependent on charcoal for cooking, and we saw sacks piled up by the roadside, awaiting transport to the capital. Our progress on the winding road was slow, and was hampered by convoys of lorries driving to and from the island's main port of Toamasina. Once past the watershed at Andekaleka, we entered a patch of native forest, and the road plunged in a series of hairpin bends onto the Moramanga Plateau below.

We arrived at the reserve entrance by midday, and went straight to lunch at the Feon'ny Ala restaurant. This restaurant is situated adjacent to the National Park, and often has interesting birds to see, plus Lined Day Geckos. After finishing our lunch, we met veteran guide Maurice, who has worked with Naturetrek groups for many years, and who took us into the National Park, Analamazaotra Reserve.

We saw Madagascar Blue Pigeon, Mad. Brush Warbler, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Malagasy Bulbul, Mad. Paradise Flycatcher, Crested Drongo, Common Newtonia, and a Nelicourvi Weaver displaying and weaving its nest. A millipede was noted on the way. We found a family of Diademed Sifakas, which included a playful baby. After this encounter, we found a family of Indris, the largest living lemur, but they were fairly high in the trees as they were settling down for the night. However, it was our first sighting of this flagship lemur species, and the one that the group most wanted to see. Overall, it had been an excellent start to our time in Andasibe. We then drove to our hotel Mantadia Lodge and checked in. Meanwhile, one client went for little stroll down to the nearby paddies, and picked up two Malagasy Kingfishers and African Stonechat.

We felt we could stay in the hotel grounds all afternoon, but we reluctantly moved on to the VOIMMA community reserve for the evening, and met our local guides. The walk produced good sightings of Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko, Green Bright-eyed Frog, Eastern Woolly Lemur and Goodman's Mouse Lemur, and we got a glimpse of Collared Nightjar.

Day 13

Wednesday 27th August

Mantadia National Park and Maromizaha Reserve

With just one full day in Andasibe (a consequence of the inconvenient internal flight schedules from Toliara), we had a comprehensive programme of activities planned. Today we visited the Mantadia Forest. After an early breakfast, we immediately set off with our local guide, Maurice, and his trainee guide Njaka. We left early in the

morning in two 4x4s. After an hour and a half bumping along an earthen road, we arrived at this lovely, pristine forest.

These virtually untouched jungles were quite unlike anywhere else we had visited, with ancient buttress-rooted giants towering above and creating an undisturbed canopy. It took a bit of scrambling, but we eventually found ourselves a Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur, although we had to crane our necks somewhat! Within minutes, we were treated to seeing a Nelicourvi Weaver (a female this time), Spectacled Tetraka, Malagasy Green Sunbird, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Long-billed Tetraka, Common Newtonia, Malagasy White-eye, and we got excellent views of Blue and Red-tailed Vangas. Further ahead, a Blue Coua showed off with its iridescent blue colour. Common species such as Malagasy Bulbul, Madagascar Magpie-Robin, Common Myna and Crested Drongo were picked up too. Through the canopy, we were observing a Madagascar Harrier-Hawk circling overhead, plus Madagascar Spinetail. Not far from a stream, we got a good view of White-throated Rail.

We constantly heard the impressive shrieks of Indris, but sadly none of the local guides was able to locate the animals themselves. Likewise, the Ground Rollers proved unwilling to appear. It was somewhat disappointing to miss some of our targets for the area, but they are elusive creatures, and this is the nature of wildlife viewing.

We had lunch at a small picnic area near the trailhead. Then came the bumpy return journey, which saw us back at Mantadia Lodge shortly after 2.00pm; we all relished an hour or so in our rooms to recharge. Keen to maximise our chances for more wildlife, and knowing we would need every second of our two days in Andasibe to explore this treasure-trove of biodiversity, Claude had arranged a final afternoon excursion to Maromizaha Forest, a spectacular higher-altitude reserve that promised several hard-to-find mammals, birds and reptiles. We would have an opportunity to track down diverse species within the scattered rainforest blocks.

We set off again at 3.30pm for our last evening and night walk. We met up with Etienne, our new local guide. After securing our permits in the office at Anevoka Village, we started our walk, which produced some close views of Forest Rock Thrush, a stunning view of Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher at eye level in front of us, Madagascar Magpie-Robin and Malagasy Green and Souimanga Sunbirds. Close to the viewing platform, a Red-fronted Coua hopped along the path in front of us.

We then had a break at the Belle Vue, from which a vast swathe of untouched jungle could be seen. Also enjoying the vista were a pair of Collared Nightjars, which swooped around us. As darkness slowly enveloped the tree-clad hills, we relished the spectacular surroundings, and listened to the calls of Blue Couas and Madagascar Flufftails emanating from the lower slopes. Soon, it was time to retrace our steps, with the stroll back to the bus doubling as a night walk. We got a very good view of Goodman's Mouse Lemur along the way, and a Rainforest Scops Owl was perched on a branch at very close range and provided some splendid photo opportunities. This experience was hard to beat, but a couple of reptiles came close when we picked up some recently-discovered chameleons. The island of Madagascar hosts not just the largest chameleon, but also the tiniest, such the Two-toned Soft-nosed Chameleon (*Calumma roaloko*) and Angozongahy Nosed Chameleon (*Calumma emelinae*). Perinet Chameleon (*Calumma gastrotaenia*) and Green Bright-eyed Frog (*Boophis viridis*), Analamazaotra Madagascar Frog (a mossy frog, *Spinomantis aglavei*) were added the list this evening, as well as a Madagascar Bullseye Moth (*Cyligramma disturbanis*), a beautiful thorny phasmid, and Moss-mimic Stick Insect (*Parectatosoma macquersii*), endemic to the rainforest of Madagascar.

Having thanked our excellent guide, Etienne, we made our way back to Mantadia Lodge to prepare for dinner, and Claude outlined the next two days' programme. All agreed it had been an eventful and splendid day.

Day 14

Thursday 28th August

Andasibe to Tana

We awoke to a misty start to the day and the distant wailing of Indris from the forest. After a filling breakfast and a short drive to the entrance to the Indri Reserve, our last morning gave us a final chance to explore the Analamazaotra Reserve in daylight. It would be an opportunity for further encounters with familiar species (or perhaps to eke out another addition or two to the lemur list). We stopped by the open surroundings of a fish farm, and got a glimpse of a Purple Heron.

Common Brown Lemur and Diademed Sifakas were seen. However, we still had some species of lemurs to track down: finally, nearly at the end of the morning walk, how lucky we were when we stumbled across both the gorgeous Eastern Woolly Lemur, and Grey Bamboo Lemur. Topping the morning's lemur viewing was a marvellous encounter with a group of four Indris, one with a young baby. Our group also enjoyed an ultimate Indri encounter, with a family bounding through the trees just metres above us.

Birds seen during the park visit included: Common Sunbird-Asity, Red-fronted and Blue Couas, Malagasy Brush Warbler, Common Newtonia, Common Moorhen, Malagasy Kingfisher, Madagascar Magpie-Robin, Malagasy Bulbul, Souimanga Sunbird, Madagascar Wagtail and African Stonechat. Now it was time to say goodbye, and to thank Maurice for showing us so much of the interesting local wildlife and sharing his vast knowledge.

After lunch at Mantadia Lodge, we boarded the bus for Tana, and we arrived late in the afternoon. One client went to stay overnight at the Carlton Hotel, in the town centre, but we'd see her again the following day, as all of us had decided to do some souvenir shopping on the last day of our tour.

Day 15

Friday 29th August

Tana

By popular consensus, we decided to have a slightly later breakfast. We first drove into Tana and picked up our friend from the Carlton Hotel. Then we drove to the Lisy Boutique in the outskirts east of town at Antanimora, where there was a good selection of handicrafts, T-shirts with Malagasy designs, embroidery and spices to take home. And then we headed to the international airport terminal. Our group finally disbanded, with one client heading on for the Nosy Be extension. After sharing so many experiences together, it was sad to say our goodbyes.

Day 16

Saturday 30th August

Tana – Addis Ababa – London

Clients arrived back home after a long international flight.

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