

## Tour Report Madagascar with Mike Dilger 14 - 29 September 2023

Grey bamboo lemur by Mike Dilger



Velvet asity by Jayne Simmonds



Black and white ruffed lemur by  
Pete Evans



Hedgehog tenrec by Jayne Simmonds



Compiled by Mike Dilger

## **Tour Leader: Mike Dilger & Harry Nirina with ten guests**

### **Day 1: London Heathrow T4 to Paris CDG, and the Ivato International Airport in Antananarivo, Madagascar. Arrival at Relais des Plateaux**

#### **Thursday 14 September 2023**

Mike Dilger (MD) met up with six of the ten guests at Heathrow T4 at a ridiculously early hour for the short trip across to Paris CDG Airport. Meeting up with a seventh guest, who'd flown in from Manchester, a dash across the airport to link up with the Madagascar flight then ensued, with all, fortunately, managing to board.

Delayed by around an hour before leaving, the ten-hour flight was trouble-free, with us eventually arriving in Madagascar's capital, Antananarivo, at 10.00 pm local time. Once visas had been paid for and we had successfully negotiated passport control, we collected our bags. On departing, we were met by a smiling Harry Nirina (HN), our local guide for the trip, who had been waiting patiently for us in Arrivals.

With money changed and all our bags loaded, we then boarded the bus, before taking the short drive across to our hotel, Relais Des Plateaux, close to the airport. Rooms duly allocated, everyone was so tired that all then proceeded to crash after the long flight.

### **Day 2: Relais des Plateaux Hotel, Antananarivo, to VOIMMA (or Indri special reserve), before an overnight at Vakona Lodge**

#### **Friday 15 September 2023**

Arising early, MD was keen to carry out a spot of bird watching around the hotel grounds. The first species to be admired was that of Madagascar bee-eater, where two were observed in a nearby tree. With the guests now gathering for breakfast, he was subsequently able to show these handsome birds to a couple of members of the group, along with a singing Madagascar wagtail on the hotel roof and a solitary Madagascar stonechat perched on the hotel's walled perimeter. Reuniting with the rest of the guests, including the final three who had made their own way to the hotel, everyone then sat down to enjoy a breakfast which consisted of pastries, fruit, omelettes and coffee. While loading up the bags back into our bus, MD was also able to point out both Madagascar stonechat and the wagtail to those who'd previously missed these two endemic species, along with a few Madagascar red fodies, which confusingly looked more like female house sparrows than yet another Malagasy endemic.

Picking our way slowly through Antananarivo's busy streets, we eventually reached the Tsarasaotra highway and encountered our first paddy fields on either side of the road. A number of paddies contained plenty of herons and egrets, which proved too irresistible for the group to pass by and our driver Lanza kindly stopped so we could take a moment to identify the species present. The commonest species here was the dimorphic egret, which has recently been split from the little egret, in addition to a few great white egrets. The highlight here, however, was provided by six or seven black herons, which were busily creating umbrella shades with their wings to help catch fish - fabulous behaviour which is a familiar calling card of this species. Further bolstering the heron contingent, three or four squacco herons and a single cattle egret were also identified. Our first common mynas of the trip were seen along the roadside verge here too. Originally introduced from Asia, this bird has since become incredibly common in many of the degraded areas all across Madagascar's High Plateau, with worries it may well be competing with native cavity-nesting species for breeding sites. A few feral pigeons were also noted along the roadside during our brief stop as well.

While driving along, the group were also able to note large patches of open water cloaked with South American water hyacinth, another invasive species which is currently creating yet more issues across many of Madagascar's beleaguered wetlands. A little further along the road, good views were then obtained of a hammerkop, having been initially spotted by one of the guests, before a second individual was then noted close to the roadside town of Manjakandriana, along with a single striated - or green-backed heron.

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Continuing westwards along RN2, we finally began dropping off the dusty plateau, with rice farming and brick-making quickly dominating the terrain on both sides of the road. The bricks here are composed of clay dug from the paddies before being shaped into bricks with the help of a mould. Once dried in the sun the bricks are fired in roadside kilns, before then being sold to passing traffic.

Approaching our lunch stop, Harry then spotted a male Oustalet's chameleon by the roadside. This species is distinctively black & white, with a prominent row of scales along the back and is normally far more common in the drier, western parts of the country. Its location here made Harry speculate that it could conceivably mean it belonged to a distinct sub-species. With heavy traffic passing close by - and often at speed - it was considered an unsafe place to linger, so after a quick look we all returned to the bus. The next point of interest was the Pont Mangoro (or Mangoro Bridge) over the River Mangoro, with Harry informing the group that the river originally contained a large population of Nile crocodiles. But fearful of these supreme predators, the locals subsequently cleared them away from settlements, with a population still supposedly existing in sections of the river's rural backwaters.

Stopping for lunch at Pizzeria Diary Restaurant, just west of the town Moramanga, the group then proceeded to learn the famous 'Lamako' chant, which is used as a means of thanks, and would also be used later in the trip to thank our hosts! Suitably replete after a lovely meal, the group then settled back for the last leg of their journey. Reaching the town of Moramanga, Harry informed us that the town's name meant 'many mangoes', but the town was also famed for being front and centre of a populist uprising against the French, starting in 1947. Many Malagasy were subsequently killed during the rebellion that ensued and ultimately led to the country's independence in 1960. Moramanga is currently a thriving town due to the presence of a large cobalt and nickel mine located just outside the town.

Suddenly, and for the first time, native forest began to appear along the roadside, and we were just at the point of arriving at the park entrance of VOIMMA private reserve when one of the guests spotted some lemurs along the roadside. Quickly identified as a troop of around six or seven common brown lemurs, the males could clearly be seen with their black faces as the troop fed on fruits from a roadside tree. As cameras clicked away, all were thrilled with their first lemurs of the trip, with some locals even stopping to enjoy the lemurs too, which in turn caused a bit of a roadblock.

Delighted with the trip's first lemurs, we then met up with our guides for the duration of our time in Andasibe-Mantadia - the celebrated local naturalist Patrice, along with his children Michael and Dominique. Hitting the ground running, our guides then proceeded to show us a couple of small chameleons in the shrubbery of the Park HQ's entrance. Both in the genus Calumma, the second and third species of the trip were short-horned and big-nosed chameleons respectively. Commencing our walk into the forest, the first birds Patrice was able to point out were crested drongo and female red-tailed vanga, with the group enjoying good views of both these endemic species.

A little further along the trail, the next bird to be added to our list was that of a blue coua. A surprisingly large bird and similar in both size and ecological niche to the African turacos, this individual perched briefly before flying off, giving most of the group half-decent views. And the next creature to be admired could also be called 'coua-food', in the form of a mossy leaf-tailed gecko. Head down and lying along the trunk of a small sapling, this incredibly well-camouflaged reptile was so well hidden that nobody could initially find it, including the coua we had just seen moments before.

Heading further into the forest, Patrice also pointed out the cactus *Rhipsalis baccifera*, hanging up the trees like an epiphyte. Belonging to a family - the Cactaceae - which reaches its maximum expression in the New World, this is the family's only known representative in the whole of Madagascar. While enjoying the cactus, a second blue coua was pointed out, followed by a comet moth cocoon hanging from a tree - which looked reminiscent of a huge white, dangling sock in the tree.

Now walking along a forest ridge, the next find the guides were keen to point out was a Madagascan mega - in the form of the island's largest surviving lemur. The solitary indri was resting quietly in the tree canopy,

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patently in the process of digesting its lunch, and despite being tough to see through the leaves and branches, everyone ultimately managed to gain a reasonable view of this iconic resident of Madagascar's eastern rainforests. However, the lemur's thunder was quickly stolen by a female parson's chameleon, which our guides had managed to locate close by in the understory. Just a couple of metres up from ground level, this chameleon proved to be a photographer's dream, before itself being then trumped by a young male parson's chameleon back by the roadside. Possessing two divergent horns on its head casque, this species is one of the largest chameleons in the world. And despite our guides still considering this individual to be a juvenile, it was still close to half a metre in length. Finally turning back towards the park entrance, the last bird of note was a Madagascar wood-rail, which was initially heard before then being briefly seen while crossing the path.

Dropping off our terrific guides back in Andasibe town, we were then able to enjoy two barn owls roosting in a huge palm, along with a female Madagascar kestrel perched just above, which looked to be eating either a small rodent or a lizard. After a short drive to our accommodation at Vakona Lodge, outside the town, six guests then quickly turned around to join MD, HN and our local guides once more for a night walk along the forest road running adjacent to the VOIMMA Reserve.

Torches on, the guides' first find was that of Goodman's mouse lemur in the roadside understory. And while everyone tried to capture the perfect portrait of a lemur only marginally larger than a dormouse, MD was able to tell them that this was just about the world's smallest primate. Eye-shine was then picked up much higher in another tree close by, with Patrice declaring the gleaming eyes to belong to that of Crossley's dwarf lemur, a new species of lemur for everyone, including MD. With lights trained on the branch where the lemur was located, most managed to get a brief view of the lemur's bushy tail and pale belly before it scurried off into the darkness. HN explained we were particularly lucky to see this species, as it usually only tends to come out of hibernation from October onwards.

While scanning the roadside vegetation, it then began to gently rain, causing a froggy chorus to suddenly begin. Our guide, Michael, subsequently picked out three green bright-eyed frogs (in the Genus Boophis) in the understory. MD also pointed out a cricket with huge antennae, which also then called briefly with a bizarre staccato call. A second Boophis frog species was also picked up - this being the larger Madagascar bright-eyed tree frog. On the way back to the bus, two more brief sightings of Crossley's dwarf lemur were obtained before the group returned to the Lodge.

Reuniting with the rest of the group, everyone then enjoyed a delicious meal, washed down with the local THB beer, before compiling the day's checklist after a remarkable first day.

### **Day 3: Visit to Andasibe-Mantadia National Park**

#### **Saturday 16 September 2023**

Reuniting after the group's first full night's sleep, the day's first bird to be recorded was that of a calling Madagascar coucal, as everyone met for breakfast. The early morning appeared mostly misty, indicating that the weather would be fine later. The lodge had also placed out a light and white sheet the previous evening to see if any moths would visit, and this was thrillingly rewarded with that of a comet moth. Attached to the sheet, the moths feathery antennae could clearly be seen, revealing the specimen to be a male. And it was also in pristine condition. Surely Madagascar's most charismatic moth, this species is endemic to the forests of Madagascar, and with the adults only living for around a week made it an even more fabulous find.

While devouring breakfast, we were also able to watch a number of mascarene martins feeding over the water. A number of the birds were also collecting nesting material before then taking it underneath the lodge where this species has a small breeding colony. In the flowering shrubs planted around the lodge, a Madagascar white-eye, male and female Madagascar sunbirds and a male souimanga sunbird were also subsequently viewed at close quarters. Just before leaving, MD took a few more guests back to see the moth, and they were rewarded with a pair of Madagascar paradise flycatchers and a Madagascar wagtail - all busily gleaning the smaller insects from the moth sheet.

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Birds and moths clocked, the group then hopped straight into four off-road vehicles for the 90 minute drive to reach the primary rainforest located within Mantadia National Park. The journey along rough tracks was largely uneventful, with the highlight being good views of Madagascar coucal. Finally reaching the end of the road and the designated parking area, Patrice was able to point out a Madagascar harrier hawk soaring above our heads, along with yet another pair of Madagascar paradise flycatchers. The first giraffe-necked weevil of the trip was also found here - and possessing a relatively short neck meant it was a female.

Without delay, we then set off into the forest with our guide Michael leading the way, while Dominique and Patrice disappeared off ahead to track down lemurs. One of the dominant sounds along the forest edge belonged to that of Rand's warbler, with a fast trill not unlike our British wood warbler. The next bird noted was that of common newtonia, with all hearing its distinctive two-note call before then observing it as it flitted around the understory. Also recorded here, were the seemingly omnipresent two species - paradise flycatcher and souimanga sunbird, along with the far shyer red-tailed vanga.

Suddenly the group stopped in their tracks upon hearing the siren-like wails of indris calling in the distance. But when Patrice returned to tell us he'd managed to find diademed sifakas instead, we realised the indris would have to wait. Leaving the path, the group scrambled through the vegetation until told by our guides to look up, whereupon we were thrilled to see a mother with a baby on her back, in addition to a couple of other individuals close by. Initially quite high up in the trees, they then came lower down, giving us a far better view and allowing the photographers to take some excellent photos in more uniform light of this handsome and Critically Endangered lemur. Patently used to human visitors, the troop ignored us as they recommenced eating, only then to put on a fine display as they bounced around the trees just above our head - what a moment!

We would, however, be allowed little time to enjoy this stellar sighting, as our guides then whisked us off to our second lemur of the day, in the form of a single black-and-white ruffed lemur which was resting high up in the canopy. MD was able to set up his scope for a frame-filling view of this handsome lemur, while a few members of the group even managed to take a few snaps, despite its position some 25m above our heads. And the lemur theme was to continue as descending down through the forest, we were then shown three eastern woolly lemurs tucked up in the understory. This nocturnal species is also shy and retiring, making it in turn very difficult to locate, leading to the guests commenting that without our local guides, we would have struggled to see a single lemur, let alone fine views of three different species.

Returning for our packed lunch waiting for us at the vehicles, Michael then noticed eight blue pigeons high up in an emergent tree as we exited the forest. Once again, MD was able to set up the scope, allowing all to enjoy great views of this bird's royal blue plumage, with a contrasting red vent. A very pleasant lunch then followed while listening to Madagascar cuckoos calling from somewhere up in the canopy with their distinct and repetitive 'lesser cuck-oo' call.

MD then suggested some of the group might be keen to maximise their time in this remote forest, so along with Michael and Dominique, an extra walk to the viewpoint was hastily arranged for six guests. Of the remaining guests, two returned back to the hotel for a rest, while the other two carried on birdwatching with Patrice at the lunch-spot.

As we ascended the trail, it became immediately obvious that the birds had also woken up after a lunchtime siesta, leading us to catch up with another paradise flycatcher, before a terrific view of a male blue vanga ensued at very close quarters. Michael then spotted the bird of the trip, in the form of a nuthatch vanga, which was in the process of ascending a vertical tree trunk just like a European nuthatch. It was just superb to see both wonderful behaviour and such a fine example of convergent evolution. A common jery was also recorded here too.

Continuing further up, the next bird to be admired was that of a female common sunbird asity, with its incredibly distinct downward curved bill, before a female velvet asity was also recorded in the sub-canopy as

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well. The only shame here was the absence of the males of both species, which are decidedly more showy than their female counterparts, but they were nevertheless welcome additions to our burgeoning bird list. Finally reaching the ridge, the view from the viewpoint, which gave a fabulous vista across the primary rainforest was nothing short of wonderful. Looking out, a soaring Madagascar buzzard was easily picked up before one of the guests then spotted a lined day gecko on the wood from the collapsed shelter.

Up on the ridge, we must have been at least 150m higher up than at the parking area, and the flora certainly appeared more dominated by ferns and epiphytic mosses and orchids. Michael and Dominique were able to point out a couple of orchids in flower, with one from the species-rich genus of *Bulbophyllum*, while another just coming into flower emanated from the genus *Angraecum* and had distinctively long nectary spurs.

Coming back down the ridge, the focus then switched back to birds with the reappearance of probably the same nuthatch vanga that we had observed during their ascent, along with tyla's vanga which was seen briefly in flight. Here, too, a brief view was obtained of both ward's vanga, looking a little like our pied flycatcher and a Madagascar bulbul. Reunited with the remaining guests who had decided against the second walk, they were thrilled to have been able to photograph a giraffe-necked weevil that Patrice had managed to find for them. Jumping back in the cars, we travelled back to Vakona Lodge.

Reconvening at 4.30 pm after a couple of hours rest, we were then driven back to VOIMMA Reserve for a birdwatching session along the road, before dusk changed the focus to nocturnal mammals, amphibians and reptiles. While driving back to Andasibe to pick up our guides, we admired a Madagascar red-flamed tree, before one of the guests then spotted another Madagascar buzzard perched in the tree. Getting out to enjoy the raptor a couple of common brown lemurs were also observed in the canopy of a distant tree.

Driving to our starting point, we marvelled as four common brown lemurs crossed the road right in front of the minibus, with their tails held high, before then encountering the same family on foot a little further on. While watching the lemurs, Patrice was also keen to point out a distinctive fruiting palm with split leaves along the roadside. Possessing the scientific name of *Dypsis louvellii*, he explained that the palm's hollow trunk was traditionally used as a blow-pipe.

Duly following Patrice off the road and into what appeared to be an old banana plantation, he then proceeded to point out two roosting Madagascar forest scops - of the rufous colour morph. Working our way back onto the road, with dusk now rapidly descending, Michael found a *Betisileo* reed frog on a leaf, before everyone became distracted with the discovery of another Goodman's mouse lemur. This caused particular excitement for the group members who had opted to miss the previous evening's walk, with this individual also far livelier than the one we'd encountered the night before. Astonishingly adept at climbing, the tiny primate eventually disappeared from view up into the canopy.

As our guides proceeded to locate a variety of creatures, many of the guests simply wandered from find to find as a short-horned chameleon, another frog and an array of stick insects were pointed out in turn. As we boarded the minibus, one last treat was in store as we watched a number of Madagascar nightjars flying and perching in trees surrounding the park headquarters' buildings. What a great way to end a full and very entertaining day.

#### **Day 4: Vakona Lodge to Palmarium Lodge at Akanin'ny Nofy, followed by a night walk to Aye-aye Island**

**Sunday 17 September 2023**

The group woke for an early start and, upon walking down for breakfast, soon discovered what appeared to be the makings of another lovely day lying ahead of them. Satiated and with all the bags packed and loaded

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on the minibus, the group just had time to admire a pair of souimanga sunbirds nectaring, before hitting the road once more.

Just a few miles from the Lodge, a temporary road closure over a bridge meant that the bus was forced to take a brief detour into the grounds of the old graphite factory, where a pair of Madagascar stonechat, a couple of Madagascar kestrels and a few African black swifts were all noted in quick succession. Back on the main road close to the village of Andasibe, we noticed a few Westerners had stopped by the road and, upon stopping to take a look, were rewarded with another nuthatch vanga, a couple of Madagascar bulbuls and a single Chabert's vanga.

Leaving the forest behind, we carried on eastwards along RN2, with the first birds of note being a yellow-billed kite and a couple of Madagascar bee-eaters, which were both noted near Ampasimbe. Keen to cover as much distance as possible, the next stop was for a refreshment break near the village of Sahamami, where a few more bee-eaters were seen, along with the trip's first pied crows, which were circling high in the sky. A small population of house sparrows was also noted here too.

Keen to reach Palmarium later that day, however, there could be little time to rest so we carried on eastwards, eventually arriving at Antsampanana, where the road took a turn northwards. This time last year, Madagascar pratincoles were spotted at a fuel station, and remarkably, exactly the same species was observed again, just a hundred metres from where they'd been recorded in 2022. This must have been too much of a coincidence, with Harry speculating that he thought the species may well breed along the Laroka River just south of the town. Only breeding in Madagascar, this species spends the Austral winter in East Africa before then returning back here in late September - and all enjoyed super views as the locals looked on with great curiosity as we admired these gorgeous birds through the telescope! While watching the pratincoles, MD also spotted a couple of black African swifts feeding high above the petrol station.

Continuing on our way we eventually reached the large town of Brickaville, where the traffic was very busy. This town was also the location of both a large sugar refinery and a railway station that marks one of the mid-way points between the east coast and the capital Antananarivo. Just a few miles further north, Lanza pulled over the minibus as we then transferred all our kit into four off-road vehicles for the 45 minute drive to Manambato on the shores of Lake Rasoabe. Changing the mode of transport once more, we then boarded a waiting boat to carry on our journey further northwards. This entire waterway is a huge system of artificial canals, natural lakes and rivers and stretches along the entire east coast for around 650km, making it one of the longest navigable inland waterways in the world. Like the previous year, very little wildlife was seen on the way, with the exception of a few bee-eaters and a drongo, but the journey was certainly a welcome change from the monotony of the bus. Much hotter at sea level than it had been in the rainforest, this made the breeze onboard a very welcome addition as we finally arrived at Lake Ampitabe, on the northern shore of which we would be spending the next two nights.

Having checked into the delightful Palmarium Hotel, we next enjoyed a very late lunch, before then retiring to our rooms to both rest and refresh before the evening's excursion for a date with a very special animal. Reconvening at 5.30 pm we boarded the boat for the 15 minute trip back across the water to small island now home to a number of aye-ayes. Joined by our local guide Romeo, we then assembled for a chat on the beach, before commencing the walk up to the arena, only stopping for brief views of Madagascar nightjars, which were churring all around us. Walking in single file through the forest, both in the pitch dark and with our head torches, we soon arrived at the viewing amphitheatre to find two aye-ayes already present! Romeo thought these individuals were a mother and youngster of around 11 months and had been attracted down from the trees by banana paste smeared on the trees put by the island's rangers.

A delightful half-hour then quickly passed by as the whole group delighted in watching the lemurs climbing, descending, feeding and interacting with each other. At times the lemurs were no more than a couple of metres away, enabling all to see this species' unique look, described as 'having the face of possum, tooth of mouse and ear of bat'. Our guide, Romeo, explained that all the adult aye-ayes here were animals either

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recovered from deforested areas or seized by rangers, before being placed on the island as a sanctuary. According to local folklore, aye-ayes are considered to bring bad luck and death, and so were traditionally killed on sight, but realising that the population was plummeting the authorities quickly passed laws to ensure the species is now heavily protected.

Moving to another viewing area, and before our allotted time was up, we were then able to see a different adult female ripping into a coconut with her incisor teeth to get to the flesh inside. With the hard work of breaking through the husk then done, another youngster then came down to enjoy the fruits of all her hard labours. Meanwhile, another male, which had opened another coconut close by, all gave way to the female, with MD explaining that in many lemur species, a strong matriarchal hierarchy is imposed with males bottom of the pecking order!

It had been a simply wonderful trip across to the island, with fireflies a very able supporting act to the main event. On the short boat trip back across to the lodge, the clear conditions also provided one of the most impressive night skies that any of the guests could recall with a vast number of stars - particularly given the lack of light pollution in this part of Madagascar. Before collapsing in their rooms, the group tucked into a later dinner before heading for a well-deserved night's sleep.

**Day 5: From Palmarium Lodge, through Brickaville, to Analamazaotra National Park. Overnight at Vakona.**

**Tuesday 19 September 2023**

Rising early, the group were quickly packed, allowing them to have an early breakfast at 5.30 am before then taking the 6.30 am boat ride back south along the lake and canal system. It was another calm and sunny day, with all able to enjoy the boat ride. Scanning out, a number of birds were seen, including yellow-billed kite, Madagascar bee-eater, crested drongo, Madagascar coucal, and one of the vasa parrot species.

Jumping back into the off-road vehicles, HN had to do some running repairs on one of the cars due to an issue with one of the battery terminals before then being reunited with Lanza back at Brickaville. Reversing our journey back to Andasibe, we again stopped at Sahamami for a pit stop, where a yellow-billed kite & a blue coua were picked up in some distant trees, other than that wildlife was pretty sparse. Picking up our picnic lunch in the village of Andasibe, we were reunited with Patrice, Michal and Dominique at the headquarters of Analamazaotra National Park, before then enjoying lunch on the park's benches. Birds in the grounds were plentiful here, with the group noting a Madagascar magpie-robin, two Madagascar wagtails, a crested drongo and a Chabert's vanga, along with a brief view of a Madagascar cuckoo-shrike.

Suitably replete, we then headed into the reserve's forest, with Patrice explaining that 'Analamazaotra' means 'river forest' and the National Park was established in 1970 and adjoins Andasibe-Mantadia National Park to the north. Walking the Green Lake Trail, the first birds Patrice was able to point out were two Madagascar scops owls in a large palm, while the near-constant backing track of Madagascar cuckoos calling could also be heard in the background. In the path-side stream, there were plenty of whirligig battles gyrating on the surface of the water as well.

Ascending up the ridge the distant call of a henst goshawk could be heard from somewhere within the forest, as Patrice pointed out a number of flowering orchids, including the endemic species *Bulbophyllum analamazaotrensis* and a species without leaves, which photosynthesises with its aerial roots in the genus *Microcoelia*. A little further ahead a blue coua was heard calling before it then flew straight past the group, strung out along the ridge line.

After a short period walking along the ridge, the group then descended along one of the side trails to meet up with Dominique who had managed to locate a mother and baby diademed sifaka eating peacefully just above our heads and with the male nearby. The lemurs were not in the slightest bothered by our presence, which gave the guests the opportunity to both enjoy the most wonderful behaviour and take some

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enchanting photos. For the orchid enthusiasts, another species was recorded from the genus *Bulbophyllum*, which is thought to contain over 210 species in Madagascar alone.

Hitting the trails again, four indris were subsequently encountered high up in trees along the Indri 2 trail. Initially, they appeared to be mostly relaxing and digesting their lunch until they woke up and entertained the group as they bounced off through the trees. A terrestrial species of orchid in the genus *Cynorkis* was also spotted here, with over 90% of the 173 species recorded in this genus being confined to Madagascar. Walking back down and out of the forest, and towards the fish farm, it then began to rain lightly.

Once again, our guides were further ahead and, with the help of an employee at the farm, had encountered a Madagascar tree boa curled up in the vegetation. Probably close to 2 metres in length, it was gently moved out into the open, enabling photos to be taken before then being gently placed back.

Also around the back of the fish farm, a large patch of bamboo was found to contain two grey bamboo lemurs, a new species of lemur for the trip and Harry's favourite lemur! So dense was the bamboo that it took a while for all to see this new species clearly, but eventually they moved out into the open, where great views could be obtained from the bridge over the river as the lemurs tucked into the bamboo's shoots and leaves. Walking the short distance back to the headquarters, there was just time for a spot more birding, as a Madagascar turtle dove was spotted on the path and a Madagascar sunbird observed in the path side shrubbery, before then boarding the minibus once more for the short drive back to Andasibe.

Saying goodbye to our wonderful guides at the village before then singing the Lamako as a thank-you, we then checked back into the Vakona Lodge before reuniting for dinner in front of a roaring fire.

## **Day 6: From Vokona Lodge to Antsirabe - via Antananarivo**

### **Wednesday 20 September 2023**

Facing a big travel day ahead, the guests met up (with their bags already packed) for a 5.30 am breakfast. It had rained heavily overnight and so was surprisingly cold as everyone tucked into their early breakfast. While the bags were packed into the minibus, a number of guests sneaked in a spot of birding and managed to obtain good views of Mascarene martins around the water, while Madagascar white-eye, souimanga sunbird and a crested drongo were all observed in the shrubbery surrounding the lodge.

Heading slowly south, we joined RN2 to head back to Antananarivo. Wildlife highlights were limited to the usual suspects along the paddies, with great white egret, cattle egret, dimorphic egret and a hammerkop seen as well, in addition to a single striated heron as we approached Moramanga. Also, along the degraded roadside habitat, Indian mynas were common, along with a couple of yellow-billed kite. Reaching the town of Mandjakandriana, we then began the steady climb back up onto Madagascar's high plateau, with a couple of Madagascar manikins being the sole highlight here.

Packed lunches had been brought with us from Vokona Lodge, and while sorting out a location to enjoy the break on the outskirts of Antananarivo, MD spotted a number of brown-throated martins feeding over the paddies close to the road. Lunch was eventually taken in the shade behind a restaurant, with a few guests even managing to spot a malachite kingfisher in between bites of their sandwich. It was the Indian mynas that stole the show, however, as despite being introduced their song was, nevertheless, wonderful to listen to.

In the sun, it was very hot, with the result that butterflies were in abundance. A brilliant blue was certainly the pick of the bunch, while a small species from the family Lycaenidae, which might have been smoky blue, was also photographed by one of the guests. Passing through the capital's outskirts, we could see across to metropolitan Antananarivo for the first time, with Harry giving us a colourful history of the Queen's Palace, or Rova, on the Hill. Initially built in the early 17th Century and housing a series of monarchs, it controversially burnt down in 1995, before eventually being completely restored.

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Suitably replete after our break, we then headed south and onto RN7 en route to Antsirabe, where we would ultimately spend the night. As we put some miles under our belt the landscape began steadily changing as the terrain became dryer, resulting in rice paddies being replaced by vegetables. Harry was also able to point out a number of tombs of the Meringa tribe's people, who tend to practice Animism.

After a long and tiring drive, we eventually hit the outskirts of a very busy Antsirabe. Here an evening market was in full swing as we slowly worked our way through the busy traffic and thronging crowds. Despite being fascinating to witness, we were all, nevertheless, relieved as we pulled up in front of the Plumeria Hotel at around 6.30 pm. Upon checking into the rooms, everyone was able to luxuriate in the superb showers and enjoy an excellent internet connection. So by the time we met for dinner, everyone was in fine fettle and ready for the second week of the trip.

## **Day 7: From Antsirabe to Ranomafana & Karibotel - via Ambositra**

### **Thursday 21 September 2023**

Refreshed after a very comfortable night's sleep, everyone reconvened at breakfast before loading up for the last, long travel day. Before leaving Antsirabe, HN took the group to see the old colonial hotel, the Hotel des Thermes. Originally built by the French in 1897 as an exclusive hotel where visitors could take in the thermal springs, it is now a classic symbol of faded grandeur, despite still being run as a hotel. In the shop, located in the reception area, some of the guests bought postcards, while outside, a number of guests also purchased a 'valiha' – a stringed instrument constructed from bamboo, which is considered the national instrument of Madagascar.

While in Antsirabe, a few guests also visited the gem shop to admire some of Madagascar's precious stones. Leaving the town behind, we were soon back on the open road, with yellow-billed kites and the usual array of egrets for company. Taking a break on the way, we watched some Malagasy women planting out rice seedlings, while HN explained the whole rice cultivation process. A little further along, there was also the opportunity to see the entire brick-making process, where each brick is handmade with a wooden mould, before being left to dry in the sun and ultimately fired in the roadside kilns. The finished bricks are then stacked by the roadside in order to be sold to passing trade.

The next stop was at the wood-carving village just north of Ambositra. Here the guests had the opportunity to see the artists sculpting away in the workshop, before many made purchases for families and friends back at home. Stopping for lunch in Ambositra itself, we sat in the shade to enjoy our food, while simultaneously being kept royally entertained by a troop of Malagasy dancers. By way of wildlife entertainment, MD spotted a female kestrel in between lunch courses and a citrus swallowtail nectaring close by was also photographed by a number of the guests. But with many miles still to complete before nightfall, we were soon on the road again with Ranamofana as our end goal.

With seemingly every mile further south, the land appeared to get progressively drier. What did not change, however, was the constant ribbon development along the road, where a succession of small communities could be seen selling all manner of produce and goods, such as hats and baskets. Along the way, the main wildlife interest was provided mostly by yellow-billed kites, pied crows, Indian mynas and the occasional sunbird.

Passing a pond, one of the guests thought they'd briefly caught sight of a kingfisher, and after a brief stop, this indeed proved the case as a male malachite kingfisher was spotted looking for its dinner. At this location, a couple of Madagascar bulbuls and a crested drongo were also spotted before continued our journey southwards.

Reaching the village of Ambohimahasua, we noted what appeared to be a large heronry in a few trees, which were themselves within a large walled garden. Stopping to investigate further, we were delighted to find a

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number of species were present, with the most numerous species being black-crowned night heron and dimorphic egret, with smaller numbers of great white and cattle egrets. Many of the black-crowned night herons appeared to have unfledged young still in their nests, while both colour forms of dimorphic egret were also noted. It was a totally unexpected but very welcome sight and with plenty of birds flying to and from the heronry and gave everyone renewed vigour to finish the journey.

Now on RN25, we were heading east towards Ranomafana. With dusk slowly descending forest once more became more dominant along the roadside. It was a tired group that was delighted to reach the Karibo Hotel at around 8.30 pm after wonderful and safe driving by Lanza. Quickly checking in, we then met again for a late dinner and the first of our three-night stay on the edge of one of Madagascar's most famous and rich National Parks - that of Ranomafana itself.

## **Day 8: Ranomafana National Park - The Ranomafana Loop (twice) and along the RN25**

### **Friday 22 September 2023**

Karibotel is located on the side of a hill, with steps everywhere, which means it can be tiring getting around the grounds, but the views can also be fabulous. The restaurant, for example, gives a superb view across the whole of the forest and the river below. While waiting for the guests at breakfast, a spot of impromptu birding resulted in Madagascar wagtail, Madagascar magpie robin, crested drongo, Indian mynah and a pair of Chabert's vangas. As the guests assembled, they too were able to enjoy some of these, along with a few fork-tailed palm swifts and mascarene martins, which were hawking for insects in the airspace above the hotel. The blue skies also indicated the weather would be favourable all day.

Meeting our guides for the duration of our stay in Ranomafana, we boarded the bus for the 30 minute drive to the park entrance. Joining us on the Taletakely trail was head guide Stefan, along with Stefan Jr, Christian, James, Paulette and Ju. Heading off, the first bird we could hear was the distinctive trill of rand's warbler, before eventually managing to spot it in the top of a tree. A crested drongo was also heard singing here too.

Descending down to the bridge spanning the Namorona River, MD picked spotted a male nelicourvi weaver before a satanic leaf-tailed gecko was then pointed out just at the other end of the bridge. There were so many tourists queuing up to take the gecko's portrait here, it was with some relief that we were then able to take to the trail and leave behind most of the madding crowd. The frog *Boophis madagascariensis* was then picked up on a path-side shrub by one of the guides, before the trail began climbing both steeply and away from the sound of rushing water below. While ascending, a grey-crowned tetraka was heard singing before putting in a brief appearance, along with one of the glass-wing butterflies, which was one of 18 species in the genus *Acraea*. Leading the way, Stefan also pointed out a number of plants, including one species within the *Araceae* family, which locals believed had the power to prevent lightning strikes! A very pretty and diminutive lobelia was also common here, along the margins of the trail, with Stefan informing us that the Ranomafana's forest held four such species of ground Lobelia.

Further up, the call of 'lemur' then went up as our guides located a troop of red-fronted brown lemurs close to the path. Moving quickly through the trees, at least nine or ten were counted as they passed close by, with the troop including a mother and young baby within their ranks. Still on the front of its mother's belly, it was obvious that the baby was very young, while another individual - possibly the father - was also seen hugging the mother and baby in a wonderfully intimate moment, while the rest of the troop fed contentedly nearby. The male lemurs of this species could also be clearly differentiated from the females, by virtue of their black faces and red caps too.

While watching the lemurs, a small mixed flock of birds was also noted as they passed our viewpoint, with male and female red-tailed vanga and a pair of Madagascar paradise flycatchers certainly the most prominent. Throughout this whole time, the repetitive calls of Madagascar cuckoos were a constant soundtrack as they called from the canopy above. Back once again on the main trail, another mixed flock of

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birds was encountered, which included a second male nelicourvi weaver and two green jerys. At this point, a single long-billed tetraka was also picked up with the flock, which despite being only seen briefly, was immediately identifiable by its larger size.

By now, we had moved into high-quality forest, with Stefan then hearing a distinctive 'woop' call, which was diagnostic of one of the forest's most charismatic birds - that of the pitta-like ground roller. Steadily creeping towards the calling bird, it was eventually spotted skulking in the undergrowth, with most of the group managing to catch at least a glimpse of this iconic, rare and most colourful bird before it disappeared once more into the undergrowth. Meanwhile, Harry, who was further back on the trail, also managed a brief sighting with one of the guests of an Eastern forest red rat in the undergrowth too. Following our guides up a steep ridge, the next lemur to be pointed out was that of a single black-and-white ruffed lemur resting high up in the branches of a canopy emergent, before realising that a much rarer lemur had been located back down below, making us feel like 'The Grand Old Duke of York's' men!

Now down to just one individual within the entirety of the park, the solitary greater bamboo lemur was subsequently spotted sitting quietly in a small thicket of bamboo. When Stefan was young, he remembered this lemur as being far more common, but due to rampant deforestation, the population then began a precipitous decline. Suddenly down to just two individuals - consisting of just a father and his daughter - this was then reduced to one, when the father was found dead a few years ago, making the sighting of this single female both exciting and yet incredibly poignant. To make matters even worse, a reintroduction from the single remaining population elsewhere was attempted in Ranomafana earlier in 2023, but all eleven lemurs died as a result of being unable to cope with the levels of cyanide present in the bamboo, which the remaining female had patently built up resistance to. Very used to a constant stream of tourists, this critically endangered primate appeared utterly unfazed by the presence of so many admirers, which allowed her adoring fans to fill their boots.

After taking our leave, we then began the descent back down to the river, with a white-headed vanga heard, before managing a fine view of a spectacled tetra in the undergrowth. But the group, unbeknownst to them, were due one final treat before leaving the forest. Only discovered to science in 1985, the formation of the National Park exists in large part due to the presence of the golden bamboo lemur. As our guides pointed to a couple asleep in a tangle of branches and bamboo leaves, it was admittedly quite tough to see this species' golden colour, which differentiates them from the other species of bamboo lemur in Ranomafana. Harry explained that this species often wakes up early to feed, when it is far more active, before then spending a large proportion of the rest of the morning resting and digesting a belly full of bamboo. Another Critically Endangered lemur, this species' entire world distribution is confined to Ranomafana and the forest close by.

Returning back to the hotel for lunch, many guests chose to either take the afternoon to rest or visit the village of Ranomafana with Harry, while MD took one guest, along with the guides back into the forest. Crossing the river once again, the first birds to be noted were two Madagascar buzzards in some kind of territorial dispute. Briefly clashing in mid-air before one then flew upriver while the other perched in a tree, allowing a good view of a species that looks remarkably similar to the buzzard encountered in the UK.

Ascending the same path as the full group had walked earlier in the day, the spectacled tetraka was seen in the same location, before MD then spotted a Madagascar cuckoo-shrike in the lower reaches of the canopy. Then in the undergrowth, one of the guides spotted some movement, which subsequently ended up being another pitta-like ground roller. Very close to hand, this handsome bird's fabulous colours could even be picked out in the murk of the undergrowth, before vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

Once again, climbing back up the ridge, the next bird to be observed was another undergrowth specialist in the form of white-throated oxylabes. The skulking and yellow-throated female was seen first, followed by the fabulous male, after which the species was named. Up on the ridge, another shy bird of the forest undergrowth reluctantly revealed itself, as a red-fronted coua popped briefly into view. Initially located by its call, the bird, like so many forest species, then seemingly disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving the group both thrilled and a touch disappointed - as can often be the case with birdwatching in the rainforest!

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Further on, a female velvet asity and female Madagascar paradise flycatcher were seen as we carried on upwards and along the ridge. The plaintive call of a Crossley's vanga was then heard, which marked the beginning of a terrific session as a mixed flock of vangas passed by our position. Here, white-headed vanga, two tyla's vangas, crested drongo and blue vanga were seen at very close quarters, along with a female paradise flycatcher. A pollen's vanga was also heard here, along with brown mesquite, but neither of the latter two would make an appearance.

Taking a moment to catch our breath after all the excitement, the birds kept coming, as yet another male nelicourvi weaver and grey-crowned tetraka were picked up, with the latter showing well for what is usually a decidedly shy and retiring species. Descending back down to the river, a single lesser vasa parrot flew past, and while listening to the near-constant call of Madagascar cuckoos, a troop of brown lemurs was also enjoyed at close quarters. The lemur theme then continued with the same two golden bamboo lemurs that the whole group had spotted earlier in the day, but having, by now, woken up, we were able to check out their golden features much more clearly.

Crossing the bridge and ascending back up to the park entrance, two or three common jerys were seen before meeting up with the rest of the group for an evening walk. Donning torches and with dusk rapidly descending, the first lemur encountered along the roadside was that of rufous mouse-lemur, which had been encouraged to the forest edge by banana smeared earlier on some branches by the guides. Other tourist groups, in addition to our own, were also present, but with at least four or five mouse lemurs present in just a 100m stretch there was plenty for all to see. While watching one mouse lemur, one of the guests also spotted an Eastern forest red rat feeding on the forest floor.

Stefan Jr then located a glaw's chameleon, which was around a couple of inches in length and the most wonderful emerald green colour. A couple of very handsome caterpillars were also observed in roadside plants here too. An epiphytic orchid belonging to the genus *Aerangis* was also found here and possessed a spray of white, pendant flowers with very long, elegant spurs. was also admired with binoculars here too. Somewhat lower down was another very distinct orchid which may well have been *Oenia rosea*.

Changing our focus back to chameleons, a female O'Shaunessy's female was then found by our guides, followed by a male, with the latter almost entirely red when initially located, before quickly changing dark green as a result of all the attention. A third species of chameleon was then picked up, this being *Calumna fallax*, or deceptive chameleon. This was then quickly followed by a blue-legged chameleon before attention switched back to mammals when a greater dwarf lemur was picked up by eye-shine on the bough of a large roadside tree. Called greater dwarf lemur, this now looks set to be split into a different species called Haute-Matisatra dwarf lemur. Much larger than the mouse lemurs, it had large eyes, befitting a nocturnal species, and a pale belly.

Happy with our haul and an incredibly productive first day in one of Madagascar's most prestigious National Parks, we then headed back to the hotel for dinner and bed.

## **Day 9: Ranomafana National Park - Sahamalaotra Trail (twice) & The Ranomafana Loop**

### **Saturday 23 September 2023**

Rising early for a dawn walk in the forest, six guests, MD & HN convened down at the bus for a 4.30 am start, before driving up to the park entrance to meet our guides. Unfortunately, conditions were far from ideal, with low-lying fog and drizzle in the air, with the plan to walk some of the Sahamalaotra trail. A number of birds were singing in the pre-dawn light with Madagascar magpie robin, Madagascar coucal both heard from

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the forest edge, along with a very noisy Madagascar brush warbler which was calling from somewhere in the dense undergrowth. On the road, the song of a very distant Benson's forest thrush could also be heard, before the group snatched a brief view of a collared nightjar as it flew straight down the road and over our heads.

Walking off the road and onto the trail, a dense patch of undergrowth on either side of the path eventually revealed the briefest of views of a female Crossley's vanga. Well-known as a super-secretive skulker, this is one of a small cadre that Harry calls 'devil birds'! Most, however, caught a brief view of the birds when they shot across the path and back into the sanctuary of the undergrowth.

A little further along the trail, we stopped at a junction where Stefan had heard the call of another 'devil bird' in the form of a Madagascar wood rail. Lining us up, Stefan hoped that the rail would cross the path, and we were in luck when it duly sprinted past the group, looking just like a small, rufous rail. Taking a side path, with dense, secondary forest on either side, a stripe-throated jery was heard, with Stefan giving us an impromptu masterclass to explain the subtle difference between the jery and the similar song of rand's warbler.

Then James, one of our guides, suddenly heard the contact call of Milne-Edwards sifaka, as a group of four or five were duly spotted high up on the ridge. Only distant and brief views were obtained before the lemurs moved off along the ridge and out of view. It was nevertheless great to have good views of a new Critically Endangered species of lemur, which is also considered a speciality of Ranomafana.

Returning back along the same path, a single blue coua was then picked up high in the canopy before returning to the forest edge and a more open area, where rand's warbler, green jery and common newtonia were all seen well. Exiting the forest once again, all then returned to the hotel for a much-deserved breakfast.

Keen to max out our time in the forest, there was little time to rest after breakfast as we headed back up the road and onto the Sahalamaotra Trail for a second visit. First up, was a species of terrestrial orchid at the entrance in the genus *Cynorkis*, with all managing good views of another singing Rand's warbler as we moved back into the forest once more. Taking the same side trail once more, with folk tired and keen to stay on the flat, a couple of red-bellied lemurs were then observed. Taking time to enjoy this sociable and much-underrated lemur, the male of the pair could clearly be picked out with the distinctive pale spots close to his eyes.

Next, our incomparable guide Stefan picked out the call of a yellow-browed oxylabes, a super skulking bird not even seen by MD before. Using a tape briefly, the bird briefly appeared in front of a couple of guests before then disappearing once gain into the dense undergrowth. Hitting a purple patch, good birds were now coming thick and fast, as Stefan and one of the guests were lucky enough to obtain a brief view of a red-fronted coua - another specialist bird of Ranomafana that MD and a guest had also briefly seen the previous day. A Madagascar fluff-tail was then heard from the undergrowth, but on this occasion steadfastly refused to come out and show itself. Some you win, some you lose...!

The sifakas, on this occasion, could not be relocated, but recompense was provided by Stefan Jr who had managed to find a male giraffe-necked weevil, to the obvious delight of the keen photographers in the group as they snapped away at surely one of the world's most astonishing invertebrates. Tired after two intense sessions, the group then returned for lunch, before taking a well-deserved siesta, as the weather had turned hot after the drizzle and fog experienced earlier in the day.

Meeting up later in the afternoon for one last session at Ranomafana, Six guests, MD & HN took the short journey back to park headquarters. We then reunited with our guides to the news that Stefan Snr and Paulette had located a troop of Milne-Edwards just across the bridge and close to the Talatekely Trail. The bad news was that they were currently up a very steep slope! Dropping down to the bridge, a crested drongo was seen before hauling ourselves up a very steep trail running straight up the hill. It was supremely worth all the effort though as the sifakas, this time, were feeding just a few metres away from a heavily sweating, but delighted group. There were at least five lemurs, with the closest members of the troop being a mother

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and baby no older than three months of age. It was utterly joyous watching their behaviour, as they totally disregarded our presence, with a hilarious moment as the baby lemur bounced up and down on his mother's belly, before then hanging from a branch like a gibbon.

After around 10 minutes of the most fabulous entertainment, the troop then bounded off down the hill, giving in the process, the one guest who hadn't fancied climbing the hill the most marvellous solo experience as he convened with the lemurs all alone! Deciding to quit while we were ahead, we then left the forest for one last walk along the road. One of the guests then found a short-horned chameleon low down in the vegetation, before a mixed flock of birds was picked up high in the trees with a pair of pollen's vangas being the highlight. A white-headed vanga was also seen here, along with a male blue vanga - it was simply a 'vanga overload'. A small troop of brown lemurs were then picked up on the other side of the road, posing a problem as to what the the guests should look at first. A tyla's vanga was also seen close to where the lemurs were feeding, as Stefan also pointed out the distinctive tri-syllabic note of the white-headed vanga that was seen earlier and patently still close by.

Always listening to calls, Stefan next pointed out the distinctive call of a pitta-like ground roller, which was heard calling from deep within the forest. This bird was responded to by another hidden elsewhere, but hearing this species is much easier than seeing it! Another short-horned chameleon was then located as we walked back to the minibus, while also listening once more to the seemingly omnipresent sound of numerous calling Madagascar cuckoos. Spending some time to actually try and see one, when then saw a couple, as two chased each other across the canopy.

Returning back to the hotel, everyone then met up for our final dinner at Karibo as we celebrated the end of Ranomafana with a drink with our guides. Before bidding farewell, the group then performed 'The Lamako' to Stefan and his terrific team as thanks for a fabulous couple of days.

## **Day 10: Karibotel, Ranomafana to the Anja Community Reserve & Jardin du Roy Lodge, Isalo - via RN25 & RN7**

### **Sunday 24 September 2023**

Arising for a 6 am breakfast after our last night's stay at Karibo Hotel, the by now well-oiled drill of loading up allowed us to get on the road by 7 am. Heading westwards and back towards towards RN7, we bid farewell to the forest, ahead of a four-hour drive to Anja.

Seeing paddy fields once more, one guest reported a hammerkop, as we started seeing herons once more, in the form of great white and dimorphic egret. Heading southwest, the terrain became evermore drier as we started noticing pied crows in abundance, punctuated by the occasional yellow-billed kite. The highlight of this drive, bird-wise, was that of a female kestrel, eating what appeared to be a lizard.

Reaching the city of Fianarantsoa, Harry explained that the religious denomination in this part of Madagascar is predominantly Catholic, and given the day we saw many residents dressed in their Sunday best. The key landmark in Fianarantsoa, that dominates the old town, is the statue of Mother Mary, which we were able to observe before leaving the city behind.

Befitting the drier environment, we started noticing a different suite of crops, with Harry pointing out a field of Artemisia which is cultivated as a medicinal drug, alongside the endemic grass Papyrus madagascariensis. With grasses now dominating, we began seeing many more zebu herds. Where conditions prevailed, however, rice was still cultivated, and upon entering the Betisileo tribal area, the famed rice terraces could be seen snaking up the hillside. As everyone took photos of this impressive landmark, Harry explained that the soils are so fertile here that this permits three crops to be produced a year.

In the grassland adjacent to the road, we then began to notice the distinctive flappy lark flight revealed the presence of Madagascar larks, with this habitat being their stronghold in the country. The land slowly became

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more dramatic too, with huge granitic outcrops, including that of Andringitra Mountain - the second highest in Madagascar - and its surrounding range. Harry explained that this National Park was a reserve of two halves - with rainforest predominating in the west, while dry grassland takes over in the eastern rain shadow. The rock formations here were astonishing and certainly a welcome change from the flat, featureless terrain on the high plateau.

Stopping for an early lunch at Betisileo Country Lodge, we were able to watch stripe-throated jerys feeding in the trees at the entrance while waiting for the food to arrive. By now it was so hot that everyone opted to take lunch indoors. 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 Daniel and Mila, our local guides for the duration of the visit.

Walking the short distance into the reserve, the first thing to be noticed was the heady smell from the flowering tree *Melia azederach*, or Chinaberry tree, from the Meliaceae family. Passing the small lake adjacent to the reserve, we also noted around 100 red-billed pintail and about half a dozen comb ducks. Above the water, mascarene martins were spotted hawking for insects, while the occasional yellow-billed kites were also picked up. Just inside the forest our guides then showed us a couple of large oustalet's chameleons. One of Madagascar's most distinctive chameleons, their black/white colouration and scales along the entire length go the dorsum made them look just like miniature dinosaurs. A few birds could also be heard singing while the chameleons were photographed, with both Madagascar magpie robin and Madagascar bulbul spotted following a quick scan.

Then just around the first corner, we encountered our first ring-tailed lemurs, for which the reserve is justifiably famed. The first ones spotted were resting up in a tree, but there were plenty lower down as well, including many females with young babies. The lemurs were soon all around us, with the group thrilled to have such a special encounter with surely Madagascar's most iconic lemur. For those as happy to watch as take photos, there was plenty of wonderful behaviour to enjoy, including social grooming, feeding babies, scent marking and regular calling to each other with strange cat-like contact calls. Most of the mothers seemed to have one baby, but one female was also spotted with twins - one on her back while the other was on her front. The babies were also very young, with Daniel and Mila estimating them to be certainly no more than two or three weeks old. Daniel also explained that when the community started the project in 1983 there were just 150 lemurs, but now an estimated 750 lemurs were present - a fine example of a successful initiative, that also financially supports the local community.

Tearing ourselves away from this idyllic scene, we walked slowly back through the forest, with one keen-eyed guest even managing to spot a *Boothis goudotii* frog plastered to leaf. Some of the guests also saw a snake, which appeared to most closely resemble Bernier's striped snake and a lucky few on the way out even saw one of the earlier oustalet's chameleons catching an unfortunate fly with its extendable tongue!

After saying goodbye to our guides, we headed back to the main road, before turning southwest once more. The terrain here was dominated by grassland, and upon passing the town of Ihosy Harry informed us that this area was the home of the Ibarra people - also known as the 'fighting tribe'! We then passed the Horombe Plateau, composed mostly of arid grassland and only punctuated by the occasional dusty settlement situated back from the road. Harry explained that most of this part of Madagascar is 'off-grid', with solar power the only form of electricity for those without a generator. The plateau was also virtually treeless, as we periodically passed large herds of zebu with their attendant herders.

With night falling, we eventually arrived at the town of Isalo, which itself is situated at the edge of the National Park. Just outside the town, we then turned onto a dusty track and towards our hotel, Jardin du Roy. Here a Madagascar nightjar was spotted flitting through the minibus's lights before finally pulling up in front of our palatial accommodation for the beginning of a two-night stay. After such a long journey, everyone was thrilled with such plush surroundings, and once settled into their rooms, the group reconvened for a well-earned drink and delicious meal.

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## Day 11: Jardin du Roy Lodge, to Isalo National Park - Swimming Pool Trail & Namaza Trail

### Monday 25 September 2023

After a terrific night's sleep, the group convened for breakfast at 6.30 am. With two guests keen to rest at the hotel, the group of eight guests then took the short journey back to Isalo, to both pay for our entrance to the park and collect our guide Nirina. On the way we passed plenty of pied crows, a couple of olive bee-eaters & the famous rock formation known locally as 'The Queen of Isalo'.

The park entrance was around 3km down a dirt track, with a Madagascar cisticola seen briefly as we parked up. We then took the Piscina Naturelle Trail, which also takes in a view of Madagascar's 'Grand Canyon'. Passing slowly upwards and through dry woodland, grey-headed lovebirds were noted immediately, with at least four or five noted in one tree alone, along with a couple of ring-tailed lemurs resting in the shade below the path. At this point, a couple of Madagascar bulbuls and a single drongo were also noted, along with a male Madagascar sunbird. The canyon down below also echoed with the sound of a calling Madagascar coucal. Just by the path, a few folk enjoyed a brief view of a female Benson's rock thrush, with Nirina hoping that we'd find the far more colourful male later in the day. Up on the huge rock formations ahead of us, a pair of Madagascar kestrels could be both seen and heard, with both then noisily flying about before eventually resettling back onto the rock face in order to mate! On a small rocky buttress nearby a couple of young Dumeril's Madagascar swift lizards were also noted here, while a common newtonia called in the trees.

Steadily rising once more we left the woodland behind, and as we approached the point where the trail passes between two huge buttresses of rock, Nirina was able to point out Madagascar sundew plants along the path edge. A locust and a couple of Isalo stick insects were also picked up close to hear as well. Nirina then talked about the pile of 'wishing stones', and as we also placed stones on the pile, before making a wish, he also chatted to us about the burial practices of the local people. Practising Animism, the local community here will often place the bones of family members close to prominent viewpoints, following their deaths - With Isalo's hills highly revered as a sacred place.

Now in an area with fire-resistant tapia trees, Nirina explained that they were also the food plant of the Madagascar silk moth. Turning over a few stones, Nirina's next trick was to show the group the endemic scorpion *Opisthacanthus madagascariensis* as a female and a couple of her young were subsequently revealed. The plants were fascinating here, too with a beautiful terrestrial orchid noted alongside *Ischnolepis tuberosa*, a flowering plant not only endemic to Madagascar but also confined solely to the National Park. Looking a little like a broom, this plant is apparently used medicinally to help close the fontanelle of newborn babies.

Walking up to the most astonishing viewpoint, offering a vista over 'Madagascar's Grand Canyon', Nirina then talked about the rock being Jurassic sandstone, which was laid down in bands, and with high levels of iron. Algae has also changed the colour of some rocks, giving them in turn a most attractive hue. We also looked at a couple of the tombs where locals had placed their ancestor's remains.

With the natural swimming pools, on this occasion, a touch too far, we began slowly retracing our steps. Reaching the Tapia woodland once again, one of the guests noted a hoopoe, and as another was quickly spotted all were able to enjoy tremendous views. However, this sighting was quickly trumped when the plaintive calls of cuckoo rollers were picked up. Spinning around, all the group were treated to a fly-by of initially the female, before the more colourful male then followed past us - what a moment! One of the cuckoo rollers was then mobbed by the resident pair of kestrels, which looked diminutive by comparison. Further down, a single Madagascar buzzard was then seen high above the canopy as common fodies called in the trees below.

Boarding the bus once more, the group then took the hour-long drive around to the Namaza Trail before walking across to the woodland down in the valley floor. At this time of the day, the heat was searing, but

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the temperature soon dropped once inside the forest. Along the way, a white-headed vanga high up in a curtain of trees was enjoyed by those who had missed this species in Ranomafana. Taking over a couple of picnic tables both a little further on, and close to the water, we then enjoyed the food brought down for us by two local chefs. While dining, Harry had a banana stolen by a female red-fronted brown lemur, with everyone astonished by its audacity as it ran in and then out with its contraband.

Saying goodbye to five members of the group who were keen to relax by the hotel's pool in the afternoon, the final intrepid three, along with MD and Nirina headed upstream towards the Blue and Black Pools. Initially passing through a spot of dry forest, Nirina was also able to point out a pair of white-browed owls roosting. *Crotalaria grevei*, otherwise known as Parrot's beak-flower, was also noted on the trail here. Slowly working our way upstream, and around large boulders, we stopped to enjoy the dragonflies at one sunny pool. A species of emperor dragonfly was seen here, along with species from the genera *Sympetrum* and possibly *Orthetrum*. With one guest opting to stay here, along with a guide, in order to photograph them.

Moving further up, a few ring-tails were noted in the trees located on top of the canyon's walls, while Nirina was also able to point out in one damp patch a species of insectivorous plant in the genus *Utricularia*. With the sun now dipping behind the canyon walls, it quickly became much cooler as ferns and *Pandanus* palms were noted in abundance. Upon reaching the Blue Pool, we then travelled the short distance further on to reach the waterfall cascading into the Black Pool, which also marked the end of the trail. Returning to the blue pool both guests had a paddle, before MD then stripped off for a swim - and was able to confirm that the water was very cold indeed!

Returning quickly to meet the remaining guest, a male Benson's rock thrush then showed incredibly well with one of the guests managing to take great shots of this rare endemic species. Spiders in the Genus *Nephila* were also noted here. Reaching the forest camp where we'd previously enjoyed lunch, the group were then able to enjoy a Madagascar turtle dove, before being delighted to find a troop of Verreaux's sifakas in the trees, right by the camp and just above the water! Rushing quickly down to enjoy this new lemur, all were delighted to find four or five individuals, including a mother and baby, as they peaceably sat up in the branches while munching on leaves.

Before returning to the bus, however, there was one more treat to come, as a pair of Madagascar hoopoes were spotted feeding on the ground before a single Madagascar buttonquail was then picked up scuttling around in the leaf litter. Returning back to the hotel, the entire group was then reunited for dinner, with plenty of stories to tell about their wonderful day in Isalo.

## **Day 12: Le Jardin du Roy, Isalo to Zombitse National Park & Les Dunes d'Ifaty, Ifaty**

### **Tuesday 26 September 2023**

Rested after a good night's sleep, everyone convened for a delightful breakfast, which preceded a 7.30 am departure. Bidding goodbye to our hosts, we headed west once more along RN7 for the two-hour drive, and to our first stop at Zombitse National Park. Along the way, the seemingly omnipresent yellow-billed kites, Indian mynas and pied crows were all noted as we passed through a series of small holdings, zebu herds, and small villages strung out along the road.

Opening up once again onto grassy plateaus, the distinctive palm trees of *Bismarckia nobilis* soon dominated the landscape, before then reaching the town of Ilakaka. In the early 1990s, there were only about 40 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 60,000 by 2005. Since high profits are at stake, this has become something of a 'cowboy town', with many stalls buying and selling the gemstones the locals have either unearthed or discovered by panning in the river.

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A couple of hours later on, we entered the forest once more, marking the start of Zombitse National Park. Arriving at the park entrance, our three guides, Zerina, Tiavo and Tivery, were waiting for us, with Zerina showing us the endemic succulent plant *Euphorbia enteripholia*, as we shouldered our bags.

With our guides having been out in the forest prior to our arrival to locate some of the reserve's special creatures, the next animal they were keen to show us was, admittedly a touch underwhelming. Zombitse sportive lemur is both a nocturnal and endemic species confined to the park, however as this particular individual was hunkered right down inside a tree cavity created by the loss of a branch, the only part of the animal we could actually see was a small spot of fur poking through a hole in the wood!

Crossing the road and into the main body of the park, a three-eyed lizard was next to be pointed out, with the dark eye-like spot on the back of the reptile's head making its identification very straightforward. Zerina was also able to point another screw-pine, from the genus *Pandanus*, which appeared distinct from many of the other closely related species due to the presence of prop roots. Apparently, this is another plant with medicinal properties, with the roots being used to make a tea that helps relieve asthma.

Spotting wildlife ahead of the group, our guide Thiavo then led us to the location where a single Verreaux's sifaka was relaxing low down in a tree. This was yet another new species of lemur for many in the group, with the animal allowing us to approach to very close quarters, before then finally awaking from its post-lunch snooze. Its athleticism was then demonstrated very impressively as it then proceeded to bound off through the trees. Close to where the sifaka was viewed, our guides were then able to point out a particularly striking orchid in the genus *Erangis*, which possessed long sprays of beautiful white, pendant flowers. Constantly ringing the changes, the guides then tested us with a game called 'Spot the Chameleon', before then pointing out to the flummoxed group a simply huge male Oustalet's chameleon. Lying parallel to a branch, Harry estimated the creature's length (along with its tail) to be around 70cm, making it surely one of the world's largest chameleons.

Continuing our walk, a beautiful and familiar call suddenly stopped us in our tracks. The call of the cuckoo-roller was heard by all, before rounding the corner we were lucky enough to catch up with a pair perching in a tree. Perhaps best described as an 'avian oddity', this bird has diverged, in an evolutionary sense, so far from any other species, that it has the rare distinction of being placed in its own family - the Leptisomidae. By now, we were experiencing the full heat for the day, meaning water breaks had to be taken frequently as we followed our guides along the park's dry and dusty trails. There was to be no let-up in the wildlife, however, as our guides next pointed out a standing day gecko on a tree trunk. And just around the corner, a second much larger specimen was observed, as everyone reached for their cameras once more.

With bird sightings, up to this point, relatively few and far between this injustice was quickly corrected when a male giant coua was spotted in the undergrowth. This large ground-dwelling member of this endemic Malagasy family could perhaps be described as a cross between a pheasant and a ground cuckoo and ultimately showed very well after a bit of patience. A female, possibly its partner, was then spotted close by. A crested drongo was also noted here before this common species was trumped by a single greater vasa parrot, which was tucked up and out of the heat of the day in the canopy of a tree. MD was also able to point out two common jerys while feeding in the canopy of an adjacent tree here too. The pendulum then swung gloriously back to lemurs with the discovery by our guides of a troop of Verreaux's sifaka, asleep high up in a tree. Patently having had their breakfast earlier in the morning, most of the six members were draped across various branches, while busily digesting the contents of their stomachs. And did not seem even remotely perturbed by the admirers taking their photos some 20m below on the forest floor.

With our time in Zombitse slowly drawing to an end, we began heading to the entrance. After a brief diversion, in an ultimately failed attempt to locate a calling cocquerel's coua, enjoyed our packed lunches by the park's entrance.

Thanking our guides for a terrific few hours in the forest, we then turned back onto the RN7 and towards our final destination of the day - the small coastal town of Ifaty. Around 30 mins west of Zombitse is the small

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town of Sakaraha, where Harry was able to point out a very distinctively ship-shaped tomb. Both adorned by around 40 zebu skulls and fenced off, Harry explained that this was patently the burial place of someone of great importance from 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 creates an incredibly strong liquor, with apocryphal tales of some locals losing their sight after Tokagasy-fuelled binges!

With the road now finally quieter and in better condition, we were able to increase our speed, with a few macaque doves noted as we approached Tuléar. Entering Tuléar at rush hour, this large coastal town, which is the third largest in Madagascar, was a riot of colour and noise. Obviously market day in the town, 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, we left the town behind, and the countryside changed to that of grassland, with distant dunes and salt pans at the coast just visible on the horizon. Passing an array of marshy and brackish areas, a couple of black-winged stilts were then spotted.

With our lodge now close by, the surrounding terrain began changing dramatically as we took in beaches, mangroves and dunes for the first time. Driving down the private road to Les Dunes d'Ifaty in darkness a Madagascar nightjar flash past the headlights before we finally pulled into the car park. Checking in, and with all so tired after such a long day spent both spotting wildlife and driving, the decision was made to abandon a pre-arranged night walk, which would in turn allow us proper time to shower before an early dinner. Retiring earlier to bed would also give us the opportunity for a proper night's sleep before our dawn date with the spiny forest the following day.

**Day 13: Reniala Private Reserve, Ifaty & then either snorkelling or local salt pans. To Toliara & flight to Antananarivo Airport in the evening. Overnight at the Relais des Plateaux**

**Wednesday 27 September 2023**

Meeting outside the lodge just before 5 am, we all boarded the minibus for the short drive to the spiny forest, with hopefully an exciting morning's bird and mammal watching ahead of us. Picking up our guide, Relache, en route, dawn was breaking as we parked up at the entrance to the reserve. The private reserve is owned and managed by Relache's family and is not only a stunning place, but an astonishingly important one for a number of 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 by the early morning orange glow. Walking along the sandy path and into the reserve, the first bird to be spotted was a Madagascar nightjar, as it flew straight past the group - a good sign of things to come! Plenty of birds were singing at this time, with stripe-throated jery heard to the right, while a common jery was holding territory on the other side. A little further on Relache then picked up the call of two crested couas calling against one another, and after following him 'off-piste' we eventually caught up with one of the members of this handsome species high up in a tree.

The spiny forest was also a botanist's delight, as we also marvelled at both species of baobab and the octopus trees, which are the standout features of this incredibly rare habitat. The reserve appears to be very well managed too, with many plants possessing labels denoting both the common Malagasy names alongside the scientific name of species.

A little further on, Relache's spotters had managed to track down one of the reserve's mega rarities - sub-desert mesite. Restricted to the dry forests of the island's southwest, this species is one of three mesites to be encountered across Madagascar. The mesites are considered so different from any other birds that they have even been placed in their very own family - the Mesitornithidae. Famed for freezing when they feel threatened, this individual too was stock-still on a branch - presumably hoping not to be seen, which allowed all in the group the opportunity to fill their boots with this enigmatic and exceptionally rare bird.

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In addition to the immense rarities, common & widespread birds were also present, such as Madagascar magpie robin, for example. But it was not long before we were enjoying yet another of Ifaty's rare birds, in the form of long-tailed ground-roller. Considered the most sort after bird at Ifaty, this species is usually seen pacing around on the forest's sandy floor, almost like a chilled-out roadrunner, but this individual appeared to be quite happy perched in a tree, allowing everyone, once more, to gain the most marvellous views of this stunning bird.

Relache then heard the call of sickle-billed vanga in the distance, and while trying (ultimately unsuccessfully) to track this species down, the rare duo of both Archbold's newtonia and sub-desert tetraka, were spotted, which were both new birds even for MD. Despite both being quite secretive, after a little patience most members of the group managed to see both of these endemics to Madagascar's southwestern forests. While peering through the undergrowth, a Chabert's vanga was also spotted higher in the canopy here too.

A little further on, a small mixed bird flock was encountered, which appeared to comprise mostly common fodies and common jeries, but these were quickly abandoned in order to catch up with Relache ahead, who had managed to find a running coua. So-called, as it mostly tends to run around the forest floor, this individual, however, was quietly perched up in the branches of a tree instead. Quickly dropping to the ground, the group were subsequently able to see why the bird was so-called! And just a few yards away, the coua theme continued with a red-capped coua, which can also - and confusingly - be called green-capped coua, according to where the bird is encountered. Our individual appeared to have a primarily russet-coloured cap as we watched it perching high up in a tree.

Changing from feathers to fur, Relache and his team of spotters were then able to show us our second species of sportive lemur in as many days. The solitary white-footed sportive lemur was wedged into a spiny crack in between two branches, and being a nocturnal species was patently resting up after a night's foraging. Its large chestnut eyes were quite mesmerising, as it looked down at the humans below with more than a measure of utter disinterest.

Slowly preparing to walk back, Relache then pointed out quite possibly the best surprise of the trip - a lesser hedgehog tenrec. Looking just like a miniature hedgehog, Harry put the find in context by explaining that this was only the second time he'd ever seen this species. Being a species that tends to hibernate through the dry season, it looked to have just emerged, with everyone clambering for photos of this simply terrific animal. And the sighting of new species continued, as a warty chameleon was spotted in the undergrowth near the entrance to the reserve. Upon walking out of the reserve a number of locals had also accumulated to sell us all the local crafts that they'd made. There was still, however, time for one last bird, as MD spotted some weaver bird nests, in a tree just outside the entrance. Constructed by sakalava weavers, a male was subsequently located while carrying out some running repairs to its nest. A closer inspection then revealed at least four or five birds tucked away in their nests too. While walking back to the bus, one of the guests managed to spot a Madagascar button quail, which MD had previously seen with a few guests at Isalo. And upon driving out, after a most successful visit, a namaqua dove flashed in front of the bus.

Taking breakfast back at the lodge, some of the guests then chose the option of a brief snorkelling trip out to the fringing coral reef, while others relaxed back at the lodge. Afterwards, all reunited for a 1 pm lunch. While dining, a group of around 15 grey-headed love birds flew into the tree just a few yards away, before a Madagascar giant swallowtail butterfly was then enjoyed while it, too, enjoyed lunch from the various flowering shrubs dotted around the restaurant.

Still surprisingly hot at 3 pm, this did not, however, deter five guests, as they joined MD & Harry for a spot of birding along the coast. Picking up Relache on the way, Indian mynas and crested drongo were observed before reaching the afternoon's destination. Despite being tough to spot birds at the saltpan, due to both the distance and the fact we were looking into the sun, a greenshank and two Kittlitz plover were nevertheless recorded. With the help of MD's scope, a grey heron was also spotted through the heat haze.

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Jumping back into the minibus, we moved onto a site a touch further south called Belalanda, comprising of a number of brackish pools. Taking to foot, the fringing cypress grasses along the way held common fodies and Madagascar cisticolas. The smell of the site, it has to be said, was quite ripe, but this did not seem to bother the birds, as we heard the distinctive call of whimbrel, before picking up a couple of these long-leafed waders. Another bird that occasionally visits British shores - the curlew sandpiper - was then spotted, with three picked up at the edge of the water. Close by, three Madagascar bee-eaters were also the source of considerable admiration, while a flock of around thirty greater flamingoes were spotted way off in the distance, along with some great white egrets.

On the edge of the mud, a different plover was also noted. This wader was both larger than the Kitlitz plover seen earlier and in winter plumage, and after a good deal of debate, we decided it was a lesser sand plover. By now, however, time was once again against us, so we walked back to the minibus in preparation for an early dinner.

Loaded up once more, we checked out of our hotel with darkness descending for the short journey to the Tuléar Airport and our flight back to Antananarivo. Before heading into the airport, we bid farewell to our fabulous (and safe) driver Lanza. Despite arriving good time, the flight was unfortunately delayed by close to three hours, necessitating a long wait in Departures. Eventually, we did manage to board, and after a 90-minute flight, were dropped off at our hotel close to the capital's airport. It was not until well after 2 am that we finally managed to check in, and with everyone so tired, the entire group headed straight for bed after a long but incredibly enjoyable wildlife-filled day.

#### **Day 14: Visit to the Parc de Tsarasaotra, followed by local shops and onwards to Antananarivo International Airport for the flight home**

##### **Thursday 28 September 2023**

Waking up late, most of the guests just managed to squeeze into breakfast before the 10 am shut-off time, and suitably satiated all then reunited at 12 noon for our last wildlife spotting session. First order of the day was a visit to the Tsarasaotra Wetland Reserve in the heart of Antananarivo. This is the capital's only RAMSAR site and consists of two large lakes completely separated from the hubbub of the city by a wall. It is also simply the best place to watch herons and wildfowl in the whole of Madagascar's central Highlands.

Just a short trip from the hotel, we parked up outside, before then walking in and were immediately confronted by more birds than we had seen all trip. In the centre of the first lake was an island containing a huge number of dimorphic egrets (of both colour forms), squacco herons, black-crowned night herons, cattle and great white egrets, but the most attention was focussed on the vast flock of wildfowl on the water too. Here, hundreds and possibly thousands, of red-billed teal were present, along with a lesser number of white-faced whistling ducks, which were mostly relaxing either at the water's edge or roosting on fallen trees.

After a good scan MD managed to find at least four or five hottentot teal among the two more numerous species. Walking slowly around the first lake in an anti-clockwise fashion, we eventually reached the second pond, where the invasive water hyacinth still looked to be choking much of the water. Some attempts are being made to remove this aquatic plant, as evidenced by the huge rotting piles mounded up on the lake's banks. On the second lake, black-crowned night herons were sharing the space predominantly with squacco herons and cattle egrets, while a few striated herons were also observed here. Common moorhens were also noticeable here and despite looking very similar to our British moorhen, the Malagasy equivalent is considered a different sub-species.

Walking back around the first lake to the entrance, one of the guests then spotted a Madagascar kestrel, while MD also heard the staccato call of a Madagascar brush warbler in amongst the thick riparian vegetation. MD then spotted a couple of Meller's ducks, a rare Madagascan endemic duck, with another couple subsequently found a little later on, but the star bird was hidden in amongst the egrets on the island by Harry.

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Madagascar pond heron is distinguished by its creamy white plumage, blue cere and bill with pinkish legs - and represented a cracking find! This is the only known place that this species inhabits all of central Madagascar and is categorised as 'Endangered' by the IUCN.

Blissfully happy with our haul and invigorated by a visit to such a super site, the group then boarded the minibus before taking lunch back at the hotel. Many guests then chose to go gift shopping for family and friends back home, before then reuniting for our last Malagasy dinner. All that remained then, was to load up for the short trip to Antananarivo's International Airport for our flights home. Singing the 'Lamako' to our fabulous guide, Harry, Nirina one last time, we bid farewell to our Malagasy friend and headed off for the flight back to Paris, the short hop across to either London or Manchester and onwards to home after a life-enhancing and unforgettable trip.

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# Checklist for Madagascar with Mike Dilger



	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
	<b>BIRDS</b>															
1	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</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	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>													✓	
12	Madagascar crested ibis	<i>Lophotibis cristata</i>		H												
13	White-faced whistling duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>						✓								✓
14	Comb duck	<i>Sarkidiornis melanotos</i>											✓			
15	Meller's duck	<i>Anas melleri</i>														✓
16	Red-billed teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>				✓						✓				✓
17	Hottentot teal	<i>Anas hottentota</i>														✓
18	Madagascar harrier	<i>Circus macroscelus</i>										✓				
19	Madagascar buzzard	<i>Buteo brachypterus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			
20	Bat Hawk	<i>Machaeramphus alcinus</i>														
21	Yellow-billed kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		

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22	Madagascar harrier-hawk	<i>Polybroides radiatus</i>		✓					✓							
23	Henst's goshawk	<i>Accipiter henstii</i>					H				H					
24	Madagascar kestrel	<i>Falco newtoni</i>	✓		✓				✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
25	Madagascar buttonquail	<i>Turnix nigricollis</i>											✓		✓	
26	Brown mesite	<i>Mesitornis unicolor</i>								H						
27	Subdesert mesite	<i>Monias benschi</i>													✓	
28	Madagascar flufftail	<i>Sarothrura insularis</i>									✓					
29	Madagascar wood rail	<i>Mentocrex kioloides</i>	✓								✓					
30	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>														✓
31	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>												✓	✓	
32	Madagascar pratincole	<i>Glareola ocularis</i>			✓		✓									
33	Lesser sand plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>														✓
34	Kittlitz's plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>														✓
35	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>														✓
36	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>														✓
37	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>														✓
38	Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>														✓
39	Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓													
40	Madagascar turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia picturata</i>					✓						✓			
41	Namaqua dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>												✓	✓	
42	Madagascar blue pigeon	<i>Alectroenas madagascariensis</i>		✓												
43	Grey-headed lovebird	<i>Agapornis cana</i>											✓	✓		
44	Lesser vasa parrot	<i>Coracopsis nigra</i>					✓			✓						✓
45	Crested Coua	<i>Coua cristata</i>														✓
46	Blue Coua	<i>Coua caerulea</i>	✓				✓				✓					
47	Red-fronted Coua	<i>Coua reynaudii</i>								✓	✓					
48	Red-breasted Coua	<i>Coua serriana</i>														✓
49	Coquerel's Coua	<i>Coua coquereli</i>													H	

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50	Running Coua	<i>Coua cursor</i>														✓	
51	Giant Coua	<i>Coua gigas</i>														✓	
52	Madagascar coucal	<i>Centropus toulou</i>		✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
53	Madagascar cuckoo	<i>Cuculus rochii</i>		✓			H			H	✓			H	✓		
54	Collared nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus enarratus</i>									✓						
55	Madagascar nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus madagascariensis</i>		✓	H	H						H	H	H	✓		
56	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓								
57	Madagascar scops owl	<i>Otus rutilus</i>		✓			✓										
58	White-browed owl	<i>Ninox superciliaris</i>											✓				
59	African palm swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>		✓						✓	✓						
60	African black swift	<i>Apus barbatus</i>			✓												
61	Madagascar malachite kingfisher	<i>Alcedo vintsioides</i>			✓			✓	✓				✓				
62	Velvet asity	<i>Philepitta castanea</i>		✓						✓							
63	Olive bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓				✓		✓			
64	Cuckoo roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor</i>								H			✓	✓			
65	Madagascar hoopoe	<i>Upupa marginata</i>											✓				
66	Pitta-like ground roller	<i>Atelornis pittoides</i>								✓	H						
67	Long-tail ground roller	<i>Uratelornis chimaera</i>														✓	
68	Common sunbird asity	<i>Neodrepanis coruscans</i>		✓													
69	Yellow-bellied sunbird asity	<i>Neodrepanis hypoxantha</i>							✓								
70	Madagascar green sunbird	<i>Nectarinia notata</i>		✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
71	Souimanga Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia souimanga</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
72	Madagascar lark	<i>Mirafrha hova</i>										✓	✓	✓			
73	Mascarene martin	<i>Phedina borbonica</i>		✓						✓	✓						
74	Brown-throated martin	<i>Riparia paludicaola</i>						✓	✓								
75	Madagascar wagtail	<i>Motacilla flaviventris</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
76	Forest rock thrush	<i>Monticola sharpei</i>									H		✓				

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77	Madagascar magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus albospecularis</i>					✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	
78	Madagascar stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓									
79	Common jery	<i>Neomixis tenella</i>		✓					✓				✓		✓	
80	Green jery	<i>Neomixis viridis</i>		✓					✓	✓						
81	Stripe-throated jery	<i>Neomixis striatigula</i>		✓						✓	✓				H	
82	Rand's warbler	<i>Randia pseudozosterops</i>		✓					✓	✓						
83	Madagascar brush-warbler	<i>Nesillas typica</i>									H					H
84	Sub-desert brush-barbler	<i>Nesillas lantzi</i>													✓	
85	Spectacled tetraka	<i>Xanthomixis zosterops</i>							✓	✓						
86	Grey-crowned tetraka	<i>Xanthomixis cinereiceps</i>							✓	✓						
87	Long-billed tetraka	<i>Bernieria madagascariensis</i>							✓							
88	White-throated oxylabes	<i>Oxylabes madagascariensis</i>							✓							
89	Madagascar yellowbrow	<i>Crossleyia xanhophrys</i>								✓						
90	Madagascar white-eye	<i>Zosterops maderaspatanus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓					
91	Archbold's newtonia	<i>Newtonia archboldi</i>													✓	
92	Common newtonia	<i>Newtonia brunneicauda</i>	✓	✓					✓	✓			✓		✓	
93	Red-tailed vanga	<i>Calicalicus madagascariensis</i>	✓	✓						✓						
94	Blue vanga	<i>Cyanolanius madagascarinus</i>		✓						✓	✓					
95	Chabert's vanga	<i>Leptopterus chabert</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓					✓	
96	White-headed vanga	<i>Leptopterus viridis</i>								✓	✓		✓			
97	Hook-billed vanga	<i>Vanga curvirostris</i>				✓										
98	Madagascar cuckoo-shrike	<i>Coracina cinerea</i>					✓			✓						
99	Madagascar bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes madagascariensis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			
100	Tylas vanga	<i>Tylas eduardi</i>		✓						✓	✓					

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101	Pollen's vanga	<i>Xenopirostris polleni</i>								H	✓					
102	Madagascar paradise flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	
103	Nuthatch vanga	<i>Hypositta corallirostris</i>		✓	✓											
104	Crossley's vanga	<i>Mystacornis crossleyi</i>									✓					
105	Ward's vanga	<i>Pseudobias wardi</i>		✓												
106	Crested drongo	<i>Dicrurus forficatus</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	Y	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
107	Pied crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>			✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
108	Common myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	✓				✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
109	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓			✓								
110	Nelicourvi weaver	<i>Ploceus nelicourvi</i>								✓	✓					
111	Sakalava weaver	<i>Ploceus sakalava</i>														✓
112	Madagascar fody	<i>Foudia madagascariensis</i>	✓	✓				✓					✓			
113	Forest Fody	<i>Foudia omissa</i>								✓	✓					
114	Madagascar Mannikin	<i>Lonchura nana</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	Crossley's dwarf lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus crossleyi</i>	✓													
5	Haute Matsiatra dwarf lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus grovesi</i>								✓						
6	Zombitse sportive lemur	<i>Lepilemur hubbardorum</i>												✓		
7	Petter's sportive lemur (white-footed?)	<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>	✓	✓			✓			✓	✓					

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13	Red-fronted brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur rufifrons</i>								✓			✓			
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	<i>Indri indri</i>	✓	H			✓									
21	Aye-aye	<i>Daubentonia madagascariensis</i>				✓	✓									
22	Crowned Lemur (Introduced)	<i>Eulemur coronatus</i>					✓									
23	Black Lemur (Introduced)	<i>Eulemur macaco</i>					✓									
24	Lesser hedgehog tenrec	<i>Echinops telfairi</i>														✓
25	Eastern red forest rat	<i>Nesomys rufus</i>								✓						
	<b>AMPHIBIANS</b>															
1	Betsileo reed frog	<i>Heterixalus betsileo</i>		✓												
2	Madagascar reed frog	<i>Heterixalus madagascariensis</i>					✓									
3	Pointy frog spp.	<i>Blommersia sp.</i>														
4	Madagascar tree frog	<i>Boophis madagascariensis</i>	✓							✓	✓					
5	Green bright-eyed frog	<i>Boophis viridis</i>	✓													
6	Goudot's bright-eyed frog	<i>Boophis goudoti</i>											✓			
	<b>REPTILES</b>															
1	Radiated Tortoise	<i>Astrochelys radiata</i>				✓	✓									
2	Short-horned chameleon	<i>Calumma brevicorne</i>	✓	✓												
3	Deceptive chameleon	<i>Calumma falax</i>									✓					
4	Glaw's chameleon	<i>Calumma glawi</i>								✓						
5	Big nose chameleon	<i>Calumma nasutum</i>	✓	✓						✓	✓					
6	O'Shaughnessy's chameleon	<i>Calumma oshaughnessyi</i>								✓						

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7	Parson's chameleon	<i>Calumma parsoni</i>	✓														
8	Panther chameleon	<i>Furcifer pardalis</i>				✓											
9	Oustalet's chameleon	<i>Furcifer oustaleti</i>	✓									✓	✓				
10	Warty chameleon	<i>Furcifer verrucosus</i>											✓	✓			
11	Three-eyed lizard	<i>Chalerodon madagascariensis</i>											✓				
12	Dumeril's Madagascar swift	<i>Oplurus quadrimaculatus</i>										✓					
13	Cuvier's Madagascar swift					✓											
14	Gravenhorst's skink	<i>Trachylepis gravenhorstii</i>				✓											
15	Lined day gecko	<i>Phelsuma lineata</i>		✓	✓												
16	Peacock day gecko	<i>Phelsuma quadriocellata</i>								✓							
17	Standing's day gecko	<i>Phelsuma standingi</i>											✓				
18	House gecko sp.	<i>Hemidactylus sp.</i>														✓	
19	Mossy leaf-tailed gecko	<i>Uroplatus sikorae</i>	✓	✓													
20	Madagascar tree boa	<i>Sanzinia madagascariensis</i>				✓											
21	Bernier's striped snake	<i>Dromicodryas bernieri</i>										✓					
	<b>BUTTERFLIES &amp; MOTHS</b>																
1	Citrus swallowtail	<i>Papilio demodocus</i>										✓					
2	Green lady	<i>Graphium cyrnus</i>										✓	✓				
3	Madagascar orange tip	<i>Colotis evanthe</i>		✓								✓					
4	Grass yellow sp.	<i>Eurema</i>										✓					
5	African monarch	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>										✓					
6	Madagascar beauty	<i>Salamis anteva</i>		✓													
7	Acraea spp.	<i>Acraea spp.</i>								✓							
8	Brilliant blue	<i>Junonia rhadama</i>					✓					✓					
9	Comet moth	<i>Argema mittrei</i>	✓	✓													
10	Owl moth	<i>Erebus Sp</i>	✓														
11	Blue spp.	<i>Family Lycaenidae</i>						✓									
	<b>INVERTEBRATES</b>																

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1	Giant pill millipedes 40 spp.			✓			✓										
2	Golden orb web spiders	<i>Nephila spp.</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓									
3	Giraffe-necked weevil	<i>Trachelophorus giraffa</i>		✓							✓						
4	Flatid leaf insect	<i>Pyromania rosea</i>									✓	✓					
5	Preying mantis spp.									✓							
6	Stick insect spp.			✓													
7	Crab spider spp.			✓													
8	Isalo stick-insect	<i>Acrioptera impennis</i>												✓			
9	Madagascar scorpion	<i>Opiscanthus madagascariensis</i>												✓			
10	Scarlet dragonfly	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>												✓			
11	Black ground skimmer	<i>Diplacodes lefebvrei</i>												✓			
12	Madagascar emperor	<i>Anax tumorifer</i>												✓			
13	Demoiselle species			✓													

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	<b>Miscellaneous plant species</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>	<b>Location</b>
1	Traveller's palm	<i>Ravenala madagascariensis</i>	Widespread
2	Floss flower	<i>Ageratum houstonianum</i>	Widespread
3	Pinkball tree	<i>Dombeya wallichii</i>	Widespread
4	Blue porterweed	<i>Stachystarpheta jamaicensis</i>	Widespread
5	Old world forked fern	<i>Dicranopteris linearis</i>	Widespread
6	Crown of thorns	<i>Euphorbia milli</i>	Widespread
7	Soursop	<i>Annona muricata</i>	Andasibe
8	Giant crinum lily	<i>Crinum asiaticum</i>	Andasibe
9	Stag's horn clubmoss	<i>Lycopodium clavatum</i>	Andasibe
10	Giant bramble	<i>Rubus alcelifolius</i>	Andasibe
11	Orchid species	<i>Bulbophyllum sp.</i>	Andasibe
12	Orchid species	<i>Angraecum sp.</i>	Andasibe
13	Endemic orchid species	<i>Bulbophyllum analamazaotrensis</i>	Andasibe
14	Epiphytic orchid sp.	<i>Microcoelia sp.</i>	Andasibe
15	Terrestrial orchid sp.	<i>Cynorkis sp.</i>	Andasibe
16	Madagascar flame tree	<i>Delonix regia</i>	Andasibe
17	Palm sp.	<i>Dypsis louvellii</i>	Andasibe
18		<i>Crotalaria retusa</i>	Palmarium
19	Banks' grevillea	<i>Grevillea banksii</i>	Palmarium
20	Madagascan periwinkle	<i>Catharanthus roseus</i>	Palmarium
21	Pitcher plant species	<i>Nepenthes madagasariensis</i>	Palmarium
22	Norfolk Island pine	<i>Araucaria heterophylla</i>	Palmarium
23		<i>Laportea humblotii</i>	Ranomafana
24		<i>Dichaetanthera sp.</i>	Ranomafana
25	Madagascar giant bamboo	<i>Cathariostachys madagascariensis</i>	Ranomafana
26	Endemic orchid species	<i>Oenia rosea</i>	Ranomafana
27		<i>Miconia crenata</i>	Ranomafana
28	Australian bottlebrush	<i>Callistemon sp.</i>	Palmarium
29	African Senna	<i>Senna didymobotrya</i>	Palmarium
30		<i>Dianella ensiflora</i>	Andasibe
31	Mistletoe cactus	<i>Rhipsalis baccifera</i>	Andasibe
32		<i>Justicia hilaris</i>	Andasibe
33	Chinaberry tree	<i>Melia azedarach</i>	Anja
34		<i>Papyrus madagascariensis</i>	Anja
35		<i>Artemisia annua</i>	Crop
36		<i>Psiadia altissima</i>	?
37	Creeping ox-eye	<i>Sphagneticola trilobata</i>	Widespread
38		<i>Ischnolepis tuberosa</i>	Isalo
39	Tapia	<i>Uapaca bojeri</i>	Isalo
40		<i>Convolvulus aschersonii</i>	Isalo
41	Bladderwort sp.	<i>Utricularia sp.</i>	Isalo

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42	Parrot's beak	<i>Crotalaria grevei</i>	Isalo
43	Farafatsy	<i>Givotia madagascariensis</i>	Ifaty
44	Bismarck palm	<i>Bismarckia nobilis</i>	Zombitse
45		<i>Euphorbia enteripholia</i>	Zombitse
46	Orchid species	<i>Erangis sp.</i>	Zombitse
47	Madagascan butterfly bush	<i>Buddleja madagascariensis</i>	?
48	Octopus tree	<i>Didiera madagascariensis</i>	Ifaty
49		<i>Fernandoa madagascariensis</i>	Ifaty
50		<i>Folotsia floribunda</i>	Ifaty
51		<i>Henonia scoparia</i>	Ifaty
52		<i>Cedrolepsis grevei</i>	Ifaty
53		<i>Cordyla madagascarienses</i>	Ifaty
54	Baobab sp. 1	<i>Adansonia za</i>	Ifaty
55	Baobab sp. 2	<i>Adansonia rubrostipa</i>	Ifaty
56		<i>Dalbergia trichocarpa</i>	Ifaty
57		<i>Delonix floribunda</i>	Ifaty
58	Common water hyacinth	<i>Pontederia crassipes</i>	Tsarasaotra

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