

Madagascar's Mammals

Naturetrek Tour Report

28th October – 14th November 2023



Fossa



Indri



Aye-aye



Ring-tailed Lemurs

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Summary

We left a wet and stormy UK just before Hallowe'en and arrived in a contrasting hot and sticky Madagascar, full of enthusiasm for finding some of the unique mammals of this wonderful island. We started off on a high – on the east coast we were privileged to see not one but at least four of the incomparable Aye-ayes. Moving on down to the rainforests of the Andasibe-Mantadia Park we were treated to a feast of day active and diurnal lemurs, with the haunting cry of the magnificent Indri as our soundtrack.

We then visited the hugely contrasting Kirindy, in the dry and dusty north west, defined by the unmistakeable profiles of Baobabs. Here we were privileged to observe both male and female Fossa – the strange and unsettling predator of lemurs, as well as curiosities like the Giant Jumping Rat.

Berenty delivered what we all love – the 'dancing' Verreaux's Sifakas and the endearing Ring-tailed Lemurs, as well as owls, chameleons and many other goodies. This island continues to be deforested but some reforestation is now taking place and, hopefully, its delightful people and wildlife will continue to charm us in the future.

Days 1 and 2

Saturday 28th – Sunday 29th October

Our holiday began at London's Heathrow Terminal 2, when the group boarded the flight to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. The flight was on time and we got into Addis with a couple of hours to spare before our on-going flight to Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. However, this time advantage was gradually eroded as we sat on the runway for the best part of an hour. No explanations were offered so we surmised that it was either a problem getting hold of steps, or a bus to take us to the terminal, or both. But we all made it in the end and arrived in Tana about lunchtime on Sunday 29th. There we met up with Desi, our local guide, exchanged money, and headed off to our hotel.

Before losing the daylight, we decided to have a look at the rice paddies opposite the hotel. Before leaving the hotel grounds we had a good look at the colour variations within the male Madagascar Fody population which were using the trees in the hotel grounds. Then we strolled across in a break in the traffic and lined up along the embankment overlooking the rice paddies. As if standing guard, an enormous Golden Orb-web spider hung down from the telegraph wire in the centre of a dangling web. Around her were the macabre remains of her victims. Our main ornithological diversion were the regular lines of the Madagascar sub-species of Little Egret, which is dimorphic – individuals are either white or slate grey. As they moved from their feeding areas to their roosting areas it seemed that the dark morph was predominant, and it was interesting to speculate why this might be so.

As the light faded, we headed back to the hotel for some briefing before dinner. We gave an outline of the trip, things to watch out for in terms of staying safe and healthy etc, then settled down for our first dinner of the trip. Having been on a plane the previous night we retired early to bed.

Day 3

Monday 30th October

After breakfast we set off to brave the traffic of Tana once more. Although the journey was slow, the city is bustling and colourful, with squadrons of small motorbikes and bicycles jostling for road space with minibuses, tuk-tuks, bicycle rick-shaws etc. Our objective was Tsarasaotra lake, an oasis in the midst of this busy city. This site is privately owned and protected and is a Ramsar site. Although the water was unusually high it was still bustling with water bird activity. Large rafts of Red-billed Teal and White-faced Whistling Ducks were scattered over the open water or sitting on logs. The island in the middle of the lake was alive with Dimorphic Egrets along with Squacco Herons, Black and Black-crowned Night Herons. Here and there were dotted immature Malagasy Pond Herons. Further along the shore we began to pick out Hottentot Teal amongst the Red-billed Teal.

We worked our way around the lakeshore, stopping to try and find a calling Malagasy White-eye and Malagasy Coucal. We located two Brush Warblers, just after we had been admiring a juvenile male Oustelot's Chameleon. Further on, a larger, darker Oustelot's chameleon peered at us superciliously from a shaded branch while out on the water a blue flashing jewel indicated the passing of a Malagasy Kingfisher. A little further on, two Malagasy Hoopoes explored an open flooded area. Then we boarded the bus and headed back to the hotel. After a leisurely lunch we drove back out to the airport for our short flight to the east coast.

After a short and uneventful flight to Toamasina we checked into our comfortable hotel, looking forward to our adventures the following day.

Day 4

Tuesday 31st October

After an early breakfast we departed our hotel and made the short drive to the port of Anjavidy. Here, on the Pangalane channel, we hopped aboard our craft and headed south along the channel. The boat was narrow, with open sides and a cover to protect us from the elements and we had a very relaxing journey towards the Palmarium. The canal, which is man-made, links a series of lakes and the whole system is sheltered from the sea by a narrow strip of land. It is bustling with human activity, indicating its importance to the local Malagasy population. People were bathing, doing laundry, fishing and using it to transport goods, often rather precariously balanced on narrow canoes. Eels were clearly very important and we saw a huge number of structures designed to funnel them towards traps. A Yellow-billed Kite flew over as we crossed one of the lakes and Olive Bee-eater and Malagasy Kingfisher were also spotted.

At about mid-day we arrived at the Palmarium. No sooner had we disembarked than we spotted a group of Indri sitting in a tree near the water. Having enjoyed them for a few minutes we climbed the steps and checked in. Our rooms were not quite ready so most of us enjoyed a stroll in the forest before sitting down to an excellent lunch. In the afternoon we had a walk around the reserve with one of the centre guides. Our first encounter was with Indri, and both male and female came to investigate us (and to be fair, the bananas held by the guide). We learnt that the male has green eyes and the female has yellow eyes. After a brief visit they hurtled off through the trees in a Gibbon-like fashion. This was closely followed by an encounter with Brown Lemur, followed by Red-bellied Lemur, Black Lemur and Black and White Ruffed Lemur. What an afternoon! All these animals were preparing for the night by looking for a sleeping site which caught the last of the day's sun and would catch the early sun in the morning. All these animals were habituated but were nevertheless wild. It meant that they would come down for a banana treat, and even sit on someone's shoulder while enjoying it. A great experience for the group.

Later in the afternoon we boarded a boat to try and find our main objective for this visit to the Palmarium – the elusive Aye-aye. We set off in the gathering dark and by the time we had reached the island it was completely dark. Using head torches we climbed a hill to the site where some coconuts had been placed. As we got there, two Aye-ayes had beaten us to it and were already feeding on the coconuts. Fascinated, we watched how they used their powerful teeth to penetrate the coconut then their modified finger to scrape out the contents. No less than four showed up in due course and there were many interesting interactions. Moving to a different site we encountered two more. We got close and protracted views of all these individuals – an unforgettable experience!

Day 5

Wednesday 1st November

A very early start this morning saw some of us investigating the forest trails in search of birdlife. However, it was surprisingly quiet and we heard only the calls of Malagasy Coucal, Bulbul, Green Sunbird and Souimanga Sunbird. A male Black Lemur was a rewarding distraction and we returned for breakfast.

After breakfast we went out again with one of the guides from the centre. We had a delightful encounter with a Black and White Ruffed Lemur which followed us for some time, including sitting on the shoulders of some members of our party. A Malagasy Green Pigeon gave us reasonable views. We enjoyed the posing of a Spiny Tailed Iguana which sat up on a tree stump. A female Panther Chameleon swayed backwards and forwards as we watched her, low in a bush, whilst high up a beautiful Giant Day Gecko watched us from the crown of a coconut palm. As we proceeded along the trail our guide found a stick insect and posed the group the task of locating it – with mixed results! As we walked along the beautiful Palmarium beach we were shown a lovely Heterixalus tree frog. Although paler than the surrounding leaves, by hiding under a leaf it was both inconspicuous and at a reduced risk of desiccation. Our final highlight was a colony of Pitcher plants growing in a wet flush near the beach. Some even had the remains of their victims at the base. As it was getting very hot by then, we retreated to the camp to rest before lunch.

In the heat of the day the group relaxed but were entertained by a 'folkloric show' down on the beach. Several members were invited up to dance along with the troupe, and sportingly did so. In the evening, a night walk took us in search of nocturnal animals. Our first finds were the tiny Stump-tailed Chameleons - males an inch or so long with the females even smaller. These diminutive reptiles live in the leaf litter and how they were spotted by our guide was a mystery. A little further on we had good views of an Eastern Woolly Lemur, and several others followed. But our star find for the night was a Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec. This animal, for all the world like a small hedgehog, was sitting on top of a stump, completely still. It was so still that we thought it had expired but when touched by our guide it came to life and scuttled across the forest floor with impressive speed.

We followed this with our last dinner at La Palmarium, but with many memories to bring home.

Day 6

Thursday 2nd November

Today was to be a travelling day. We headed south in a boat from La Palmarium, for about one hour until reaching the beach at Manambatu. On the way we had seen not just the fish traps but also groups of people wading chest high in order to use nets manually. Here we boarded our 4x4 vehicles to negotiate the very rough track up to the main road (N2). This was very slow due to many dips and potholes, but better time was made on the N2. Many people were walking on the road and the little towns we passed through were invariably thronged with brightly

dressed people buying and selling at the roadside. Rather worryingly there was much evidence on the hilltops of burning for subsistence agriculture – it is very difficult for the government to organise replanting of trees in the face of this subsistence need. We arrived at Andasibe at about 1230 and checked into our hotel. The old French name of Perinet has largely been replaced with the Andasibe-Mantadia name for the important rainforest being protected here. But after a long drive it was time for a little relaxation before our late afternoon activities began.

Setting off at 1600, we met Maurice, the guide for the local community reserve. We walked slowly along the road looking for birds. In the reserve, a Rainforest Scops Owl was roosting in some bamboo, and seemed unconcerned at our presence. In the orchid garden, a Malagasy Kingfisher sat obligingly at the edge of a pond while in the trees behind, several Crested Drongos, and Green Sunbirds, flitted about the bare branches. A little way from this, Maurice had discovered the roosting site of a Malagasy Long-eared Owl which was partly obscured by branches high in a pine tree. By this time it was getting dark so we donned head torches and explored the community reserve through a night walk. This was most enjoyable, with the highlights being a Crossley's Dwarf Lemur, Eastern Woolly Lemur and Goodman's Mouse Lemur. The eyeshine from the Woolly Lemur was particularly bright; quite startling in the torchlight. A couple of frogs put in an appearance and a diminutive Pygmy Kingfisher sat roosting on the end of a twig, not at all alarmed at being the centre of attention.

So, after a long day, it was back to the hotel for an excellent dinner, ready for our forthcoming day in Mantadia.

Day 7

Friday 3rd November

Today was our visit to the Mantadia section of the National Park. Although only 17 km away, it took more than one hour because of the dirt roads. As always, we passed many people walking on the road, and they were invariably smiley and friendly. As we drove along, we admired the tree ferns growing among the Pandanus palms. A White-throated Rail crossed the road between the vehicles before we arrived at Mantadia.

We set off along the trails with our guide and soon heard the raucous barking of Black and White Ruffed Lemurs. They were mainly high in the canopy, and indeed often sleep very high in order to avoid predation by the Fossa. We watched them move athletically between trees, occasionally squabbling with others. Later we enjoyed good views of Common Brown Lemur, including a mother with young. Our view of Red-bellied Lemur was restricted to an adult with young resting very high in a tree. Our lemur highlight was undoubtedly our time spent with a family group of four Diademed Sifakas. These beautiful animals were very tolerant of our presence, and we were able to get close without disturbing them. In the background, Indri were calling.

But lemurs weren't the only attraction. An adult female and juvenile Velvet Asity, sitting motionless above the river, proved challenging for the whole group to pick them out. A tiny but gloriously coloured Baron's Mantella Frog was a delight and was located through its characteristic call. A female Giraffe-necked Weevil was found quite high up on a bush – a particular attraction for many people. By this time we were all ready for lunch and went to an attractive picnic spot where there were seats for everyone. A short walk afterwards produced some great bird sightings: Olive Bee-eater and a lovely Blue Coua being the highlights. Moving on again, we came to a small lake where Madagascar Wagtails had built a nest in a wooden stump in the water. A Broad-billed Roller called then flew into a nest hole. A Madagascar Swamp Warbler called and flitted about near the water's edge. A Madagascar Cuckoo called from atop a leafless tree. All this time, a Red-fronted Coua had been calling from a thicket, but not showing itself. We decided to walk down to the thicket, where our guide played its call. Although still in deep

cover, it allowed some of the group to get a view of this stunning bird. At that point we retraced our steps and returned to the hotel.

We had another evening walk, starting about 1800, in the community reserve. Things started off quietly – two Goodman's Mouse Lemurs spotted very briefly by those at the head of the group. But then our guide heard something rustling, which turned out to be a Lowland Streaked Tenrec. This wonderful little mammal was rooting about in the leaf litter. About the size of a mouse, it had a long snout, bristles and cream and black stripes on the back. After we all had a good look, it went charging off again through the leaf litter. A little further on we came upon a Weasel Sportive Lemur. This is an endangered species, so we felt privileged to observe it as it clung onto a small tree and observed us with its large eyes. That was our final encounter of the evening and we retreated to our hotel for the night.

Day 8

Saturday 4th November

Our first destination this morning was the Andasibe section of the National Park. After a short ride in the vehicles, we set off on the trails. As we approached a footbridge we noticed a dark blob in the overhanging bamboo. This turned out to be an Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur. We went closer and were rewarded with this small lemur (the smallest day active lemur) climbing through the bamboo over our heads

As we passed some fish ponds on the park boundary, we spotted the skulking shape of a Striated Heron making its way along the water's edge. A little further on we tried in vain to see a Madagascar Flufftail but the stop did enable us to see a Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher sitting on the nest.

We slowly climbed a steep slope, pausing only to examine a Pandanus Frog on a plant of that name, until it flattened out on the top. As we progressed another 100m or so we began to pick out the pied coloration of Indri near the tops of the trees. For 30 minutes or so we enjoyed the company of these magical lemurs as they fed, leapt from tree to tree, and interacted with each other.

Reluctantly we left the Indri and made our way back down a minor path. Here, sitting in the centre of a small Pandanus, was a roosting Collared Nightjar. This endemic species is confined to rainforest and does not sing like other nightjars. It was beautifully camouflaged, its warm mottled colours blending perfectly with the dead plant material. A little below this one, another one was roosting on the ground and despite our passing very close by it remained stationary.

In mid-morning we had to say our goodbyes to the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park and began the journey back to Tana.

Day 9

Sunday 5th November

This was our day to travel to Kirindy. Due to flight alterations, there was only room for seven on the scheduled flight so two of us had to travel in a small charter. This was an interesting experience in a six seater Cessna 206. The low-altitude flight allowed fantastic views of Madagascar and its slower speed meant that although it left earlier, the two flights landed in Morondava at about the same time.

Having acquired some water, we set off on the dirt roads towards Kirinday. Although not a long journey it was slow because of the rollercoaster pattern of transverse ridges which develop on these tracks. We stopped at the wonderful 'Avenue of Baobabs' a sequence of these magnificent trees which line the road at one end of a village. We were pleased to see that some young Baobabs had been planted as eventual replacements for their giant neighbours, as regeneration of these trees can be difficult once their surrounding forest has been removed. We arrived at Kirinday in late afternoon: it was very hot, so we retired to our lodges until things had cooled down a little.

In the evening we had a night walk in Kirindy Forest. As we waited in the car park someone shouted 'Fossa' – we whirled around to see a Fossa crossing the forest track about 50 metres away. Turning back round to face the car park we could see people excitedly crowding round one end. On reaching that side we had wonderful close views of a male Fossa rummaging around and then, finding something to eat, it moved into the open where we all had excellent views of this formidable predator. What a start to the evening!

Our next encounter was with a Grey Mouse Lemur which was feeding high in a tree and so was partly obscured. Very soon afterwards a Pale Fork-marked Lemur, feeding on sap, withdrew up to the canopy but gradually relaxed and came down the trunk again where it recommenced feeding on the sap. Two roosting birds, sitting stock still in the vegetation, were caught in the torchlight – a Magpie Robin and a Hook-billed Vanga – but neither flinched at our approach so presumably not moving is part of their concealment strategy. A couple of lovely Red-tailed Sportive Lemurs watched us impassively as we held them in the torchlight. Just as we returned to the vehicles a Grey Mouse Lemur scuttled along a branch very close to the vehicles, then we headed back for a tasty dinner.

Day 10

Monday 6th November

Conscious of the heat, we set off early for our morning exploration of Kirinday Forest. We set off along the trails in this dry deciduous forest. We stopped to have a chat about the magnificent Baobabs and learnt that there are no extant animals capable of ingesting and spreading the ripe fruit – this had historically been done by Gorilla Lemurs and other extinct species. Nowadays the only chance of reproduction is when the fruit rots and other animals can then get into it. Alongside the Baobab was Fossa scat with abundant fur in it – looking very like the fur of the Red – fronted Brown Lemur, which was the next animal we located. This was a small group of about four or five lemurs which were feeding very close to the path. The male, with his striking rufous forehead, was very interested in us and came very close. The female with a small baby kept her distance.

We spent some time with another group of lemurs – Verreaux's Sifakas – which were feeding on the leaves of Baobabs. We were delighted by the acrobatic leaps of these beautiful Sifakas and were particularly impressed by the ability of a baby to cling to her mother's back as she leapt. We learnt that they cling to their mother's belly for the first three months; thereafter they moved to her back.

Interspersed with the lemur activity there were birds – Madagascar Paradise Flycatchers flitted through the branches along with Blue Vanga, Long-billed Tetraka etc. A notable sighting was of two Sickle-billed Vanga chasing each other in a tree. They use the long sickle shaped bill to find invertebrates in rotten wood, so filling a niche occupied by woodpeckers elsewhere.

Spiny-tailed iguanas and a three-eyed Lizard gave us reptile interest but then the increasing heat indicated that we should withdraw to the shade and we returned to our accommodation.

Another night walk found us once again on the trails of Kirindy forest. Things were quieter this evening, but we did find a number of Grey Mouse Lemurs. We had excellent views of them feeding on sap and of their ability to almost bounce from tree to tree.

Day 11

Tuesday 7th November

Our early morning walk took us to another section of the forest. Lesser Vasa parrots chased each other in between bouts of feeding on fruit. A movement to the side of the path caught our eye and a group of about 10 Red-fronted Lemurs approached us on the ground. Several of the females had youngsters slung under their bellies and were also wearing collars with number tags so they were presumably the subject of research. Common Newtonias gave us some nice close views, sometimes associating with other species such as Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher.

The loud call of Giant Coua allowed us to locate two of these impressive birds as they stalked the forest floor, while high in the canopy Crested Coua was seen. A particular delight was finding a roosting Grey Mouse Lemur in a hollow tree. It looked down on us sleepily from its cosy hollow.

We were still enjoying the Grey Mouse Lemur when a call from up the track alerted us to something else. Accordingly, we hurried back to the camp to hear the call of 'Fossa!' We arrived in time to watch a beautiful female, probably pregnant, moving about at the back of the forest camp. She ambled around in a leisurely fashion, fully aware of our presence but completely unperturbed. She was obviously also feeling the heat as she chose a patch of shadow and spreadeagled herself on the ground to maximise her surface area. After a few minutes she rose and trotted back into the forest: a fantastic end to the morning.

This evening, we had arranged a special outing to try and see the famous Giant Jumping Rat, now confined to the Kirindy area. This involved enlisting a local scientist who was studying them, as well as our guide. Arriving at Kirindy later than usual, we immediately headed into the forest to an area not normally visited. We split into two groups and waited quietly in the dark in a patch of forest near to an occupied burrow. Nothing happened for perhaps 20 minutes but we were struck by the absolute silence. Suddenly a scrabbling noise indicated that one had emerged, and we shone torches to try and find it. After some time, we managed to locate it and all got at least a glimpse of this intriguing animal. Not wishing to disturb it further, we withdrew. As we drove back into the camp, eyeshine indicated a Fossa walking on the track and this animal was seen again as we drove back to our accommodation, well pleased with the evening's events.

Day 12

Wednesday 8th November

Today we returned to Tana. But we had time for a couple of stops before Morondava airport. Our first stop was at the famous 'love Baobab', so called as one trunk was entwined around the other in a seeming embrace. At this site we were distracted by two Giant Swallowtails in a mating embrace over the trees. Very appropriate we thought. Our next stop was at the 'Allee des Baobabs', where we had stopped on the way down. Then our charter flight back to Tana enabled us to have excellent views of this enormous island. Unfortunately the scale of deforestation was only too evident from the air, and the central highlands seemed particularly badly affected.

After a late lunch in Tana, some of us visited the local market. We were very impressed by the local craftsmanship and several unplanned items were bought. Then it was an early night in view of our very early start the next morning.

Day 13

Thursday 9th November

We had a very early start this morning to get to the airport in time for the 0700 flight from Tana to Tolognaro (Fort Dauphin). The airport was relatively quiet so we had time to relax before the two hour flight. On arrival we boarded three four-wheel drive vehicles and visited a local petrol station where we stocked up on water. We waited there briefly while a small party visited the pharmacy, then headed off towards Berenty

The road had once had a tarmac surface, but it was now so worn that it had disappeared every few hundred metres and the dirt sections were deeply rutted. This made progress meandering and slow, and no danger of nodding off after our early start! However, a lot of work was taking place to improve the road, which meant frequent short diversions but did hold the promise of an improved road in future.

We passed through several small towns with bustling markets – chock full of colourful local fruit and vegetables and even more colourful people. A short stop at the National Park office allowed use of the facilities but also allowed to us appreciate the unique coverage of this National Park, which ranged from rain forest in the east to spiny forest in the west with transitional forest in between.

Another brief stop was at a cemetery. Here we discovered that the height of each memorial corresponded to the age/importance of the individual and that the bodies were not beneath the memorials but were in a separate building.

Finally we arrived at Berenty in time for lunch and check in to our individual lodges. After a rest following lunch, we set out on a late afternoon walk with our guide, Olivier. Almost immediately we had our first encounter with the 'dancing' Sifakas – this is where Verreaux's Sifakas cross open ground in a lolling gait which many perceive as dancing. Later we also got good views of Red-fronted Brown Lemurs and, of course, the famous Ring-tailed Lemurs, walking demurely almost under our feet, many with babies on their back.

Nice views were also obtained of Yellow-billed Kite and Malagasy Green Pigeon. A pair of Madagascar Hoopoes fed on the ground in front of us. Common Jery and Madagascar Paradise Flycatchers flitted in the bushes. A striking sighting was a group of Helmeted Guineafowl feeding in the forest. We managed to get a glimpse of a White-browed Owl which was becoming active; but the gathering dark indicated it was time for a break before our next activity.

As we assembled in the gloaming Madagascar Nightjars patrolled overhead. Our night walk this evening was in the spiny forest, the amazing Malagasy habitat dominated by the spiny Octopus Trees. Almost immediately headtorches picked up a tiny Grey Brown Mouse Lemur in an Octopus Tree – it bounded from limb to limb as if spring loaded. A Warty or Spiny Backed Chameleon sitting on the end of a branch was one of two which we located. More Grey Brown Mouse Lemurs followed but then something larger – a White-footed Sportive Lemur. It seemed rather coy initially and would only show us its back, but we finally did get views of its face as it looked

down on us with enormous orange eyes. A roosting Magpie Robin sat motionless directly above the path as we passed along on our way to finding another Sportive Lemur; then it was back to Berenty for dinner.

Day 14

Friday 10th November

This was our full day in Berenty, and we began with a pre-breakfast walk around the reserve, including the gallery forest by the river. We began to spot birds around the parking area. A Crested Coua sat high, in full view, showing off its blue facial skin. Two Malagasy Kestrels called to each other. Sakalava Weavers and Common Mynas jostled for position on trees of medium height.

Two Verreauxs Sifakas danced after each other down a forest path. In this case the elegant 'dance' was two individuals who were in conflict. A group of Red-fronted Brown Lemurs appeared in the trees above us. We learned how the females are greyer, with paler faces, than the males. Females with babies are carried underneath the mother unlike the Ring-tailed Lemurs which transfer the young to the back when they reach a certain age. These Brown Lemurs had been reintroduced here and were expanding rapidly. Some considered this a mistake as they, unlike the other lemur species here, do not eat the leaves of the Octopus tree. Food for them is therefore relatively sparse and their lifespan is probably shorter as a result. A roosting White-footed Sportive Lemur seemed wedged between the branches of an Octopus Tree, but eventually deigned to show us its face. We all thought a hollow tree might be more comfortable and indeed, later in the day, we did locate one in just such a location. As we walked along, Yellow-billed Kites patrolled overhead – no surprise as we had seen a nest the previous day.

After breakfast we embarked on another walk. Unusually it was raining periodically; sometimes a gentle drizzle, sometimes heavier bursts. Sifakas and Red-fronted Brown Lemurs were again in evidence and we were regularly regaled with song from Magpie Robins. Pill Millipedes seemed particularly common and we had to be careful to avoid treading on them. A roosting White-browed Owl, inevitably partly hidden by leaves, was, with a little perseverance, eventually seen by all.

As we arrived at a large Tamarind tree we were urged to be quiet. Walking gently beneath its wide-spreading branches, we began to pick up pendulous shapes hanging vertically. This was the regular daytime roost site for the Madagascar Flying Fox – a huge bat with a wingspan of almost 1 metre. The need to be quiet was because loud human voices can make them take to the air, thus using up valuable energy in what should be their resting phase. As we retraced our steps it began to rain more steadily, but we did stop to observe a Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher sitting on the nest. It seemed a rather exposed position and we discussed the difficulties of finding a nest site safe from both aerial and terrestrial predators; for example the Ground Boa. This was pertinent as we had just been observing the shed skin of one of these impressive snakes. A quick visit to the river followed – it had much more water than normal due to the unusual rain – then we retreated to the camp to dry out before lunch.

In the late afternoon we ventured out again; this time into another part of the spiny forest. We learnt that the Octopus tree wood can be used for building, and saw a small house constructed from it. This forest is protected but cyclones can bring trees down in an unpredictable way. Amazingly, Sifakas can jump between these intensely spiny trees without apparent discomfort – a real mystery. We passed some fine Baobabs, some with evidence of Sakalava Weaver nests. In the cleft between the two trunks of one Baobab a Velvet Gecko – a nocturnal species – was hiding, waiting for darkness before becoming active. A little further on both male and female Thicktail Day

Geckos were picked out by our guide despite their camouflage. A Green-capped Coua made an appearance just before we rejoined the vehicles for our return to camp.

Our night walk was in the gallery forest at Berenty itself. We very quickly located both Grey-brown and Grey Mouse Lemurs. As ever, they leapt unbelievable distances between branches for such tiny creatures. Several White-footed Sportive Lemurs were also being acrobatic – a different animal from the sleepy eyed version found in hollow trees during daylight hours. Sitting quietly on branches were Spiny – backed or Warty Chameleons, but also two of the lovely little Jewelled Chameleons. Loud hoots saw us looking for White-browed Owl, and we had a beautifully posed individual on top of a dead tree. Although we had less success locating the calling Scops Owl, we returned for dinner well satisfied.

Day 15

Saturday 11th November

Our pre-breakfast walk was in the nearby spiny forest and it was a glorious morning – sunny but cool; just perfect for a walk. Our first find was a Crested Coua, posing nicely in the bright sun, and this was followed by other birds also posing right on the top of Octopus trees. One of the group was anxious to find Grey-headed Love Bird and the calls of this species eventually allowed us to find a male, also perching on the top of an Octopus tree. Lesser Vasa Parrots appeared and disappeared, seemingly toying with the photographers in the group. Our final mission was a quick tour of the Saisal fields in the hope of finding Malagasy Sandgrouse. Although not seen on the ground, a pair, and a flock of 14 were seen.

After breakfast we began with another quick tour of the Saisal fields – no luck this time, although a Malagasy Cisticola did present itself for inspection. This was followed by a tour of the tree nursery – Berenty is planning to expand both the gallery forest and the spiny forest and the nursery was impressive, both in scale and in the range of species present, including Baobabs. In the gallery forest we enjoyed a range of species which were now becoming familiar - Verreaux's Sifaka, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher and Helmeted Guineafowl for example. We had wonderful views of a male Frances's Sparrowhawk. We left him behind only to find him perching above us a little way ahead again, this time dismembering a Cicada. After lunch we drove back to Talagnaro. Again, there were many diversions due to roadworks but we arrived at our comfortable hotel in good time for dinner.

Day 16

Sunday 12th November

Our flight back to Tana was originally scheduled for morning but, having been moved to the afternoon, we went for a walk around the town of Fort Dauphin or Talagnaro. We walked through to the coast, and took a few minutes to admire the turquoise sea, with a light sprinkling of surfers. The white sandy beach was tempting but no one was geared up for swimming. Instead we followed the coast along the busy little streets. A young woman emerged from a house holding half a dozen live chickens in each hand. We photographed her and she posed dramatically, entering into the spirit of fun. Further on, two young men walked by us holding an enormous sailfish, with its swordlike mouthparts. Swinging by the town hall and busy harbour, we returned to in time for a re-pack before our flight.

In some consternation we found that our flight back to Tana had been cancelled. This caused a flurry of activity, with the eventual result that we were rebooked on an early flight the next morning. The hotel managed to reorganise and find us rooms for another, unexpected, night and also provided us with dinner. We made the most of it by walking down to the beach and enjoying the sunset, before dinner.

Day 17 and 18

Monday 13th and Tuesday 14th November

On Monday we were up bright and early, to make sure we were on the morning flight back to Tana. As it happened, we were just about the first at the airport and our seats had been confirmed. It was, therefore, with a little relief that we took off, on time, to Tana; thus arriving in good time for our international flights home.



Clockwise from top left – Avenue des Baobabs, Spiny-tailed Iguana, Collared Nightjar, Black & White Ruffed Lemur

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Species lists

Mammals (H = Heard only)

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023														
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Tenrecs	Tenrecidae															
Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec - E	<i>Echinops telfairi</i>				✓											
Lowland Streaked Tenrec - E	<i>Hemicentetes semispinosus</i>						✓									
Dwarf and Mouse Lemurs	Cheirogaleidae															
Crossley's Dwarf Lemur - E	<i>Cheirogaleus crossleyi</i>					✓										
Goodman's Mouse Lemur - E	<i>Microcebus lehilahytsara</i>					✓	✓									
Grey Mouse-lemur - E	<i>Microcebus murinus</i>								✓	✓	✓			✓		
Pale Fork-marked Lemur - E	<i>Phaner pallescens</i>								✓							
Grey Brown Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus griseorufus</i>												✓	✓		
Aye-eyes	Daubentoniidae															
Aye-aye - E	<i>Daubentonia madagascariensis</i>			6												
Woolly Lemurs	Indriidae															
Eastern Woolly Lemur - E	<i>Avahi laniger</i>				✓	✓										
Indri - E	<i>Indri indri</i>			✓			H	✓								
Diademed Sifaka - E	<i>Propithecus diadema</i>						4									
Verreaux's Sifaka - E	<i>Propithecus verreauxi</i>									✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Large Lemurs	Lemuridae															
Crowned Lemur - E	<i>Eulemur coronatus</i>			✓												
Brown Lemur - N	<i>Eulemur fulvus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓								
Black Lemur - E	<i>Eulemur macaco</i>			✓	✓											
Red-bellied Lemur - E	<i>Eulemur rubriventer</i>			✓			✓									
Red-fronted Lemur - E	<i>Eulemur rufus</i>									✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur - E	<i>Haplemur griseus</i>							✓								
Ring-tailed Lemur - E	<i>Lemur catta</i>												✓	✓	✓	

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023														
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
Red Ruffed Lemur - E	<i>Varecia rubra</i>				✓											
Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur - E	<i>Varecia variegata</i>			✓			✓									
Sportive Lemurs		Lepilemuridae														
White-footed Sportive Lemur - E	<i>Lepilemur leucopus</i>												✓	✓		
Red-tailed Sportive Lemur - E	<i>Lepilemur ruficaudatus</i>								✓							
African Rats		Nesomyidae														
Malagasy Giant Jumping Rat	<i>Hypogeomys antimena</i>											✓				
Eastern Red Forest Rat - E	<i>Nesomys rufus</i>															
Flying Foxes		Pteropodidae														
Madagascan Flying Fox - E	<i>Pteropus rufus</i>														✓	
Malagasy Mongooses		Eupleridae														
Fossa - E	<i>Cryptoprocta ferox</i>									✓		✓				

Birds

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023															
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
White-faced Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>		✓														
Blue-billed Teal	<i>Spatula hottentota</i>		✓														
Red-billed Teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>		✓														
Helmeted Guineafowl - I	<i>Numida meleagris</i>												✓	✓	✓		
Collared Nightjar - E	<i>Gactornis enarratus</i>							✓									
Madagascar Nightjar - N	<i>Caprimulgus madagascariensis</i>			✓						✓			✓	H			
Madagascar Spinetail - N	<i>Zoonavena grandidieri</i>						✓										
Malagasy Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus gracilis</i>								✓							✓	
Malagasy Black Swift - N	<i>Apus balstoni</i>		H			✓											
Malagasy Coucal - N	<i>Centropus toulou</i>				H	H	✓	✓				✓	H	✓	H		

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023														
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Crested Coua - E	<i>Coua cristata</i>						✓									
Blue Coua - E	<i>Coua caerulea</i>						✓									
Green-capped Coua - E	<i>Coua ruficeps olivaceiceps</i>													✓	H	
Red-fronted Coua - E	<i>Coua reynaudii</i>						✓									
Coquerel's Coua - E	<i>Coua coquereli</i>									✓						
Giant Coua - E	<i>Coua gigas</i>									H	✓		✓	✓	H	
Madagascar Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus rochii</i>						✓			H	H		✓	H		
Madagascar Sandgrouse - E	<i>Pterocles personatus</i>															✓
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓				✓									
Malagasy Turtle Dove	<i>Nesoenas picturatus</i>							✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓		H	✓	
Madagascar Green Pigeon - E	<i>Treron australis</i>			✓	✓								✓			
Madagascar Blue Pigeon - E	<i>Alectroenas madagascariensis</i>							✓								
White-throated Rail	<i>Dryolimnas cuvieri</i>						✓	✓								
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓			✓									
Madagascar Pratincole	<i>Glareola ocularis</i>					✓										
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		✓			✓			✓							
Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>							✓								
Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	✓	✓													
Malagasy Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola idae</i>		✓													
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓	✓					✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>						✓									
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓				✓	✓			
Black Heron	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>		✓													
Dimorphic Egret	<i>Egretta dimorpha</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓			✓				
Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>							✓								✓
Frances's Sparrowhawk - N	<i>Accipiter francesiae</i>															
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>			✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Madagascar Buzzard - E	<i>Buteo brachypterus</i>							✓								
Madagascar long-eared owl	<i>Asio madmadagascariensis</i>					✓	H									
White-browed Owl - E	<i>Athene supercilialis</i>											✓	✓	✓		

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023														
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Torororoka Scops Owl	<i>Otus madagascariensis</i>									✓			✓	✓	✓	
Rainforest Scops Owl - E	<i>Otus rutilus</i>			H	H	✓	✓									
Cuckoo-roller - N	<i>Leptosomus discolor</i>						H									
Madagascar Hoopoe - E	<i>Upupa marginata</i>		✓						✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Broad-billed Roller	<i>Eurystomus glaucurus</i>						✓			✓			✓	✓		
Short-legged Ground Roller - E	<i>Brachypteracias leptosomus</i>														✓	
Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher - E	<i>Corythornis madagascariensis</i>					✓										
Malagasy Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis vintsioides</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓								
Olive Bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓								
Malagasy Kestrel	<i>Falco newtoni</i>		✓					✓					H	✓	✓	✓
Greater Vasa Parrot	<i>Coracopsis vasa</i>								✓	✓						
Lesser Vasa Parrot - E	<i>Coracopsis nigra</i>						✓				✓			✓	✓	
Grey-headed Lovebird - E	<i>Agapornis canus</i>										✓			✓	✓	
Velvet Asity - E	<i>Philepitta castanea</i>						✓									
Hook-billed Vanga - E	<i>Vanga curvirostris</i>								✓							
Sickle-billed Vanga - E	<i>Falculea palliata</i>									✓						
White-headed Vanga - E	<i>Artamella viridis</i>															
Chabert Vanga - E	<i>Leptopterus chabert</i>						✓							✓		
Rufous Vanga	<i>Schetba rufa</i>									✓						
Tylas Vanga - E	<i>Tylas eduardi</i>						✓									
Common Newtonia - E	<i>Newtonia brunneicauda</i>										✓			✓		
Madagascar Cuckooshrike - E	<i>Cebblepyris cinereus</i>										✓					
Crested Drongo	<i>Dicrurus forficatus</i>					✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata</i>									✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Madagascar Lark - E	<i>Eremopterix hova</i>														✓	
Malagasy Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes madagascariensis</i>		H	H		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mascarene Martin	<i>Phedina borbonica</i>		✓													
Malagasy Brush Warbler	<i>Nesillas typica</i>		✓													
Subdesert Brush Warbler - E	<i>Nesillas lantzii</i>													H		
Madagascar Swamp Warbler - E	<i>Acrocephalus newtoni</i>						✓									

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023														
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Long-billed Bernieria - E	<i>Bernieria madagascariensis</i>									✓						
Common Jery - E	<i>Neomixis tenella</i>												✓	✓	✓	
Madagascar Cisticola - N	<i>Cisticola cherina</i>														✓	
Malagasy White-eye	<i>Zosterops maderaspatanus</i>		✓				✓		✓				H			
Common Myna - I	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Madagascar Starling - E	<i>Hartlaubius auratus</i>														✓	
Madagascar Magpie-Robin - E	<i>Copsychus albospectularis</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Madagascar Stonechat - E	<i>Saxicola sibilla</i>						✓	✓								
Souimanga Sunbird - N	<i>Cinnyris sovimanga</i>			H	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Malagasy Green Sunbird - N	<i>Cinnyris notatus</i>					✓										
Nelicourvi Weaver - E	<i>Ploceus nelicourvi</i>							✓								
Sakalava Weaver - E	<i>Ploceus sakalava</i>								✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Red Fody	<i>Foudia madagascariensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
Madagascar Mannikin - E	<i>Lepidopygia nana</i>	✓	✓			✓			✓							
Madagascar Wagtail - E	<i>Motacilla flaviventris</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓								
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>					✓										

Reptiles & Amphibians

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023														
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Narrow-mouthed Frogs	<i>Microhylidae</i>															
Marbled Rain Frog - E	<i>Scaphiophryne marmorata</i>					✓										
Reed Frogs	<i>Hyperoliidae</i>															
Madagascar Reed Frog - E	<i>Heterixalus madagascariensis</i>				✓											
Madagascan Frogs	<i>Mantellidae</i>															
Green Bright-eyed Frog - E	<i>Boophis viridis</i>					✓										
Pandanus frog spp	<i>Guibemantis spp</i>							✓								
Baron's Mantella Frog	<i>Mantella baroni</i>						✓									

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023															
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Orange-backed Mantella Frog	<i>Mantella ebenau</i>						✓										
Common Geckos	Gekkonidae																
Panther Gecko - E	<i>Paroedura picta</i>										✓						
Striped Day Gecko - E	<i>Phelsuma lineata</i>			✓	✓			✓								✓	
Gold-dust Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma laticauda</i>				✓												
Giant Day Geckp	<i>Phelsuma grandis</i>				✓												
Thicktail Day Gecko - E	<i>Phelsuma mutabilis</i>													✓			
Dwarf Geckos	<i>Lygodactylus spp.</i>		✓											✓	✓		
House Geckos	<i>Hemidactylus spp.</i>		✓						✓	✓	✓					✓	
Sakalava Madagascar Velvet Gecko	<i>Blaesodactylus sakalava</i>													✓			
Chameleons	Chamaeleonidae					✓											
Nose-horned Chameleon - E	<i>Calumma nasutum</i>					✓											
Oustalet's Chameleon - E	<i>Furcifer oustaleti</i>		✓						✓	✓							
Panther Chameleon	<i>Furcifer pardalis</i>				✓												
Jewelled Chameleon	<i>Furcifer lateralis</i>													✓			
Warty Chameleon - E	<i>Furcifer verrucosus</i>												✓	✓	✓		
Stump-tailed Chameleon	<i>Brookesia spp</i>						✓										
Madagascan Iguanids	Opluridae																
Merrem's Madagascar Swift - E	<i>Oplurus cyclurus</i>			✓	✓				✓	✓	✓						
Three-eyed Lizard	<i>Chalarodon madagascariensis</i>										✓		✓		✓		
Tortoises	Testudinidae																
Southern Spider Tortoise - E	<i>Pyxis arachnoides</i>													✓			

Others

E=Endemic, N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		October - November 2023														
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Butterflies																
Citrus Swallowtail	<i>Papilio demodocus</i>			✓			✓					✓				
Cream-lined Swallowtail	<i>Papilio delalandei</i>							✓			✓					
Spotted Blue Swallowtail	<i>Papilio epiphorbas</i>				✓											
Madagascar Giant Swallowtail	<i>Pharmacophagus antenor</i>											✓				
African Monarch	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>								✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Madagascar Forest Nymph	<i>Aterica rabena</i>			✓	✓											
Yellow Pansy	<i>Junonia hierta paris</i>													✓		
Common Leopard	<i>Phalanta phalantha</i>											✓		✓	✓	
Madagascar Leopard	<i>Phalanta madagascariensis</i>													✓	✓	
Grass Yellow	<i>Eurema spp</i>													✓	✓	
Other invertebrates																
Stick Insect	-				✓									✓		
Flatid Leaf-bug	<i>Phromnia rosea</i>													✓		
Pill Millipede (Green or Brown)	<i>Sphaerotherium sp.</i>													✓		
Madagascar Golden Orb-web Spider	<i>Nephila madagascariensis</i>	✓	✓											✓		✓
Red Millipede							✓									
Giraffe-necked Weevil	<i>Trachelophorus giraffa</i>						✓									
Giant African Land snail	<i>Achatina fulica</i>				✓									✓		

Baobabs	
Western Baobab	<i>Adansonia za</i>
Grandidiars Baobab	<i>Adansonia grandidieri</i>
Fony Baobab	<i>Adansonia rbrostipa</i>