

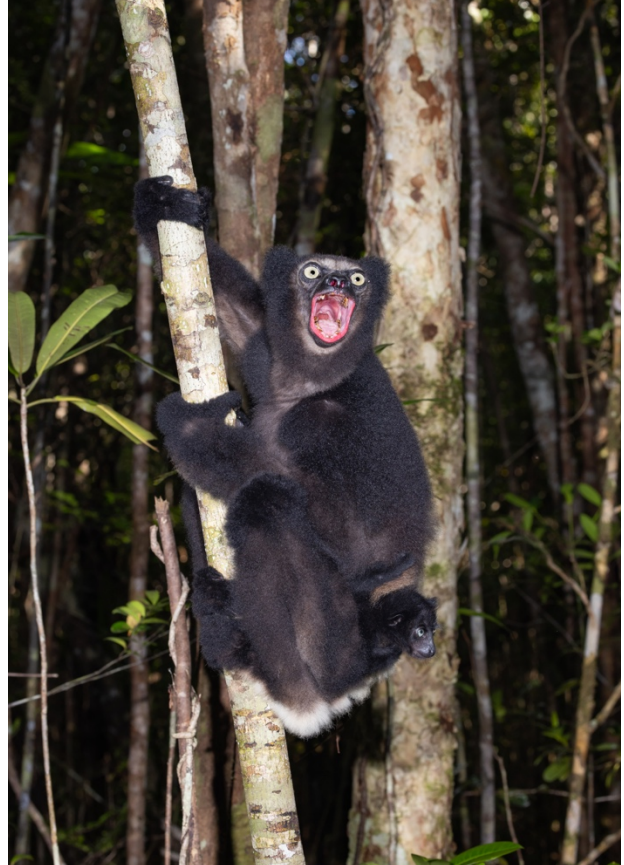
Madagascar: A Wildlife Photography Tour

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 23rd September 2023



Milky Way & Granddier's Baobab



Indri



Fossa



Giraffe-necked Weevil

Tour report and images by Oliver Smart



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Tour leader Oliver Smart, local guide Claude Rambeloson with two Naturetrek clients

Introduction

It is difficult to put into words the extraordinary, unique and diversity of the wildlife of Madagascar and in particular on a photographic tour where you're immersing yourself into their world. From the howling of Indri to the delicate and bizarre Giraffe-necked Weevil, we scoured fascinating landscapes for subjects to photograph. We climbed deep limestone gorges, canoed and sailed along rivers, walked spiny and deciduous forests and trekked through wet tropical rainforest in our three-week long trip. There were too many highlights to mention, but some of the best included many species of lemur, with Ring-tailed featuring highly, the cutest of nocturnal mouse lemurs and of course the dancing Verreaux's Sifakas. We discovered many species of reptile including a currently undescribed species of *Brookesia*, which fits on the tip of your finger! We admired the beauty of thorn and kite spiders and trekked in search of special endemic birds including vangas, couas and mesites. We also had a surreal encounter with a Fossa. Along with some stunning landscapes including the famous Avenue of Baobabs, we also enjoyed nocturnal exploration and gazing up at the night sky as we experimented and enjoyed some Astro-photography too.

Day 1

Monday 4th September

Departure from the UK

A simple process of navigating Heathrow Terminal 2 for our departure to Madagascar via Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. The overnight flight was straightforward enough with no major issues.

Day 2

Tuesday 5th September

Arrival in Tana

After our connecting flight and having caught up with the two members of the group, we arrived into a sunny and warm Antananarivo in Madagascar. It was beautiful flying over the country and to enjoy the landscape from above.

We met Claude Rambeloson, our local guide for the duration of the trip and after fairly quick VISA and immigration control procedures in the new international airport, we collected our luggage, exchanged some US Dollars into the local Ariary currency and made our way the short distance to our hotel for the first two nights.

After a short briefing, we unpacked and headed for a leisurely walk to the rice fields, overlooked by the hotel. We spotted a few birds including Madagascar Fody, Squacco and Black Heron, Great and Cattle Egret, but they were too distant to photograph. Instead, we enjoyed watching the local children playing football in the dust; which actually made for an interesting shot as the sun started to drop behind them; their activity kicking up the dust, which was nicely backlit. We walked for a few minutes until we found a good spot for a landscape photo of the rice fields. Using leading lines and HDR technique, we were able to catch the great contrast in the bright orange sky and reflected water and the dark borders to the fields.

After a very long day, it was nice to relax for dinner and to get to know one another a little better.

Day 3

Wednesday 6th September

Parc Tsarasaotra, Palissandre Hotel, Queen's Palace & Maison Vue Royale

Our day started at 6.15am as we spent some time before breakfast connecting with birdlife in the hotel grounds. From the balcony on the upper floor, we were at eye level with the tree tops and enjoyed the early light and photographed Madagascar Mannikin, Red Fody, Common Myna and Malagasy White-eye.

We headed to Parc Tsarasaotra to the north of Tana and enjoyed a fabulous walk around the lake. This jewel in the heart of the city is so underestimated, although it is amazingly a RAMSAR site; the smallest in the world in fact. There were thousands of Red-billed Teal, along with a pair of Meller's Duck, hundreds of Black Heron, Dimorphic Egret, Squacco Heron, Night-heron and White-faced Whistling Duck. We enjoyed a good amount of time with these along with spotting three Comb Duck, a Malagasy Pond Heron and a Malagasy Kingfisher. We heard briefly a White-throated Rail and eventually caught up with a couple of Madagascar Swamp Warbler. We also spotted a few nice butterflies including Brilliant Blue, African Monarch and Madagascar Brown Pansy. A few others unfortunately went unidentified. We did get brief but good views of Madagascar Dwarf Gecko and better still an Oustalet's Chameleon alongside the footpath. We spent time trying to get some interesting shots amongst the foliage.

After a fabulous lunch at the Palissandre Hotel where we spotted a Striped Day Gecko and another Malagasy Kestrel, we drove the short distance to the Queen's Palace, where our guide Francois showed us the sights and features of the renovated buildings. There is a fantastic history to the rule of Madagascar going back several hundred years and it was nice to appreciate the site and enjoy the most amazing panoramic views of the city.

Our final stop of the day was Maison Vue Royale and to enjoy some snacks and sundowner as we watched the setting sun. A group of three Malagasy Black Swift flew passed and as it got dusky, a few hundred bats appeared out of nowhere, crossing in front of us and all heading off to the south-west.

Day 4

Thursday 7th September

Morondava, Avenue of Baobabs

With early flight plans for the morning, we had an hour on the upper balcony of the hotel first thing. We added Madagascan Wagtail and Malagasy Bulbul to the photographed list as well as more delightful shots of Madagascar Mannikin.

After breakfast, we were taken to the national airport and enjoyed short flights to Morondava. From here we had lunch at the fabulous Palissandre Côte Ouest Hotel on the beach before driving inland to the famous Avenue of Baobabs. For our small group our plan was to photograph the stunning trees during the setting sun, hopefully with some star bursts in the images. Once it got dark, our focus was shooting the Milky Way with Grandidier's Baobab in the foreground.

After wandering off the main track in search of some scenic shots, we encountered a pair of Crested Drongo, a Madagascar Cisticola, Malagasy Kestrel and a nesting colony of Sakalava Weavers. Back to the main focus for the evening we composed some fabulous shots of baobabs, standing tall against the surrounding vegetation.

As the sun dropped below the deep blue sky, we framed images to include the sun bursting through gaps in the trees. After the sun had finally disappeared, we then set about finding a good location for astro-photography. It was more challenging than expected as there was more light pollution in the area than we had envisaged. Once we found a good spot along the main track, we were able to compose some delightful shots with the magnificent Milky Way glowing bright in the night sky.

Back to the hotel for dinner and our late night finished with some Common House Geckos scolding us from the rafters!

Day 5

Friday 8th September

Drive from Morondava to Kirindy & Kirindy Forest

Our day started at 7am as we walked along the beach. The pirogues were heading out to catch their fish for the day. There was a little birdlife with White-fronted Plover, Common Sandpiper and Sanderling along the shoreline. Inland we picked out our first Olive Bee-eaters too.

The morning was spent driving an almost three-hour journey to Kirindy. Even though just a fragment of former deciduous dry forest remains, it is still a very important location for many endemic or highly localised wildlife. We passed through the Avenue of Baobabs once more and then watched the change from flat-topped Grandidier's Baobab to the redder and rounder canopied Fony Baobab. Apart from a Giant Coua walking along the edge of the scrub our driver picked out the main highlight, a group of five Verreaux's Sifaka. The light was not perfect but being mainly white animals, it was fairly easy to expose for them.

After arriving and taking lunch by the pool, we headed off into Kirindy Forest. Our local guide Remi has been working there for over 30 years, so his experience would be highly valuable. This was soon to be confirmed, as he took us to roosting Ousatlet's Chameleon, Torotoroka Scops Owl, two roosting Red-tailed Sportive Lemur and Cuvier's Madagascar Swift (a large iguanid). Vaughan spotted a fantastic Pencil Snake *Mimophis mahfalensis*, which posed amongst the leaf litter for many minutes, it's poise just like a bent stick.

Today's tuition was introduction to using flash and we spent time using different settings to maximise the failing light and the increasing darkness. It was soon to take over completely as we could not see anything without artificial light. By nightfall we were shooting with full flash output and soon it was put to the test with Grey Mouse Lemur, Pale Fork-marked Lemur and several Cuvier's Madagascar Ground Gecko *Paroedura picta*. These beautifully marked geckos spend their time on the forest floor, blending in perfectly with the leaf litter, despite their bright colours and patterns.

After returning from the forest for a quick dinner, we headed back to look for the key two mammals once more, but not before connecting with a fabulous White-browed Owl hunting in and around the tented camp. Amazingly this was our third of the evening as we had two around the hotel grounds! We failed to see the Fossa tonight, but

we heard and tracked a Giant Jumping Rat through the forest. Unfortunately it eluded us a clear view. We saw its nesting burrow, a large mound of red earth piled up on either side of its entrance hole. We'll try again for the Fossa tomorrow!

Day 6

Saturday 9th September

Kirindy Forest

After a late finish, we were still up for a 6am departure in search of birds as well as looking for the Fossa around the camp. Again, the latter failed to show, but we had an amazing encounter with a number of superb forest bird species; almost all very photographable. Madagascar Robin-chat, Hook-billed, White-headed, Rufous and Red-tailed Vanga, Madagascar Hoopoe, Crested Drongo and best of all was our tour leader heard a rustling in the leaf litter which alerted us to four White-breasted Mesite! Amazingly we were grateful for being on a path which allowed us to track them in parallel for a hundred meters as they continue to feed. The morning light was beautiful with an orange glow creating the perfect conditions for shooting them.

Back at the tented camp, we continued to enjoy Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher and Sakalava Weavers collecting nesting material before we returned to our lodge for a well-earned breakfast.

After some much-needed downtime, we enjoyed the lodge grounds, catching up on our own personal items before we headed back to the forest at 3pm. We started our walk from the campground and headed along trails in a rectangular loop. Our tour leader first picked up a Red-fronted Brown Lemur posing nicely about three metres off the ground and then a pair of Rufous Vanga. We stalked them for some time and took some great close-ups of the male perching only a few metres from us. As we exited the loop halfway, a cyclist advised us that one of our prime targets was chilling by the kitchen! We dashed back to the campground and there lying on the ground with people still continuing to work was a male Fossa: unbelievable!

Of course, we took plenty of shots, but somewhat bittersweet the male was lying on top of a slab of concrete. Hardly the natural shot we were after, however it was still incredibly impressive and a moment we'll never forget.

After another walk in a different section of forest, we returned for an early dinner and then back out again for one last nocturnal outing. We spent the majority of our time hoping to see the Giant Jumping Rat, but tonight was just not our night and the resident rat was not at home! We did enjoy a large Long-horned Beetle which when provoked gave a desperate cry as well as a Western Big-footed Mouse.

Day 7

Sunday 10th September

Drive from Kirindy to Bemaraha

A slightly less busy start as we completed our packing and hit the track for the long drive to Tsingy de Bemaraha. The nine-hour journey took us through less productive grassland habitat, although we picked up a number of Greater Vasa Parrot, Malagasy Kestrel, Madagascan Lark and best of all a pair of Madagascar Buttonquail wandering along the road.

We crossed two rivers by rustic ferries along on our route, but both enjoyable being on the water. The first crossing over the Tsiribihina River took about 45 minutes and we spotted a few larger flocks of Knob-billed and White-faced Whistling Duck.

At our arrival at the hotel, we enjoyed the stunning views of the nearby forest as the sun set before unpacking in our luxurious rooms and enjoyed our first of three dinners here. Our tour leader had another *Boophis doulioti* frog in his bathroom too!

Day 8

Monday 11th September

Petite Tsingy boat trip with forest excursion

Starting off at 6.45am, we arrived at the Manambolo River and boarded our twin dugout canoe for a journey upstream. It was so peaceful and we soon encountered lots of birdlife, in particular many Madagascar Pratincole and Mascarene Martin. A Malagasy Kingfisher, a pair of mating Three-banded Plover, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Madagascar Wagtail, Malagasy Black Swift and Madagascar Green Pigeon were also seen and mostly photographed. As we admired the scaling cliffs on either side of the river, we arrived for our main hike of the day along the Manambolobe circuit.

It was tough going climbing up to the Tsingy, partly because of the hot and humid conditions, but also due to the number of animals we stopped to photograph or observe! Several reptiles showed well today including Madagascar Day Gecko, Madagascar Dwarf Gecko, Western Girdled Lizard and Tandreana Skink. Several stunning Madagascar Forest Nymph butterflies were spotted too, along with a brilliant roosting Madagascar Nightjar! Using another technique, we were shooting through vegetation to accentuate the bokeh around the subject.

We reached our first viewpoint overlooking the river and cliffs...wow! It was very hot by now, so we stopped for a few shots and then carried up into the Petite Tsingy itself. This was extraordinary as we climbed and wound our way up and through gaps onto the top of the limestone pinnacles! What an amazing sight this was; well worth the effort. More pictures followed before we started the long descent back through the forest to the canoe.

Our return leg saw us getting stuck a few times in the very shallow water, but this allowed time to spot Madagascar Harrier-hawk and Humblot's Heron too.

The group decided to have the afternoon off, so we reconvened for dinner and prepare for our next big adventure tomorrow, the Grande Tsingy!

Day 9

Tuesday 12th September

Grande Tsingy

Starting out after breakfast we arrived at the car park for our day walk just before 8am. We trekked through the dry deciduous forest encountering three Decken's Sifaka (a very localised endemic) and also a Randrianasolo's (aka Bemeraha) Sportive Lemur in its roosting tree. Birds were good too with a flock of fourteen Lesser Vasa Parrot and our first Madagascar Spinetail as well as a pair of displaying Cuckoo Roller and a Madagascar Brush Warbler.

The climb into the Tsingy system was fairly easy going but then the fun started. Hooking up to a cable system for relaying up the vertical Tsingy was an adventure and amazing to appreciate the views from the top. We spent some time enjoying and photographing the views before continuing through the intricate maze of crevices and pinnacles.

We climbed down to the base of the Tsingy where we crawled through narrow cave holes, not before enjoying a Forest Rock Thrush with its delightful soft song posing well for pictures. We also spotted our first Madagascar Beauty butterfly basking briefly in a ray of light hitting the cave floor.

On exiting the cave system, we enjoyed admiring the classic bottle trees, storing the water in their trunks for the dry season, in this case the endemic species *Cyphostemma laza*. We also had better success with reptiles too, photographing Thicktail Day Gecko, Aldabra Day Gecko, Gravenhorst's Mabuya and a *Lygodactylus* sp. Another sighting of two Decken's Sifakas and a very close view of a Western Red Forest Rat, only found in the Tsingy. Unfortunately, it was always well obscured, so images were not possible.

Our evening finished with a pre-dinner night walk around the hotel grounds. We discovered eight Oustelot's Chameleons and two Peter's Mouse Lemur although only the former was photographable using full flash.

Day 10

Wednesday 13th September

Soleil de Tsingy Hotel, drive to airport & back to Tana

An early morning walk around the hotel grounds produced a Cuvier's Madagascar Swift, a Tetraka nest, a Common Leopard butterfly and a few birds including a pair of Crested Drongo repeatedly diving into the swimming pool.

After breakfast and packing, we headed to the local aerodrome, about an hour's drive for our chartered ninety-minute flight back to Tana. The views were stunning as we cruised at 9,500 feet above the Tsingy and then the central plateau bisecting Madagascar. The arid landscape interspersed with incredible deep gorges, dry river beds and tiered hills.

The afternoon was at our leisure before joining for dinner.

Day 11

Thursday 14th September

Lemurs Park, flight to Fort-Dauphin

Following a notice that our morning flight was being postponed until the evening, we worked out a new plan for the following three days to ensure we could maximise our time at Berenty. For our morning excursion, we headed west to Lemurs Park, where many species are being cared for including Black, Crowned and Coquerel's Sifaka, Ring-tailed and Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur. This was a great opportunity for the group to practice on these mammals before our arrival in the south. It was a lovely chilled morning in peace and quiet in the delightful park.

After lunch and a couple of hours of editing and discussion, we transferred to the national airport for Fort-Dauphin. We arrived late into the night, just in time for dinner and straight to bed. A 3am wake-up call was pending!

Day 12

Friday 15th September

Berenty Reserve

With our flight postponed, we arrived much later than expected so we wanted to ensure not to miss any time at Berenty. Our guide and driver stayed with us at the hotel and at 4am, we departed for the two-hour journey. Overnight there had been some rain, but further west it would be arid and hot. The route took us through a dramatic monoculture of sisal plantation, which has replaced the native spiny forest in an area over 150,000 hectares!

Our only sighting of note was the briefest of a *poensis* race of Western Barn Owl in the headlights of the car. On arrival at 6am, we headed straight into the spiny forest, where we were blessed with beautiful morning conditions and light and maximising our chances of Ring-tailed Lemur and Verreaux's Sifaka waking up and basking like buddhas in the various species of octopus trees. These spiny trees have long arms like tentacles, hence the name.

We also encountered an obliging Malagasy Kestrel, a pair of Madagascar Buttonquail, Crested Coua, Madagascar Magpie-Robin and Madagascar Hoopoe and our leader also located its nest! At the car park of the hotel lemurs totally dominated and along with some Red-fronted Brown Lemur, we filled our minds with memories and memory cards with gorgeous pictures of them basking and playing.

After breakfast, we took some time out before lunch and again before our afternoon excursion. We stuck close to the reception area as we located two very obliging Giant Coua, along with three White-footed Sportive Lemurs roosting in two different tree holes. We then focussed our time on the lemurs; Verreaux's Sifakas, which would cross the car parking area in the late afternoon. Their behaviour is quite different to the Ring-tailed Lemurs, in that they dance, jump and leap sideways, an extraordinary but effective method of covering open ground. With fast shutter speeds, it was possible to catch them bounding with all four limbs in the air! The Ring-tails on the other hand are more casual, sauntering down the tracks with tails raised high in the air, as if they owned the place – I'm pretty sure they do! They were fun too, to watch, admire and photograph. We also practised further with sunburst shots with lemurs in them.

After dinner, we set about entering the spiny forest tract searching for nocturnal wildlife. It wasn't long before we found plenty to work with including two baby scorpions, a White-footed Sportive Lemur, four Grey-brown Mouse Lemur, two Madagascar Nightjar, two Torotoroka Scops Owl and a Spiny Chameleon.

Day 13

Saturday 16th September

Berenty Reserve, Angapolo Forest & Analalava Forest

Our morning excursion took us 30-minutes' drive from Berenty, to the Angapolo Forest, a private area of protection spiny forest surrounded by sisal plantations. It's much cooler in the south early in the morning, but it quickly heats up once the sun breaks the horizon.

We completed a loop walk through the forest with an extended area along the edge. Common Newtonia was our first new bird species. However today, we appreciated the plants and trees with a number of endemic 'octopus'

tree species including *Allandia ascendens*, *A. Dumosa*, *A. procera* and *Didierea trollii*. After locating and photographing some Verreaux's Sifaka, we spent time with a superb baobab *Adansonia za*. We finished the morning with shots of Three-eyed Lizard and Grey-headed Lovebird.

During late afternoon, we visited a private spiny forest area called Analalava, led by expert forest ranger Joemora. His wildlife finding skills were mind-blowing and as we arrived, he had a scorpion and hissing cockroaches to show us, before we spotted our first Three-eyed Lizard for the day. In the forest itself he showed us many roosting species including Torotoroka Scops Owl, White-browed Owl, White-footed Sportive Lemur and best of all four Grey-brown Mouse Lemur all huddled together. These made for a fantastic image. We also admired the *Adansonia za* baobab trees, where roosting in one was a Sakalava Velvet Gecko.

After dinner, we walked with Mbola around the gallery forest and found further night lemurs but also our first Malagasy Fruit Bat. We finished the night back in some spiny forest where we set about photographing the Milky Way with spiny 'octopus' trees in the foreground.

Day 14

Sunday 17th September

Drive to Fort-Dauphin, flight to Tana & drive to Mantadia

With a long day of travel, we departed Berenty at 4am and took breakfast at Croix du Sud in Fort-Dauphin. After our flight back to Tana and one of the best lunches of the trip at Au Bois Vert, we drove the four hours to Andasibe, situated halfway towards the east coast.

Our evening walk before dinner was very special, visiting the VOI Local Community Reserve just a few minutes from our hotel. We started off with a scorpion and two species of stick insect, before Vaughan clocked an Eastern Woolly Lemur. Above it sat a Goodman's Mouse Lemur too! We managed a few shots of the former before continuing the loop trail. It was fairly quiet apart from a couple more Goodman's Mouse Lemurs before we struck gold. Our local guide Maurice had heard a rustling in the leaf litter and quickly discovered a Lowland Streaked Tenrec; magic! A distinctive and in similar appearance to hedgehogs, the endemic family only found in Madagascar are descents from a common ancestor where the African otter shrews diverged millions of years ago. Stunning portraits of the small mammal were possible.

After a late dinner, we retired for a well-earned rest, ready for a full day exploring the rainforest.

Day 15

Monday 18th September

Analamazaotra & Mitsinjo Park

A misty and cool start to the day but in the wet rainforest this is not unexpected. We visited Analamazaotra and whilst getting the permits we saw a Madagascar Thorn Spider *Gasteracantha rhomboidei madagascariensis*, an amazing yellow and black spiked-backed adult in its web. In the forest we encountered Blue Coua and a confiding Madagascar Flufftail. With lower light, we had to continue to use full flash to light many of our subjects.

We climbed onto higher ground where we saw a couple of Brown Lemur, whilst listening to the loud singing calls of Indri. Not long afterwards we were standing beneath a group high in the canopy calling loudly, their wailing

sounds were deafening! We managed a couple of shots before we headed to see some Diademed Sifaka. It was harder to get close to them with dense foliage and other onlookers, but we managed to track them and eventually observe at very close quarters. A couple of the females had young too.

We spent all morning exploring the park and forest trails, encountering a few other birds including Ward's Flycatcher, Nuthatch Vanga, Madagascar White-eye and Madagascar Cuckooshrike. On our exit we were shown a Madagascar Tree Boa and several *Phelsuma lineata bifasciata* geckos.

After lunch we returned to the forest and caught up with several wonderful species to photograph including the locally endemic Parson's Chameleon, Rainforest Scops Owl and best of all a Southern Flat-tail Gecko (aka Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko). It was resting low down on a tree, so we used a portable LED light to light the subject whilst we took images.

We followed soon after with our night walk but encountered few mammals this time, however two wonderful chameleons; Perinet and two Brown Leaf Chameleon were very photographable, so we made good use of our full-flash setup and were rewarded with great shots.

Day 16

Tuesday 19th September

Mantadia National Park

For our final day in the Andasibe-Mantadia region, we ventured deep into the rainforest area of Mantadia, about 90-minutes' drive from our hotel. The going was on a rough track and through a few tiny settlements. The evidence of deforestation was stark, but the future might be bright if the restoration processes continue to gather pace. We arrived at the rainforest and quickly began to appreciate what has been lost from so much of the region. Towering trees 30+ metres above us, steep hillsides in dense tiered foliage and a thick understorey of a multitude of plants and life.

We could hear Indri calling a little way off and the sounds of forest birdlife. Madagascar Dotted Border butterflies flitted around the car parking area. A Nelicourvi Weaver had built a nest here too and above us Rand's Warbler was singing from a high perch alongside four Madagascar Blue Pigeon. We entered the forest and immediately started climbing. It was noticeable that orchids were now starting to appear as the season gradually receives more moisture before the rainy season in January. *Cynorkis ridleyi* were scattered in several places along the floor, their gentle pink flowers standing out amongst the green. Also *Jumellea longifolium* were spotted as well as *Bulbophyllum leptostachyum*. We photographed these using a portable LED light to help illuminate them against the background.

We carried on and eventually heard the calls of Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur, which we caught up with. They were high in the canopy, so photo opportunities were limited. We were pleased to see another Lowland Streaked Tenrec and further Diademed Sifaka.

The next hour or so was spent chasing a large roving bird flock that our leader spotted. The initial species spotted was a Tylas Vanga but subsequently the flock included Blue, White-headed, Nuthatch and Red-tailed Vanga, Crested Drongo, Madagascar Cuckooshrike and Wedge-tailed Jerry. A group of three Brown Lemur started descending from the canopy too.

After this frenetic and exciting activity, we thought it could not get better but as we exited the forest near the river, we located some Giraffe-necked Weevils which we spent time photographing along with another bizarre arachnid: Long-winged Kite Spider *Gasteracantha versicolor*. Best of all though were two White-throated Rail that were along the edge of the riverbank and eventually showed brilliantly and even mated right in front of us!

We ate our late lunch at a nearby forest lake which held a Madagascar Pond Heron, Common Moorhen and a Madagascar Grebe. Madagascar Spinetail flew overhead and came to drink.

Our drive back to the hotel late afternoon only sighted a Frances Sparrowhawk, which was fairly presentable, but we were glad for some rest and recuperation after an amazing day in the forest.

Day 17

Wednesday 20th September

Palmarium

The morning was spent travelling for four hours to the boat crossing through the Pangalana Canal. The road was in poor repair so it was slow going, particularly behind lorries heading to Taomasina. The final section of rough track was appalling, and the driving conditions were not even that bad; it must be horrendous during the wet season!

Once aboard, we cruised through two lakes and the canal, taking about an hour to reach the Palmarium, our hotel for the night. We spotted Olive Bee-eater, Striated Heron, Madagascar Kingfisher and several Madagascar Pratincole along the way.

Once checked in and fed, we headed out with one of the staff, Ricot. The staff work on all aspects of running the lodge as it is a remote base, however Ricot was also one of the best guides here. Soon we were enjoying Parson's and Panther Chameleons and our leader set up a shot and using flash for photographing a male catching grasshoppers. We also enjoyed some of the tame lemurs here too including Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur, Brown Lemur (with some crossed with Black and Crowned) and Red-bellied Lemur. The forest was dark so flash played a big part in exposing the images and ensuring they were nice and sharp.

After the afternoon walk, we boarded the boat again with other hoteliers and we headed to Aye-aye Island. No guesses what we were looking for here! We spent just under an hour on the island where nine animals live. They have bred too and so a new island is being established and some animals will be translocated to encourage a growth in the local population. Sadly, some local people still believe they are omens, bringing bad luck to those who encounter them. This conflict is beginning to be reversed and hopefully the Aye-ayes future is much brighter.

The animals are attracted to food as otherwise seeing one would be almost impossible. They are surprisingly large, the biggest nocturnal primate. Their big bushy tails and cat-like body size makes them rather substantial as they quietly climb through the forest. It was not long before a male descended, giving us our first great chance for shots. We were not allowed to use flash, but a bright LED light was just enough to give us acceptable ambient lighting. A little later we went to another spot where a female and a young Aye-aye came to feed too; quite breath-taking to see them so closely and observe their unique appearance and behaviours.

Following dinner, we could not help but take a final wander in the forest. We were blown away by the extraordinary species in such a small section that we searched. We located Pendulous Tree Frog, Madagascar Reed Frog, *Stumpffia* sp., two Madagascar Net-casting Spider *Asianopis madagascariensis*, Madagascar Clawless Gecko, Gunther's Dwarf Gecko and Speckled Day Gecko. We photographed all these and more as we continued late into the evening. The most significant find of all were three *Brookesia* sp. geckos, but they are so new to science they have not been fully described yet and do not even have a species name!

With an early start for our final day, we headed back to our rooms at 10.30pm.

Day 18

Thursday 21st September

Palmarium, drive to Andasibe

The morning was arguably one of the nicest walks, through lowland rainforest to the edge of the lake. At our usual steady pace, we were hunting for any final wildlife to photograph, however our first target was Indri!

We'd had good views of them at Andasibe, but today we were hoping for even better. Our local guide Ricot was amazing at mimicking their loud vocal calls and in just a matter of a few minutes a female with a two-month-old baby, a juvenile and a male came down to within arm's length! They really are stunning close up and we filled our boots with shots of them from every conceivable angle. They even gave a sound rehearsal for us too and it is quite incredible the volume!

We hunted for smaller wildlife from here-on and soon came across *Phelsuma parva*, another super green-and-blue day gecko which posed suitably for shots. We also spent some time with Red-legged Orb-weaver Spiders and at the lake a couple of delightful Madagascar Reed Frogs. Interestingly during the daytime, they change their body colour and are bluish in tone on the upperside and orange underneath, compared to their drabber camouflaged colouration at night. Our final spot was to see two species of pitcher plant, *Nepenthes madagascariensis* and *N. masoalaensis*.

After lunch and our speedboat ride back to Manambato, we headed the long drive back to Andasibe for our final night.

Day 19

Friday 22nd September

Drive to Tana & flights home

Our return travel was as easy and straightforward as the journey outbound, despite a five-hour layover in Addis and a 3am alarm call! After almost three weeks enjoying the warm climes and stunning wildlife in Madagascar, we were back in the UK heading to our respective home towns. What an eventful and amazing trip, with so many memorable encounters and as a photographic tour, we were able to maximise every opportunity and leave with masses of stunning images.



Verreaux's Sifaka



Grandidier's Baobobs



Panther Chameleon



Oustelot's Chameleon

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Species lists

Mammals

		September 2023																	
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Family Cheirogaleidae																			
Grey Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus murinus</i>					✓	✓							✓					
Grey-brown Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus griseorufus</i>												✓	✓					
Goodman's Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus lehilahytsara</i>														✓	H			
Pale Fork-marked Lemur	<i>Phaner pallescens</i>					✓													
Peter's Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus myoxinus</i>									✓									
Family Lemuridae																			
Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur fulvus</i>															✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-fronted Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur rufus</i>						✓						✓	✓					
Red-bellied Lemur	<i>Eulemur rubriventer</i>																	✓	
Ring-tailed Lemur	<i>Lemur catta</i>												✓	✓					
Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur	<i>Varecia variegata variegata</i>																✓	✓	H
Family Lepilemuridae																			
White-footed Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur leucopus</i>												✓	✓					
Zombitse Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur hubbardorum</i>																		
Red-tailed Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur ruficaudatus</i>					✓													
Randrianasolo's Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur randrianasoloi</i>									✓									
Family Indriidae																			
Eastern Woolly Lemur (Avahi)	<i>Avahi laniger</i>														✓			✓	
Decken's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus deckenii</i>									✓									

		September 2023																	
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Verreaux's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus verreauxi</i>					✓							✓	✓					
Diademed Sifaka	<i>Propithecus diadema</i>															✓	✓		
Indri	<i>Indri indri</i>															✓	H	H	✓
Family Daubentoniidae																			
Aye-aye	<i>Daubentonia madagascariensis</i>																	✓	
Other Mammals																			
Fossa	<i>Cryptoprocta ferox</i>						✓												
Boky-Boky (Narrow-striped Mongoose)	<i>Mungotictis decemlineata</i>						✓												
Lowland Streaked Tenrec	<i>Hemicentetes semispinosus</i>														✓		✓		
Giant Jumping Rat	<i>Hypogeomys antimena</i>					H													
Madagascar Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus rufus</i>													✓					
Western Red Forest Rat	<i>Nesomys lambertoni</i>									✓									
Western Big-footed Mouse	<i>Macrotarsomys bastardi</i>						✓												

Birds (H = Heard only)

		September 2023																			
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	
Birds																					
White-faced Whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>			✓				✓	✓												
Knob-billed Duck	<i>Sarkidiornis melanotos</i>			✓				✓	✓												
Meller's Duck	<i>Anas melleri</i>			✓																	
Red-billed Teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>			✓																	
Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>						H							✓							
Madaqascan Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus pelzelinii</i>																✓				

		September 2023																			
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	
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>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓							✓					✓	
Humblot's Heron	<i>Ardea humbloti</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>											✓			✓						
Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>								✓												
Madagascan Harrier-Hawk	<i>Polyboroides radiatus</i>								✓	✓											
Frances's Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter francesiae</i>						✓		✓								✓				
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	
Madagascan Buzzard	<i>Buteo brachypterus</i>					✓	✓		✓	✓											
White-breasted Mesite	<i>Mesitornis variegatus</i>						✓														
Madagascan Flufftail	<i>Sarothrura insularis</i>															✓					
White-throated Rail	<i>Dryolimnas cuvieri</i>			H						✓							✓				
African Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio madagascariensis</i>																	✓			
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓												✓	H				
Madagascan Buttonquail	<i>Turnix nigricollis</i>								✓	✓			✓	✓							
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>								✓	✓											
Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>								✓												

		September 2023																			
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	
White-fronted Plover	<i>Charadrius marginatus</i>					✓															
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>								✓												
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					✓			✓												
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					✓															
Madagascar Pratincole	<i>Glareola ocularis</i>								✓									✓			
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓	✓			✓											✓	✓	
Malagasy Turtle Dove	<i>Nesoenas picturatus</i>					✓	✓	✓		✓				✓				✓			
Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>				✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓						
Madagascar Green Pigeon	<i>Treron australis</i>								✓									✓			
Madagascar Blue Pigeon	<i>Alectroenas madagascariensis</i>																✓				
Malagasy Coucal	<i>Centropus toulou</i>			H					H	H	H		H	✓	✓				H		
Crested Coua	<i>Coua cristata</i>					H			✓	H			✓								
Blue Coua	<i>Coua caerulea</i>															✓					
Coquerel's Coua	<i>Coua coquereli</i>					✓			✓												
Giant Coua	<i>Coua gigas</i>					✓	✓						✓	✓							
Madagascar Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus rochii</i>															H	H				
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>												✓		✓						
Rainforest Scops Owl	<i>Otus rutilus</i>													✓	H	✓					
Torotoroka Scops Owl	<i>Otus madagascariensis</i>					✓	H						✓	✓							
White-browed Hawk-Owl	<i>Ninox supercilialis</i>					✓	H							✓							
Madagascar Owl	<i>Asio madagascariensis</i>															✓					
Madagascar Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus madagascariensis</i>				✓				✓					H	H				H		
Madagascar Spinetail	<i>Zoonavena grandidieri</i>									✓							✓				
African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>					✓		✓										✓			

		September 2023																			
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	
Malagasy Black Swift	<i>Apus balstoni</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓										✓		
Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>											✓									
Cuckoo Roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor</i>									✓						H	H				
Madagascan Pygmy Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis madagascariensis</i>														✓						
Malagasy Kingfisher	<i>Corythornis vintsioides</i>			✓					✓							✓	✓	✓		✓	
Olive Bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>					✓		✓			✓		✓				✓	✓	✓		
Madagascan Hoopoe	<i>Upupa marginata</i>						✓						✓	✓							
Malagasy Kestrel	<i>Falco newtoni</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓							
Greater Vasa Parrot	<i>Coracopsis vasa</i>							✓	✓								✓				
Lesser Vasa Parrot	<i>Coracopsis nigra</i>					✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓							
Grey-headed Lovebird	<i>Agapornis canus</i>						✓	✓	H	✓	✓			✓							
Red-tailed Vanga	<i>Calicalicus madagascariensis</i>						✓									H	H				
Hook-billed Vanga	<i>Vanga curvirostris</i>						✓						H	H		H					
White-headed Vanga	<i>Artamella viridis</i>						✓				✓						✓				
Blue Vanga	<i>Cyanolanius madagascarinus</i>																✓				
Rufous Vanga	<i>Schetba rufa</i>						✓														
Tylas Vanga	<i>Tylas eduardi</i>																✓				
Nuthatch Vanga	<i>Hypositta corallirostris</i>															✓	✓				
Common Newtonia	<i>Newtonia brunneicauda</i>													✓		✓					
Ward's Flycatcher	<i>Pseudobias wardi</i>															✓					
Madagascan Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina cinerea</i>															✓	✓				
Crested Drongo	<i>Dicrurus forficatus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata</i>						✓		✓					✓		✓	✓				
Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	

		September 2023																			
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	
Madagascan Lark	<i>Eremopterix hova</i>							✓													
Malagasy Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes madagascariensis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	H	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Mascarene Martin	<i>Phedina borbonica</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		✓									
Malagasy Brush Warbler	<i>Nesillas typica</i>									✓											
Madagascan Swamp Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus newtoni</i>			✓																	
White-throated Oxylabes	<i>Oxylabes madagascariensis</i>																H				
Long-billed Bernieria	<i>Bernieria madagascariensis</i>						✓														
Wedge-tailed Jery	<i>Hartertula flavoviridis</i>																✓				
Rand's Warbler	<i>Randia pseudozosterops</i>																✓				
Common Jery	<i>Neomixis tenella</i>					✓	✓			✓			✓		✓		✓				
Green Jery	<i>Neomixis viridis</i>																H				
Madagascan Cisticola	<i>Cisticola cherina</i>				✓	✓		✓													
Malagasy White-eye	<i>Zosterops maderaspatanus</i>			✓												✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Madagascan Magpie-Robin	<i>Copsychus albospectularis</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓			✓				
Forest Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola sharpei</i>									✓											
Madagascan Stonechat	<i>Saxicola sibilla</i>														✓		✓			✓	
Souimanga Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris sovimanga</i>			✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>																				
Nelicourvi Weaver	<i>Ploceus nelicourvi</i>															✓	✓				
Sakalava Weaver	<i>Ploceus sakalava</i>						✓	✓						✓							
Red Fody	<i>Foudia madagascariensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓			✓						
Madagascan Mannikin	<i>Lepidopygia nana</i>			✓	✓				✓								✓				
Madagascan Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flaviventris</i>			✓	✓				✓			✓			✓	✓	✓		✓		

Reptiles & Amphibians

Common name	Scientific name	September 2023																	
		4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Reptiles & Amphibians																			
Frogs																			
Madagascar Bright-eyed Frog	<i>Boophis madagascariensis</i>																	✓	
<i>Boophis douloti</i>	<i>Boophis douloti</i>						✓	✓		✓	✓								
Dumeril's Bright-eyed Frog	<i>Boophis tephraeomystax</i>																	✓	
Madagascar Reed Frog	<i>Heterixalus madagascariensis</i>																	✓	✓
Pandanus Tree Frog	<i>Guibemantis liber</i>																	✓	
Microhylid frog sp.	<i>Stumpffia</i> sp.																	✓	
Chameleons																			
Brown Leaf Chameleon	<i>Brookesia superciliaris</i>															✓			
Leaf Chameleon sp.	<i>Brookesia</i> sp.																	✓	
Short-nosed Chameleon (aka Perinet Chameleon)	<i>Calumma gastrotaenia</i>															✓			
Parson's Chameleon	<i>Calumma parsonii</i>															✓		✓	
Oustalet's Chameleon (aka Malagasy Giant Chameleon)	<i>Furcifer oustaleti</i>			✓		✓	✓			✓									
Spiny-backed Chameleon	<i>Furcifer verrucosus</i>												✓	✓					
Panther Chameleon	<i>Furcifer pardalis</i>																	✓	✓
Lizards, Geckos & Skinks																			
Three-eyed Lizard	<i>Chalerodon madagascariensis</i>									✓			✓	✓					
Collared Iguanid (aka Cuvier's Madagascar Swift)	<i>Oplurus cuveri</i>					✓	✓			✓	✓								✓
Sakalava Velvet Gecko	<i>Blaesodactylus sakalava</i>													✓					

		September 2023																	
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Large-headed Gecko (aka Cuvier's Madagascar Ground Gecko)	<i>Paroedura picta</i>					✓								✓					
Madagascar Dwarf Gecko	<i>Lygodactylus madagascariensis</i>			✓						✓									
Dwarf Gecko sp.	<i>Lygodactylus sp.</i>									✓									
<i>Lygodactylus tuberosus</i>	<i>Lygodactylus tuberosus</i>												✓						
<i>Lygodactylus miops</i>	<i>Lygodactylus miops</i>																	✓	
Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko	<i>Uroplatus sikorae</i>															✓			
Lined Emerald Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma lineata bifasciata</i>															✓			
Lined Emerald Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma lineata lineata</i>			✓															
Gold Dust Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma laticauda</i>																		✓
Thicktail Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma mutabilis</i>								✓	✓				✓					
Madagascar Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma madagascariensis</i>								✓										
Aldabra Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma abbotti</i>									✓									
Speckled Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma guttata</i>																	✓	
<i>Phelsuma parva</i>	<i>Phelsuma parva</i>																		✓
Common House Gecko	<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i>				✓		✓			✓									
Broad-tailed Girdled Lizard (aka Western Girdled Lizard)	<i>Zonosaurus laticaudatus</i>								✓										
Gravenhorts's Mabuya	<i>Trachylepis gravenhorstii</i>									✓			✓						
Peter's Keeled Cordylid	<i>Tracheloptychus petersi</i>													✓					
Tandrefana Skink	<i>Trachylepis tandrefana</i>								✓										
Madagascar Clawless Gecko	<i>Ebenavia inunguis</i>																	✓	
Peters' Spotted Gecko	<i>Geckolepis maculata</i>																	✓	

Invertebrates

Common name	Scientific name	September 2023																	
		4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Butterflies																			
	Papilionidae																		
Madagascar Giant Swallowtail	<i>Pharmacophagus antenor</i>				✓	✓	✓												
Mocker Swallowtail	<i>Papilio dardanus</i>																		✓
	Nymphalidae																		
African Monarch (aka Plain Tiger)	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓			✓						
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓															
Brilliant Blue	<i>Junonia rhadama</i>			✓		✓			✓	✓			✓	✓					
Madagascan Brown Pansy	<i>Junonia goudotii</i>			✓															
Madagascan Forest Nymph	<i>Aterica rabena</i>								✓					✓					
Spotted Sailor	<i>Neptis saclava</i>								✓										
Madagascar Beauty	<i>Salamis anteva</i>									✓									✓
Common Leopard	<i>Phalanta phalantha</i>										✓								
	Pieridae																		
Madagascar Dotted Border	<i>Mylothris phileris</i>																✓		
Other Invertebrates																			
Madagascar Emperor	<i>Anax tumorifer</i>																		✓
Madagascar Hissing Cockroach	<i>Gromphadorhina portentosa</i>								✓										
Cicada	<i>Tibicinidae sp.</i>										✓								
Stick Insect sp.	-														✓	✓			✓
Giraffe-necked Weevil	<i>Trachelophorus giraffa</i>															✓	✓		
Arachnids																			
Red-legged Golden Orb-weaver Spider	<i>Trichonephila inaurata madagascariensis</i>		✓	✓						✓						✓			✓

		September 2023																	
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Madagascar Thorn Spider	<i>Gasteracantha rhomboidea madagascariensis</i>																✓		
Long-winged Kite Spider	<i>Gasteracantha versicolor</i>															✓			
Madagascar Net-casting Spider	<i>Asianopis madagascariensis</i>																	✓	
Scorpion sp.	-												✓	✓	✓				