

## Tour Report Wild Madagascar 12 - 28 September 2024

Grey bamboo lemur



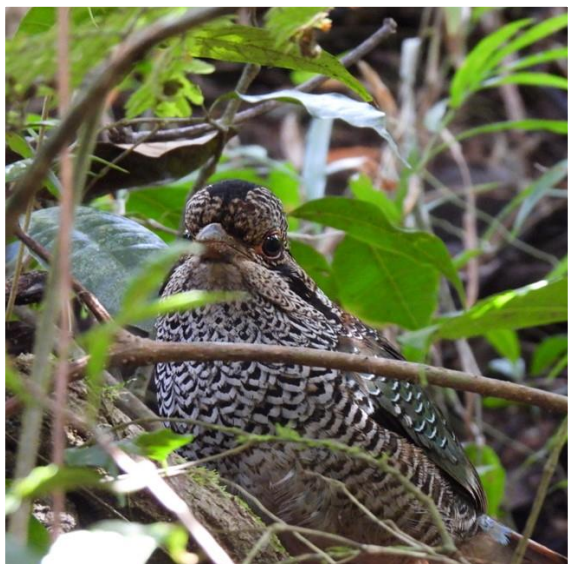
Aye-aye



Diademed Sifakas



Scaly ground-roller



Compiled by Mike Dilger

Tour Leader: Mike Dilger (MD) & Harry Rakotosalama (HR) with ten guests

**Day 1:**

**Friday 13 September 2024**

Ivato International airport in Antananarivo, Madagascar. arrival at Relais Des Plateaux

Tour-leader Mike Dilger (MD) met up with seven of the ten guests at Heathrow Terminal 4, with the final three making their own way from their home countries of Australia and the United States respectively. The plane for Nairobi left a little late, but all arrived in East Africa early in the morning and met for breakfast in the transit lounge. While waiting for our connecting flight to Antananarivo, a spot of birding was conducted through the lounge windows and across the terminal, with black kite, little swifts, pied crows and superb starlings all logged. After a very pleasant few hours of relaxing, birding, eating and dozing we then boarded our flight for Antananarivo. The visa process at Arrivals was both exceptionally speedy and efficient, and with all bags accounted for, the group walked through into arrivals where they were met with the smiling face of our Malagasy guide Harry Rakotosalama (HR).

After local currency had been obtained, we boarded the minibus, driven by Doré for the short drive to our Hotel - Relais Des Plateaux. Once checked in, everyone was given time to relax in their rooms before the entire group met up once again for a 6 pm briefing. In the interim, a few of the guests enjoyed a short walk around the hotel compound, and in the process logged three species: Madagascar fody, Madagascar wagtail and Madagascar stonechat, which were all perhaps unsurprisingly endemic to the island. HR then went through the itinerary for the week, while MD formally welcomed the group and covered a few other bases as to how the trip would run. Dinner was then enjoyed at the hotel before a tired but thrilled group retired to their rooms for the night.

**Day 2:**

**Saturday 14 September 2024**

Relais des Plateaux Hotel, Antananarivo, to VOIMMA (or Indri special reserve), before an overnight at Vakona Lodge.

Waking up early, the group met for a 6 am breakfast, with a long but exciting day ahead of them. As the bags were loaded, the group enjoyed seeing a Madagascar wagtail and a few Madagascar fodies within the hotel compound, before setting off south towards central Tana. Along the way, Harry was able to give a brief introduction to the geography of Madagascar and talked a little about the breakup of the super-continent of Gondwanaland, which resulted in Madagascar's separation from the African mainland around one hundred and sixty million years ago (mya), and the much later separation from what is now considered India between 66 and 90 mya.

We soon began to see rice paddies on both sides of the road and stopped briefly to watch a pair of zebu being used to plough the wet fields. Here a large flock of cattle egrets was also noted, with MD explaining this species can be seen on five continents (including the UK), making it one of the world's most widely distributed birds. Common mynas were also common here, with MD also indicating this to be an introduced species which has reached pestilential levels in the degraded areas across Madagascar's highland plateau. A sharp-eyed HR then managed to pick out a non-breeding Madagascar pond heron, a rare and localised endemic that has recently been categorised as 'Endangered' by the IUCN. Back on the bus, a black heron was additionally noted when it flew past.

Joining the bypass on the outskirts of Tana we then headed eastwards, as a number of dimorphic egrets were seen in another paddy - a species that has been recently split from that of little egret. A few great egrets were also observed along the way as our heron/egret species count quickly began to mount. Our first raptor of the trip proved to be a yellow-billed kite, while a Madagascar kestrel perching in some roadside vegetation quickly followed on the kite's heels. Despite being the dry season, the weather appeared to be mostly overcast, with mist in patches, as we continued our journey eastwards along the somewhat pot-holed RN2.

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Passing through a series of small settlements we then reached the town of Manjakandriana, where a second hammerkop and another yellow-billed kite were noted. By now, well out in 'the sticks', the group were able to take in their first views of rural Malagasy life, with people either working in the paddies or selling their wares along the road. With Tana located on top of Madagascar's plateau at an elevation of around 1,200 metres above sea-level (asl), we eventually began to lose height as we continued westwards, only stopping to enjoy both an adult and juvenile striated heron and a few dimorphic egrets along one of the bunds separating the many paddies lining our route on both sides. In some scrub close by, the staccato call of Madagascar brush warbler could be heard, while a few obtained brief flight views of a Madagascar coucal, before then listening to its haunting, bubbling call from somewhere out of view.

Hot on the coucal's heels, HR then picked up a pair of Malagasy stonechat close by, with both perching in clear view, while others in the group opted instead for excellent close-ups of a yellow-billed kite drifting over the paddies. We were then just about to leave when a guest spotted a Madagascar malachite kingfisher on a snag. Once MD had lined up this smart species in the scope, all were treated to excellent views of a species that doesn't look too different from that of our own native British kingfisher. While watching the kingfisher, a female common fody was also picked up in some nearby scrub.

As we reboarded the bus, MD was also able to point out the small plant *Mimosa pudica* along the roadside, which is a species with the remarkable ability to instantly collapse its leaves upon being touched, to prevent being nibbled by herbivores. Continuing further east, the temperature also began to rise as we crossed the bridge over the Mangoro River, and into the town of Moramanga.

Stopping for a delightful, if lengthy lunch in Moramanga, we duly arrived at Andasibe and the headquarters of Analamazaotra Special Reserve, where we were met by head guide Price and his children, Michael and Dominique - who work as his spotters. Birding as soon as we left the minibus, our first bird was a male Madagascar magpie robin, which was quickly followed by a male souimanga sunbird and a crested drongo in the reserve's garden. We were at the point of starting on the trail 'Circuit Indri 1' when Patrice alerted us to the presence of a small troop of common brown lemurs feeding opposite the park entrance. At least three lemurs were noted as they fed both on the ground and in the low branches at the forest edge, with a number of guests also noting that one of the lemurs also had a small baby strapped to its chest. It was also tremendous to have 'bagged' the first of hopefully many lemur species so early in the trip.

Taking to the trail, and after some patience, we eventually managed to secure views of a Madagascar brush warbler, in addition to hearing its staccato call. Quickly we were surrounded by the forest, with a stripe-throated jery singing in the top of a tree, while the forests reverberated to the 'lesser cuck-oo' call of the Madagascar or lesser cuckoo. Michael's sharp eyes then spotted a young Madagascar tree boa curled up in vegetation along the trail, while in a scrubby tangle, underneath some banana trees, a grey morph roosting Madagascar scops owl was also pointed out just above our heads. Slowly ascending up the main trail, the pink flowering orchid *Cynorkis purpuresecens* could be seen, along with a distinctive purple flower in the family Acanthaceae.

Heading on upwards, we eventually reached the ridge, which enabled us to look down on quality forest on either side. Suddenly a blue coua appeared in the canopy just above our heads, with all getting good sightings of this much sought-after species, particularly when it flew across the trail just ahead of us. A shout then came from our spotters, causing us to quickly break away from the trail as we blindly followed them through the tangle of undergrowth until almost bumping into one of the trip's key target species - the stunning and exceptionally rare diademed sifaka. Surely one of the most beautiful of all lemurs, the whole group watched entranced as the troop ate and rested above our heads, before then starting to get more active. While many of these lemurs are used to the presence of tourists, they appeared to largely ignore our presence, which allowed for some stunning views as we inched around to ensure the sun was at our back for the best photographic opportunities. To the delight of all the group, one of the sifakas was also nursing a baby on its belly, but this did not seem to impede her movement in any way, as she seemed intent on making it as difficult as possible for the photographers in the group to get the ultimate mother and baby shot! While enjoying the sifakas we could also hear the haunting calls of several small troops of distant indris elsewhere in the forest, which made the moment even more special.

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Leaving the sifakas and heading back up to the ridge, our spotters then located a small troop of indris, in the form of a mother, baby and a second adult high up on a horizontal branch in the canopy. Not content with just having their photograph taken, the indris then began to call, as we listened to their iconic wail from down below. While watching the indris, a troop of common brown lemurs then passed along the ridge line right past us, which provided a wonderful supporting act to the main star attraction. However, the wildlife interest was not just confined to that of lemurs, as the birders in the group were then distracted by a spectacled tetraka, before a pair of calling cuckoo rollers flew over the path and above our heads. This latter species is considered so different from all the world's avifauna, that it has been placed in its own unique order - the *Leptosomiformes* - and the species is additionally one of the most sought-after birds in Madagascar.

Descending from the ridge, we eventually reached the part of the trail running alongside the fish farm, as we obtained good views of another stripe-throated jery and the trip's second malachite kingfisher. Finally emerging out of the forest and back at the park entrance, Patrice had one more terrific sighting for us, in the form of a male nelicourvi weaver, that was in the process of constructing a nest right alongside one of the park buildings. Exiting the park slightly late (as it normally closes at 4 pm) we then took the short drive of around 20 minutes to Vakona Lodge, which would be our home for the next two nights.

Checking in, the group then retired to their respective cabins before reconvening a couple of hours later for the trip's first night walk. Taking the short drive, via the now-closed graphite factory, on our way back down to Andasibe, HR managed to spot a male short-horned chameleon from the minibus - the first of many chameleons we hoped! Collecting our guides a little further on, we then took a short walk into the VOIMMA Community Reserve. By now it was raining lightly, in addition to being dark - 'good weather for frogs' we thought, as we slowly scanned the surrounding vegetation with our torches for anything that jumped, hopped, crawled or flew.

A call went up once more from Patrice somewhere off the trail, and as we reached his position we could clearly see he'd managed to spot an eastern woolly lemur high up in the tree. Being a species that is difficult to see well at the best of times, a fine view was nevertheless obtained in the torch beam, with this being yet another lemur that was carrying a baby. Leaving them both to feed in peace, a couple of nose-horned chameleons were then spotted in the path-side vegetation. This species is much smaller than the short-horned chameleon for earlier on in the evening by HR, with the adults reaching a maximum of seven or eight centimetres in length.

In addition to all the sightings, many calls could also be heard, with Madagascar nightjar and Madagascar scops owl certainly the most prominent. Dominique then managed to find a Madagascar tree frog *Boophis madiscariensis*, which certainly proved very popular with the photographers in the group. The final sighting of the night came with a very fleeting glimpse by some within the group of a Goodman's mouse lemur, which was only distinguished as a new species in 2005. But with the rain, by now, evermore persistent, we decided to quit while ahead and returned to the lodge. After enjoying a fine, first dinner, the day's impressive list was tallied up before everyone then retired to bed for a much needed rest.

**Day 3:** **Sunday 15 September 2024**  
Visit to Mantadia National Park & the night walk along the road adjacent to Analamazaotra NP.

At Vakona, the restaurant and reception sit on stilts above a small lake, meaning that we could watch the Mascarene martins feeding over the water while enjoying our breakfast. In addition to the martins, some Madagascar mannikins were also spotted feeding in the short grass along the water's edge - which represented yet another endemic species to add to our burgeoning list.

Walking the short distance up to where the minibus was parked, we met up with our guides Patrice, Michael & Dominique once more, who were keen to show us the males of both Souimanga and Madagascar green sunbirds feeding and interacting with each other in a nearby flowering shrub - what a great way to start the day! The drive to Mantadia National Park necessitated the use of 4WD vehicles due to the poor state of the

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road, so we transferred into three different vehicles for the ninety-minute journey to the primary forest. By slowly working our way around the pot-holes, we eventually reached the entrance to the park, which also represented the half-way mark. And while HR secured our entrance tickets, an impromptu spot of birdwatching quickly produced the day's second male souimanga sunbird, two Madagascar bulbuls and a stripe-throated jery.

Eventually, after another forty-five- minutes, we reached the parking place that also marks the entrance to the primary rainforest. Immediately a rand's warbler could be seen singing high in the canopy, while up in the sky, Patrice pointed out a couple of Madagascar spinetails hawking for insects above the tree canopy. Before entering the forest, Patrice then once again came up with the goods, in the form of a couple of giraffe-necked weevils, surely one of the strangest invertebrates on Planet Earth. Both sexes were represented, with the male clearly distinguished by possessing the longer of the two necks.

While admiring and photographing the weevils, one of the guests then very nearly trod on a Madagascar tree boa curled up in the roadside vegetation! Also added to the list here was a single greater vasa parrot viewed in flight and a perching male Madagascar sparrowhawk, with all attaining super views of this difficult-to-see species in MD's scope. However, with the distant calls of indris beckoning us, we bid farewell to our drivers and plunged straight into the forest to discover what delights were awaiting us.

Almost immediately Michael declared he could hear the call of a pygmy kingfisher - a species that tends to be confined both to within a primary forest and close to a stream - and after a short amount of playback, tremendous views of this tiny orange kingfisher were obtained when it perched on a nearby branch. This also represented the first lifer of the trip for MD! Moving on, a few members of the group then saw a red forest rat dashing across the path before another troop of brown lemurs was picked up. Plant interest was also provided by a yellow flowering orchid in the genus *Bulbophyllum*. In amongst the chorus of calling rand's warblers, stripe-throated jerys and Madagascar brush warblers, Michael then told us he's heard the whooping call of scaly ground-roller. Considered rare, secretive and magnificently marked, the scaly ground roller represents a stellar addition to anyone's list, and so we followed its call straight down to the river to see if we could catch a glimpse.

With the bank being a touch precipitous, half the group decided to stay with HR and Dominique, while MD's group followed Michael and Patrice in the direction of the call. On the way down we could also hear common newtonia calling from the trees, while Madagascar bee-eaters passed noisily overhead. As we scanned the forest floor for any signs of the ground-roller, two distant troops of indris began calling, with brief views additionally obtained of a lesser vasa parrot as it flew through the understory.

After a considerable wait, which involved the entire group crossing the river one by one, on Patrice's back! We eventually managed to catch up with utterly brilliant views of a single bird as it crept around on the floor, at times, very close to us. It was a thrilling find, with all agreeing it to have been well worth the considerable effort put in to secure stellar views of one of Madagascar's most sought-after birds. Before crossing back over the river, we also had a good view of a single white-browed owl roosting high up in a tree, and back on the other side, we proceeded to walk straight into a large mixed flock, which included nuthatch vanga, Madagascar paradise flycatcher, Madagascar white-eye and red-tailed vanga.

Joining the rest of the group once more, we enjoyed a second mixed flock in quick succession, with a male Madagascar paradise flycatcher, common Newtonia and a male red-tailed vanga identified, before the rest of the birds disappeared through the trees. Further ahead, more good news rippled back to us that our spotters had located a small troop of black-and-white ruffed lemurs, so there would be no rest permitted before setting off once more up the trails and onto the ridge line. On the way to catch up with the lemurs, yet another mixed flock was encountered, and while most rushed off to see the lemurs, MD and a couple of others stayed behind to log spectacled tetraka, Madagascar white-eye, common Newtonia, a single long-billed tetra and a single grey-crowned tetraka.

Catching up with the rest of the group in a dense bamboo thicket, we all craned our necks upwards to observe three lemurs high up on a canopy branch while taking in a late morning siesta. Eventually, the

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lemurs woke up and began grooming each other, in a delightful family moment. Leaving the lemurs in peace we headed back down and out of the forest to the waiting cars.

The sightings were to continue out of the forest too, with Patrice next pointing out the nest of a pair of Madagascar harrier hawks, enabling MD to scope them up for a much better view. While watching the pair, we then delighted in seeing the male mating with the female. Suddenly realising we had been in the forest for over three hours, hunger drove us back to the vehicles, whereupon our packed lunches were enjoyed on benches at the forest edge.

After a delightful break, most of the guests then headed straight back into the forest with MD, HR and the guides for a short walk. Hitting the main trail once again, our first wildlife sighting of the afternoon was that of a giant millipede on a tree trunk. Hitting yet another mixed flock, possibly our fourth of the day, we quickly identified Madagascar bulbul and Madagascar paradise flycatcher, while Patrice went on ahead to try and locate some calling white-throated rails. Moving back down to the river bank where we had seen the ground-roller earlier on, two rails showed reasonably well after a judicious amount of playback.

Heading back up towards the ridge, our next mammal of the day was a cracker, in the form of red-bellied lemur. Finding them was not straightforward, and involved a long ascent, with three finally located in dense vegetation. This is a species that can be easily sexed, as the males possess white splashes between their eyes and snouts, and the species' black tails are another very distinctive feature. Heading back down, to ensure we would be exiting the park before 4 pm, we then bumped into another small troop of diademeds. The lemurs sat very close to us for a while, before eventually bouncing off through the trees - one of the individuals clearly a mother with a very young baby clinging to its belly - what a moment!

On the way back down, a single tyla's vanga was heard before eventually reaching the vehicles for the drive out of the park. Passing the park entrance just ten minutes to spare before it was due to close, Patrice was next able to show us two Madagascar swamp warblers in some degraded pasture, with a single Madagascar starling additionally spotted high up in a canopy tree.

Arriving back at Vakona Lodge, everyone proceeded to take a short rest before reuniting for the night walk. Before leaving, and close to the Lodge, one of the workers was able to point out to MD a young short-nosed chameleon, which was subsequently admired and photographed by many in the group. Taking the night walk slightly earlier than the previous evening, and with both the sky much clearer and the moon close to full, we headed back to the road running alongside Analamazaotra NP.

Picking up our spotters en route in the centre of Andasibe Village, our first treat came in the form of an adult barn owl roosting in a palm tree. With all barn owls worldwide considered to be composed of just one species, there is much conjecture as to how many subspecies are present, but it seems highly likely the subspecies here are endemic to Madagascar. Jumping back in the minibus, we then parked up a little further down the road to commence our walk. Almost immediately, a couple of chameleons were located by our spotters, with both being adult male and female representatives of the short-nosed chameleon we'd just enjoyed at Vakona.

The shout of 'mouse lemur!' then went up as one appeared briefly in the forest, and while this individual appeared elusive, it was not long before a much more obliging individual was located a little further along the road. And while dodging the motorbikes, cars, lorries and tuk-tuks, the whole group eventually managed to secure both terrific views and photos of one of the world's smallest primates. Next up, our spotters managed to find two different species of frog - these being *Boophis viridis* and the much smaller *Boophis tasymena*. More than satiated with all the reptile, amphibian and mammal sightings, the group then headed back to the lodge for a late dinner and, in some cases a celebratory beer, after an action-packed day that had been nothing short of scintillating.

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**Day 4:****Monday 16 September 2024**

Vakona Lodge to VIOMMA and travel to Palmarium Lodge at Akanin'ny Nofy, with a night walk to Aye-aye Island

Meeting down at the lodge once more for an early spot of birding before breakfast, a quick scan over the water produced a number of Mascarene martins, a green jery and a single Malachite kingfisher perched by the side of the lake. One lucky guest, on her way down to breakfast, had also managed to film a lowland streaked tenrec which was pointed out to her by one of the hotel staff.

After breakfast, we headed back through the graphite factory and met up with our spotters for the last time, with a walk in the private reserve of Voimma on the agenda. Upon arrival, Patrice and his team pointed out a single Chabert's vanga and rand's warbler, while the bubbling call of Madagascar coucal could be heard. The first reptile pointed out by our guides was that of a female short-horned chameleon behind the entrance buildings, and as we headed into the forest Patrice pointed out both an *Amaryllis* in full flower and a spectacled tetraka singing - which MD suggested sounded remarkably similar to that of a dunnoek in the UK.

Quickly hitting a mixed flock in the forest, most managed to see either all or a combination of a single male blue vanga, a Madagascar cuckoo shrike, a red-tailed vanga and a female Madagascar paradise flycatcher. And by the water, the staccato call of Madagascar brush warbler cut through the morning air.

Further along the path, a pair of indri fast asleep on a high branch were located by our spotters, but having previously seen this species well we quickly moved on in our search of other species not yet recorded on the trip. This proved a good call as Michael & Dominique next showed us a male Parson's chameleon - which is well known as being the largest species of chameleon in the world. But as this individual was considered no older than five years old, it would, our guides suggested, reach a much larger size. Once the chameleon had been photographed, the group's attention then focused back on the indris, whom having woken up, then treated us to terrific views as they swung away through the trees!

Following this most pleasant interlude for chameleons and lemurs, birds once again took centre stage as a male forest fody was encountered, which was then immediately trumped by a hook-billed vanga on a branch just above the path. However, one last surprise was in store, in the form of a small troop of grey bamboo lemurs which had been located by our spotters in a patch of bamboo. Surely one of the gentlest and most peaceable of lemurs, this was also HR's favourite lemur, and provided the most perfect full stop to our time in Andasibe as we watched three peaceably munching away on bamboo.

Leaving the forest, we thanked our wonderful guides, Patrice, Michael and Dominique for their expertise and companionship before bidding farewell as Toré turned our minibus towards Palmarium. We also said a temporary farewell to Harry at this point, with full knowledge that he would catch up with us again down in Fianarantsoa. The road to Brickaville proved long and winding, and slowly we headed north and east we were able to take the time to enjoy a slice of Malagasy life en route. Stopping for lunch at Sahamami, we enjoyed our sandwiches while watching a slice of home - in the form of a small colony of house sparrows which had descended to feed on our crumbs! Moving on once more, our next stop was at Antsampanana, where our driver stopped to fill up with diesel at the petrol station. As in previous years, this location proved a real hotspot for Madagascar pratincoles when MD spotted two on the station forecourt's roof. It's thought that this species may well breed along the nearby Laroka River just south of the town. Only breeding in Madagascar, this species spends the Austral winter across in East Africa before returning here in late September - and its recent trip across the Mozambique channel was certainly appreciated by the group, with all admiring these gorgeous birds.

With a boat to catch there could be little time to waste, and upon reaching the outskirts of Brickaville we crossed the town's river in the knowledge that the small village of Manambato was now not too far away. In Brickaville the traffic was very busy, as the town is the location of both a large sugar refinery and a railway station that marks one of the key staging points between the capital Antananarivo and the island's east coast. And just a few miles further north, we pulled over before then transferring all our kit into three off-

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road vehicles for the thirty-minute drive across to the village of Manambato, itself situated on the shores of Lake Rasoabe. Here the road to the lake is normally in terrible condition, but to MD's delight, it had improved substantially since his previous visit, with only the last section still requiring an upgrade.

Changing the mode of transport once again, we boarded the waiting boat that would take us north to our next destination. The entire waterway here runs parallel to the coast and consists of a series of natural lakes and rivers connected by man-made canals, resulting in a total navigable stretch of around 650 kilometres. This in turn makes it one of the the longest navigable inland waterways in the world. Like in previous years, very little wildlife was seen on the way with the exception of a purple heron and a Madagascar coucal, but the journey certainly made a welcome change from the monotony of bouncing around in the bus. With us now down at sea-level, this meant the temperature was much warmer than we'd experienced in the rainforest, with the onboard breeze a very welcome addition. Finally arriving at Lake Ampitabe, all that then remained was the short trip across to the northwestern shore where Palmarium Lodge was located, which would also serve as our accommodation for the following two nights.

Upon checking-in, all took the opportunity to rest and refresh before the evening's excursion - which would entail a date with a very special animal. Reconvening at 5.30 pm we boarded the boat for the fifteen-minute trip back across the water to the small island that has now become home to a total of eight aye-eyes. Joining our local guide Romeo, we briefly assembled for a chat on the beach, before commencing the short, dark walk up to the arena, accompanied by the sound of Madagascar nightjars churring somewhere close by. Walking in single file through the forest, we quickly arrived at the viewing amphitheatre to find that one aye-eye was already present! Attracted by coconuts that are wedged in the forks of trees as supplementary food by the park rangers, the aye-eye then proceeded to rip it open with its incisor teeth, before being joined by a second individual which promptly headed straight for the second coconut.

A delightful hour then quickly passed by as the whole group became utterly entranced while watching the lemurs climbing, descending, feeding and interacting with each other. On a couple of occasions, the lemurs were little more than a couple of metres away, enabling all to appreciate this species' unique appearance, with them having been described as 'possessing the face of possum, tooth of mouse and ear of bat'. Our guide Romeo explained that all the adult aye-eyes here were animals either recovered from deforested areas or seized by rangers, before being placed on the island as a sanctuary. According to folklore, aye-eyes are considered to bring bad luck and death, and so were traditionally killed on sight, but attitudes mercifully appear to be changing, with authorities also acting quickly to ensure this iconic Malagasy species has recently become one of the most heavily protected species in the entire country.

As the guests revelled in aye-eyes, a third lemur suddenly joined the fray, which resulted in one of the incumbent lemurs quickly acquiescing to let it feed, having already done all the hard work by opening the coconut in the first place. Here MD was able to explain that in lemur society a strong matriarchal hierarchy exists, and as males are bottom of the pecking order, this strongly suggested that the last lemur to arrive would almost certainly have been a female. After the most wonderful entertainment, the group then took the short boat ride back across to the lodge, with the clear conditions making for a beautiful night sky. But before collapsing into our beds, we tucked into a late dinner at the end of another action-packed day.

## **Day 5:**

**Tuesday 17 September 2024**

Palmarium Lodge & grounds, plus a second visit to Aye-eye Island

Having all met up for a 7.30 am breakfast we subsequently discovered that one of the guests had been bitten during the night by a *Scolopendra* centipede that had somehow ended up in his bed! He was, however, absolutely fine after his far-from-ideal night's sleep. All had additionally heard the very noisy Madagascar nightjars the night before too, and while tucking into croissants, fruit and coffee also took a brief break from dining to enjoy four Madagascar green pigeons and a couple of Madagascar bulbuls in the trees close by.

Meeting up with Romeo, our guide for the day, we set off for our morning walk around the hotel's grounds and almost immediately came across a troop of common brown lemurs, which is considered one of the few

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native species here. At Palmarium, a number of the lemurs have been introduced to the Lodge from other locations in Madagascar, and so are out of their natural range here. An example of this was the single black lemur, which originates from much further north in Madagascar, with a hybrid between a black and crowned lemur also present. The captive radiated tortoises, which originate from southern Madagascar were also admired, with Romeo estimating the largest specimen to be at least 35 years old.

This was also an opportunity for those in the group to capture some stunning portraits of other habituated and non-native lemurs, such as a young indri, some very approachable black-and-white ruffed lemurs and a troop of crowned lemurs. In this latter species, Romeo was able to point out the differences between the males with their little black caps, and the plain-capped females. While watching the lemurs, a souimanga sunbird could also be heard as it sang constantly in the trees just above our heads. Next up was a small troop of red-bellied lemurs, which we'd previously seen in the wild at Andasibe, and were not native here either. While enjoying these lemurs at such close quarters, one of the guests then spotted a tiny baby clinging to its mother's belly, which Romeo estimated to be no more than a couple of days old.

Leaving the Lodge's grounds and taking to the forest paths, the first bird to be spotted was another hook-billed vanga, as we also enjoyed our second parson's chameleon in as many days. Eventually, we reached the beach, with Romeo pointing out an adult Cuvier's Madagascar swift (or plated lizard). The lizard had a very obvious stumpy tail, which was the result of an attempted predation, but a little further along the beach we also noted a couple more individuals of the same species with their original tails intact.

On the beach, the Australian bottlebrush (*Callistemon*) plants which have colonised the sand were also home to two or three Madagascar reed-frogs, which interestingly have a number of different colour morphs - with both yellow and pale pastel blue forms found. As the photographers switched to 'macro' for these handsome, but diminutive herps, a small praying mantis was also discovered here too. Also along the beach, another yellow-billed kite drifted past, while a Madagascar bee-eater and fork-tailed drongo ensured that the birding interest was maintained.

Next up, Romeo showed the group a patch of pitcher plants (*Nepenthes Madagascariensis*) in a small, wet area at the edge of the forest. This insectivorous group of plants reaches its maximum expression in Asia and the plants here may well have rafted across on some floating vegetation before slowly evolving into their own unique species. Walking back to the hotel, we proceeded to take lunch before allowing the group a much needed afternoon off. With some either catching up on sleep or resting, others took a walk around the hotel's grounds. Those out and about managed to see both a large Oustalet's chameleon and a juvenile panther chameleon, while four lucky guests had a front row seat when a greater hedgehog tenrec was found trying to enter the restaurant - before being gently ushered out by the hotel staff!

Meeting up at 5.30 pm, the group took the short boat-ride back across the water to enjoy aye-aye island for the final time. Walking up the steps to the first arena, an animal was already present and we watched utterly entranced as it opened up a fresh coconut by using its incisor teeth to rip open the husk. A hole duly created, it then drank the milk, before using its long index finger to prise away pieces of flesh. It was simply fascinating behaviour to watch.

A second lemur then came down to feed on the other coconut, before then jumping over onto our side of the arena as we enjoyed nothing short of stellar views. However, upon air return and before dinner, one last treat was waiting for us. After searching for a while Romeo managed to find the tiny chameleon *Brookesia nophi* which is in the process of being described to science. - with this being its only known locality. Here too, we delighted in very brief views of a single dwarf fat-tailed lemur and a more prolonged view of a nocturnal eastern woolly lemur. There was however little doubt as to which animal had been the star - the tiny new species of chameleon, which appeared no longer than around three centimetres in length. Returning the short distance to the lodge, we enjoyed a fine last dinner At Palmarium before retiring for the night.

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**Day 6:****Wednesday 18 September 2024**

Palmarium Lodge to Tamatave, flight to Fianarantsoa & drive to Ranomafana - Centrest. Walk along the road by Ranomafana.

With a long travel day ahead, we all met for a quick 6.30 am breakfast before boarding the boat for the ride north along the canals to Tamatave. This was the first time this route had been attempted by a WW group and was conceived in a bid to cut out the best part of two and a half tough travel days down to Ranomafana. As the boat ride north was estimated to take around three hours, we settled back in our seats to enjoy the scenery.

At first, very little wildlife was seen, with MD & HR suggesting this could be down to a combination of overfishing and disturbance. However, further north more wildlife began to be seen, as we logged a common moorhen and a white-faced whistling duck. In the degraded areas alongside the waterway, common mynas were abundant, along with a single Striated heron. And towards the end of the journey we were treated to a wonderful fly-by of a purple heron, along with sightings of a crested drongo, squacco heron, great white egret and intermediate egret. A group of four pied crows flying past was also a new species for Michael (our Andasibe guide) who had accompanied us to Tamatave, primarily to make sure we got safely on the plane!

Reaching the outskirts of Tamatave, we left the lake and entered a narrow canal where the banks were peppered by both litter and people. Here we motored passed folk cutting bamboo, washing clothes and fishing, among a whole host of other activities. The port itself, where we disembarked, was both bustling and filthy in equal measure, as evidenced by the water, which looked like pea soup! Meeting our new driver, the journey to the airport took around thirty minutes, before being welcomed by a Madagascar kestrel on the terminal roof.

Bidding farewell to Michael with the traditional 'lamako', we were all subsequently ushered through to the departures, where everyone was weighed with their bags to make sure we didn't tip over the collective allowed weight limit of nine hundred kilograms. Boarding the small twenty-two-seat charter, it was exciting to see plenty of bee-eaters feeding over the adjacent grassland as we took off and headed south. The journey took around two hours and gave us all a fabulous opportunity to enjoy central Madagascar from the air, with great views of paddy fields and even views of Ranomafana National Park from a distance.

Upon landing in the busy city at Fianarantsoa, it was great to see HR waiting for us with our new driver Rodin, both of whom had driven all the way down from Tana the previous day. Quickly loading up, we headed northeast out of the city and almost immediately passed a large rural area where bricks were being constructed from clay. The whole process - all the way from digging the clay, to firing the shaped bricks in roadside kilns - could be clearly seen laid out before us, and the group were astonished to see how many bricks the women were capable of carrying and balancing on their heads.

During the drive, plenty of yellow-billed kites were noted, but the minibus only stopped once to observe a dark form of the dimorphic egret - with all the previous individuals in the trip having been of the far more common white morph. After a couple of hours, the sides of the road became ever more forested, giving us a clear indication that Ranomafana was close, but it was not until late afternoon that we were given the opportunity to check in to our rooms at the Centrest Lodge.

After a break to refresh, we all took the short drive to where we would carry out a short night walk along the road. Our guides met us at the hotel and included Stefan Senior, Stefan Junior, James, Christian and Pauletta, all of whom had worked for MD, HR & WW previously. Before leaving, there was just time to show the group both Madagascar wagtail and white-eye, both species we had already seen on a number of occasions - but still a pleasure to see again.

The first reptile located was a lined day gecko, followed by a big-nosed chameleon, but these were soon trumped by a O'Shaunessy's chameleon. O'Shaunessy's is one of the largest chameleons, but unlike the Parson's, the males only possess one horn. This was the precursor of a good night for chameleons, with a band-bellied and a blue-legged also seen and well photographed before everyone headed back down the

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hill to Centrest. Thanking our guides, we went straight for a delicious dinner before retiring to bed, knowing we'd need plenty of energy to tackle the park in the morning.

### **Day 7:**

**Thursday 19 September 2024**

Ranomafana NP - AM Talatakely Trail, PM Sahalamaotra Trail, evening walk along the road

Breakfast completed, we reunited with our guides for the morning walk along the famous Talatakely Trail, located within the National Park. Passing the research station, we caught sight of a Madagascar kestrel, and once entry had been secured at the ticket office we set off, walking firstly down to the bridge over the Namorova River. Immediately we could hear perhaps the two commonest bird songs in this part of the world - these being Rand's warbler and Madagascar cuckoo, with the latter calling almost continuously with a 'less-er cuck-oo!' call - it is a much harder species to see though.

Down by the bridge, a mixed flock suddenly appeared, with red-tailed vanga and Madagascar cuckoo-shrike seen particularly well. Also noted here were a couple of common newtonia and a male souimanga sunbird. The bridge spans the river and offers a fine view of the forest on either side, with plenty choosing to use this moment to take photos of the gorge and rushing water below.

We had only just reached the forest on the other side when the call went up that our spotters had managed to find the first lemur of the day - in the form of a small troop of red-fronted brown lemurs. The downside, however, was the lemurs were some way off the path, so we bushwhacked uphill on a tiny trail before eventually reaching the spot where the lemurs were quietly feeding. Viewing at least six lemurs, which included two babies, it was of course worth the scramble, with the reddish-coloured caps of the males easily distinguishing them from the females' brownish-coloured caps.

Heading back to the trail, we could hear the plaintive calls of cuckoo-rollers above the tree and had brief views of a pair displaying through a gap in the canopy. This is one of the most sought-after birds in Madagascar, primarily due to the fact it is so different from any other bird that it has been placed in its own order. It also possesses a confusing name, as the species is neither closely related to cuckoos nor rollers!

Barely had we caught our breath when Stefan Senior announced that they'd located another troop, but this time of golden bamboo lemurs. Confined to Ranomafana, the species 'discovery brought the forest to the world's attention and prompted the creation of the park in 1991. Usually the lemurs will eat at first light and then rest to digest, and as the lemurs were asleep, all we could see was a few balls of brownish-golden fluff high up in a range of bamboo! But Stefan Senior said that he would leave spotter there, so when they woke up we would hopefully see them more clearly.

Continuing along the trail, a Grey-crowned Tetraka was well observed before our spotters came up with the goods once more. Commonly when Stefan Senior was a boy, the decline of the greater bamboo lemur had been nothing short of catastrophic, with only one individual believed to be remaining in the park. Frequently there can be a melée around this animal, due to its star status, but as our spotters had actually located it, our group was able to take in this sole representative of its species without jostling for position. Viewing this last remaining individual with a combination of joy and sadness we left it to eat in peace.

Moving higher up into the forest, we began spotting a few more birds, as a white-headed vanga appeared briefly in the canopy, along with a Madagascar cuckoo-shrike that was busily emptying a cobweb of either the spider's prey or the spider itself! Back down at eye level, another mixed flock was chanced upon, with a trio of tetrakas to the fore: spectacled, grey-crowned and the rarest of the lot - the wedge-tailed. This latter species of tetraka can be difficult to see and so represented a new species for all present - including MD. Flushed with success, a male Madagascar magpie robin posed well for the group, before Stefan heard the distinct 'whoop!' call of a pitta-like ground roller.

Stalking this secretive bird along the path, a few members of the group obtained a fleeting glimpse before it disappeared in the undergrowth, with the hope it might reappear later in our stay. Slowly tramping to the

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viewpoint, we heard the calls of green jery and Tyla's Vanga, but did not loiter to enjoy the view as news came, via our spotters, that a small troop of Milne-Edwards sifakas had been located below in the forest. After quite a tricky scramble down, all managed to obtain fairly decent views through a tangle of vines and bamboo of the three sifakas resting on a large branch high up in the canopy. Perched precariously on the bank ourselves, there was an element of relief when we 'left the lemurs to it' and worked our way back up for a well-deserved rest at the viewpoint.

After a terrific morning, we then headed back down the trail, only stopping to observe a flowering orchid in the genus *Oeonia*, with white flowers, which the locals called 'moonlight orchid'. Back at the Centrest we all took lunch with eight guests joining MD and the guides for a second walk in the forest, this time along the much flatter Sahalamaotra Trail on the other side of the road to the river.

Once more to the constant soundtrack of Madagascar cuckoos, Stefan Senior talked about the damage caused to this part of the forest due to a recent spate of cyclones, with the forest only now beginning to recover. Further along the trail we all enjoyed super views of a pair of Madagascar magpie-robins, allowing us to see the clear differences between the male and female in this sexually dimorphic species. A white-eye was then picked up before another troop of Milne-Edwards sifakas were found - with these being distinctly easier to see and photograph than the troop we'd been watching before lunch. September is of course when many lemur babies are born, and after a careful look this troop didn't disappoint either, with two babies clinging to their mothers' bellies.

Now down by the stream, Stefan had a search through the Pandanus palms and quickly located a few Pandanus frogs (*Mantidactylus pulcher*) sitting in the leaf axils. Heading away from the stream and slowly uphill, the spotters had another treat waiting, in the form of a new species of lemur. Slowly walking up hill, we stopped in front of a partly-hollow tree where a small-toothed sportive lemur was peering out of the hole. All the sportive lemurs are nocturnal, and so rest up during the day, but many are incredibly localised, with this species barely known away from the National Park. So entranced were we at the lemur peeping out of the hole, that most missed the moment when a highly secretive Madagascar fluff-tail briefly crossed the path right behind us! On the way back down we also had a fleeting view of a common sunbird as it emerged back onto the road along a section of path that Stefan Senior told us had been used for hundreds of years by locals travelling to and from Antananarivo.

Heading back to collect the remaining guests who had spent the afternoon at the hotel, we then turned right around for our night walk. And with the light levels quickly dropping we were treated to terrific views of a rufous mouse lemur that had been attracted to the forest edge by banana smeared on the leaves of the roadside plants. A little further along, another mouse lemur was spotted feeding, before then having a brief fight with a third lemur descending for the free handout, with all remarking how agile these tiny lemurs were when clambering through the trees. Heading back after the most extraordinary count of new lemurs and birds, we all dined before retiring to bed early in preparation for an early birdwatching session the following morning.

## **Day 8:**

**Friday 20 September 2024**

Reconvening at the early hour of five in the morning, seven guests, MD, HR and our full complement of guides headed straight for the park entrance for a second walk along the Talatakely trail. Pausing for a moment at the Park entrance, both Madagascar palm swifts and Mascarene martins were observed above our heads as they caught the day's first flush of insects.

Upon walking down to the river, both species of sunbird, rufous warbler and Madagascar white-eye were all noted in quick succession. And after crossing the bridge we headed up on the trail and away from the sound of running water. A couple of Madagascar bulbuls were noted as they crossed the path above us, while two red forest rats were seen in quick succession as they too crossed the path, but down at ground level.

Dawn is a fabulous time to be in any forest as this is when many birds use this time to lay down territories,

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but most of the birds we could hear were species we'd already seen well, until Stefan heard the familiar 'whoop!' of the pitta-like ground roller that was! Almost immediately he spotted one on the path ahead of us and it was quickly joined by another, presumably its mate. This is both a stunning bird and an incredibly difficult one to see well, so both birders and photographers were ecstatic in equal measure when they stayed long enough to be admired by the small group of 'Vasa' (white people) quietly watching from the shadows. At one point the male started calling from a branch above the trail and it was a brilliant moment to see how it pumped its tail down when proclaiming its forest real estate.

Having not seen the golden bamboo lemurs well the day before, this was quickly righted when Stefan Junior guided us to a troop he'd just located in the understory. This time they were busily feeding, with the golden colour of their pelage clearly visible in the glorious morning light. Having left the trail to see the lemurs, we bush-whacked back onto the trail and immediately headed for the ridge-line.

Here, birds took centre-stage again as most of the group managed brief views of a very shy red-fronted coua creeping through the undergrowth. Recognising a different call, Stefan then declared that he could hear a rufous vanga calling, and after a short wait, we saw the male fly into a tree close to the path, where it appeared to be constructing a nest in a fork close to the main trunk. The female was also spotted close by and while trying to spot this bird, one of the group saw a different bird hiding in a shrub close by, which appeared to be sitting on a well-hidden nest. With excitement we peered through the undergrowth to find a female pollen's vanga incubating a clutch - in essence, we'd discovered two exciting vanga species in less than two minutes!

Walking back down, a few of the guests saw a troop of red-fronted brown lemurs crossing the trail, but our guides had kept one surprise back, in the form of a satanic leaf-tailed gecko. This creature has one of the finest camouflages in the natural world, with a tail that perfectly mimics a browning leaf, and when Stefan pointed to the shrub and asked the group to find it everyone of course failed! Once this remarkable creature had been successfully photographed, with another located close by, we headed back to the Centrest to join the rest of the group for breakfast.

Suitably rested, we reconvened for a walk along the road up by the waterfall. Upon jumping out of the bus, a Madagascar white-eye and Madagascar bulbul were picked up almost immediately, followed by the omnipresent Souimanga sunbird and a singing rand's warbler. This was then followed by a Madagascar cuckooshrike flying past, with good views obtained when it landed, while a Madagascar brush warbler was also heard 'tacking' away in the undergrowth. A little further up the road, Stefan pointed out the song of green jery, with the distinctive two-toned call of common newtonia also picked up.

Taking a moment to look at the roadside flora, the purple-flowering herb *Ageratum* could be seen, along with a Madagascar wild rose, presumably in the Genus *Rosa*. A cutting under the cliff also revealed a few nesting holes, with these belonging to breeding Mascarene martins that could clearly be seen feeding over both river and forest close by. By now it was decidedly warm and all admired two species of beetle feeding in the roadside flowering plant *Vernonia pendiculata*. One of the beetles possessed a bright orange carapace, while the second species - which was slightly smaller, had metallic green elytra. With birds quiet, due to the heat, the focus switched to a peacock day gecko located on a banana leaf. Looking up, the heat was patently creating thermals, as MD pointed to three raptors - which proved to be three Madagascar cuckoo hawks - circling up above. Here, their paler breasts and longer, streaked wings helped distinguish this species from the more common Madagascar buzzard.

Finally reaching the waterfall by the side of the road, we first inspected the wet cliff-face on the other side that was festooned with orchids, ferns and mosses. The most distinctive plants here were a pink orchid in the genus *Cynorkis* and a purple flowering member of the *Gesneriaceae* family. With the group keen to find frogs, at least three or four *Boothis madagascariensis* were quickly found among the wet moss. Here, Stefan also pointed out a species of sundew which we thought to probably be *Drosera madagascariensis* - with MD declaring that it appeared very similar to the round-leaved sundew species found in Britain.

Taking a moment to scan across the adjacent forest, a very distinctive and abundant tree in the Genus

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*Weinmannia* could clearly be picked out with its orange leaves, which only served to reiterate that whilst Madagascar does not contain high levels of biodiversity, the majority of plants appear to be endemic. Retiring back for lunch, we then took a rest throughout the heat of the day, before meeting up for our last session at Ranomafana. Here we took the minibus past the entrance to the National Park, before then turning off the main road to the village of Vohiparara. Passing through the village, we then walked over the Kidonavo Bridge, above the River Namaruna, to see what we could find along the road.

Once again, common newtonia and green jery were quickly picked up in the introduced roadside pines, along with a small flock of common fodies. While a species of *Heterixalus* (which was green with red dots and blue eye shadow) was located, the rather stunning Baron's mantella could not, on this occasion, be located. Recompense came, however, with an array of birds, including Madagascar bulbul, stripe-throated warbler, rand's warbler and a pair of red-tailed vanga. We were just about to jump aboard the minibus when a pair of Madagascar blue pigeons were picked up in the canopy of a nearby tree, along with the rather bizarre cocoons of the comet moth. Here Stefan also pointed out the Palissandre tree in the genus *Dalbergia* (possibly *monticola*) which is a tree with exceptionally valuable timber, or rosewood.

Returning back to the lodge, all managed excellent views of a purple heron in the paddies surrounding Vohiparara, before then freshening up for our last dinner in Ranomafana. Meeting up with our guides afterwards, we were all able to thank them for all their expertise and hard work with a rendition of the 'lamako', which always goes down well when initiated by the 'Vasa'!

#### **Day 9:**

**Saturday 21 September 2024**

Centrist hotel - Ranomafana to the Anja Community Reserve & hotel Relais de la Reine, Isalo - via RN25 & RN7.

After a fairly sleepless night for most, due to the close proximity of a disco blaring away in town until just before dawn, we met up for a quick 6.30 am breakfast, before a 7 am start. Setting off along the RN45, our first destination was Fianarantsoa. Passing through Anjamba, we noted a number of pied crows, with dimorphic egrets common in the town's paddies. On the outskirts of Fianarantsoa, we made a quick stop along the road to observe and photograph the huge brick-making process underway here.

HR also explained that Fianarantsoa was the capital of the Betsileo tribe - one of eighteen such tribes spread across Madagascar, with the Betsileo predominating in the Central Highlands. Stopping briefly for fuel, pied crows were suddenly everywhere, with the dark form of dimorphic egret a notable addition to our list here. A couple of raptor species were also present, with a single Madagascar kestrel and a couple of yellow-billed kites picked up before carrying on with our journey.

Suddenly Zebu, along with their shepherds, became a more prominent sight along the road, with a couple of large herds noted particularly around the small town of Ambalavao. The scenery also appeared to be becoming progressively drier, with large granite outcrops suddenly commonplace. At over 1,000 metres as we were, nevertheless, still on top of the Highland plateau, and the occasional paddy fields still contained birds, such as the one near our lunch stop which gave us the first good trip views of hammerkop.

Our next stop was at the Betsileo Country Park Lodge, where we all enjoyed a delightful lunch of sandwiches and chips, which was blissfully both inside and so out of the sweltering mid-day heat. Suitably satiated and back on the road, another hour's drive saw us reach Anja, a dry forest reserve situated at the base of a huge granitic outcrop, for hopefully one of the highlights of the entire trip. This is a reserve entirely owned and managed by the local community, and upon our arrival, the group were met by Herman, our local guide for the duration of the visit. Leaving the bus behind we then walked the short distance into the forest with our cameras at the ready. Appearing much drier than when MD had visited before, he was able to point out the complete absence of a large pond that had previously held waterfowl.

It did, however, not take long to appreciate our first wildlife when our guide pointed out a large male oustalet's chameleon in a nearby tree. While parson's holds the record for the world's 'biggest' chameleon,

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apparently oustalet's is slightly longer, with this particular individual appearing well over half a metre from snout to tail tip. Moving further into the forest, we had barely walked 50 metres before encountering our first lemurs, these, of course, being ring-tailed and for which the reserve is justifiably famous for.

Our guides explained that the total 'ring-tail' population within the reserve is now considered to be around six hundred and fifty, which is a testament to the success of this community-run project. Lemurs were suddenly everywhere we looked, with our guides explaining that this particular troop contained around fifty individuals and most of the females appeared to have babies. The middle of the day tends to be the best for close lemur encounters, as the heat drives them both down to the ground and into the shade, with ring-tails additionally being surely the most terrestrial of all the island's lemurs.

Being surrounded by lemurs caused all the photographers in the group to suddenly go into overdrive as everyone tried to take the perfect mother and baby portrait. A couple of females were also spotted with twins, as our guides explained that while one is considered the norm, two is not uncommon - particularly when plenty of food is available. Thanking our guides for their expertise we took leave of the reserve with still a long way to go until the day's final destination.

Continuing our journey westwards, the most common birds were pied crows and yellow-billed kites as HR explained that we were now moving into the land of the Barra (or Fighting) Tribe. Here dry grassland predominated, with the land frequently burnt to provide new growth for the zebu to eat. At one place, an active burn was ongoing, with a host of kites and crows patrolling the leading edge of the fire, presumably to capture any creature busily fleeing the advancing flames.

Passing the distinctive Three Sisters Hills, our first Madagascar larks of the trip were noted as they flitted both along and across the roads, together with the by-now omnipresent pied crows and yellow-billed kites. The town of Ihosi came and went, which also doubles as the capital of the Barra tribe and we only stopped briefly to admire a Madagascar Partridge feeding in the road. This can be a very tricky bird to see well, but this one proved very obliging as it fed on rice grains that appeared to have been spilt along the road. As the afternoon stretched into early evening, we were next treated to a wonderful sunset upon reaching the town of Ranohira, which also hosts both offices and entrance to the Isalo National Park.

With just 15 kilometres more to go of our marathon day on the road, we were delighted to see the Queen of Isalo rock monument, which looks just like the outline of Queen Victoria and marks the point where we turn off for the Reine de Isalo Lodge, a further one kilometre from the main road. After such a long journey, the warm welcome from the staff was much appreciated, as all enjoyed a thirst-quenching drink before checking into their rooms. All suitably refreshed, we then reconvened for a delicious dinner, washed down by the obligatory THB beer, before retiring for the night.

## **Day 10:**

**Sunday 22 September 2024**

Relais de la Reine, Isalo, to Isalo National Park - Piscina & Namaza Trails.

Having arrived after dark during the previous evening, a 6.30 am breakfast gave everyone the opportunity to see for the first time the remarkable location of our accommodation. Set in amongst boulders of sandstone, and looking more like the backdrop to a Star Wars set, it was radically different to anywhere else we'd stayed on the trip to this point. The lodge's gardens were also beautifully tended, with flowering *Pachypodium* plants already visible on some of the surrounding boulders. Some extraordinary trees were present here too, such as the palm *Bismarckia nobilis* - which is not just endemic to Madagascar, but confined to the region around Isalo.

While breakfasting, a female souimanga sunbird, two common jeries and a couple of Madagascar mannikins were spotted against a backdrop of blue sky, also indicating the weather looked set fair for our one and only day in the National Park. Leaving at 7.30 am we once again passed the Queen of Isalo rock formation, but our serene progress was suddenly delayed by a puncture. Eventually, our driver Rodin managed to replace the tyre with his spare, which was an impressive feat as the jack was barely fit for purpose. Reaching the

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park HQ in Ranohira a touch later than we'd planned, HR explained that Rano means 'water' and 'hira' was the local name for ring-tailed lemur. Picking up en route Tody, Julie and Modest - our guides for the day - we headed straight onto the dirt track and towards the parking area, with Rodin slightly damaging the front bumper on the way - admittedly not the best start to our driver's day!

Kitting up for a long walk we set off gently up the hill, stopping after barely fifty metres to admire some bizarre shield bugs gathered on the bark of a tree. But these were quickly abandoned in favour of a pair of Madagascar hoopoes located in a nearby tree. Here, the male was gently calling with a cat-like purr, which sounded very different to the call of Eurasian hoopoes. Both birds then flew down to feed on the ground, giving all ample opportunity to photograph this handsome endemic species as they fruited around in the undergrowth. Next up was another oustalet's chameleon, with this species obviously the 'default large chameleon' in the island's dryer regions.

Recommencing our walk, the resident pair of Madagascar kestrels immediately made their presence known, with one even mobbing a pied crow. Along the way, a couple of common fodies and a single common jery were also recorded as we made our way through the dry deciduous scrub. Here, Tody was excellent at butterfly identification and managed to point out to the group a well-named 'brilliant blue' butterfly as it flitted along the path. Just above the butterfly, MD then spotted a bird which was quickly identified as a male Benson's rock thrush - a rare and much sought-after sub-species of forest rock-thrush. Fortunately it also stayed around long enough for a number of the guests to take a few photos.

Continuing up the hill, a pair of crested drongos and a common mynah were spotted further down in the valley, while the distinctive, bubbling call of a Madagascar coucal could also be heard in the background. Eventually leaving the woodland behind, Tody next pointed out a male Isalo stick insect in a low bush, informing us that the males tended to be both smaller than their female counterparts and possess a different-shaped tail. He also pointed out some of the burial locations of the Barra people, who consider the Isalo hills to be sacred. Often burial sites up in the lower hills tend to be temporary, and after two to five years, their ancestors' remains are then moved to a permanent site with a far more commanding view. Tody also gave us a lesson on how to point by not fully extending the finger - which is deemed a sign of disrespect.

Moving into a slightly more open area we were now surrounded by Tapia trees (*Uapaca bojeri*), which Tody explained were an important part of the landscape here. These trees are not only fire resistant but are also the food plant of the Madagascar silkworm, which is harvested commercially for the production of silk. He then pointed out a couple of the moth cocoons hanging in a tree's branches to illustrate his point. Close by we also heard and then picked up a Madagascar lark singing in the canopy of one of the Tapia trees, with all declaring it to be quite a different song to that of our own skylark.

In addition to the Tapia trees, plenty of termite mounds dotted across the landscape, with the unrelenting sun now beating heavily down on the group. Briefly wandering off, Tody then called us over to show us a couple of scorpions he'd found under some flat rocks. Close by, a female Isalo stick insect was then located, which was indeed much larger than the male we'd seen earlier, and with a 'broken' tail, that looked just like a twig with its bark removed.

Walking next up to the most astonishing viewpoint, which offered an incredible vista over 'Madagascar's Grand Canyon', Tody talked about how the rocks here are composed of Jurassic sandstone laid down in bands. The rocks also contain high levels of iron and so are surprisingly heavy. Algae has also changed the colour of some rocks, giving them in turn a most attractive hue.

With the natural swimming pools, on this occasion, a touch too far, we began slowly retracing our steps. Reaching the trees once again, we then found a male Madagascar paradise flycatcher in one of the trees, before possibly the same pair of hoopoes that were seen earlier were picked up on the path just over half way down. We also noted an African monarch butterfly, before finally arriving back at the minibus where we were reunited with the final member of our group who'd opted instead to relax at the lodge for the morning.

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Taking the forty-five-minute drive around to the Namaza Trail, we then walked up and over to the picnic tables close to the river, noting along the way a Madagascar bee-eater, the flowers of *Crotalaria grandidieri*, an aggregation of flatid bugs, a distinctive tree in the genus *Albizia* and a giant Madagascar swallowtail butterfly. Spying a hole by the side of the path, one of the guests then observed a lizard poking its head out, which was subsequently identified as a young Merrem's Madagascar swift when it dashed out into the open.

An endemic shrub with beautiful purple flowers was also pointed out to us, with Tody explaining it helped to stop diarrhoea, a fact not lost on a couple of the guests who had been struggling with an upset stomach for a couple of days. Just short of our lunch spot we were able to enjoy a couple of Madagascar bulbuls in a flowering Indian lilac tree, a yellow pansy butterfly and a Madagascar forest nymph butterfly.

Taking our seats at the lunch tables, where Solo was busy preparing our lunch, we were busily watching a pair of Madagascar magpie-robins when the shout went up that Verreaux's sifakas had been located very close by. Quickly gathering our binoculars and cameras, we dashed down to the river and were utterly thrilled to watch a small troop crossing the river. As they descended to the ground one by one, they then stepped up onto their hindlegs before bounding across - what a moment!

Returning back to the dining area, we had barely sat down before then being called away again for fine views of a pair of white-throated rails in the vegetation down by the river. We had previously seen this species before in Andasibe, but on this occasion, the birds were showing both more clearly and out in the open. Finally dragging ourselves back to the table we tucked into a delicious lunch that had been carried all the way into the forest by our team of chefs for us to enjoy.

Of course, the wildlife-watching didn't stop with the consumption of lunch, as all delighted in watching a female Madagascar robin, a Madagascar paradise flycatcher and a small flock of common fodies clearing up scraps from the area where the plates were being washed. Once the meal had been washed down with a range of cold drinks, Tody then took the group to see a roosting spot of a pair of white-browed owls, before being called us over to admire a Dumeril's ground boa, which had been caught by one of the other guides. With the snake duly photographed it was then subsequently released back into the undergrowth, none the worse for the experience.

Deciding that it was probably a touch too late in the day to attempt the walk to the waterfall, we instead began wandering slowly back towards the minibus to see what could be found along the way. Just outside the camp, a lucky few managed to catch a couple of glimpses of a male Madagascar buttonquail walking along the forest floor. This can be an exceptionally difficult species to spot, with it additionally being a 'lifer' for MD, who was thrilled with the views obtained. On the short walk back, the bee-eaters were once again seen in a similar location to where they'd been picked up earlier, with both species of sunbird also identified before finally arriving back at the bus.

With dusk now just around the corner, we headed back to the hotel, taking time to enjoy the tree *Euphobia stenoclada* on the way round, which is renowned for its distinctive silvery foliage and shape resembling an upside-down candelabra. Paying a quick homage to the Queen of Isalo en route, we arrived back with a little time to relax and freshen up before reconvening once more for dinner. With it being our last night at Isalo, and due to an early start planned for the following day, it was not long before all had retired for the night.

## **Day 11:**

**Monday 23 September 2024**

Relais de la Reine, Isalo to Zombitse National Park & Les Dunes d'Ifaty, Ifaty.

Following another early 6.30 am breakfast, we bid farewell to Isalo with a drive of around three hours until our first destination, that being Zombitse, ahead of us. Much of the terrain consisted of flat, grassy plains with large sections burnt for zebu fodder and here the distinctive palm *Bismarckia nobilis* was prominent. Birds were few and far between, with Madagascar skylarks, common mynahs and Madagascar kestrels all picked up as we steadily headed west.

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Passing through Ilakaka, known as the 'Sapphire boom town', HR explained that in the early 1990s, there were only about forty residents in the area. But after the discovery of one of Earth's largest known deposits of alluvial sapphires in the Ilakaka River in 1998, the population had quickly boomed to nearly sixty thousand by 2005. Since high profits are at stake, this has become something of a 'cowboy town', with many stalls buying and selling the gem stones the locals have either unearthed or discovered by panning in the river,

After leaving Ilakaka behind, the terrain consisted of a fairly relentless monotony of savannah grassland, which was only interrupted by the occasional roadside hamlet. Finally, we noted our first baobabs, of the species *Adansonia za*, with HR informing us that these trees were the last remnants of a great woodland that had been ravaged by the collection of wood for building and cooking and cleared to make way for zebu, with the more fire-resistant baobabs the last trees standing.

Eventually, the forest could be seen on both sides of the road as we reached the boundary of Zombitse National Park, which is classified as a 'dry transition forest'. While driving to the entrance marshals could be seen stationed at regular intervals along the road to ensure that no accidental fires were started by discarded cigarettes, for example, tossed from passing cars. HR then spotted three lesser vasa parrots in the canopy by the roadside, with all able to spot this species' darker bill, which is one of the key features enabling them to be split from the lighter-billed greater vasa parrots.

Reaching the Park entrance, our three guides - Chivery, Odin and Randria - were waiting for us and we immediately headed straight across the road and onto the park's well-marked trails. Our guides informed us that the park comprised 36,000ha, and represented the last remaining example of this type of forest across all of Madagascar - in essence, a truly special place. The first creature to be pointed out, while resting in a tree hole, was a Sakalava Madagascar velvet gecko, which was both a nocturnal species and a new record for the group. A little further along, Randria then showed us an endemic species of *Pandanus*, with prop roots much like a mangrove tree, which apparently is used by the locals to treat syphilis.

The first bird recorded was a common newtonia, with MD commenting that this species appeared abundant across virtually all of the island's very different forested habitats. Switching focus back to reptiles, for a moment, our guides then pointed out two large adult oustalet's chameleons, with one appearing over half a metre long from its snout to tail tip. While photographing these fine specimens, we could also hear the near-constant calls of cuckoo rollers from somewhere above the canopy.

Next up, we followed our guides around the reserve's winding paths to the location of a roosting Madagascar scops owl. While the group had experienced this species earlier on in the trip at Andasibe, this was far greyer and browner in tones, when compared to the predominantly rufous-coloured eastern form. The bird theme then continued, as a giant coua crossed the path in front of us. This tends to be a shy and (at times) difficult bird to see and is almost entirely confined to the forest floor.

Yellow-billed kites and souimanga sunbirds were once again abundant before our guides then took us to the roosting spot of a Zombitse sportive lemur, which was half hunkered down in its 'day-hole'. This lemur's entire world distribution is confined to the National Park, with everyone thrilled to get another quality lemur under their belt.

Leaving the lemur to sleep, we carried along the paths and took in a small troop of Verreaux's sifaka feeding high in some trees, but having seen these so well the previous day, we left them to their lunch, before catching up with a pair of Madagascar paradise flycatchers a little further on. These birds were not on their own, however, and appeared to be the vanguard of a large mixed flock moving through the undergrowth in their wake. Suddenly birds were all around us, with most appearing to be either long-billed tetras or vangas, but one of the guides then suddenly spotted a bird scurrying along like a mouse close to the ground, which was Appert's tetraka. Appert's is considered Zombitse's star bird, and one of the main reasons why the park was established in the first place was to conserve what is the most important known refuge for this rare and very localised species. With both the guides and MD thrilled to have caught up with this five-star bird, and most guests having gotten at least a glimpse, it was a terrific moment.

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Moving further on, and now with a skip in our step, we were then treated to lovely flight views through the trees of the pair of cuckoo rollers presumably making all the noise earlier on. And when the male briefly alighted in a tree, we were also able to take in the species' characteristically huge head. Following the discovery of a second Zombitse sportive lemur, most of the group also managed to spot a standing's day gecko on a tree trunk close by before exiting the forest after an intense and intensely enjoyable three hours. Taking our lunch on the edge of the forest, we then thanked our wonderful guides with the celebratory 'lamako' before jumping back into the minibus to continue our journey westwards.

Around thirty minutes west of Zombitse is the small town of Sakaraha, where Harry was able to point out a very distinctively ship-shaped tomb. Both adorned by around forty zebu skulls and fenced off, Harry explained that this was obviously the burial place belonging to someone of great importance from within the local Mahafaly tribe. Also of interest a little further on was the village where the locally made liquor Tokagasy could be seen being distilled from fermenting sugar cane and tamarind by the roadside. This distillation process creates an incredibly strong liquor, with apocryphal tales of some locals losing their sight after Tokagasy-fuelled binges! This did not stop one of the guests from purchasing a small bottle to sample later on though!

Still on the RN7 a few miles from Maboboka, we stopped to look at a number of egrets feeding in a small area of paddy fields. Most appeared to be squacco herons, but in amongst them was a single Madagascar pond heron - which was identified by a combination of its snow-white plumage, blue bill and blue cere around the eye.

With the road now finally quieter and in better condition, we were able to increase our speed and entered Tuléar at rush hour. This large coastal city was a riot of colour and noise, with it also appearing to be market day, and the group enjoyed watching the hustle and bustle as we eased through the melee of people, cyclo taxis and other vehicles. After an hour or so of 'bumper-to-bumper' traffic, we were able to break free from the city and see the countryside change to that of grassland, with distant dunes and salt pans at the coast just visible on the horizon.

Passing next to an array of marshy and brackish areas, a couple of black-winged stilts were then spotted as we took in the beaches, mangroves and dunes that lie along the Mozambique Channel for the first time. Driving down the private road to 'Les Dunes d'Ifaty' in darkness, we finally pulled into the car park and while checking in were treated to a Madagascar nightjar flying around the reception! Retiring to our rooms, everyone was given the opportunity to refresh before dinner. With a very early start planned at the spiny forest the following day, everyone retired almost immediately after dinner while contemplating what would be our last full day's wildlife watching of the trip.

## **Day 12:**

**Tuesday 24 September 2024**

Reniala Private Reserve, Ifaty & then either snorkeling or local salt pans.

Meeting outside the lodge at 5.30 am, we all boarded the minibus for the short drive to the spiny forest, with an exciting morning's bird and mammal watching hopefully ahead of us. Picking up our guide, Relaché, en route, dawn was breaking as we parked up at the forest entrance. The 70ha private reserve is owned and managed by Relache's family and is not just a stunning place, but is also an astonishingly important one for several species found virtually nowhere else in the world.

With the sun slowly rising below the horizon, we were able to catch our first glimpse of the reserve's famous baobab trees, which looked incredibly atmospheric when backlit in the early morning's 'golden hour'. Alongside Relaché were a couple of his spotters, who then disappeared off into the forest to see what they could track down. And they quickly came up with the goods when whistling to Relaché that they'd managed to a long-tailed ground roller.

Initially, the bird flew low across the path, resulting in just brief glimpses, but after a little bit of patience,

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the bird settled down on both the ground and in full view. Surely one of Madagascar's rarest birds, it is also one of the most localised, being confined to the spiny forests of southwest Madagascar. But perhaps most importantly of all, the long-tailed ground roller is also stunning, with all delighting in this Malagasy equivalent of the North American roadrunner!

It was not, however, until we were deep in the forest's interior that we were able to fully take in both the majesty of the baobab of species *Adansonia rubrostipa* and the weirdness of the octopus trees *Didiera madagascariensis* - the reserve's two most characteristic and famous trees. The reserve was also very well managed, with many plants possessing labels denoting each species' common Malagasy name and scientific name. There is also a wonderful feeling to the spiny forest, with all commenting how different it was to anything they'd experienced elsewhere in the country.

Walking along the sandy trails, Relaché next took us to a hole in a tree which also doubled up as the day roost for a white-footed sportive lemur. It too was peering out like all the other nocturnal lemurs we'd seen previously, and it was great to notch up the third member of this unique group, with the photographers dutifully taking its picture for posterity. While watching the lemur, we could also hear the haunting, bubbling call of the Madagascar coucal from somewhere else within the forest.

Moving on, we were then treated to a brief fly-by of around a dozen grey-headed lovebirds, before our spotters once again earned their keep with another rare spiny forest resident, this being the sub-desert mesite. The mesites are an ancient family of birds entirely confined to Madagascar, and all three species are well known for freezing when disturbed, which is very handy when a group of ten naturalists are equally keen to see the bird! This individual patently seemed to have read the 'mesite-manual' and so was frozen to a branch, enabling all to see its distinctive hooked bill and spotty breast.

Having previously seen many small flocks of grey-headed lovebirds whizzing past, it was good to finally see the species clearly when a single bird posed for pictures in a tree above our heads. But we quickly moved with the discovery of a crested coua close by, which luckily perched in a tree just long enough to be enjoyed by both birders and photographers! With the birds now coming thick and fast, a small flock of Sakalava weavers were next to come across our collective radar, before Relaché pointed out both a Madagascar kestrel and distant views of a Madagascar harrier hawk on its nest at the edge of the forest.

Slowly walking back to the entrance we then suddenly hit a 'coua payday' as two species were picked up on the path both ahead of us and right along beside each other: the green-capped form of red-capped coua and running coua. The former has two different colour forms to its cap, with the green colouration being restricted to southwest Madagascar, while the running coua is easily identified by the beautiful rainbow of colours on its cere. And with our good luck holding, two lesser vasa parrots were then discovered in a distant tree, alongside a single greater vasa parrot. While watching both parrot species through the scope, a noisy sub-desert brush warbler then made its presence known from just a few metres away in a scrubby brush - this being another of those species with a world distribution no greater than the spiny forests of southwest Madagascar.

By now, many of the guests were keen for breakfast so we hastily returned to the bus, with some of the guests purchasing souvenirs from locals at the entrance to the reserve. Enjoying a late breakfast back at the hotel, folk were then free to enjoy their morning as they wished. During this time three guests opted to go snorkeling, while the rest of the group either caught up on sleep or enjoyed walking around the grounds of the lodge.

Meeting up for lunch we all enjoyed watching the Namaqua doves around the lodge, the bee-eaters by the pool and a single sakalava weaver, before then taking an afternoon visit to the salt-pans and Bellalanda close by - with wading birds the main focus of attention. Having picked up Relaché, the first wildlife to be seen was a large blond hog-nosed snake crossing the road in front of the minibus. Unfortunately, it quickly disappeared into the roadside vegetation, to the particular disappointment of those who happened to be at the back of the bus, with HR informing us that sightings of this species tend to be very few and far between. Pulling over once again, the afternoon's first target was Madagascar plover on the salt pans set back from

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the road, and Relaché was thrilled to almost immediately discover an adult no further away than thirty metres from where we were standing. Busily feeding in a patch of wet grassland peppered with litter, this rare wader is not only endemic to Madagascar but also considered a real rarity and described by the IUCN as 'Vulnerable', making it nothing short of a stunning find. Along with the plover we were also able to enjoy Madagascar larks here as well.

Moving further along the coast, on the road back to Tuléar, we stopped where the road passes right alongside a section of beach and mangrove, which enabled MD to chat about the fascinating ecology of mangroves. Out on the mud, plenty of waders were also present, with a number particularly familiar to UK birders - such as whimbrel, greenshank, common sandpiper, grey plover and turnstone. Delighted to give our trip list such a boost, we then headed off to the marshes at Bellalanda, which is a well-known site for flamingoes.

Passing wet marsh on the way, we were able to add dimorphic egret, cattle egret and a single black-winged stilt to our tally, with Relaché promising many more stilts a little further on. Now turning off the main road, at least four or five bee-eaters could be seen as they fed over the dune-type vegetation, while the largest water body at the end looked to be holding around a hundred black-winged stilts.

Spotting a single curlew sandpiper on the wetland edge, MD then spotted a plover, which was initially identified as a kittlitz, until Relaché talked the group through the subtle differences between this and the larger white-fronted plover. Subsequently re-identified as a white-fronted, a smaller kittlitz was then found just a couple of minutes later, allowing for the perfect comparison - with the 'kittlitz' additionally being our fourth plover in the space of an hour.

While watching the waders, several hirundines were also observed feeding over the water and papyrus grasses, all of which seemed to be *Masacarene martins*. But with both zebu and their herders also noted at the back of the marsh, this was perhaps the main reason why no flamingoes were present - as they are birds that tend to be very intolerant of any disturbance.

Driving slowly back towards the hotel, Relaché stopped to look over one last portion of the brackish marsh on the opposite side of the road to the mangroves and beach and promptly came back excitedly to tell us he'd just located a three-banded plover. Showing beautifully, and with the help of the scope, all were able to see the bird's two clearly demarcated breast bands, with presumably the third band positioned above its grey head. However, the wader's most distinctive feature was an incredibly obvious blood-red eye ring. This find also took the 'plover tally' for the afternoon to a 'fabulous five'!

Back at the hotel, there was only a brief moment to relax before the commencement of our night walk back in the spiny forest. With the sun slowly setting, we arrived at the entrance to the reserve, and MD promptly spotted the green-capped form of red-capped coua as everyone headed in. With it now dark, the first bird located by Relaché and his spotters was that of a Madagascar nightjar roosting on the ground. A noisy bird at night, this species had kept many of us periodically awake throughout the trip, but with only glimpses previously obtained, it was terrific to see it for a prolonged period and at such close quarters.

The next bird to be pointed out was that of a running coua on a nest, but as it was in the middle of a spiny octopus tree, all we could see was its tail poking out! The interest was not just confined to birds, however, as a new species of chameleon - the *Antimena chameleon* - was next to be enjoyed. This particular individual was a female, with Relaché informing us that this chameleon, like many of the spiny forest's inhabitants has a tiny world distribution confined to southwest Madagascar.

Now totally reliant on our head-torches, our guides then located a black sub-desert scorpion, Demeril's ground boa and a young big-headed gecko all in quick succession. But these were quickly trumped when an excited call from somewhere in the forest informed us that a tenrec had been found, in this case, the lesser hedgehog tenrec! This family of spiny marsupials is entirely confined to Madagascar and while representing the first member of this group for some, it was in fact the third species of tenrec for one lucky guest - having previously seen lowland streaked and greater hedgehog earlier in the trip. By now the group were ready to

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head back to the hotel, but there was still one last treat, in the form of a grey-brown mouse lemur spotted high up in a tree. This also represented our third mouse lemur species on the trip!

Thanking Relaché and his spotters for a simply sensational day, we headed back to Dunes D'Ifaty for dinner and an early bed, due to the early flight back to Tana scheduled for the following morning.

**Day 13:** **Wednesday 25 September 2024**  
To Toliara & flight to Antananarivo Airport in the evening. Overnight at the Relais des Plateaux

Meeting for an early breakfast, we bid farewell to our hosts at Dunes D'Ifaty and were quickly off to the airport for our domestic flight back to Tana. Tuléar was busy, making us relieved we'd left early, and we arrived at the airport in good time for our flight. Bidding farewell to our driver Rodin, as he would be driving back to Tana, the flight eventually left around an hour after the scheduled departure time.

The flight, however, was very smooth, and upon meeting our bus and new driver at the Airport in Tana, we were quickly transferred the short distance back to Relais des Plateaux, where our adventure had begun a fortnight previously. With everyone tired from a combination of the early starts and late finishes in the spiny forest, we then spent the rest of the day relaxing in the hotel.

**Day 14:** **Thursday 26 September 2024**  
Visit to the Parc de Tsarasaotra & shopping in Tana

Suitably invigorated after the previous afternoon off, we took an(other) early breakfast before heading off to Lake Tsarasaotra - surely the best reserve in the whole of the country's capital. Heading southeast, we first passed the paddies close to Lake Avato, and it was amazing to see they had almost all been planted up with rice seedlings in the space of a couple of weeks. There were also plenty of the usual suspects out in the fields, including great white egret, dimorphic egret and squacco heron. MD also drew the group's attention to the swifts in the sky, where little swift - with a white rump, could be differentiated from the larger and darker African black swift.

Parking up outside the reserve, which is also a notified Ramsar Wetland site, we paid the entrance fee and headed in. Immediately we could see hundreds, if not a couple of thousand ducks, with an abundant supporting cast of herons and egrets. Red-billed teal were the most numerous wildfowl species on the water, followed by white-faced whistling ducks, which were mostly roosting on the branches of fallen trees along the water's edge. The herons, by contrast, were most abundant on the island, as black-crowned night heron, dimorphic egret, squacco heron and a few cattle egrets and black herons were quickly logged.

MD then managed to find a single Meller's duck, which is an endemic species classified as 'Endangered' by the IUCN and also one of two key species that Tsarasaotra is rightly famed for. Walking further around, MD was then able to point out a couple of the smaller and decidedly handsome Hottentot teal, while Harry located a couple of fulvous whistling ducks, which is a rare species for Tsarasaotra and represented a new bird for everyone in the group - including MD!

Walking slowly round, plenty of common moorhen and great egrets were also found on the smaller (and more easterly) lake, which looked to have been largely cleared of the invasive aquatic plant water hyacinth that had been choking it out in previous years. Delighted to see that active management was being undertaken to conserve this important site, the good news then continued when HR located an adult Madagascar pond heron. Despite this rare heron having been seen previously on the trip, that earlier view had been from quite a distance, so to see the species' characteristic snow-white plumage, blue bill and blue cere so clearly was an obvious treat. One final species was also logged here too, in the form of a single-comb duck asleep on the island. Finally heading out of the reserve, we then said goodbye to our two Australian guests who were leaving on an earlier flight.

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After a simply terrific birding session, we then headed back to our hotel for lunch before meeting up once more for a spot of sightseeing around the capital and souvenir shopping. Heading through the busy streets, we headed first for the Queen's Palace, which stands atop a large crag and served as the home of the Sovereigns between the 17th and 19th centuries. Here the panoramic views across the city were terrific, enabling all to get a sense of the geography of Antananarivo. Photos duly taken, we then went souvenir shopping before heading back to the hotel. Upon passing the rice paddies once more, we briefly stopped to watch a number of black herons feeding with their unique 'hooding' behaviour. This entails making an umbrella with their wings to shade the water, which presumably helps them see the fish more clearly.

Many in the group then chose to repack their bags prior to the late departures planned for the following evening, before all dined together for the last time.

### **Day 15 & 16:**

**Friday 27 to Saturday 28 September 2024**

Tsarasaotra Park and the King's Palace at Ambohimanga

Meeting up for the last breakfast before our late flight to Heathrow (via Nairobi) many were keen to revisit Tsarasaotra, particularly as one of the guests had missed out due to an upset stomach the previous day. So the decision was made to briefly drop in before visiting the King's Palace at Ambohimanga.

Back at Tsarasaotra, all the regular species seen during the previous day's visit were still present, with the group particularly delighted to find three Meller's ducks, which was a substantial improvement on the singleton seen the day before. Walking around the largest lake again, good numbers of Hottentot teal were seen, along with three fulvous whistling ducks. We also identified Madagascar white-eye, and common fody and heard a Madagascar hoopoe calling as well.

A new species for the reserve also came in the form of a single-striated heron on the smaller lake, while a little further around a souimanga sunbird was seen and we also heard white-throated rails calling from the dense, riparian vegetation around the lake's perimeter. We then rejoined the bus for the forty-five-minute drive to Bohimanga and the King's Palace up on the Hill. Here the palace is surrounded by a small patch of remnant forest at an altitude of over 1,300 metres and rises above the rest of the city, with HR explaining that Bohimanga means 'blue forest' with blue considered a colour of real beauty.

The Palace was home to the King of the Merina Tribe, before the colonial era of the French and is still considered a spiritual and holy place by Malagasy people. Driving up the hill, we met up with our guide Emma who took us around the site. Initially built in 1610 under the guidance of King Andrianjaka, the palace eventually passed onto King Adrianampoinimerina, who had many wives and an enormous family. With Emma's guidance, the visit was a fascinating insight into the history and culture of what is now a very modern Madagascar

With the group always keeping one eye out for wildlife, plenty of common mynahs and a single Madagascar kestrel were spotted in the surrounding trees. And at the end of the tour, we all enjoyed a small Oustalet's chameleon while bidding farewell to our knowledgeable guide. Back at our hotel, we enjoyed lunch and dinner before finally heading the short distance to the airport. All that remained then was to thank our abulous guide Harry one last time for all his help and good humour throughout, as we headed back to our respective destinations in the early hours of the following day, after a life-enhancing and unforgettable trip.

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# Checklist for Wild Madagascar



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13	Day 14	Day 15
	<b>BIRDS</b>																
1	Purple heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>						✓		✓							
2	Squacco heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		✓				✓					✓	✓		✓	✓
3	Madagascar pond heron	<i>Ardeola idae</i>		✓				✓					✓			✓	
4	Striated heron	<i>Butorides striata</i>		✓				✓						✓		✓	✓
5	Black-crowned night heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>														✓	✓
6	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓				✓			✓			✓		✓	✓
7	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓								✓		✓		✓	✓
8	Black heron	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>		✓												✓	✓
9	Dimorphic egret	<i>Egret garzetta</i>		✓				✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
10	Hamerkop	<i>Scopus Umbretta</i>		✓							✓						✓
11	Fulvous whistling duck	<i>Dendrocygna bicolor</i>														✓	✓
12	White-faced whistling duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>						✓								✓	✓
13	Comb duck	<i>Sarkidiornis melanotos</i>														✓	
14	Meller's duck	<i>Anas melleri</i>														✓	✓
15	Red-billed teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>														✓	✓
16	Hottentot teal	<i>Anas hottentota</i>														✓	✓
17	Madagascar cuckoo-hawk	<i>Aviceda madagascariensis</i>								✓							
18	Madagascar buzzard	<i>Buteo brachypterus</i>						✓	✓								
19	Yellow-billed kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
20	Madagascar harrier-hawk	<i>Polybroides radiatus</i>			✓												
21	Madagascar sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter madagascariensis</i>			✓												
22	Madagascar kestrel	<i>Falco newtoni</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓

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23	Madagascar partridge	<i>Margaroperdix madagarensis</i>										✓					
24	Madagascar buttonquail	<i>Turnix nigricollis</i>											✓				
25	Subdesert mesite	<i>Monias benschi</i>												✓			
26	Madagascar flufftail	<i>Sarothrura insularis</i>							✓								
27	White-throated rail	<i>Dryolimnas cuvieri</i>			✓								✓				
28	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>							✓							✓	✓
29	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>												✓			
30	Madagascar pratincole	<i>Glareola ocularis</i>				✓											
31	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>												✓			
32	Madagascar plover	<i>Charadrius thoracicus</i>												✓			
33	Kittlitz's plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>												✓			
34	Three-banded plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>												✓			
35	White-fronted plover	<i>Charadrius marginatus</i>												✓			
36	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius Phaeopus</i>												✓			
37	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>												✓			
38	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>												✓			
39	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>												✓			
40	Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>												✓			
41	Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓								✓					
42	Madagascar turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia picturata</i>		✓	✓												
43	Namaqua dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>												✓	✓		
44	Madagascar green pigeon	<i>Treron australis</i>							✓								
45	Madagascar blue pigeon	<i>Alectroenas madagascariensis</i>									✓						
46	Grey-headed lovebird	<i>Agapornis cana</i>											✓	✓	✓		
47	Greater vasa parrot	<i>Coracopsis vasa</i>				H									✓		
48	Lesser vasa parrot	<i>Coracopsis nigra</i>				✓								✓	✓		
49	Crested coua	<i>Coua cristata</i>													✓		
50	Blue coua	<i>Coua caerulea</i>			✓												
51	Red-fronted coua	<i>Coua reynaudii</i>									✓						
52	Red-capped coua	<i>Coua ruficeps</i>													✓		
53	Running coua	<i>Coua cursor</i>													✓		

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54	Giant coua	<i>Coua gigas</i>										✓				
55	Madagascar coucal	<i>Centropus toulou</i>		✓		H	H		H			✓		✓		H
56	Madagascar cuckoo	<i>Cuculus rochii</i>		H		H		H	H	H						
57	Madagascar nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus madagascariensis</i>		H		H	H	H				H	✓	✓		
58	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			✓								✓			
59	Madagascar scops owl	<i>Otus rutilus</i>		✓	H	H		H								
60	White-browed owl	<i>Ninox superciliaris</i>			✓							✓				
61	Madagascar spinetail	<i>Zoonavena grandidieri</i>			✓											
62	African palm swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
63	African black swift	<i>Apus barbatus</i>														✓
64	Little swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>														✓
65	Madagascar malachite kingfisher	<i>Alcedo vintsioides</i>		✓												✓
66	Madagascar pygmy kingfisher	<i>Ispidina madagascariensis</i>			✓											
67	Olive bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>			H	✓		✓			✓	✓		✓		
68	Cuckoo roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor</i>		✓	H	H			✓	H			✓	H		
69	Madagascar hoopoe	<i>Upupa marginata</i>										✓	✓			
70	Scaly ground roller	<i>Brachypteracias squamiger</i>			✓											
71	Pitta-like ground roller	<i>Atelornis pittoides</i>							✓	✓						
72	Long-tail ground roller	<i>Uratelornis chimaera</i>												✓		
73	Common sunbird asity	<i>Neodrepanis coruscans</i>							✓							
74	Madagascar green sunbird	<i>Nectarinia notata</i>		H	✓					✓		✓		✓		
75	Souimanga sunbird	<i>Nectarinia souimanga</i>		✓	✓	✓	H		H	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
76	Madagascar lark	<i>Mirafra hova</i>									✓	✓		✓		
77	Mascarene martin	<i>Phedina borbonica</i>			✓	✓			✓	✓						
78	Brown-throated martin	<i>Riparia paludicaola</i>		✓										✓		✓
79	Madagascar wagtail	<i>Motacilla flaviventris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓					✓	✓
80	Forest rock thrush	<i>Monticola sharpei</i>								H		✓				
81	Madagascar magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus albospectularis</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓		✓				
82	<del>Madagascar</del> Madagascar Stonechat	<i>Saxicola Torquatus</i>		✓	✓											✓
83	Common jery	<i>Neomixis tenella</i>										✓		✓		
84	Green jery	<i>Neomixis viridis</i>		H		✓			H	✓						

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85	Stripe-throated jery	<i>Neomixis striatigula</i>		✓	H	✓			H	H							
86	Rand's warbler	<i>Randia pseudozosterops</i>			✓	✓				H							
87	Madagascar brush-warbler	<i>Nesillas typica</i>		✓		H			H	H							H
88	Sub-desert brush-warbler	<i>Nesillas lantzi</i>											✓				
89	Madagascar swamp-warbler	<i>Acrocephalus newtoni</i>			✓												
90	Spectacled tetraka	<i>Xanthomixis zosterops</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓								
91	Appert's tetraka	<i>Xanthomixis apperti</i>											✓				
92	Grey-crowned tetraka	<i>Xanthomixis cinereiceps</i>				✓			✓								
93	Long-billed tetraka	<i>Bernieria madagascariensis</i>			✓								✓				
94	Wedge-tailed tetraka	<i>Hartetula flavoviridis</i>							✓								
95	White-throated oxylabes	<i>Oxylabes madagascariensis</i>				H											
96	Madagascar white-eye	<i>Zosterops maderaspatanus</i>	✓		✓	✓		H		✓							✓
97	Common newtonia	<i>Newtonia brunneicauda</i>			✓	✓			✓	✓		H	H	✓			
98	Red-tailed vanga	<i>Calicalicus madagascariensis</i>			✓	✓			✓	✓							
99	Blue vanga	<i>Cyanolanius madagascarinus</i>				✓							✓				
100	Chabert's vanga	<i>Leptopterus chabert</i>				✓											
101	White-headed vanga	<i>Leptopterus viridis</i>							✓								
102	Hook-billed vanga	<i>Vanga curvirostris</i>				✓	✓		H								
103	Rufous vanga	<i>Schetba rufa</i>								✓							
104	Madagascar cuckoo-shrike	<i>Coracina cinerea</i>				✓			✓	✓							
105	Madagascar bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes madagascariensis</i>			✓	✓				✓		✓					
106	Tylas vanga	<i>Tylas eduardi</i>			H				✓								
107	Pollen's vanga	<i>Xenopirostris polleni</i>								✓							
108	Madagascar paradise flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata</i>			✓	✓						✓	✓				
109	Nuthatch vanga	<i>Hypositta corallirostris</i>			✓												
110	Crested drongo	<i>Dicrurus forficatus</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓					
111	Pied crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	✓					✓			✓	✓	✓				
112	Madagascar starling	<i>Hartlaubius auratus</i>			✓												
113	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>		✓				✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
114	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				✓											
115	Nelicourvi weaver	<i>Ploceus nelicourvi</i>		✓					✓								

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116	Sakalava weaver	<i>Ploceus sakalava</i>												✓			
117	Madagascar fody	<i>Foudia madagascariensis</i>	✓	✓					✓		✓		✓				✓
118	Forest fody	<i>Foudia omissa</i>		H		✓											
119	Madagascar mannikin	<i>Lonchura nana</i>			✓						✓						
	<b>Birds Seen In Nairobi</b>																
1	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓														
2	Little swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	✓														
3	Pied crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	✓														
4	Superb starling	<i>Lamprotornis superbus</i>	✓														
	<b>Mammals</b>																
1	Grey-brown mouse lemur	<i>Microcebus griseorufus</i>												✓			
2	Goodman's mouse lemur	<i>Microcebus lehilahytsara</i>		✓	✓												
3	Rufous mouse lemur	<i>Microcebus rufus</i>						✓	✓								
4	Fat-tailed dwarf lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus medius</i>				✓											
5	Small-toothed sportive lemur	<i>Lepilemur microdon</i>							✓								
6	Zombitse sportive lemur	<i>Lepilemur hubbardorum</i>											✓	✓			
7	Petter's sportive lemur	<i>Lepilemur petteri</i>											✓				
8	Eastern grey bamboo lemur	<i>Hapalemur griseus</i>				✓											
9	Golden bamboo lemur	<i>Hapalemur aureus</i>							✓	✓							
10	Greater bamboo lemur	<i>Prolemur simus</i>							✓								
11	Ring-tailed lemur	<i>Lemur catta</i>										✓					
12	Brown lemur	<i>Eulemur fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓										
13	Red-fronted brown lemur	<i>Eulemur rufifrons</i>						H	✓	✓							
14	Red-bellied lemur	<i>Eulemur rubriventer</i>			✓		✓										
15	Black-and-white ruffed lemur	<i>Varecia ariagata</i>			✓		✓										
16	Eastern woolly lemur	<i>Avahi laniger</i>		✓													
17	Diademed sifaka	<i>Propithecus diadema</i>		✓	✓												
18	Milne-edward's sifaka	<i>Propithecus edwardsi</i>							✓	✓							
19	Verreaux's sifaka	<i>Propithecus verreauxi</i>											✓	✓			
20	Indri	Indri Indri		✓	H		✓										

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21	Aye-aye	Daubentonia madagascariensis				✓											
22	Crowned lemur (introduced)	Eulemur coronatus				✓											
23	Black lemur (introduced)	Eulemur macaco				✓											
24	Greater hedgehog tenrec	Setifer setosus					✓										
25	Lesser hedgehog tenrec	Echinops telfairi												✓			
26	Lowland streaked tenrec	Hemicentetes semispinosus			✓												
27	Eastern red forest rat	Nesomys rufus			✓					✓							
28	Brown rat (introduced)	Rattus norvegicus				✓											
	<b>Amphibians &amp; Reptiles</b>																
1	Madagascar reed frog	<i>Heterixalus madagascariensis</i>				✓											
2	Ranomafana reed frog	<i>Heterixalus punctatus</i>							✓								
3	Madagascar tree frog	<i>Boophis madagascariensis</i>	✓							✓							
4	Green bright-eyed frog	<i>Boophis viridis</i>			✓												
5	Bright-eyed frog sp.	<i>Boophis tasymana</i>			✓												
6	Pandanus frog	<i>Mantidactylus pulcher</i>							✓								
7	Radiated tortoise	<i>Astrochelys radiata</i>				✓	✓										
8	Short-horned chameleon	<i>Calumma brevicorne</i>	✓	✓													
9	Cryptic chameleon	<i>Calumma crypticum</i>							✓								
10	Perinet chameleon	<i>Calumma gastrotaenia</i>							✓								
11	Big nose chameleon	<i>Calumma nasutum</i>	✓						✓								
12	O'shaughnessy's Chameleon	<i>Calumma Oshaughnessyi</i>							✓								
13	Parson's chameleon	<i>Calumma parsoni</i>				✓	✓										
14	Antimena chameleon	<i>Furcifer antimena</i>												✓			
15	Oustalet's chameleon	<i>Furcifer oustaleti</i>									✓	✓	✓				✓
16	Merrem's madagascar swift	<i>Oplurus cyclurus</i>										✓					
17	Cuvier's madagascar swift	<i>Oplurus cuvieri</i>						✓									
18	Madagascar skink spp.	<i>Madascincus spp.</i>										✓					
19	Lined day gecko	<i>Phelsuma lineata</i>							✓	✓	✓				✓		
20	Peacock day gecko	<i>Phelsuma quadriocellata</i>								✓							
21	Standing's day gecko	<i>Phelsuma standingi</i>												✓			

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22	House gecko sp.	<i>Hemidactylus sp.</i>						✓	✓								
23	Madagascar ground gecko	<i>Paroedura picta</i>											✓				
24	Satanic leaf-tailed gecko	<i>Uroplatus phantasticus</i>								✓							
25	Mossy leaf-tailed gecko	<i>Uroplatus sikorae</i>		✓													
26	Gravenhorst's skink	<i>Trachylepis gravenhorstii</i>								✓							
27	Madagascar tree boa	<i>Sanzinia madagascariensis</i>		✓	✓												
28	Duméril's boa	<i>Acrantophis dumerili</i>									✓		✓				
29	Blond hognose snake	<i>Leioheterodon modestus</i>											✓				
	<b>Butterflies And Moths</b>																
1	Madagascar giant swallowtail	<i>Pharmacophagus antenor</i>									✓						
2	African monarch	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>									✓		✓				
3	Madagascar forest nymph	<i>America rabena</i>									✓						
4	Yellow pansy	<i>Junonia hierta paris</i>									✓						
5	Brilliant blue	<i>Junonia rhadama</i>									✓			✓			
	<b>Misc Invertebrates</b>																
1	Giant pill millipedes 40 spp.	<i>Zephronia siamensis</i>			✓												
2	Madagascar hissing cockroach	<i>Grompadorhina portentosa</i>											✓				
3	Golden orb web spiders	<i>Nephila spp.</i>				✓							✓				
4	Giraffe-necked weevil	<i>Trachelophorus giraffa</i>			✓					✓							
5	Flatid leaf insect	<i>Pyromania rosea</i>									✓						
6	Preying mantis spp.	<i>Mantodea</i>					✓										
7	Stick insect spp.	<i>Phasmatodea</i>								✓							
8	Isalo stick-insect	<i>Acrioptera impennis</i>									✓						
9	Madagascar scorpion	<i>Opiscanthus madagascariensis</i>									✓						
10	Scorpion sp - ifaty	<i>Scorpiones</i>											✓				
11	Trapdoor sider	<i>Rhianodes sp.</i>											✓				
12	Stick insect - andasibe	<i>phasmatodea</i>			✓												
13	Caterpillars - swallowtail	<i>papilio machaon</i>			✓												
14	Satyridae	Satyridae			✓												

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15	Orange flower beetle	Mecynorrhina sp									✓						
16	Green carabid beetle	Calosoma sycophanta									✓						

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