MADAGASCAR WITH A DIFFERENCE TOUR REPORT 2022

3 - 21 November 2022

by Mark Van Beirs

Extraordinary birds, exquisite lemurs, cute chameleons and incredibly bad roads characterized our recent Madagascar with a difference tour. We managed to observe several very rarely encountered species like Madagascar Serpent Eagle, Sakalava Rail, Madagascar Pochard, Red Owl, Slender-billed Flufftail and Helmet and Bernier's Vangas and also found a great supporting cast consisting of goodies like White-breasted and Brown Mesites, Madagascar Wood Rail, Madagascar Buttonquail, Madagascar Jacana, Madagascar Ibis, Madagascar Fish Eagle, Short-legged and Scaly Ground Rollers, Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, Sooty Falcon, Schlegel's Asity, Van Dam's, Sicklebilled, Nuthatch, Rufous and Crossley's Vangas and White-throated Oxylabes. Great mammals included an impressive Fossa and a good selection of lemurs including Hairy-eared Dwarf, Moore's Woolly, Scott's Sportive, Red Ruffed and White-fronted Brown Lemurs. A variety of interesting chameleons, geckos and an unusual frog completed the animal tally. Sadly, no maintenance has happened on the Madagascar roads for a very long time, resulting in markedly longer travel times since our last tour here. This tour is definitely a trip for the more adventurous naturalists!

The first day of this "different" tour started with a long drive from the capital Antananarivo (Tana) to the Ankarafantsika National Park, courtesy of the cancelling of our flight to Mahajanga by the local airline. Our three 4×4 vehicles crossed the grassy, often burnt and usually birdless central plateau without too much trouble. A couple of brief roadside stops gave us endemics like Madagascar Pratincole, Madagascar Stonechat and Madagascar Lark. A nice patch of wetland held a rare Madagascar Jacana and a pair of smart African Pygmy Geese. In late afternoon we arrived at the HQ of the Ankarafantsika National Park and a brief outing to the edge of the nearby lake produced scope views of the scarce Madagascar Fish Eagle (an adult and a young). A party of amazing Sickle-billed Vangas and several endearing Coquerel's Sifakas were noted just before sunset.

Early next morning found us in a beautiful stretch of deciduous forest where we soon connected with a trio of White-breasted Mesites (almost at our feet – marvellous) and a nest-building pair of exquisite Schlegel's Asities. We scoped a pair of Frances's Sparrowhawks and also observed Hookbilled Vanga and more regular fare like Madagascar Drongo, Common Newtonia, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Common Jery, Malagasy Bulbul and Souimanga Sunbird. After a quick look at the lake, where Humblot's and Purple Herons and Mascarene Martins showed, we moved to the famous grid. Here we admired a cracking male Rufous Vanga and after getting drenched, we finally found a nice male Van Dam's Vanga, which allowed great scope views. We also obtained

excellent looks at Crested, Red-capped and Coquerel's Couas and a wet Torotoroka Scops Owl. After lunch a party of at least seven Sooty Falcons were found hunting insects over the forest. Madagascar Green Pigeons and Malagasy Green Sunbird were also noted. In mid-afternoon we said goodbye to this beautiful park and drove to the rather seedy town of Mahajanga where we stayed at a nice hotel near the sea.

We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at our hotel as the ferry to the south shore of the Betsiboka river was planned to leave in mid-morning. Nothing of note was seen on the crossing and the drive through the beautiful Borassus palm forest was quite exciting as it had rained recently making for some interesting mud-skidding. We drove for most of the afternoon, getting stuck several times in treacherous patches and we lost quite a bit of time at the river crossing near our destination, as the very simple ferry (three old metal boats tied together that were towed across a river) also had to handle a good number of ox carts. Eventually we reached our comfortable camp in the early evening. The spacious brand-new tents had been erected already and although the beer was a tad warm, we enjoyed our first evening on the tranquil shore of famous Lake Kinkony. The only bird of note seen on the drive was a Madagascar Harrier-Hawk.

After an early breakfast we boarded three small, oar-propelled boats that took us out into the reedbeds of Lake Kinkony. We first found a good selection of herons including lovely Little Bitterns and Malagasy Pond, Black and Purple Herons. Knob-billed Duck, African Swamphen, Madagascar Jacana, Whiskered Tern, Yellow-billed Stork, Glossy Ibis, African Spoonbill, lots of Malagasy Kingfishers and Madagascar Swamp Warbler were further additions to the tally. After a fair bit of scanning reed edges along the narrow channels through the reedbeds, a smashing Sakalava Rail was spotted and we stayed with this extremely rare rail for a terrific 15 minutes as it showed off perched up on an elevated reed stem. We obtained really cracking views of this much wanted endemic!! After this much appreciated boat trip, we took a walk in the nearby open forest where Grey-headed Lovebird and White-headed Vanga showed. After a rest in the middle of the day – it was exceedingly hot – we further explored the surroundings of our camp and came away with lots of Sakalava Weavers and Madagascar Mannikins. Although we sent out local guides to find the localized Van Der Decken's Sifakas none could be tracked down, sadly.

Early next morning we broke up camp and retraced our steps towards the ferry at Katsepy. We experienced a rather eventful journey with stuck vehicles, broken bridges, an exceedingly slow small ferry etc, but eventually, in mid-afternoon, we reached the beach where we were lucky to still find the ship. It should have left at midday but was luckily delayed for several hours ("Madagascar time"). We shared the ferry with c30 Zebu oxen that definitely hated the sea crossing. The drive yielded several Madagascar Buttonquail and African Openbills and the ferry crossing gave us a party of Saunders's Terns. A much-appreciated hot shower and some cold beers made for a nice evening.

Next day was an uneventful travel day as we made our way north along increasingly worsening roads to the small town of Antsohihy. Another travelling day followed and on the journey we picked up several Eleonora's Falcons and a Sooty Falcon. The final 45 km will be long remembered as they must rate as some of the very worst tracks, we have ever driven on a Birdquest tour!! We finally arrived late in the evening at our camping spot at the edge of beautiful rainforest.

Our full day at Bemanevika was truly magical. It started with point blank sightings of c30 Madagascar Pochards (one of the rarest duck in the world), and this was soon followed by great looks at a roosting Red Owl (another very rarely observed species). The support cast consisted of

marvels like Meller's Duck, Madagascar Partridge, Blue Coua, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, Madagascar Grebe, Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, Malagasy Brush Warbler, Madagascar Swamp Warbler, Grey Emutail, Madagascar Starling, Forest Rock Thrush, Nelicourvi Weaver and Forest Fody. While munching our lunch we obtained great looks at a cracking female Madagascar Buttonquail making her "platelets". In the afternoon we walked to a nice marsh which gave us excellent views of Madagascar Snipe and exquisite looks at a pair of extremely smart Madagascar Harriers. A magnificent, very rare Slender-billed Flufftail eventually showed extremely well. At dusk some of us took a walk through the nearby forest and found wonders like Greater Dwarf, Brown Mouse and Hairy-eared Dwarf Lemurs. We also saw an as yet undescribed Lemur, which is obviously closely related to the Sportive Lemurs. It was only seen for the first time just over two years ago. But the absolute highlight of the walk was our encounter with an impressive Fossa, which for a short while stared at us only 15 meters away before it disappeared into the forest. We also found three different species of amazing Chameleons (Madagascar Flap-necked, Blue-legged and Shorthorned).

The following day we retraced our steps along that atrocious track, but this time it took much less time (downhill) and everything went smoother. In late afternoon we arrived at our hotel in Antsohihy for a major clean up. Another travelling day ensued, and this time we had to get up in the middle of the night, as our flight departed from Mahajanga just after midday. Upon arrival in Tana, we transferred to our nearby hotel for a relaxed late afternoon and evening.

In late morning we took a flight from Antananarivo to the town of Maroantsetra, situated at the base of the Masoala Peninsula in north-eastern Madagascar. In the afternoon we explored a nearby river mouth by boat and came away with a variety of widespread waterbirds. New for the list were White-fronted Plover, Eurasian Whimbrel and Common Greenshank, but best of all was a nice Marsh Owl that was flushed from a patch of riverine vegetation.

Next morning two speedboats took us across the Helodrano Antongila Bay, past the famous island of Nosy Mangabe (which was once an excellent place to see Aye-aye) to our ecolodge on the western side of the Masoala Peninsula. The seas were delightfully calm and after a bit under two hours we set foot at the beach of our lodge. We settled in and soon went for our first walk in the surrounding forested hills. We were shown a recent nest of a Helmet Vanga, but the chick had left the nest just days ago... a real pity. We walked along the narrow and sometimes steep, root-covered trails and found beauties like Rufous and Tylas Vangas, until our guide suddenly heard the distinctive call of a Helmet Vanga. Not much later one of these spectacular birds was sitting up at eye-level for all of us to admire. What a truly phantastic creature!! A Bernier's Vanga was also heard but couldn't be nailed down. In the camp clearing a pair of Madagascar Ibises performed ever so well and on offshore rocks we scoped many Lesser Crested Terns and a Roseate Tern. An afternoon walk in the nearby hills only produced several delightful Red Ruffed Lemurs. After dinner a few hardy souls went on a nightwalk and came away with four species of lemur: Greater Dwarf, Brown Mouse, Moore's Woolly and Scott's Sportive. All of these showed brilliantly.

A short boat ride took us to a patch of what looked like white sand forest, where after just a few minutes we connected with a vanga flock that held a cracking female Bernier's Vanga. She showed particularly well. Further along the trail we found quite a bit of bird activity and at a clearing we obtained marvellous scope views of a male and a female Bernier's Vanga perched up. Terrific stuff. A Madagascar Wood Rail was glimpsed. After a rest in the middle of the day we returned to the nearby hills where a pair of very well-behaved Scaly Ground Rollers performed ever so well. These exquisite beauties gave an amazing show. We also obtained good looks at a family group of

White-throated Oxylabes. A party of Red Ruffed Lemurs cavorted and vocalized in a nearby fruiting tree and Madagascar Spinetails and Madagascar Black Swifts were identified over the camp's clearing. The nightwalk gave us the same selection of lemurs as yesterday, but we also found spectacularly camouflaged Mossy and Giant Leaf-tailed Geckos.

The following day started just after dawn near our camp where a family party of Brown Mesites obliged so very, very well. After breakfast only a few of us walked along a rather steep trail to a more distant patch of beautiful primary forest. Amongst the forest giants adorned with extraordinary plank roots and the different kinds of pandanus (screwpalm) we first found a cracking, perched Helmet Vanga which minutes later divulged its nearby nest. We admired this really special bird at its wonderfully crafted nest from a distance. Not much later one of our guides found a second nest, which was being built. Both adults regularly flew in with mosses in their bright blue bill and one of the birds was shaping the inside of the nest with its body. A distant hooting alerted us to the presence of a Short-legged Ground Roller, but it took the better part of 30 minutes to clamber up a boulder-strewn, liana-cloaked slope to finally connect with this modestly clad species. We obtained great looks as it sat sedately on a horizontal branch in the subcanopy. Suddenly, in mid-morning some of us saw a large bird fly through the canopy of the giant trees and we were immediately on high alert, as it looked very much like a Serpent Eagle. Unexpectedly it started to call and we couldn't believe our luck, as it confirmed that we were dealing with Madagascar's rarest bird of prey, a Madagascar Serpent Eagle. We saw it fly several times and also found it perched so we could discern its distinctive features. A very happy party returned to camp. In the afternoon we walked to the same area to try to get the rest of the group onto this elusive bird of prey, and, eventually, we managed to obtain perfect scope views of this very rarely-observed cracker!!! A real mega. White-fronted Brown Lemur and several parties of Red Ruffed Lemur obliged handsomely. On the return walk to camp, we flushed a Scaly Ground Roller and managed perfect scope views of a very well behaved Short-legged Ground Roller next to the trail.

The following morning, we further explored the forested hills just behind our lodge. Soon after entering a Madagascar Wood Rail was heard and soon it showed very nicely to us. A Crossley's Vanga showed very well as did a male Madagascar Magpie-Robin (of the attractive black bellied race). It took a while to entice a Red-breasted Coua into view, but eventually one kept on circling us, offering great looks. We admired a gorgeous Scaly Ground Roller for ages, but the highlight of the morning was finding the two Madagascar Serpent Eagles again. One of them obliged very well again... simply amazing. We also located some smart White-fronted Brown and exquisite Red Ruffed Lemurs. After a bit of a break, we checked a stretch of forest edge where an attractive White-throated Rail stole the show. Several Madagascar Starlings were feeding in a fruiting tree. An after-dinner walk produced the regular Greater Dwarf, Brown Mouse and Masoala Sportive Lemurs. A dainty Madagascar Pimple-nosed Chameleon and a Lined Leaf-tailed Gecko were also very much appreciated.

We left our cosy lodge early the next morning and travelled by speed boat to the town of Maroantsetra, where we admired a magnificent Tomato Frog in the garden of the hotel. From here we flew to Tana, where this unusual tour ended.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED

BIRDS

White-faced Whistling Duck Dendrocygna viduata

Knob-billed Duck Sarkidiornis melanotos

African Pygmy Goose Nettapus auritus

Meller's Duck ♦ Anas melleri Endemic.

Red-billed Teal Anas erythrorhyncha

Madagascar Pochard ♦ Aythya innotata Endemic. c 30 were noted at Bemanevika. One of the rarest ducks in the world.

Madagascar Partridge ♦ Margaroperdix madagarensis Endemic.

Madagascar Nightjar ♦ Caprimulgus madagascariensis

Madagascar Spinetail ◊ Zoonavena grandidieri

Malagasy Palm Swift ♦ Cypsiurus gracilis

Alpine Swift Tachymarptis melba

Malagasy Black Swift ◊ (Madagascar S) Apus balstoni

Little Swift Apus affinis

Malagasy Coucal ♦ Centropus toulou

Crested Coua ♦ Coua cristata Endemic.

Blue Coua ♦ Coua caerulea Endemic.

Red-capped Coua ♦ Coua ruficeps Endemic.

Red-fronted Coua ♦ Coua reynaudii Endemic.

Coquerel's Coua ♦ Coua coquereli Endemic.

Red-breasted Coua ♦ Coua serriana Endemic.

Madagascar Cuckoo ◊ (M Lesser C) Cuculus rochii Endemic.

White-breasted Mesite ◊ Mesitornis variegatus Endemic.

Brown Mesite > Mesitornis unicolor Endemic.

Rock Dove (introduced) Columba livia

Malagasy Turtle Dove ♦ Nesoenas picturatus

Namaqua Dove Oena capensis

Madagascar Green Pigeon ◊ Treron australis

Madagascar Blue Pigeon ♦ Alectroenas madagascariensis Endemic.

Madagascar Wood Rail ♦ Mentocrex kioloides Endemic.

Madagascar Flufftail ♦ Sarothrura insularis Endemic, heard only.

Slender-billed Flufftail ♦ Sarothrura watersi Endemic

Madagascar Rail ♦ Rallus madagascariensis Endemic, heard only.

White-throated Rail ♦ Dryolimnas cuvieri Endemic.

Common Moorhen Gallinula chloropus

African Swamphen Porphyrio madagascariensis

Sakalava Rail ♦ Zapornia olivieri Endemic. Great looks at this very localized species at Lake Kinkony.

Madagascar Grebe ◊ Tachybaptus pelzelnii Endemic.

Madagascar Buttonquail ♦ Turnix nigricollis Endemic.

White-fronted Plover Charadrius marginatus

Madagascar Jacana ◊ Actophilornis albinucha Endemic.

Eurasian Whimbrel Numenius phaeopus

Madagascar Snipe ♦ Gallinago macrodactyla Endemic.

Common Sandpiper Actitis hypoleucos

Common Greenshank Tringa nebularia

Madagascar Pratincole ♦ Glareola ocularis Endemic.

Greater Crested Tern Thalasseus bergii

Lesser Crested Tern Thalasseus bengalensis

Saunders's Tern ♦ Sternula saundersi

Roseate Tern Sterna dougallii

Common Tern Sterna hirundo

Whiskered Tern Chlidonias hybrida

Yellow-billed Stork Mycteria ibis

African Openbill (A O Stork) Anastomus lamelligerus

Reed Cormorant (Long-tailed C) Microcarbo africanus

Glossy Ibis Plegadis falcinellus

Madagascar Ibis ♦ (M Crested I) Lophotibis cristata Endemic.

African Spoonbill Platalea alba

Little Bittern Ixobrychus minutus

Black-crowned Night Heron Nycticorax nycticorax

Striated Heron (Green-backed H) Butorides striata

Squacco Heron Ardeola ralloides

Malagasy Pond Heron ◊ (Madagascar P H) Ardeola idae

Western Cattle Egret Bubulcus ibis

Humblot's Heron ♦ Ardea humbloti

Purple Heron Ardea purpurea

Great Egret (G White E) Ardea alba

Black Heron Egretta ardesiaca

Dimorphic Egret ♦ Egretta dimorpha

Hamerkop Scopus umbretta

Madagascar Harrier-Hawk ♦ Polyboroides radiatus Endemic.

Madagascar Serpent Eagle ◊ *Eutriorchis astur* Endemic. The Bird of the Trip. Exceptional scope views of this very rare and very rarely observed bird of prey.

Frances's Sparrowhawk ◊ Accipiter francesiae

Henst's Goshawk ◊ Accipiter henstii Endemic, heard only.

Malagasy Harrier ◊ (Madagascar H) Circus macrosceles

Yellow-billed Kite Milvus aegyptius

Madagascar Fish Eagle ♦ Haliaeetus vociferoides Endemic.

Madagascar Buzzard ♦ Buteo brachypterus Endemic.

Red Owl ♦ *Tyto soumagnei* Endemic. Excellent views at a day roost at Bemanevika.

Torotoroka Scops Owl ♦ Otus madagascariensis Endemic.

Rainforest Scops Owl ♦ Otus rutilus Endemic, heard only.

Madagascar Owl ♦ (M Long-eared O) Asio madagascariensis Endemic, heard only.

Marsh Owl Asio capensis

Cuckoo-roller ♦ (Madagascar C R) Leptosomus [discolor] discolor Endemic.

Madagascar Hoopoe ♦ *Upupa marginata* Endemic.

Broad-billed Roller Eurystomus glaucurus

Short-legged Ground Roller & Brachypteracias leptosomus Endemic.

Scaly Ground Roller ♦ Geobiastes squamiger Endemic. Regular observations of this very smart species on the Masoala Peninsula.

Pitta-like Ground Roller ◊ Atelornis pittoides Endemic, heard only.

Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher ♦ Corythornis madagascariensis Endemic.

Malagasy Kingfisher ♦ (Madagascar Malachite K) Corythornis vintsioides

Olive Bee-eater (Madagascar B-e) Merops superciliosus

Malagasy Kestrel ◊ (Madagascar K) Falco newtoni

Eleonora's Falcon Falco eleonorae

Sooty Falcon ♦ Falco concolor

Greater Vasa Parrot ◊ Coracopsis vasa

Lesser Vasa Parrot ♦ Coracopsis nigra

Grey-headed Lovebird ♦ Agapornis canus

Schlegel's Asity ♦ Philepitta schlegeli Endemic. A pair at the nest at Ankarafantsika.

Red-tailed Vanga ♦ Calicalicus madagascariensis Endemic.

Hook-billed Vanga ◊ Vanga curvirostris Endemic.

Bernier's Vanga ◊ Oriolia bernieri Endemic. Scope views of a pair on the Masoala Peninsula.

Van Dam's Vanga ◊ Xenopirostris damii Endemic.

Sickle-billed Vanga ♦ Falculea palliata Endemic.

White-headed Vanga ◊ Artamella viridis Endemic.

Chabert Vanga ♦ Leptopterus chabert Endemic.

Blue Vanga (Madagascar B V) Cyanolanius [madagascarinus] madagascarinus Endemic.

Rufous Vanga ♦ Schetba rufa Endemic.

Helmet Vanga ◊ *Euryceros prevostii* Endemic. Regular observations of this magnificent species on the Masoala Peninsula. Two active nests were found.

Tylas Vanga ♦ *Tylas eduardi* Endemic.

Nuthatch Vanga ♦ *Hypositta corallirostris* Endemic.

Common Newtonia ♦ Newtonia brunneicauda Endemic.

Crossley's Vanga ◊ Mystacornis crossleyi Endemic.

Madagascar Cuckooshrike ◊ (Ashy C) Ceblepyris cinereus

Crested Drongo ◊ Dicrurus forficatus

Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher ◊ Terpsiphone mutata

Pied Crow Corvus albus

Madagascar Lark ◊ (M Bush L) *Eremopterix hova* Endemic.

Malagasy Bulbul ♦ Hypsipetes madagascariensis

Mascarene Martin ◊ Phedina borbonica

Brown-throated Martin (Plain M) Riparia paludicola

Malagasy Brush Warbler ♦ Nesillas typica

Madagascar Swamp Warbler ◊ Acrocephalus newtoni Endemic.

Grey Emutail ♦ Bradypterus seebohmi Endemic.

White-throated Oxylabes ◊ Oxylabes madagascariensis Endemic.

Long-billed Bernieria ♦ Bernieria madagascariensis Endemic.

Spectacled Tetraka ♦ Xanthomixis zosterops Endemic.

Rand's Warbler • Randia pseudozosterops Endemic, heard only.

Common Jery ♦ Neomixis tenella Endemic.

Green Jery ♦ Neomixis viridis Endemic, heard only.

Madagascar Cisticola ♦ Cisticola cherina Endemic.

Malagasy White-eye ♦ Zosterops maderaspatanus

Common Myna (introduced) Acridotheres tristis

Madagascar Starling ♦ Hartlaubius auratus Endemic.

Madagascar Magpie-Robin ♦ Copsychus albospecularis Endemic.

Forest Rock Thrush ◊ Monticola sharpei Endemic.

Madagascar Stonechat ◊ Saxicola sibilla

Souimanga Sunbird ♦ *Cinnyris sovimanga*

Malagasy Green Sunbird ♦ Cinnyris notatus

House Sparrow (introduced) Passer domesticus

Nelicourvi Weaver ◊ Ploceus nelicourvi Endemic.

Sakalava Weaver > Ploceus sakalava Endemic.

Red Fody ◊ (Madagascar R F) Foudia madagascariensis

Forest Fody ♦ Foudia omissa Endemic.

Madagascar Mannikin ◊ (M Munia) Lepidopygia nana Endemic.

Madagascar Wagtail ♦ Motacilla flaviventris Endemic.

MAMMALS

Small Indian Civet (introduced) Viverricula indica

Fossa *Cryptoprocta ferox* Endemic. This rarely observed carnivore showed quite well on our nightwalk at Bemanevika.

Hairy-eared Dwarf Lemur Allocebus trichotis Endemic.

Greater Dwarf Lemur Cheirogaleus major Endemic.

Red Mouse-lemur *Microcebus rufus* Endemic.

Scott's (Masoala) Sportive Lemur Lepilemur scottorum Endemic.

Undescribed Sportive Lemur Lepilemur sp nov Endemic.

White-headed Lemur Eulemur albifrons Endemic.

Brown Lemur *Eulemur fulvus* Endemic.

Sambirano Lesser Bamboo Lemur Hapalemur occidentalis Endemic.

Red-ruffed Lemur Varecia rubra Endemic.

Moore's (Masoala) Woolly Lemur Avahi mooreorum Endemic.

Coquerel's Sifaka *Propithecus coquereli* Endemic.

Lowland Red Forest Rat Nesomys audeberti Endemic.

Webb's Tuft-tailed Rat Eliurus webbi Endemic.

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Collared Spine-tailed Lizard Oplurus cuvieri

Madagascar Day Gecko Phelsuma madagascariensis

Mossy Leaf-tailed (or Southern Flat-tailed) Gecko Uroplatus sikorae

Giant Leaf-tailed (or Common Flat-tailed) Gecko Uroplatus fimbriatus

Lined Leaf-tailed (or Flat-tailed) Gecko Uroplatus lineatus

Madagascar Flap-necked Chameleon Chamaeleo dilepis

Blue-legged (or Cryptic) Chameleon Calumma crypticum

Short-horned Chameleon Calumma brevicornis

Madagascar Pimple-nosed Chameleon Calumma nasutum

Oustalet's (or Malagasy Giant) Chameleon Furcifer oustaleti

Madagascar Cat-eyed Snake Madagascarophis colubrinus

Tomato Frog Dyscophus antongilii