

# CLASSIC MADAGASCAR TOUR REPORT 2023

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by Eustace Barnes

The most exciting of destinations to visit for anyone, even for those with only a passing interest in the natural world, is Madagascar. One of the more charmingly chaotic countries one is ever likely to visit. This year's tour was one of the most successful and enjoyable to date, as we worked our way through the extraordinary avifaunal and mammalian endemicity Madagascar has to offer. That is, notwithstanding the innumerable challenges posed by the diabolical infrastructure and seemingly unstoppable environmental degradation that is gathering pace – a visit sooner rather than later is better! The tour delivered great views of all the Ground-Rollers, Couas, Mesites, Asites, most of the Vangas and many other endemics, none of which will be forgotten. We had extraordinary views of most species and patience paid off time and again, delivering our targets in the most improbable and, indeed, entertaining fashion. Seeing a Henst's Goshawk being mobbed by Chabert Vanga, Brown Mesites walking about around our feet, Madagascar Pratincoles swooping over rocky river channels, Schlegel's Asity nest building, the electric green Parson's Chameleon and family group of Diademed Sifakas stand out as unforgettable highlights. In all, we recorded 185 species of birds, of which 125 were endemic, plus 32 species of mammal, including 26 species of Lemurs, and, lest we forget, 8 species of Chameleon. The foregoing 'superlative hotspot' describes our exploration of this biodiversity hotspot, which delivered a truly unforgettable tour.

We enjoyed cloudless conditions from north to south and east to west with the rains only beginning towards the end of the tour. The accommodations were generally excellent, especially the Relais de Reina. We started, as is customary, with day one and stuck with it, enjoying the excellent French cuisine, spectacular landscapes, along with good company. The latter providing fine conversation of both the glass half-full and glass half-empty variety, together with a dash of exhaustively qualified optimism, making for a truly memorable as well as a hugely successful tour.

The group met up in Antananarivo, where we were staying at the amusingly named Hotel Chat'O; a ramshackle assemblage of castellated buildings perched on a hillside close to the airport. Whilst planning a pre-tour excursion we familiarised ourselves with the commoner species of the central plateau, finding African Stonechat and Madagascar Wagtail nesting in the restaurant roof. The gardens were full of immature and female Red (Madagascar) Fodies, Malagasy Bulbuls, Madagascar Mannikins (Munias), Madagascar White-eye, Olive Bee-eater, Mascarene Martins and a couple of Malagasy Green Sunbirds. At night Madagascar Nightjars could be heard calling continuously.

After a splendid lunch, our afternoon excursion found us heading to the Parc Tsarasoatra, passing through the open paddies combined with the indescribable mess and muddle of unplanned urban sprawl, hopefully reminding us all of the value of town and country planning legislation and

effective governance. Once in the Parc, an oasis of blissful tranquility, we were instantly treated to the spectacle of thousands of White-faced Whistling-ducks and Red-billed Teal along with smaller numbers of Blue-billed or Hottentot Teal, several Knob-billed Ducks and at least three Meller's Ducks. The latter, a species we were told can be hard to find and, indeed, has been missed on occasion. The Parc is the site of a huge heronry, and so perhaps it was not surprising to see such large numbers of Black-crowned Night Herons, Dimorphic and Great Egrets, and Squacco Herons along with a few Striated Herons. Something of a surprise in this tiny park is the number of Black Herons, of which we probably saw fifty. Lurking amongst the Squacco Herons were smaller numbers of the stunning Madagascar Pond Heron adorned in their breeding finery.

The Parc also held a selection of more widespread species found on the central Plateau, including the ubiquitous Common Myna, Malagasy Kestrel, Madagascar Coucal, Red Fody, Madagascar Mannikins, Madagascar White-eye, and a single Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher. Several Madagascar Brush Warblers were lured into view, but the Swamp Warbler were not on duty. After this encouraging introduction to the avifauna of Madagascar, it was time to head back for another magnificent meal and discover the full horror of the following days lengthy drive south. Although, we were only scheduled to depart at a leisurely 5am.

Assembling in good time for our somewhat lengthy journey southwards to Ranomafana, we headed off along the pot-holed highway in the half light. Although maps indicate that one is leaving one urban area and traversing a 'green' area before re-entering the next sprawling mess the highway is lined with a more or less continuous finger of development. The potholes slow progress allowing scrutiny of a pre-industrial rural landscape, in which fields are ploughed with oxen and tended with manual labour. During our stay we did not see any tractors or other agricultural machinery. Meanwhile, the principal fuel for cooking and heating is wood, creating a smoky haze throughout the country, which along with the introduced exotics is irreversibly transforming vegetation dynamics in this benighted country. Stopping at what we called the Marais de Sisaony, some 30km south of the capital, we picked up a nice selection of species, starting with the bizarre-looking Hammerkop. This was quickly followed a couple of Greater Painted Snipe, the endemic form of Three-banded Plover (a likely future 'split'), a pair of Kittlitz's Plover, Red-billed Teal, Dimorphic Egrets, and several Striated Herons. Yellow-billed Kites wheeled overhead along with good numbers of Brown-throated (Plain) Martins and a few Mascarene Martins. We then called up a responsive pair of Madagascar Swamp Warblers and a few Madagascar Cisticolas before it was time to resume our tortuous journey along the memorably 'uneven' highway through a spectacularly uneven landscape. It did seem like forever, but it was merely a seven-hour journey before we reached the charmingly named Ambositra for lunch.

Waking to the incessant song of Madagascar Cuckoo and Malagasy Coucal at 4am, we took breakfast and headed to the park head quarters. Walking the maze of trails criss-crossing the hill forests, with our highly experienced local guide Stephane and his son Stephane II was an education. As it was at the end of the dry season, and the rains had not started, it was very dry underfoot. However, bird activity was frenetic and so we were treated to the usual procession of subfusc denizens of roadside scrub and woodlands. In this case, and on this mini continent, including Stripe-throated, Green, and Common Jerys, Souimanga Sunbird, Malagasy White-eye, Madagascar Mapie-Robin, Madagascar Bulbul and Crested Drongo. Once in taller forest Tyla's and White-headed Vangas, the stunning Malagasy Paradise Flycatchers were more numerous. We also located several female and a single male Velvet Asity, a lek-forming species in one of few families of suboscine passerines found away from the Neotropics. Thick undergrowth in the forested interior provided observations of the more sombre Spectacled and Wedge-tailed Tetrakas,

members of a newly erected family of endemic taxa in a well differentiated and complex radiation. Then it was time to get to grips with Pitta-like Ground Roller, perhaps the most easily seen member of another intriguing group. This species sharing certain morphological and behavioural characteristics with Pittas, while being another example of convergent evolution. On this occasion, it was calling from high in the canopy of a tall tree only permitting somewhat restricted views.

On our wanderings through the maze of trails we were viewed, initially with indifference and subsequently with disdain, by the beautiful Ring-tailed Vontsira (aka Mongoose). We also saw both Red-fronted Brown and Red-bellied Lemurs in several troops and enjoyed great views of the recently described Golden Bamboo Lemur before diverting to see the last known Greater Bamboo Lemur on the reserve. A species sadly in rapid decline, in spite of the efforts of local conservationists.

In the afternoon, we headed to Vohiparara for some roadside and rice paddy birding before a highly productive night walk. We worked a series of rice paddies for Madagascar Snipe without success before searching roadside woodlands for the stunning Blue Coua, which we found. As dusk fell, we searched for Chameleons and Lemurs, finding the diminutive Short-nosed, stunning Blue-legged and O'Shaughnessy's Chameleons and a single Grove's Dwarf Lemur. A little lower several Rufous Mouse Lemurs were busily scoffing mashed banana at a feeding station.

Arriving at the Vohiparara trail, in the upper section of the park, we had some important appointments with a number of highly range restricted species. At this point I should describe an entirely novel and truly remarkable birding strategy. In many parts of the world local bird guides tend to be ex-hunters and have that facility, borne of such activity, to find anything that could be eaten. In Madagascar, it seems, many bird guides are ex-pastoralists and have the skill of herding animals and birds, as it happens, through thick vegetation. We were looking for the Brown Mesite and, as soon as it gave away its presence, Stephane and his able bodied 'herders', headed off down the precipitous slopes through dense vegetation, calling loudly to one another and moving towards the birds, which they seemed able to locate to within a metre or so.

They then drove the birds towards us, resulting in a pair running about, no more than a meter from us while we watched the creatures fretting about how to free themselves of this unwanted attention. Once they remembered they had wings they duly did so and fluttered off.

Birding the upper reaches and ridge top forests was great. We found and briefly saw Rufous-headed Ground-Roller, Red-fronted Coua, numerous Pollen's, Blue, White-headed and Tylas Vangas together with the stunning Common Sunbird Asity. The more sombre supporting cast for these delightful species included Long-billed, Spectacled and Grey-crowned Tetrakas, White-throated Oxylabes, Dark Newtonia, Cryptic Warbler, Green and Common Jery and the lovely Souimanga Sunbird.

After this avifaunal spectacle we took lunch at the bus, while team subordinates were dispatched to the forest in search of our next treat. Lunch barely over, Stephane was keen to get a move on and we headed back to the forest where a Milne-Edwards Sifaka had been located for us. On this occasion our prize was a lost individual wandering through the forest calling to his troop. We then began to make our way back to the bus, only to be alerted to the presence of a Henst's Goshawk. Patience and careful digital teasing and in it came. Magnificent!

Next on our packed schedule, we then walked 3 kilometres to a small lake with a nearby open swampy grassland where we found our only Grey Emutail and several Brushland Warblers. The magnificent Blue Coua provided additional entertainment as we climbed to a watch point to look

for Mellar's Duck. No joy there, but we did see a number of Red-billed Teal. Then, onwards to our final port of call and surely one of the most memorable moments of the tour: Snipe-hunt Part II.

Snipe-hunt Part II. Stephane took us to a Besileo village where a complex strategy was agreed for seeing the Snipe. It involved the entire village, replete with an audience of the elders, babies, small children, and assorted hangers on. A dozen or so young men headed off with Stephane across the paddies while we waited on a raised roadway, from which we saw Painted Snipe, Purple Heron, Malagasy Pond Heron, and Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher. The number of field assistants then doubled as the children all wanted to help. Once most of the valley had been covered, we were called to watch point that looked over a tiny fragment of marshy vegetation along the edge of the paddies. At this point everyone converged on the area and formed a line below the marshy patch across the paddies, precariously balanced on the bunds. The tension mounted as Stephane issued loud instructions to the villagers and assorted beaters converging on the last area of marsh. An audible croak gave away the exact location of the snipe. Everyone was issued with detailed instructions as to where to stand, when to move and where to look. The Snipe flushed and flew right past us, stopping before the assembled villagers below. It was an event. Job done. It was nearly beer o'clock and so after loud celebrations we headed back to base.

On departure from Ranomafana we enjoyed a final, if brief, visit to the Vohiparara trail in search of the enigmatic and possibly once near mythical White-throated Rail. Although we did locate a pair, it would not oblige our invitations and show itself. Instead, we had to comfort ourselves with displaying Cuckoo-rollers, Rand's Warbler, Green and Common Jerys, Grey-crowned, Wedge-tailed, and Long-billed Tetrakas, White-throated Oxylobes, Red-tailed and Blue Vangas and so on.....It was time to take our leave of the 'pastoral' birding team and make our way west.

The next stop was the pitifully small and highly degraded Anja reserve, to see the iconic Ring-tailed Lemur and a surprising number of Oustalet's Chameleons. It was hot, the forest dry and the Lemurs flaked-out in small troops throughout the reserve. No need for the wildlife to be corralled here as the forest was but a ragged fragment. It was a pleasant diversion for us on an otherwise rather dull journey across the almost treeless plateau. It must have been a remarkable landscape, populated as it would have been with Elephant Birds and Giant Lemurs. To travel through this degraded landscape, in what is recorded as being a rapidly drying region, does not inspire hope, even for the eternally optimistic.

Our final destination was the Isaola museum, located beneath towering rocky cliffs, and home to 'Benson's' Rock Thrush. This taxon is widely regarded as a distinct species, but currently lumped in Forest Rock Thrush. Once located and satisfactorily scrutinised in the fast-fading light, we made our way to the magnificent Relais de la Reine; a hotel set very sympathetically in a magnificent savanna landscape. Your inexhaustible leader was then treated to a pair of White-browed Owls outside his room and several calling Madagascar Nightjars. Otherwise, we were forced to settle down to compiling the list, while enjoying superb French cuisine and Beethoven's ninth.

As the sun rose over an extraordinary landscape around our equally extraordinary hotel, we walked the open savannas in search of the uncommon Madagascar Partridge. We managed reasonable views of a couple along with brief views of a Madagascar Buttonquail, and numerous Madagascan Cisticolas. Sadly, we had to leave this spectacular establishment, as there was little of a biological nature to detain us and myriad endemic taxa to be sought further west. After breakfast, we made our way to the Zombitse NP, briefly walking trails through the dry forests that line the highway. This area of forest was the first western dry forest we were to explore, replete with a new set of birds, mammals, reptiles, and plants. The principal reason for our visit, was to see the Appert's Tetraka. After a long search, accompanied by the delightful Zhereen and

numerous Cuckoo-rollers, we found a pair. In the company of several Long-billed Tetrakas, they were fossicking about in leaf litter on the forest floor. Our local guide had found a roosting White-browed Owl which was much appreciated and photographed. We also saw our first Giant Coua and several Crested Couas, of the form *pyropyga*. It seems likely this taxon will be recognised as a full species in due course, given the increasing use of morphology rather than ecological function to determine species limits. Drawing our brief visit to a close we rested while eating our packed lunch. As it happens, in the company of the highly range restricted Zombitse Sportive Lemur, which peered out at us. Time to go.

Our final stop was the Tsinjoriaka Forest reserve at La Table, a low dense thorn scrub and home to Verreaux's Coua and Red-shouldered Vanga. We managed to see both of these species very well, along with the sub-fusc Sub-desert Brush Warbler before dusk brought activity to a close. We then descend to the coastal plain for a night at the Victory Hotel. A delightful establishment showing the tell-tale signs of post-imperial ageing, aka neglect.

The following morning another round of complex logistics found us on our way to the offshore island of Nosey Ve. After an interminable boat journey, we arrived to enjoy superb views of Crab Plovers in the company of Black-bellied Plovers, a couple of Turnstones, a Grey Heron, and a Great-crested Tern dozing with a Little Tern on a newly developed sand bank. Crossing to the main island we had nice views of the beautiful Red-tailed Tropicbird. Although there are said to be 750 pairs of this graceful creature on the island, we only saw 12 individuals during our visit, increasingly populated by the vendors of tat together with their synanthropic attendants (chickens, goats, dogs etc). The latter, no doubt working their way through the skinks, geckos, and other wildlife.

We crossed the narrow sea to the beach resort of Anakao. This was to have a cold drink and search for the Littoral Rock Thrush that inhabits the extraordinary dune vegetation in south-west Madagascar. Once we had all secured good views of a singing male and had a drink, we headed back to Tulear for lunch and thence to the well-appointed Bamboo Club resort near Ifaty, a mere five-minute drive from the Spiny Forest.

In the late afternoon we made a brief visit to the Forest of spines and baobabs, seeing our first Subdesert Mesite, numerous Crested Couas and the odd looking *Thamnornis*. The latter a species that combines features of the Brush-warblers and Tetrakas. This environment made a big impression on us all with its combination of gigantic cactus-like *Didiereaceae* (Octopus Trees), *Pachypodium rosulatum*, Western Baobab *Adansonia za*, and Fony Baobab *Adansonia rubrostipa*, and spiny *Euphorbias*. This unique forest, which unsurprisingly, is suffering continuous degradation from wood cutters, charcoal manufacturers, and pastoralists is, as such, severely threatened as a functional ecosystem. Surviving, and perhaps benefiting from this transformation the Madagascar Hoopoe and Sakalava Weavers provided last minute entertainment.

Dawn the following morning found us again in the Spiny Forest with another expert team of bird herders, headed by Mosa. This time, not only barefoot, but also clothed in bright green, red and blue field apparel. We, on the other hand, were all dressed in high tech field clothing in muted tones usually considered essential for biological fieldwork. Mosa, a very knowledgeable individual with many years of experience in the region, seemed oblivious to the contrast, expressing more concern for the continuous degradation of his beloved forests. Once on task, Mosa and his team successively rounded up, first one then a pair of, Long-tailed Ground-Rollers. Outstanding! The birds were brought to our feet. This is certainly one of the most wanted birds of the tour. Next was

Madagascar Buttonquail, 'Green-capped' Coua and Archbold's Newtonia. Rounding up the flightier passerines proved more of a challenge for Mosa but not one he was unable to meet. Again, it involved several 'spotters/trackers' moving the bushes calling loudly as they slowly drove the birds toward us. Lafresnaye's Vanga was nowhere to be found and our search only produced more Sickle-billed and Chabert Vangas, a single Subdesert Mesite and a stunning Madagascar Harrier-Hawk.

After a great lunch and lounging by the pool during the heat of the day, we resumed birding. Several roadside stops at the Ifaty salt pans produced first the endangered Humblot's (Madagascar) Heron and then Madagascar Plover in the company of the more numerous Kittlitz's and White-fronted Plovers. After a quick look at the endemic form of Three-banded Plover we returned to the Spiny Forest to see a roosting Madagascar Nightjar that had been located by another member of the team.

Requiring only Lafresnaye's Vanga, from this impoverished region, we returned to the Spiny Forest. However, in spite of a lengthy search we failed. Cutting our losses, we headed to the Belalande wetlands where we were treated to the magnificent sight of Baillon's Crakes, our first White-throated Rail and another Greater Painted Snipe. Time was running out. We took an early lunch, packed, and prepared for a final search for Lafresnaye's Vanga before our flight to Antananarivo in the evening.

The Lafresnaye's Vanga, it turns out, is not inclined to sit atop bushes and trees as its appearance might suggest. Instead, it works slowly and methodically through thick vegetation and only periodically calls. Were it not for its calling this would be a very difficult species to find. Mosa and his team positioned themselves, triangulated and slowly homed in on a calling bird with remarkable precision. They slowly worked through dense spiny scrub with loud instructions, until it was located feeding in a dense vine tangle. Job done. Once we had all seen the bird well it was time to go. Time indeed to get to the airport and address the ludicrous requirements of air traffic 'baggage' control. It was painful, but, as expected, principally involved parting with money and removing heavy items (cameras) from one's bags, although only temporarily of course. Anyway, our flight only left one hour late, which was remarkable and may well qualify as an early departure in Madagascar.

Departing at a near reasonable time we took our leave of Faulty Chat'O towers and headed to Andasibe. We stopped for a brief look for Madagascar Pratincole at the Mangoro river crossing. A miserable spot and, not unsurprisingly, the birds were not in evidence owing to uncharacteristic Malagasy infrastructural development works taking place. In this case a bridge. We quickly moved on and did not stop otherwise, arriving in good time for a pleasant lunch. After outlining to Patrice, our local guide, what we had not seen we planned the ensuing days.

We headed directly to the nearby community VOI MMA reserve. Patrice's local spotter had been sent to the reserve earlier to find Crested Ibis and so we headed directly to the spot where a pair were quietly feeding along a narrow forest stream. After enjoying great views of this spectacular endemic, we torn ourselves away, in search of the delightful Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, which we again quickly located. Another spotter had been keeping an eye on a family group of Indri. We then enjoyed watching this extraordinary creature and listen to their ethereal calls, so evocative of Madagascar's rainforests. Along the way we found a startlingly bright Parson's Chameleon which was hugely appreciated. A small mixed flock then produced great views of Spectacled Tetraka, Tylas Vanga, White-headed Vanga and, new for the tour, Nuthatch Vanga. We then caught up with

Madagascar Starling and the stunning Madagascar Blue Pigeon and rather lovely Madagascar Green Pigeon. We also saw several troops of Common brown Lemurs and a pair of Rainforest Scops Owls before walking the road, where we saw a pair of Madagascar Flufftail and several Blue Couas.

The following morning, we departed early and headed for the Mantadia NP. We first found a large Tree Boa crossing the road and first of many snakes we were to see during the remainder of the tour. We walked the road and in no time a Short-legged Ground Roller was heard calling. We then enjoyed good views of this large arboreal Ground-roller, resembling the somewhat smaller neotropical Puffbirds. At the same spot we also had good views of another Pitta-like Ground Roller before retracing our steps in search of Red-breasted Coua. This is a shy species and most difficult of the Couas to see. It was not so easily rounded up and we had to content ourselves with viewing a calling bird through thick vegetation. Then the search was on for the incomparable Scaly Ground Roller, which had not yet started calling with any great frequency. However, not to be deterred Patrice and our spotters were working a territory and, after an hour or so, located an individual which was then successfully herded towards us. It ended up atop a low branch contemplating its demise and eyeing each of us. Spectacular views were had by all, and it was time to have lunch but not before a troop of Black and white Ruffed Lemurs erupted into their ear-splitting territorial routine. Once we had enjoyed good views of this rather beautiful creature, we did take lunch before heading back along the road to a tiny forest pool where we enjoyed superb views of Forest Fody, our only Madagascar Grebe, our first Broad-billed Rollers and another Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher.

A little further along the road, we stopped at a marsh and, while Patrice determined the best spot from which to look for a certain Rail, we had a look at another Madagascar Flufftail. Once all happy, the site having been prepared, we traipsed across the marsh where we all managed good views of the now very uncommon Madagascar Rail. After that, it was time to go and see a pair of Barn Owls, that had taken up residence in a large palm tree in front of the, now dilapidated, French colonial railway station. I believe we were as interesting to the Owls and locals as the Owls were to us. Anyway, back to our quarters for dinner and to prepare for a short night walk.

The night walk delivered several more goodies in the form of the diminutive Brown Leaf Chameleon and rather larger Parson's Chameleon, along with several Goodman's Mouse Lemurs.

Today was to be a difficult day in the Antavolobe community reserve. All started well enough with an overwhelming chorus of Indri echoing all around us and across the valleys. We managed to find another Rufous-headed Ground-Roller easily enough and most of us enjoyed some great views of this rather beautiful creature. Then along a ridge trail we saw a number of Blue Pigeons, Greater Vasa Parrots, several Cryptic Warblers, and a pair of Red-fronted Couas. Entering taller forest, all was quiet, and so it continued all day with no mixed flocks and little vocal activity at all. We did see another Rufous-headed Ground Roller which performed very well. In fact, this species is not rare, just restricted to higher elevation forests with dense understorey vegetation. In which, needless to say, if it is not calling you will not see. In our case the birds were calling, in which case patience and careful use of playback should always deliver.

We were looking for Helmet Vanga, but the local guides did not know of an occupied nest. They had an idea of where one was being constructed but did advise that it was 'bushy-bushy long way'. We had seen very little and what did we have to lose? So, given we had a fit and willing group, we decided to go. However, 'bushy-bushy long way' turned out to be four hours off-trail through

dense forest with thick undergrowth for no reward. In addition, it rained, making an already difficult hike worse. The locals were not lost, but they seemed unable or unwilling to give any indication of how long it would take or how far it might be to get back to the trail. The nest site drew a blank and we found no mixed flocks, so we headed back upslope to the vehicles. Returning early to the same trails the following morning, we had a repeat performance with no mixed flocks and virtually no activity in the forest interior. It was oddly quiet except for the Rufous-headed Ground Rollers. We had to cut our losses and return to base.

The afternoon was more productive as we worked on the remaining target species. This kicked off with the resident Madagascar Owl, that likes a particularly tall pine tree. Entering the VOI community reserve again we first found a couple of Grey Bamboo Lemurs, followed by a family group of Diademed Sifakas. The latter a particularly pretty member of the Sifaka tribe. Collared Nightjar roosting beneath a palm was next. A bird that lived up to its reputation as one of the more beautifully marked members of the family, and so ended another fine day at Andasibe.

After a brief session in the car park, we took our leave of this magnificent area and headed to Antananarivo. We did witness several spectacular accidents but not particularly interesting or new birds. There was a large Oustalet's Chameleon at our only pit stop which provided photographic opportunities. Once in Antananarivo we headed to Parc Tsarosaotra for a second visit. We were greeted with the usual meleé of White-faced Whistling Ducks, Red and Blue-billed Teal, Black Heron, Dimorphic Egret, Squacco Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Striated Heron and a small number of Knob-billed Ducks and Malagasy Pond Herons. We had to search out the Mellers Duck for Antonio, who had missed out on the first visit. Otherwise, it was Yellow-billed Kite, Great Egret, Common Myna, and Malagasy White-eye and little else.

Then we had prepared ourselves for the next epic journey, which was to take us north to the Ankarafantsika National Park. It is a long way, but the road was not too bad and there were some important distractions along the way. Our first stop on the high plateau provided us with great views of four male Madagascar Harriers. This is a species in steep decline with the draining of many wetlands. At present, it seems secure in this region but probably not for much longer. We then made stops at two river crossings where we finally caught up with Madagascar Pratincole, enjoying spectacular views of several pairs wheeling around calling and hawking for insects. Winding along the endless highway we eventually descended to the coastal plain, where we visited a couple of wetlands. We did not find the hoped-for Madagascar Jacana, but we did see another Humblot's Heron and a couple of Purple Herons, along with Black Heron, Dimorphic and Great Egrets, a few Common Gallinules, and a single Painted Snipe.

We arrived in good time to the park and our accommodations, the condition of which caused us to rename the park Ankara-discom-fantsika. That was owing to the high heat and humidity combined with the poorly appointed rooming. However, the food and service turned out to be very good. A night walk was then hastily arranged and off we set in search of Lemurs and Chameleons. Of these, we saw Grey and Golden-brown Mouse Lemurs, Milne Edwards Sportive Lemur, the cryptic Rhinoceros Chameleon, and several large Oustalet's Chameleons. A Torotoroka Scops Owl called with the usual chorus of Madagascar Nightjars chuntering away in the night.

Next day we were to visit the Betsiboke estuary. This involved getting up at 3.30am, driving three hours to Majunga, on the coast, and taking a speed boat into the delta. As we had only just undertaken a 12-hour bus journey to get to 'Misery' Inn this proved an unpopular option and much of the group bailed out on this event. As it happens, gliding around the delta in a speed boat was



very enjoyable. The first bird was Saunder's Tern, of which we saw 6 or 7. In the mangroves, we did not see the Bernier's Teal, but we did see about 8 or 9 Malagasy Sacred Ibises. The Teal has not been seen for a couple of weeks and were assumed to be with young and hiding up in the mangroves. In any event, no matter how many times we circled the islands we could not locate them. However, good numbers of the dark phase Dimorphic Egrets, another Humblot's Heron and a Grey Heron kept us entertained while we worked through numerous small flocks of waders on the falling tide. This included Greater Sandpipers, Greenshank, Whimbrel, Curlew Sandpipers, Sanderling, and several groups of Terek Sandpipers. In the mouth of the estuary, we enjoyed watching over a 1000 Lesser Flamingos, a single, Yellow-billed Stork and several more Malagasy Sacred Ibises. An excellent and highly diverting boat trip.

Driving back to Ankarafantsika through the denuded hilly terrain produced very little until we reached some degraded wetlands and rice paddies near the park. Here, found Glossy Ibises, numerous groups of Black Herons, 2 Humblot's Herons and a few White-faced Whistling-Duck, while overhead small groups of Olive Bee-eaters and Mascarene Martins hawked for insects. A late afternoon walk along the edge of Lac Ravelobe gave us spectacular views of a pair of Madagascar Fish Eagle, a species now down to less than 100 pairs. The lakeside forests held small troops of Verreaux's Sifakas and a couple of Mongoose Lemurs while we were treated to the aerial acrobatics of numerous pairs of Broad-billed Rollers, Yellow-billed Kites, and Pied Crows. A night walk around the car park and headquarter buildings gave us numerous Sportive Lemurs and a pair of Wolly Lemurs plus a Mauritanian Tomb Bat. As it had rained the night before, there were snakes aplenty including Madagascan Cat-eyed Snake, the uncommon Madagascan Tree Snake and both the Giant and Blonde Hog-nosed Snakes. As a couple of the team were departing the following day, we called in a Torotoroka Scops Owl, which duly sat and called above our heads.

An important component of any visit to the Ankarafantsika National Park is to seek out the endemic avifauna of the dry woodlands typical of the region, making for a truly superb days birding. We kicked off in the taller semi-humid woodlands around Lac Ravelobe where we found Rufous and Blue Vangas, Madagascar Cuckooshrike, numerous Cuckoo-Rollers calling wildly overhead, the nominate form of Common Jery and a magnificent pair of Schlegel's Asity at a nest. A tour highlight and perennial favourite, this extraordinary subsocine does indeed remind one of the neotropical Manakins.

Boat rides around Lac Ravelobe provided a pleasant break from walking trails and our various trips produced the Madagascar Fish Eagle, Madagascar Jacana, Little Bittern, hundreds of Cattle Egrets, and nice close-up views of Purple Herons.

Enjoyable as it was the boat rides could not delay the inevitable exploration of the hill forests. Walking the maze of trails, we firstly lured into view a White breasted Mesite. A superb species reminding us of forest rails, Australasian Quail Thrushes or Neotropical Quail Doves but being unrelated to any of these. Another good example of a convergent radiation. Our work not done we continued in search of more demanding quarry; Van dam's Vanga and Coquerel's Coua. After a considerable period of time a male Vanga was located and eventually found picking about in a spiny Euphorbia. A little later a Coquerel's Coua was heard and lured into view giving us all outstanding views before the approach of dusk drove us back to base.

The following day, we took to the hellish highway once again and headed back to the capital at a tortuous 25km per hour. We stopped to see three adult Madagascar Jacanas and a couple of Purple Herons, but little else at a once magnificent wetland. Although, seeing a local fashionista dressed in a pink Versace onesie, topped with huge sunglasses and black bowler hat, while riding a

bicycle and balancing two gigantic sacks of charcoal was something to behold. Such scenes were typical of our Madagascan epic peregrinations with many moments deserving inclusion in future Mad max remakes. Surviving all of this, the natural world does offer hope, and, in the spirit of such futile optimism, we stopped to watch Madagascar Pratincoles cut through the haze, hawking for insects as they gracefully scythed back and forth overhead.

The following morning, we took a short flight to Fort Dauphin and drove to Berenty, a location made famous by its iconic Ring-tailed Lemurs. These mischievous cat-like denizens of the spiny forests were much in evidence on arrival, and we enjoyed watching their antics alongside the inquisitive Verreaux's Sifakas and Red-fronted Brown Lemurs.

Our visits to taller gallery forest produced numerous views of somewhat tame Giant and Crested Couas, Hook-billed Vanga, several France's Sparrowhawks, and a single Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk alongside numerous troops of Ring-tailed Lemur, Verreaux's Sifakas and a couple of roosting White-footed Sportive Lemurs and a large roost of the endearing and rather handsome Madagascar Flying Fox. Amongst the abundant Madagascar White-eyes and Souimanga Sunbirds we made sure we all saw the southern debilisform of Common Jery. The latter a good candidate for elevation to species rank.

Visiting the nearby spiny forests dominated by Didiereaceae (Octopus Trees), Euphorbias and a few huge Baobabs we were treated to great views of a roosting Torotoroka Scops Owl and a pair of Madagascan Nightjars along with several Warty Chameleons, and the critically endangered Radiated Tortoise. We also managed to locate a couple more White-footed Sportive Lemurs and Red brown Mouse Lemurs curled up in dense Euphorbias, a single Grey Mouse Lemur and, after dark, another White-browed Owl.

After another session in the gallery forests, we returned to Fort Dauphin and drove directly to the cliff top above town in search of Kelp Gull and Humpback Whales. The Gull, sometimes thought of as a distinct species, the Madagascar Gull, was easily spotted along the shore. It took a while before we found Humpback Whales with young, a pod of Dolphins of uncertain identity and probably also other larger Whale species, too distant to be identified.

Our final excursion took us to the southernmost humid forests of the eastern escarpment at Andahahela National Park. This area is being rapidly cleared, inspite of being a putatively protected area, but it remains the primary site for the enigmatic Red-tailed Newtonia. After walking through tall open evergreen forests, we located a pair of this delightful species. Returning to the vehicles across the ashy slash and burn wasteland we took our final looks at a bereft Cuckoo Roller and a pair of Madagascar Starlings. The temperatures were soaring, we were sweating, and it was time to return to the urban chaos of Fort Dauphin.

Heavy rain then cut short any plans we may have devised to explore littoral forests to the north and our afternoon only offered a much-needed rest and the opportunity for completion of paperwork.

All too soon, that was it and it was time to head home after a magical tour of this fantastic island continent. A tour that will not be forgotten, and which is essential for anyone interested in the natural world. However, better make it sooner rather than later. Finally, many thanks to the ground operators for delivering a faultless program and the team who did not offer any resistance to often demanding schedules and made such a huge contribution to making this such a productive and enjoyable tour.

## **BIRD OF THE TOUR**

- 1<sup>st</sup> Scaly Ground Roller**
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Schlegel's Asity**
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Brown Mesite**
- 4<sup>th</sup> Long-tailed Ground Roller**
- 5<sup>th</sup> Madagascar Crested Ibis**
- 6<sup>th</sup> White-breasted Mesite**
- 7<sup>th</sup> Common Sunbird Asity**
- 8<sup>th</sup> Madagascar Pratincole**
- 9<sup>th</sup> Henst's Goshawk**
- 10<sup>th</sup> Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher**

## **SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR**

The species and family sequence, taxonomy and species names follow the I.O.C. World Bird List which is available on-line at [www.worldbirdnames.org/](http://www.worldbirdnames.org/). Taxa which are split by the author of the principal field guide, but not by IOC, are noted.

Species only recorded on the extension are indicated with (X).

Species given following status categories, assessed by the IUCN. Near threatened, Vulnerable, Endangered, Critically endangered.

Where species names followed by the diamond symbol (◊) indicated they are either endemic to the country, are range restricted or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g., only seen on one or two Birdquest tours, are difficult to see across all or most of its range, the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species.

## BIRDS

**White-faced Whistling Duck** *Dendrocygna viduata* Abundant Parc Tsarasaotra.

**Knob-billed Duck** *Sarkidiornis melanotos* 6 Parc Tsarasaotra on both visits. Also seen near Ankarafantsika.

**Blue-billed Teal** *Spatula hottentota* Common Parc Tsarasaotra. Also, Belalande wetlands,

**Meller's Duck** ♦ *Anas melleri* 3 Parc Tsarasaotra on two separate dates. Getting hard to find.

**Red-billed Teal** *Anas erythrorhyncha* 450 Parc Tsarasaotra on both visits.

**Helmeted Guineafowl (introduced)** *Numida meleagris* (SE) Several large groups seen Berenty.

**Madagascar Partridge** ♦ *Margaroperdix madagarensis* Up to three at Isalo.

**Collared Nightjar** ♦ *Gactornis enarratus* 1 seen in the Analamazaotra Reserve, Andasibe.

**Madagascar Nightjar** ♦ *Caprimulgus madagascariensis* First in gardens of Hotel le Chat O. Common & widespread.

**Madagascar Spinetail** ♦ *Zoonavena grandidieri* First seen in the Spiny Forest. Very small numbers elsewhere.

**Malagasy Palm Swift** ♦ *Cypsiurus gracilis* Small numbers seen Ranomafana and widely thereafter.

**Malagasy Black Swift** ♦ *Apus balstoni* 1 Ranomafana.

**Malagasy Coucal** ♦ *Centropus toulou* Parc Tsarasaotra, Ranomafana and widely elsewhere.

**Crested Coua** ♦ *Coua c. cristata* Fairly common at Ankarafantsika NP.

**Crested Coua** ♦ (Chestnut-vented C) *Coua [cristata] pyropyga* Seen Zombitse, the Spiny Forest, Ifaty and Berenty.

**Verreaux's Coua** ♦ *Coua verreauxi* 2 seen well in the Tsinjoriaka protected area. Heard on a second visit.

**Blue Coua** ♦ *Coua caerulea* Fairly common Ranomafana and Andasibe.

**Brown-capped Coua** ♦ (Red-capped C) *Coua [ruficeps] ruficeps* Fairly common at Ankarafantsika NP.

**Green-capped Coua** ♦ (Red-capped C) *Coua [ruficeps] olivaceiceps* 1 in the Spiny Forest, 1 Tsinjoriaka protected area.

**Red-fronted Coua** ♦ *Coua reynaudii* Fairly numerous Ranomafana, but hard to see. An adult and a nest with two chicks seen in the laroka forest.

**Coquerel's Coua** ♦ *Coua coquereli* One seen very well in Ankarafantsika NP. Our last Coua taxon.

**Running Coua** ♦ *Coua cursor* 1 in the Spiny Forest reserve.

**Giant Coua** ♦ *Coua gigas* 1 Zombitse National Park. Several pairs at Berenty, where common.

**Red-breasted Coua** ♦ *Coua serriana* After a concerted search we all eventually saw one in Mantadia NP.

**Madagascar Cuckoo** ♦ *Cuculus rochii* Numerous in humid and semi-humid forests .

**White-breasted Mesite** ♦ *Mesitornis variegatus* Fairly common at Ankarafantsika NP.

**Brown Mesite** ♦ *Mesitornis unicolor* Extraordinary experience at Ranomafana. Two birds rounded up by our highly competent local guides to parade at our feet, almost in touching distance and within a metre for several minutes.

**Subdesert Mesite** ♦ *Monias benschi* 1 female on our first visit to the Spiny Forest and another on our last visit.

**Madagascar Sandgrouse** ♦ *Pterocles personatus* 8 on the Horumbe plateau.

**Rock Dove (introduced)** *Columba livia* Surprisingly few.

**Malagasy Turtle Dove** ♦ *Nesoenas picturatus* Common in the Ifaty Spiny Forest, Ankarafantsika NP and Berenty.

**Namaqua Dove** *Oena capensis aliena* Common in the west.

**Madagascar Green Pigeon** ♦ *Treron australis* Several in the gardens of our hotel at Andasibe.

**Madagascar Blue Pigeon** ♦ *Alectroenas madagascariensis* Seen at most reserves in the Andasibe area.

**Madagascar Forest Rail** ♦ *Mentocrex kioloides* Three seen very well at Ranomafana.

**Madagascar Flufftail** ♦ *Sarothrura insularis* Heard Ranomafana, seen on two occasions at Andasibe.

**Madagascar Rail** ♦ *Rallus madagascariensis* A pair seen very well near Andasibe.

**White-throated Rail** ♦ *Dryolimnas cuvieri* Heard Ranomafana, 2 Belalande wetlands, 2 Andasibe, 1 Ankarafantsika.

**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* Common Parc Tsarasaotra and elsewhere in wetland habitats.

**Baillon's Crake** *Zapornia pusilla* 2 Belalande wetlands.

**Madagascar Grebe** ♦ *Tachybaptus pelzelinii* 1 Mantadia NP.

**Lesser Flamingo** *Phoeniconaias minor* Up to 1000 in the Betsaboka estuary.

**Madagascar Buttonquail** ♦ *Turnix nigricollis* 1 Isalo, 1 Ifaty Spiny Forest, 1 Ankarafantsika, 1 Berenty.

**Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* Seen at Ifaty salt pans.

**Grey Plover (Black-bellied P)** *Pluvialis squatarola* Several on Nosey Ve.

**Madagascar Plover** ♦ *Charadrius thoracicus* Small numbers on the coast from Tulear to Ifaty.

**Kittlitz's Plover** *Charadrius pecuarius* Marais Sisaony, Ranomafana, Ifaty.

**Three-banded Plover** ♦ (Madagascar T-b P) *Charadrius [tricoloris] biffrenatus* Marais Sisaony and several sites thereafter.

**White-fronted Plover** *Charadrius marginatus* Common Ifaty salt pans.

**Greater Sand Plover** *Charadrius leschenaultia* Up to 15 in the Betsaboka estuary

**Greater Painted-snipe** *Rostratula benghalensis* 2 Marais Sisaony, 1 Ranomafana, 1 Ambondromamy.

**Madagascar Jacana** ♦ *Actophilornis albinucha* 1 on Lac Ravelobe. 3 on degraded wetlands west of Ambondromamy. Now very uncommon with the destruction of so much wetland habitat. Cest la vie.

**Eurasian Whimbrel (Eurasian W)** *Numenius [phaeopus] phaeopus* Common Tulear.

**Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica* 6 Tulear mudflats

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres* 1 Nosey Ve and Ifaty salt flats.

**Curlew Sandpiper** *Calidris ferruginea* 2 Tulear, 250 Betsiboka estuary.

**Sanderling** *Calidris alba* A few noted in the Betsaboka estuary.

**Madagascar Snipe** ♦ *Gallinago macrodactyla* A highly memorable event, that employed an entire village both watching and assisting in a monumental search for this, now rare, species.

**Terek Sandpiper** *Xenus cinereus* Common in the Betsiboka estuary

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* 1 en route to Beamilaka, 1 in the Betsiboka estuary.

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* One noted in the Betsiboka estuary.

**Crab-plover** *Dromas ardeola* 8 on Nosey Ve.

**Madagascar Pratincole** ♦ *Glareola ocularis* 7 on Manankazo river crossing, 6 on Betsiboka river crossing – Ida y Vuelta. A very lovely looking species.

**Kelp Gull** ♦ (SE) *Larus [dominicanus] melisandae* Several.

**Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia* One bird at Ifaty salt pans.

**Greater Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bergii* 2 Nosey Ve, common Fort Dauphin.

**Lesser Crested Tern** *Thalasseus bengalensis* On the sea at Fort Dauphin.

**Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*** 2 Nosey Ve and several more in the Betsiboka estuary alongside next species.

**Saunders's Tern *Sternula saundersi*** 6-7 Betsiboke estuary.

**Common Tern *Sterna Hirundo*** 1 Betsiboke estuary.

**Red-tailed Tropicbird** ♦ *Phaethon rubricauda* 12 on Nosey Ve.

**Yellow-billed Stork *Mycteria ibis*** 1 in the Betsiboka estuary.

**Reed Cormorant (Long-tailed C) *Microcarbo africanus*** 1 seen distantly near Ankarafantsika NP.

**Madagasy Sacred Ibis** ♦ *Threskiornis bernieri* 7 in the Betsiboka estuary

**Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*** 12 in rice paddies near Ankarafantsika NP.

**Madagascar Ibis** ♦ (M Crested I) *Lophotibis cristata* A superb pair along a narrow stream near Andasibe.

**Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*** 1 heard and briefly seen on Lac Ravelobe.

**Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*** Abundant Parc Tsarasaotra, small numbers elsewhere.

**Striated Heron *Butorides striata*** Parc Tsarasaotra, small numbers elsewhere.

**Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*** Common Parc Tsarasaotra.

**Madagasy Pond Heron** ♦ (Madagascar P H) *Ardeola idea* A few Parc Tsarasaotra. 1 Vohiparara.

**Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*** Common.

**Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*** 1 Nosey Ve, 1 Ifaty salt pans, 1 near Ankarafantsika NP, 1 Betsiboka estuary.

**Humblot's (Madagascar) Heron** ♦ *Ardea humbloti* 1 seen twice at Ifaty salt pans, 3 near Ankarafantsika, and 1 in the Betsiboka estuary. Unusual to see so many of this now rare species.

**Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*** 1 Vohiparara, 1 Isalo, 2 near Ankarafantsika.

**Great Egret *Ardea alba*** Large colony Parc Tsarasaotra. Small numbers elsewhere.

**Black Heron *Egretta ardesiaca*** Very common Parc Tsarasaotra and in rice paddies around Ankarafantsika.

**Dimorphic Egret** ♦ *Egretta dimorpha* Common Parc Tsarasaotra, where the white phase dominant. Also, very common in the Betsiboka estuary, where the dark phase is dominant.

**Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta*** 10 Marais Sisaony and a few elsewhere.

**Madagascar Harrier-Hawk** ♦ *Polyboroides radiatus* 2 Spiny Forest, Ifaty. 1 Ankarafantsika.

**Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk** ♦ *Aviceda madagascariensis* 1 seen Berenty.

**Frances's Sparrowhawk** ◊ *Accipiter francesiae* Several seen at Berenty.

**Henst's Goshawk** ◊ *Accipiter henstii* Superb adult at Ranomafana.

**Malagasy Harrier** ◊ *Circus macrosceles* Up to 4 males a few kilometres before Manankarzo river crossing.

**Yellow-billed Kite** *Milvus aegyptius* 10 Marais Sisaony. Widespread and fairly common.

**Madagascar Fish Eagle** ◊ *Icthyophaga vociferoides* A pair at Ankarafantsika on Lac Ravelobe.

**Madagascar Buzzard** ◊ *Buteo brachypterus* A few at Ranomafana and small numbers elsewhere.

**Western Barn Owl** *Tyto alba* One at its nest in Andasibe.

**White-browed Owl** ◊ *Athene superciliaris* 2 Isalo, 1 Zombitse, 2 Berenty.

**Torotoroka Scops Owl** ◊ *Otus madagascariensis* Heard and seen Ankarafantsika. A roosting bird at Berenty.

**Rainforest Scops Owl** ◊ *Otus rutilus* A roosting pair near Andasibe.

**Madagascar Owl** ◊ (M Long-eared O) *Asio madagascariensis* 1 roosting bird near Andasibe.

**Cuckoo-roller** ◊ *Leptosomus discolor* Seen and heard Ranomafana, Zombitse and Andasibe.

**Madagascar Hoopoe** ◊ *Upupa marginata* 1 Antananarivo, 2 Ifaty, 2 Ankarafantsika and 4 Berenty.

**Broad-billed Roller** *Eurystomus glaucurus* Common Andasibe. Less common at Berenty.

**Short-legged Ground Roller** ◊ *Brachypteracias leptosomus* A pair, Mantadia NP.

**Scaly Ground Roller** ◊ *Geobiastes squamiger* A superb individual seen in Mantadia NP.

**Pitta-like Ground Roller** ◊ *Atelornis pittoides* Common at Ranomafana, where four seen. Also, Mantadia NP.

**Rufous-headed Ground Roller** ◊ *Atelornis crossleyi* 1 Vohiparara trail, Ranomafana. Fairly common in the upper reaches of the Antavolobe community reserve, where we saw three. It is not rare in its preferred habitat, but it can be tricky to actually see it well.

**Long-tailed Ground Roller** ◊ *Uratelornis chimaera* Outstanding views of 3 in the Spiny Forest, Ifaty.

**Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher** ◊ *Corythornis madagascariensis* Finally seen in VOI MMA and Mantadia NP

**Malagasy Kingfisher** ◊ (Madagascar Malachite K) *Corythornis vintsioides* 1 Parc Tsarasaotra. Singles elsewhere.

**Olive Bee-eater (Madagascar B)** *Merops superciliosus* First seen Antananarivo.

**Malagasy Kestrel** ◊ *Falco newtoni* 2 Antananarivo on first day. Common thereafter.



**Greater Vasa Parrot** ♦ *Coracopsis vasa* 1 Ranomafana, 10 or so at Antavalobe community reserve (Iaroka forest).

**Lesser Vasa Parrot** ♦ *Coracopsis nigra* 2 Ranomafana, fairly common in the spiny forest at Ifaty and Berenty.

**Grey-headed Lovebird** ♦ *Agapornis canus* Seen Anja, Ifaty Spiny Forest and Berenty.

**Schlegel's Asity** ♦ *Philepitta schlegeli* Three seen in Ankarafantsika NP.

**Velvet Asity** ♦ *Philepitta castanea* 4 Ranomafana, Several Andasibe

**Common Sunbird-Asity** ♦ *Neodrepanis coruscans* 2 Ranomafana and Andasibe,

**Red-tailed Vanga** ♦ *Calicalicus madagascariensis* Common Ranomafana,

**Red-shouldered Vanga** ♦ *Calicalicus rufocarpalis* 1 Tsinjoriaka Forest Reserve.

**Hook-billed Vanga** ♦ *Vanga curvirostris* 1 Ranomafana, fairly common Berenty.

**Lafresnaye's Vanga** ♦ *Xenopirostris xenopirostris* One seen at Tsinjoriaka protected forest near Tulear after an exhaustive search. A retiring and uncommon species. One of few time requiring species.

**Van Dam's Vanga** ♦ *Xenopirostris damii* 3 found at Ankarafantsika. Another retiring species that requires tracking down. Another time requiring species.

**Pollen's Vanga** ♦ *Xenopirostris polleni* Common Ranomafana,

**Sickle-billed Vanga** ♦ *Falcolea palliata* Several in the Spiny Forest and at Ankarafantsika.

**White-headed Vanga** ♦ *Artamella viridis* Several Ranomafana and Ankarafantsika.

**Chabert Vanga** ♦ *Leptopterus Chabert* A few Ranomafana, common Spiny Forest, few elsewhere.

**Madagascar Blue Vanga** ♦ *Cyanolanius madagascarinus* Common Ranomafana, Mantadia and Ankarafantsika NPs.

**Rufous Vanga** ♦ *Schetba rufa* Fairly common at Ankarafantsika NP.

**Tylas Vanga** ♦ *Tylas eduardi* Common Ranomafana and Andasibe.

**Nuthatch Vanga** ♦ *Hypositta corallirostris* Common around Andasibe.

**Dark Newtonia** ♦ *Newtonia amphichroa* 1 Ranomafana, several Iaroka forest.

**Common Newtonia** ♦ *Newtonia brunneicauda* 3 Ranomafana, common Zombitse and Mantadia.

**Archbold's Newtonia** ♦ *Newtonia archboldi* Seen Spiny Forest, Ifaty and Zombitse NP.

**Red-tailed Newtonia** ♦ (SE) *Newtonia fanovanae* Two seen Andohahela NP.

**Ward's (Flycatcher) Vanga** ♦ *Pseudobias wardi* Several Ranomafana and Mantadia NPs.

**Crossley's Vanga** ◊ *Mystacornis crossleyi* A pair with young Ranomafana.

**Madagascar Cuckooshrike** ◊ *Ceblepyris cinereus* First seen Ranomafana.

**Crested Drongo** *Dicrurus forficatus* Common Ranomafana and frequent thereafter.

**Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher** ◊ *Terpsiphone mutata* Common Ranomafana and seen regularly thereafter.

**Pied Crow** *Corvus albus* Common in the south.

**Madagascar Lark** ◊ *Eremopterix hova* 1 near Ranomafana, common on the central plateau and the west.

**Malagasy Bulbul** ◊ *Hypsipetes madagascariensis* First seen Antananarivo. Common everywhere.

**Mascarene Martin** ◊ *Phedina borbonica* First seen Antananarivo.

**Brown-throated Martin (Plain M)** *Riparia paludicola* Marais Sasaony and Ankarafantsika.

**Malagasy Brush Warbler** ◊ *Nesillas typica* Parc Tsarasaotra day one and thereafter.

**Subdesert Brush Warbler** ◊ *Nesillas lantzii* Seen La Table and Spiny Forest, Ifaty.

**Madagascar Swamp Warbler** ◊ *Acrocephalus newtoni* Marais Sasaony and around Andasibe.

**Grey Emutail** ◊ *Bradypterus seebohmi* 3 Ranomafana. Now rather scarce.

**Brown Emutail** ◊ *Bradypterus brunneus* 1 heard Ranomafana and glimpsed by a couple. A murine skulker.

**White-throated Oxylabes** *Oxylabes madagascariensis* A pair at Ranomafana. Several pairs at Andasibe.

**Long-billed Tetraka (Bernieria)** *Bernieria madagascariensis* Several Ranomafana, common Zombitse NP, Ankarafantsika and Andahahela NP.

**Cryptic Warbler** ◊ *Cryptosylvicola randrianasoloi* 1 Ranomafana. Fairly common at Iaroka forest.

**Wedge-tailed Jery** ◊ *Hartertula flavoviridis* First seen Ranomafana. Uncommon.

**Thamnornis** ◊ (T Warbler) *Thamnornis chloropetoides* Only in the Spiny Forest.

**Spectacled Tetraka** ◊ *Xanthomixis zosterops* Several pairs Ranomafana

**Appert's Tetraka** ◊ (A Greenbul) *Xanthomixis apperti* 1 at Zombitse.

**Grey-crowned Tetraka (G-c Greenbul)** *Xanthomixis cinereiceps* Several Ranomafana.

**Madagascar Yellowbrow** ◊ *Crossleyia xanthophrys* 1 Ranomafana.

**Rand's Warbler** ◊ *Randia pseudozosterops* 2 Ranomafana. Heard Iaroka forest.

**Common Jery** ◊ *Neomixis tenella orientalis* Common Ranomafana.

**Common Jery** ♦ *Neomixis tenella debilis* Very common in the Ifaty spiny forest and at Berenty.

**Common Jery** ♦ *Neomixis t. decaryi* Common at Ankarafantsika NP. One of the brightest of the taxa subsumed within *N. tenella*. It seems likely this taxon will be elevated, together with the regionally discreet taxa, to full species status.

**Green Jery** ♦ *Neomixis viridis* Very common Ranomafana and Andasibe.

**Stripe-throated (Subdesert) Jery** ♦ *Neomixis striatigula pallider* Common Spiny Forest. This and the following taxon are now considered separate species by Birdlife International.

**Stripe-throated Jery** ♦ *Neomixis s. striatigula/sclateri* Seen Ranomafana (*striatigula?*). Andasibe (*sclateri*) and Andahahela (*striatigula*).

**Madagascar Cisticola** ♦ *Cisticola cherina* Marais Sasaony and common at many sites thereafter.

**Malagasy White-eye** ♦ *Zosterops maderaspatanus* Parc Tsarasaotra and common at many sites thereafter.

**Common Myna (introduced)** *Acridotheres tristis* Very common.

**Madagascar Starling** ♦ *Hartlaubius auratus* Only seen at Andasibe.

**Madagascar (Pelzeln's) Magpie-Robin** ♦ *Copsychus [albospecularis] pica* Seen Ifaty and Berenty Spiny forests and Ankarafantsika dry forest.

**Madagascar Magpie-Robin** ♦ *Copsychus a. albospecularis* Recorded at Andasibe with nearly all black individuals around the hotel. The Magpie-Robin taxa on Madagascar have been revised by Birdlife International, with *pica* and *inexpectatus* named Pelzeln's Magpie-Robin. While it is biogeographically consistent to 'lump' these taxa, it is not morphologically so, and would not seem to meet the criterion for separation as defined by the methodology. See Tobias and Seddon.

**Forest Rock Thrush** ♦ *Monticola sharpie* Several Ranomafana.

**Forest Rock Thrush** ♦ (Benson's R T) *Monticola [sharpei] bensoni* Isalo Museum.

**Littoral Rock Thrush** ♦ *Monticola imerina* Seen Anakao. A species found in tall xerophytic vegetation in the dunes.

**Madagascar Stonechat** ♦ *Saxicola sibilla* Common on central plateau

**Souimanga Sunbird** ♦ *Cinnyris sovimanga* Common Ranomafana

**Malagasy Green Sunbird** ♦ (Long-billed G S) *Cinnyris notatus* Hotel Le Chat'O

**House Sparrow (introduced)** *Passer domesticus* Common in the north-west and abundant in Majunga.

**Nelicourvi Weaver** ♦ *Ploceus nelicourvi* A few Ranomafana and common Andasibe.

**Sakalava Weaver** ♦ *Ploceus sakalava* Common in the west.

**Red (Madagascar) Fody** ♦ *Foudia madagascariensis* Common

**Forest Fody** ◊ *Foudia omissa* Recorded Ranomafana and Andasibe.

**Madagascar Mannikin** ◊ (M Bibfinch) *Lepidopygia nana* Seen around Antananarivo

**Madagascar Wagtail** ◊ *Motacilla flaviventris* Common around Antananarivo.

## MAMMALS

The following listing adopts the taxonomy of Mittermeier et al. This taxonomy is largely derived from a peer reviewed paper that identifies rivers below 1000m, in the 'larger' (undefined) catchments, as sufficient barriers to geneflow and proposes the revision of terrestrial Madagascan taxa on this basis. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in Lepilemur, Hapilemur and Avahi species. See Goodman and Ganzhorn, 2004.

**Ring-tailed Vontsira** *Galidia elegans* 1 superb individual at Ranomafana.

**Humpback Whale** *Megaptera novaeangliae* At least two from Fort Dauphin.

**Mauritanian Tomb Bat** *Taphozous mauritanus* Several seen in Ankarafantsika NP.

**Malagasy Flying Fox** *Pteropus rufus* A large roost at Berenty, where 70 or more seen.

**Grove's Dwarf Lemur** *Cheirogaleus grovesi* 1 at Ranomafana. Previously lumped in Greater Dwarf Lemur (*C. major*)

**Grey-brown Mouse Lemur (SE)** *Microcebus griseorufus* Common Berenty.

**Goodman's Mouse Lemur** *Microcebus lehilahytsara* 2 in VOI MM, Andasibe.

**Grey Mouse Lemur** *Microcebus murinus* 3 Ankarafantsika NP.

**Golden-brown Mouse Lemur (Golden M L)** *Microcebus ravelobensis* 3 Ankarafantsika NP.

**Rufous Mouse Lemur** *Microcebus rufus* 2 at Ranomafana.

**Milne-Edwards's Sportive Lemur** *Lepilemur edwardsi* Seen Ankarafantsika NP. Commonly seen in entrance car park.

**Zombitse Sportive Lemur** *Lepilemur hubbardorum* 1 at Zombitse.

**White-footed Sportive Lemur (SE)** *Lepilemur leucopus* Very common at Berenty.

**Small-toothed Sportive Lemur** *Lepilemur microdont* 1 seen Ranomafana.

**Petter's Sportive Lemur (Black-shouldered S L)** *Lepilemur petteri* 1 at Ifaty in the Spiny Forest.

**Brown Lemur** *Eulemur fulvus* Seen Mantadia NP and Ankarafantsika NP

**Mongoose Lemur** *Eulemur mongoz* Several seen Ankarafantsika NP.

**Red-bellied Lemur** *Eulemur rubriventer* Common at Ranomafana.

**Rufous Brown Lemur (Red-fronted BL) *Eulemur rufus*** Several groups at Ranomafana. Also, at Berenty, where introduced.

**Golden Bamboo Lemur *Haplemur aureus*** A troop of 4 at Ranomafana.

**Gray Bamboo Lemur (Grey B L) *Haplemur griseus*** A couple seen in Mantadia NP and another in VOI MMA.

**Ring-tailed Lemur (SE) *Lemur catta*** Abundant in the Anja reserve.

**Greater Bamboo Lemur *Prolemur simus*** 1 at Ranomafana.

**Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur *Varecia variegata*** Three seen in Mantadia NP.

**Western Woolly Lemur (Western Avahi) *Avahi occidentalis*** Seen Ankarafantsika NP, where common.

**Indri *Indri indri*** Seen in Mantadia NP.

**Coquerel's Sifaka *Propithecus coquereli*** Common in Ankarafantsika NP.

**Diademed Sifaka *Propithecus diadema*** Seen around Andasibe, including from the lodge.

**Milne-Edwards's Sifaka *Propithecus edwardsi*** 1 at Ranomafana.

**Verreaux's Sifaka *Propithecus verreauxi*** A troop of five at Zombitse with young. Abundant at Berenty.

**Red Forest Rat *Nesomys rufus*** 2 at Ranomafana.

**Roof Rat *Rattus rattus*** Several on the roofs of our accommodations at Ankarafantsika.

A number of unidentified bat species were seen during the course of the tour.

## REPTILES

**Radiated Tortoise *Astrochelys radiata*** A critically endangered species. Seen in the spiny forests at Berenty.

**Brown Leaf Chameleon *Brookesia superciliaris*** Seen VOI MMA, Andasibe.

**Oustalet's Chameleon *Furcifer ousteleti*** Seen Anja and Ankarafantsika, where common

**Warty Chameleon *Furcifer labordi*** 1 found in the Ifaty Spiny Forest and common in Berenty spiny forest.

**Rhinoceros Chameleon *Furcifer rhinocerotus*** Numerous in Ankarafantsika NP.

**Deceptive Short-nosed Chameleon *Calumma nasutum*** Seen at Ranomafana

**Parson's Chameleon *Calumma parsonii*** Two large males seen Andasibe. The brightest of all the species seen.

**Cryptic (Blue-legged) Chameleon** *Calumma crypticum* 1 seen Ranomafana.

**O'Shaughnessy's Chameleon** *Calumma oshaughnessyi* 1 large individual seen Ranomafana.

**Three-eyed Lizard** *Chalarodon madagascariensis* Fairly common in the spiny forests and at Zombitse.

**Cuvier's Madagascar Swift** *Oplurus cuvieri* Very common in Ankarafantsika NP

**Western Plated Lizard** *Zonosaurus laticaudatus* Common in Ankarafantsika

**Giant Day Gecko** *Phelsuma grandis* At Ankarafantsika NP headquarters in dining room.

**Lined Day Gecko** *Phelsuma lineata* Seen in the Hotel dining room at Ranomafana.

**Peacock Day Gecko** *Phelsuma quadrio cellata* Vohiparara trail, Ranomafana.

**Koch's Day Gecko** *Phelsuma kochi* Seen Ankarafantsika.

**Madagascar Tree Boa** *Sanzinia madagascariensis* Three seen at sites around Andasibe.

**Madagascar Cat-eyed Snake** *Madagascarhopis colubrinus* Several seen at Ankarafantsika NP.

**Madagascar Tree Snake** *Parastenophis spp* One seen at Ankarafantsika. An uncommon species.

**Collared Bright Snake** *Liophidium torquatum* Several in Ankarafantsika NP.

**Giant Hognose Snake** *Leioheterodon madagascariensis* Seen Ankarafantsika NP, where common.

**Blonde Hognose Snake** *Leioheterodon modestus* Seen Ankarafantsika NP, where common.

## BUTTERFLIES

**Citrus Swallowtail** *Papilio demodocus* Seen Tana and around Ranomafana.

**Cream-lined Swallowtail** *Papilio delalandii* Seen Ranomafana and Andasibe.

**Banded Blue Swallowtail** *Papilio oribazus* Seen Mantadia NP.

**Madagascar Swordtail** *Graphium evombar* See several times in Ankarafantsika NP.

**Green Lady** *Graphium cyrrus* Numerous Antasibe-Mantadia NP.

**Madagascar Giant Swallowtail** *Pharmacophagus Antenor* Common around Tulear.

**African Monarch** *Danaus chrysippus* Seen Ranomafana NP and Ankarafantsika NP

**Madagascar Forest Nymph** *Atterica rabena* Seen Ranomafana and Andasibe-Mantadia NP.

**Madagascar Beauty** *Salarnis anteva* Seen Ranomafana.

**Common Leopard** *Phanta phalanthra* Seen Antasibe.

**Madagascar Brown Pansy *Junonia goudotii*** Seen Andasibe-Mantadia NP.

**Brilliant Blue *Junonia rhadama*** Seen in good numbers in Parc Tsarosaotra. A stunning species.

**Yellow Pansy *Junonia hierta*** Seen Ranomafana.

**Blue Pansy *Junonia oenone*** Seen Andasibe and Ankarafantsika.

**Indian Ocean Satyrs *Heteropsis spp*** Seen in Andahahela NP and Andasibe. Possibly different species.

Also, a number of unidentified *Lyceanidae*, *Pieridae* and *Hesperidae* species were seen, particularly at Mantadia NP.

### Further reading

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