



COMORO ISLANDS TOUR REPORT 2024

29 September - 8 October 2024

BY HANNU JÄNNES

This was Birdquest's fifth exploration of the Comoros Islands, a group of islands where even today, very few birders visit. The Comoros has a number of endemic birds, of which we saw 27 species, and a number of interesting island specific subspecies. Keeping in mind the current trend of splitting/elevating isolated island populations to species level, we tried to see as many of these as possible. The main birding attractions of the islands are the four scops owls that are very different in both appearance and vocalizations, the unique Humboldt's Flycatcher, the wacky and systematically very interesting Cuckoo-roller, the electric blue Comoro Blue Vanga, the Comoro Thrush (with distinctive forms on three different islands), and a good selection of drongos, white-eyes and sunbirds. In addition to the birds, it was interesting to get a glimpse of the everyday life of the people living on these remote islands, which each has its own feel. As often is the case on these island-hopping tours the transfers between the islands are a main concern and this year's tour was no exception. We had to modify our itinerary quite a bit as something seemed to go wrong with every inter-island transfer. Luckily our local agent and local guides were on the ball, and we didn't lose too much birding time on the changes. With more reliable inter-island connections and with somewhat better accommodation the Comoros Islands would be a pure pleasure to bird.

Our tour began late afternoon at Dzaoudzi airport on Mayotte, the easternmost island of the Comoros, which is part of France and the EU, and the wealthiest of all four Comoro islands. After meeting our local crew, we took the obligatory ferry from Petit Terre to the main island. It was already dark when we arrived at our accommodation near Combani Peak. The check-in to our very modest cabins was anything but smooth, and involved a lot of intense exchanges, many unanswered questions and even raised voices! Anyway, after the turbulent check-in, we enjoyed our first look at the endemic Mayotte Scops Owl, which was very common in the area, followed by a decent dinner. The next morning, we birded the surrounds of our resort situated on the edge of a large patch of forest giving great views over a wide valley. Interesting birds seen during the morning included several Comoro Blue and Comoro Olive Pigeons, and couple of noisy Cuckoo-rollers of the form *discolor*. After breakfast we were picked up by our local team, who were supposed to take us to another part of the island, but this expedition was a bit of a disaster as our local guide seemed to be unable to find an open access road to the required birding area. After quite a bit of driving around and a short visit to a botanical garden, we decided that we had had enough and returned to our resort. This was the only time on the tour we suffered from an incompetent local crew. On all the other islands knowledgeable guides did a good job. We then spent the rest of the day and the following, partially rainy, day birding the surrounds of our accommodation, where we managed to see nearly all of our target species including France's Sparrowhawk of the local form *brutus*, Malagasy Palm and Black Swifts, Mayotte Drongo – even on the

nest, Malagasy Paradise Flycatchers of the form *pretiosa*, Mayotte White-eye and Mayotte Sunbird. We also had more views of the wacky Cuckoo-rollers and saw the cute Mayotte Scops Owl in daylight. Leaving Comboni Peak behind we transferred back to Petit Terre stopping on route to bird in a local park, where, after a protracted search, we found our main target, the Mayotte form of the Comoros Fody. In the process we also saw several Red Fodies, Mayotte Sunbirds and Mayotte White-eyes, which had been quite scarce around our accommodation in Mt Comboni. After a good lunch in the harbour, we took a ferry from Grande Terre to Petit Terre, where, after some coastal birding, we checked in to our pleasant accommodation.

Next morning we were whisked back to the harbour, where, after quite a tedious check-in process, we boarded our ferry to Anjouan. While waiting for the ferry to leave, Todd spotted a bird hiding amongst the structures of the pier, which proved to be an African Pied Wagtail. There are no previous records of the species from anywhere in the Comoros on eBird, so obviously a very rare bird there. After the ferry left Mayotte, we picked up some White-tailed Tropicbirds, Greater Crested Terns and a few hundred each of both Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies at sea. We also observed three Bulweria type petrels and two White-bellied/Black-bellied Storm Petrels during the sail, but both had to be left unidentified due to rather brief views at long distance. The fast ferry (with a restaurant) which we were supposed to take had been replaced with a slow ferry (with no restaurant or any other type of service), and, instead of the scheduled three hours, it took us over seven hours to reach Anjouan. In the harbor of Anjouan, we experienced real African vibes rushing our way through the immigration and visa process and picking up our luggage from the pier. Luckily our capable local guide Patrice was there to help us.

The next morning, we began near the village of Moya on the other side of the island, where our guide took us on a steep and very narrow trail up a forested hillside. At a spot pointed out by our guide, we tried to call out the elusive Anjouan Scops Owl, but there was no response. Soon after it started raining and things looked anything but promising, but you've got to try. I played the song of another target species, the Comoro Thrush, and soon got a response maybe 70 meters back along the trail, where we soon sighted a pair. As the thrush spot seemed to radiate some owl vibes too, I played the call of the scops owl again, got an immediate response from a tree nearby, and for the next 20 minutes we enjoyed good daytime views of a pair of these rare and cute owls. On the way down we spotted the rare *pusillus* race of France's Sparrowhawk, which showed well, and the little-known Anjouan form *potior* of the Crested Drongo was also around. The rest of the day was mostly spent birding along the paved mountain road above the Moya village, where we encountered nearly all the remaining target birds including Greater Vasa Parrot, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher of the form *vulpina*, Anjouan White-eye, Anjouan Sunbird, Anjouan Brush Warbler and the Anjouan form *anjuanensis* of the Comoros Fody. The only bird we couldn't find, despite a rather extensive search, was the Anjouan form of the Cuckoo-roller. It wasn't until after eight o'clock in the evening that we were back in our accommodation.

Next day, instead of the scheduled boat transport to the island of Moheli, which was cancelled for at least two days due to rough seas, we had to take a plane to get to Moheli. Unfortunately, as there are no direct flights between Anjouan and Moheli, this rerouting meant that we had to fly first to Grand Comoros for an overnight stay. Arriving on Grand Comoros, we were met by Omar, our capable ground agent, who took us for a quick, but tasty, lunch and then for some quality birding. Our main avian target in the lowland forest patches at the SW corner of the island was the scarce Grande Comoro Drongo, an endemic species, with an estimated population of 70 mature individuals. In addition, the mixture of lowland forest and farmland produced a selection of other interesting species including several Greater Vasa Parrots, a very responsive pair of Comoro Black Parrots, Humblot's and Malagasy Green Sunbirds, brilliant views of a pair of Cuckoo-rollers (of the endemic form *gracilis*) and point-blank views of a confiding France's Sparrowhawk of the form *griveaudi*.

After a night in our pleasant hotel in downtown Moroni, the capital of Grand Comoros, we took the short flight to the island of Moheli. As we had already lost one day on Moheli, we were in a hurry and headed straight out birding taking packed lunches with us. Our first destination was an area of hill-side forest on the other side of island, known as the place to find the endemic Comoro Green Pigeon. Reaching the village of Oullah we were met by a local guide, who took us up a rather steep trail to an area where the pigeons were supposed to be. As soon as we reached the site, the skies opened up, and we were practically flushed down the steep slope by a massive tropical rainstorm. Back at the vehicle we were soaking wet, but as this was our only night on the island (or so we thought), and as we still had a bird to find, we just had to keep going. After an hour's drive we were back on the other side of the island, where soon after sunset, we located our target, the recently discovered Moheli Scops Owl, which eventually gave us all really great views.

The new morning saw us at the entrance of the Moheli National Park, where, after all the lost birding time and bad luck on the island, we had to try to see as many of the species still missing during the few morning hours we had left. This worked out well, and we soon had great encounters with the amazing Comoro Blue Vangas, Moheli Brush Warblers and Madagascar Paradise Flycatchers of the Moheli form *voeltzkowiana*. Additionally, we had more views of birds we had already seen the day before including Malagasy Harrier, Comoro Thrush (of the Moheli form *moheliensis*), Moheli White-eye, Malagasy Green Sunbird, Humblot's Sunbird and Comoro Fody (of the Moheli form *eminentissima*). Then we rushed to the airport for our flight back to Grand Comoros only to find out that the flight had been cancelled, and we had to stay one extra night in Moheli! This change of itinerary gave us another chance to try and see the much-needed endemic Comoro Green Pigeon and we soon found ourselves back on the other side of the island. This time, trying another site with a different local guide, we had better luck and, after a pleasant hill walk, had brilliant views of a flock of twelve showy pigeons feeding in a flowering tree. In addition, the sunny and very pleasant afternoon produced excellent daytime views of Moheli Scops Owl.

Next morning we were able to fly back to Grand Comoros, where, after losing one day on Moheli, we didn't have any time to waste. Our first destination was the beautiful and very scenic upland heath on the top of Mount Karthala. Luckily there is now a paved road that takes you up to 1600m asl, and you only need to ascend around 400 vertical meters to reach the habitat for the endemic Karthala White-eye. It took a lot of searching to locate a flock of four of these beauties, and in the process, we also saw many African Stonechats (of the endemic subspecies *voeltzkowi*, a potential split), Kirk's White-eyes, three stunning Malagasy Harriers, good numbers of Comoro Olive and Comoro Blue Pigeons, a few Madagascar Spinetails, a handful of Grande Comoro Bulbuls, big numbers of Greater Vasa Parrots and heard only Common Quails. Later we descended to the forest zone, where, before darkness fell, we had our first encounters with Grande Comore Brush Warbler and a confiding Comoro Thrush of the endemic (sub)species *comorensis*. When darkness fell the endemic Karthala Scops Owls started their evening concert, and it didn't take long to have brilliant views of two of these cute owls, the last of the four scops owl species that live on the Comoros.

The next morning, our last in the Comoros, was going to be a busy one as we were still missing some badly needed special birds. We started the day on the slopes of Mt Karthala, where the first stop gave us the endemic *consobrina* form of the Comoro Fody, a new bird, and more views of the Grande Comoro Brush Warbler and Comoro Black Parrot. Next stop was in taller forest lower down the mountain, where, just as we were running out of time, we found our prime target, the very special Humblot's Flycatcher, which showed well. Another important find was a flock of four Comoro Cuckooshrikes, and we also saw two Cuckoo-rollers and a France's Sparrowhawk. All the endemic Grand Comoros birds now in the bag, it was time to drive back to Moroni and enjoy good breakfast in a nice café. Later, after packing and check-out, it was time to say thank you to everyone for being such great company during our Comoros adventure.

BIRDS OF THE TOUR

1st Comoro Blue Vanga

2nd Karthala White-eye

3rd Cuckoo-roller & Humblot's Flycatcher

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g., it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is 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).

The species names and taxonomy used in the bird list follows Gill, F., Donsker, D., & Rasmussen, P.(Eds). **2024. IOC World Bird List (v14.1)**.

Where the subspecies seen is/are known, these are often given in parentheses at the end of the species comment.

BIRDS

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* Heard only on Mount Karthala, Grand Comoro.

Madagascar Spinetail ◊ *Zonavena grandidieri* A couple of birds were seen on two days on Mt Karthala in Grand Comoro.

Malagasy Palm Swift ◊ *Cypsiurus gracilis* Noted on all islands except Grand Comoro.

Malagasy Black Swift ◊ (Madagascar S) *Apus balstoni* Seen on Moheli and Mayotte.

Rock Dove (introduced) (Feral Pigeon) *Columba [livia] var_ domestica*

Comoro Olive Pigeon ◊ *Columba pollenii* Endemic to Comoros. Noted on all islands except Moheli.

Malagasy Turtle Dove ◊ *Nesoenas picturatus* Endemic *comorensis* on all four islands in the Comoros.

Ring-necked Dove (introduced) (Cape Turtle D) *Streptopelia capicola*

Tambourine Dove (introduced) *Turtur tympanistria*

Comoro Green Pigeon ◊ *Treron griveaudi* Endemic. A flock of 12 seen extremely well on Moheli.

Comoro Blue Pigeon ◊ *Alectroenas sganzini* Endemic. Noted on all four islands, sometimes in good numbers.

Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola*

Common Ringed Plover (Ringed P) *Charadrius hiaticula*

Greater Sand Plover *Anarhynchus leschenaultii*

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus* ca200 from the Mayotte-Anjouan ferry.

Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus* ca200 from the Mayotte-Anjouan ferry.

Greater Crested Tern (Swift T) *Thalasseus bergii* Two in Mayotte and ca20 from the Mayotte-Anjouan ferry.

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* A handful of birds around Mayotte.

White-bellied/Black-bellied Storm Petrel *Fregetta tropica/gallaria* Two birds at sea between Mayotte and Anjouan.

Dark Petrel *Bulweria sp* Three unidentified Bulweria type petrels were sighted at sea between Mayotte and Anjouan.

Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel* One in Anjouan.

Great Frigatebird *Fregata minor* Three on Grand Comoro.

Striated Heron (Green-backed H) *Butorides striata* Five in Petit Terre, Mayotte.

Malagasy Pond Heron ◊ (Madagascar P H) *Ardeola idae* One in Petit Terre, Mayotte.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* Noted on all islands.

Great Egret (G White E) *Ardea alba*

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Frances's Sparrowhawk ◊ *Accipiter francesiae* We had brilliant views of all the three endemic subspecies (or species) *griveaudi* (Grand Comoro), *pusillus* (Anjouan) and *brutus* (Mayotte).

Malagasy Harrier ◊ (Madagascar H) *Circus macroscelus* Small numbers on Moheli and Grand Comoro.

Mayotte Scops Owl ◊ *Otus mayottensis* Endemic. Common around our accommodation on Mayotte. Great views!

Karthala Scops Owl ◊ *Otus pauliani* Endemic. Great views of two on Mt Karthala, Grand Comoro, where common.

Anjouan Scops Owl ◊ *Otus capnodes* Endemic. Excellent daytime views of a pair near Moya.

Moheli Scops Owl ◊ *Otus moheliensis* Endemic. Excellent views (both at night and during the day) on Moheli.

Cuckoo-roller ◊ (Comoro C R) *Leptosomus [discolor] gracilis* Couple of good sightings of this endemic (sub)species on Grand Comoro.

Cuckoo-roller ◊ (Madagascar C R) *Leptosomus [discolor] discolor* This form was noted in Mayotte and Moheli.

Broad-billed Roller *Eurystomus glaucurus* A few sightings on Moheli.

Olive Bee-eater (Madagascar B-e) *Merops superciliosus* Noted on Mayotte, Anjouan and Moheli.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* One on Moheli.

Greater Vasa Parrot ◊ (Greater Comoro P) *Coracopsis [vasa] comorensis* Noted on Anjouan, Moheli and Grand Comoro, where abundant on the slopes of Mt Karthala. Endemic race *comorensis*.

Comoro Black Parrot ◊ (Lesser Comoro P) *Coracopsis sibilans* Endemic. Two on the Ngoumbaju trail and two on Mt Karthala on Grand Comoro.

Comoro Blue Vanga ◊ *Cyanolanius comorensis* Endemic. Excellent views of five on Moheli.

Comoro Cuckooshrike ◊ *Cebalepyris cucullatus* Endemic. Four on Mt Karthala on our last morning.

Mayotte Drongo ◊ *Dicrurus waldenii* Endemic. A handful of birds, including a nest, on Mayotte.

Crested Drongo ♦ (Anjouan D) *Dicrurus [forficatus] potior* This stylish bird was quite common on Anjouan.

Grande Comore Drongo ♦ *Dicrurus fuscipennis* Endemic. Three birds were sighted along the Ngouombaju trail, Grand Comoro.

Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher ♦ *Terpsiphone mutata* Noted on all four islands: *pretiosa* (Mayotte), *voeltzkowiana* (Moheli), *vulpine* (Anjouan) and *comorensis* (Grand Comoro).

Pied Crow *Corvus albus* Seen on all four islands.

Malagasy Bulbul ♦ *Hypsipetes madagascariensis* Noted on all four islands.

Grande Comore Bulbul ♦ *Hypsipetes parvirostris* Endemic. Seen on the higher slopes of Mt Karthala.

Anjouan Brush Warbler ♦ *Nesillas longicaudata* Endemic. Good views of a pair on Anjouan.

Grande Comore Brush Warbler ♦ (Comoro B W) *Nesillas brevicaudata* Endemic. A handful of birds on the higher slopes of Mt Karthala.

Moheli Brush Warbler ♦ *Nesillas mariae* Endemic. Three, with excellent views, on Moheli.

Karthala White-eye ♦ (Comoro W-e) *Zosterops mouroiensis* Endemic. A flock of four at 2000m asl on Mt Karthala.

Anjouan White-eye ♦ *Zosterops anjuanensis* Endemic. 15 or so on the slopes above Moya.

Kirk's White-eye ♦ *Zosterops kirki* Endemic. Small numbers on Grand Comoro on all three days.

Moheli White-eye ♦ *Zosterops comorensis* Endemic. Relatively common on Moheli.

Mayotte White-eye ♦ *Zosterops mayottensis* Endemic. Relatively common in Mayotte.

Common Myna (introduced) *Acridotheres tristis*

Comoro Thrush ♦ (Grand Comoro T) *Turdus [bewsheri] comorensis* Endemic subspecies. Good views of one on the slopes of Mt Karthala.

Comoro Thrush ♦ (Moheli T) *Turdus [bewsheri] moheliensis* Endemic subspecies. A handful of birds were seen.

Comoro Thrush ♦ (Anjouan T) *Turdus [bewsheri] bewsheri* Endemic subspecies. Two birds seen.

Humblot's Flycatcher ♦ (Grand Comoro F) *Humblotia flavirostris* Endemic. Two birds, a pair, on the slopes of Mt Karthala.

African Stonechat ♦ (Grand Comoro S) *Saxicola [torquatus] voeltzkowi* Endemic subspecies. Common on Mt Karthala.

Malagasy Green Sunbird ♦ *Cinnyris [notatus] voeltzkowi* Endemic subspecies. A handful of birds on Moheli.

Malagasy Green Sunbird ♦ (Comoro Green S) *Cinnyris [notatus] moebii* Endemic subspecies. Small numbers were seen on Grand Comoro.

Humblot's Sunbird ♦ *Cinnyris humbloti* Endemic to Comoros. Both subspecies *humbloti* (Grand Comoro) and *mohelica* (Moheli) were sighted.

Anjouan Sunbird ♦ *Cinnyris comorensis* Endemic. Common on Anjouan.

Mayotte Sunbird ♦ *Cinnyris coquerellii* Endemic. Relatively common in suitable habitat in Mayotte.

Red Fody ♦ (Madagascar R F) *Foudia madagascariensis* Seen on all four islands.

Comoro Fody ♦ (Red-headed F) *Foudia eminentissima* Endemic to Comoro seen on all four islands. Subspecies *anjuanensis* on Anjouan, *consobrina* on Grand Comoro, *eminentissima* on Moheli and *algondae* in Mayotte.

Bronze Mannikin *Spermestes cucullata*

African Pied Wagtail *Motacilla aguimp* One spotted by Todd in the harbour of Petit Terre in Mayotte, while waiting for our ferry to depart. No previous eBird records of this species from Mayotte or anywhere else in the Comoros.

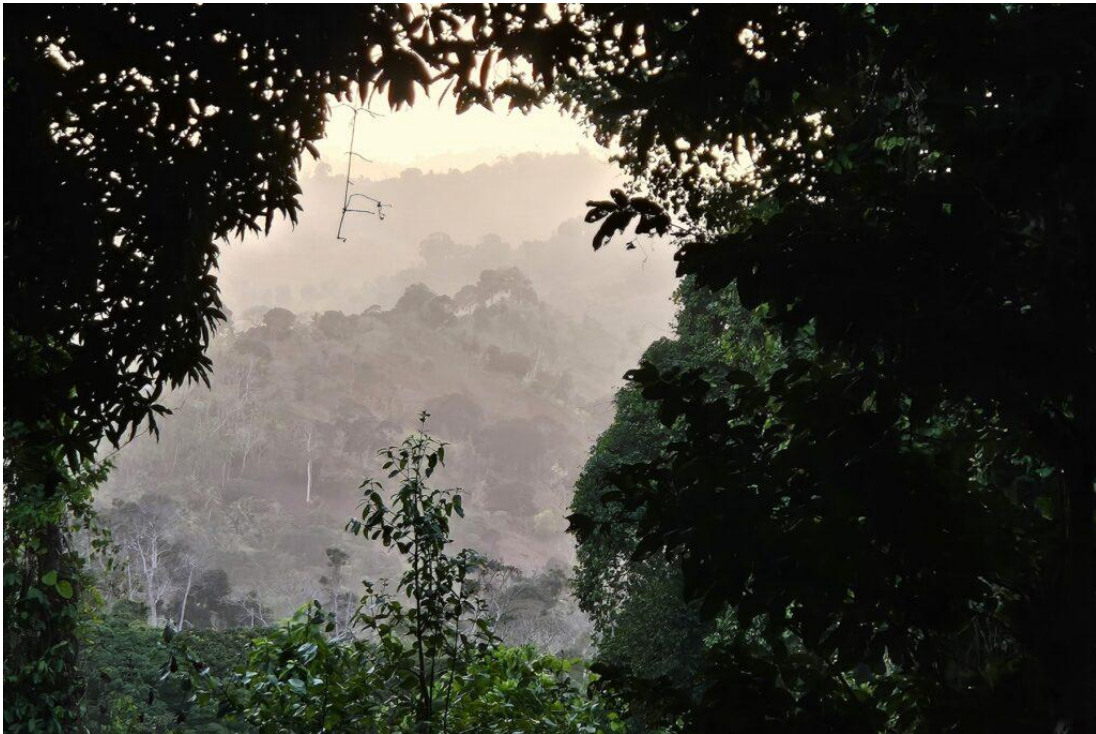
MAMMALS

Unidentified Dolphin One was sighted from the Mayotte-Anjouan ferry.

Seychelles Flying Fox *Pteropus seychellensis* Rather common and widespread in the Comoros.

Brown Lemur (introduced) *Eulemur fulvus* A troop of these creatures around our accommodation in Mt Combani, Mayotte.

Javan Mongoose (introduced) *Herpestes javanicus* Introduced. Non-leader. One was sighted in Grand Comoro.



Mt. Combani (image by Hannu Jännes)



Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher of the vulpina race (image by Hannu Jännes)



Grande Comore Drongo (image by Ken Berry)



(Anjouan) Crested Drongo (image by Hannu Jännes)



Comoro Blue Pigeon (image by Hannu Jännes)



Anjouan Harbour (image by Hannu Jännes)



Brown Lemur (image by Hannu Jännes)



Comoro Green Pigeon (image by Hannu Jännes)



female Cuckoo-roller of the endemic gracilis race (image by Ken Berry)



Karthala White-eye (image by Hannu Jännes)



Moheli Scops Owl (image by Hannu Jännes)



Mayotte Scops Owl (image by Hannu Jännes)



Birding on top of Mt. Karthala (image by Hannu Jännes)



Frances's Sparrowhawk of the brutus race (image by Hannu Jännes)



Comoro Olive Pigeon (image by Hannu Jännes)



African Stonechat of the endemic subspecies voelzkowi (image by Hannu Jännes)



Mt. Combani (image by Hannu Jännes)



Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher of the pretiosa race (image by Hannu Jännes)



Cuckoo-roller of the discolor form (image by Hannu Jännes)



Comoro Blue Vanga (image by Hannu Jännes)



Comoro Black Parrot (image by Ken Berry)



Anjouan Brush Warbler (image by Hannu Jännes)



Entrance to Mt. Combani (image by Hannu Jännes)



Karthala Scops Owl (image by Hannu Jännes)



Mayotte White-eye (image by Hannu Jännes)



Anjouan Scops Owl (image by Ken Berry)



Comoro Fody of the endemic Grand Comoro subspecies consobrina (image by Hannu Jännes)