

# Madagascar Trip Report

November 17 – 30, 2016 with Guides Peg Abbott & Alastair Kilpin



**Tues., Nov. 15 & Wed., Nov. 16**

## Early Arrivals to Madagascar

Several of the group arrived early; some to rest up from their long travels and some to explore a bit of the city on their own. Gail and John went with local tour guide Joseph and had a grand day, going into the city center to view the pulse of life. They enjoyed lunch at the restaurant at the train station, Café de le Gar, tried the local Three Horses beer, explored and learned, but were not able to see the museum they had hoped, as it was closed to prepare for the big Francophone conference (all French-speaking nations — this year Madagascar is the host). Peg and Elaine stayed back at the hotel to bird, enjoy a leisurely lunch, chase down Elaine's lost suitcase, and try out the pool. The birding was great in the gardens; we got first looks at Malagasy Brush Warbler, Madagascar Magpie-Robin, scores of Red Fody, Common Jery, Madagascar Wagtail, Madagascar Bulbul, Pied Crow, and towards dusk some Black-crowned Night Heron going to their roost. From the lower part of the property we could look off to some agricultural fields and adjacent houses, sensing a bit

of rural life.

[Hotel Au Bois Vert](#) is in a residential area near the airport and is a delightful oasis with gardens, a good restaurant, Wi-Fi, comfortable rooms, and a lovely small pool. The staff could not have been more helpful, though English is rare here — good to practice your French ahead of a Madagascar visit! Birds are attracted in by tall pines and other deciduous flowering trees. Souimanga Sunbird came in to sample nectar from some of the flowering shrubs. Time passed quickly and we got some much-needed rest.

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## **Thurs., Nov. 17 Lac Alarobia & The Tsimbazaza Zoo**

With over half the group in early, Peg arranged for a bus to take us to a small wetland nature reserve just outside the city. Lac Alarobia has an impressive bird list and we were not disappointed! Just inside the gate we heard high-pitch calls and found White-faced Whistling Duck everywhere. There were hundreds, resting on logs jutting out of the pond and loafing on the open banks of an island in the lake. We estimated 400 or so, joined by an equal number of Red-billed Teal. Mixed in were small numbers (half a dozen) of European Moorhen, five endemic Meller's Duck, and a couple of Eurasian Coot. On the island, Squacco Heron were in abundance with several hundred present, sporting rich caramel colors in breeding display. They were matched in number by Dimorphic Egret, mainly white phase, also breeding and showing off dazzling plumes. There were a half dozen Black Heron as well.



Peg searched hard and pulled out a breeding-plumage Malagasy Pond Heron, brilliant white with a blue bill, perched atop the island's scrub. With luck, it stayed there for scope views. The herons were nesting, so activity was high; we found chicks of varying ages.

We walked trails around two ponds while there, and some locals showed us our first chameleon, a young Oustalet's. Butterflies were out in the sun; we saw Little Blues, Brown Pansy, African Commodore, African

Monarch, Common Diadem, and really stunning Spotted Blue Swallowtail. The back pond had the highest number of Hottentot Teal, over forty in a quiet corner, sunlit as they glided along the reeds.

Walking the dike between the two ponds, Gail called out a great find: a mother White-throated Rail and her three chicks! Two of the chicks were on a mud-mound nest, the third had walked off a bit. We watched her preen and feed, all out in the open. This was the bird of the day!

We were hungry for lunch and as we had found so many great species, it seemed prudent to head on. Gail had enjoyed her lunch so much the day previous that we returned to Café du Gar where we sat in the garden enjoying fresh salads, good sandwiches, and our first view of Madagascar Wagtail which almost walked up to the table. We were still awed by Red Fody, particularly the male's brilliant plumage,



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so having them in the hedgerow was a treat. There was a nice mix of locals and foreigners dining in the garden. Then, we all got a taste of the hustle and bustle of the city as we navigated our way to the zoo.

At the zoo entry, we knew our driver had nicely called ahead because a rare English speaking guide was ready to offer his services. We readily took him up on it and enjoyed asking questions as we toured around. We saw Madagascar Fish Eagle, quite a variety of the native

birds, Nile Crocodile, and on some small islands in a pond, Ring-tailed, White-faced, and other lemurs were on display and free to move around. We then saw some very depressing small cages for a variety of smaller lemurs. They did let them out to lick honey off our arms and faces which they seemed to enjoy, but oh! for some funds to make their cages better!

We were all tired by this point, so by the closing at 4:00 PM, we saw a few snakes, sampled the little boutique shop, and headed back — a grueling hour+ of heavy traffic to our tranquil oasis at Au Bois Vert. We experienced street life first-hand: meat markets with whole chickens, rows of sausage, and organ meats all out in the sun with someone swatting flies. Racks of western clothing, shoes piled high. Beautiful fruits and vegetables in a kaleidoscope of color. Tyre shops, cash points, phone charging stations. Vendor after vendor sold the same mix of wares, all of whom started their day hopeful for sales but by 6:00 PM you



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could tell those hopes were dashed. Despite the rough conditions, people mingled peacefully, with lots of greetings — there was business in motion all around us.



Back at the hotel we met Helge, David, Peter, and our guide Alastair. It was great to have a full complement for the tour, though we were missing just one who had to cancel at the very last minute — she was in our thoughts throughout the trip. One other missing item was Peter's bag; he was incredibly relaxed about its loss. After he was held up on the Delta route in by a mechanical issue, he had been routed through London to finally catch us. Laundry was to be a daily activity for all of his coming days.

We enjoyed a welcome dinner and heard about our plans for the next days. Then it was off to bed and rest for the grand adventure!

**Fri., Nov. 18**

## **Flight to Toliara / Arboretum Antsokay / Coastal Drive to Ifaty**

We started the morning with a wander through the hotel gardens, getting more views of many of the



same species, including Madagascar White-eye, which were feeding on white berries that were double the size of the rings around their eyes; they held their own alongside vocal Madagascar Bulbul. We had breakfast as they opened, and were soon off for our day. We were braced in case there were glitches with Air Madagascar, of which we heard of many, but for us things went pretty much right on schedule.

We landed in a habitat that many of us looked forward to experiencing first hand, and the fascinating adaptations of Madagascar's arid land plants were apparent right away. A field stop in Madagascar is like being let out in



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fantasyland — we experienced this sensation over and over again!

Our plan was to have lunch and a walk at the great little Arboretum Antsokay in Toliara. They were ready for us with an outdoor table in the shade where a pair of Madagascar Magpie-Robin were busy working on a nest. We had a delicious choice of fish or chicken, nice salads, and ice cream for dessert ... yum!



Souimanga Sunbird were on display from the table, Madagascar Bee-eater passed overhead, and with so much to see we were soon on the trail to spot more native species. Many of the plants were in bloom. Almost immediately our local guides pointed out a perched Madagascar Kestrel which was being harassed by a Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher — wow! Soon to follow were a couple of large Warty Chameleons rivalled by close-up views of Madagascar Nightjar, roosting just off the trail but blending in almost perfectly with the leaves. Next came a real showstopper: A Green-capped

Coua crossing and re-crossing the trail! Our local guide and her helpers kept it calm but in range. This herding was a curious style of bird-sighting for many of us, but for large, ground-dwelling species it worked quite well. It also worked well to get everyone onto the smart Madagascar Buttonquail which scuttled through the spiny undergrowth. We all had super looks, and then witnessed our first vanga, a Chabert's Vanga, looking quite dapper on a perch. For many the highlight was seeing our first lemur, a Gray-brown Mouse Lemur snoozing in a vine tangle. It all happened fast and furiously, and we really had to peel ourselves away as the afternoon fled, with a few planned bird stops awaiting on our drive up the coast to Ifaty.



The ocean was choppy along the drive, with a strong offshore breeze; we watched local sailing crafts come and go. In Southwest Madagascar life is hard, with few resources except the richness of the sea. We watched men hauling in nets, and a constant stream of boats that stretched out to an offshore reef. Housing was simple stick construction with thatch roof covering, some had a shade ramada and an outside cooking area. Villages were clustered tightly together all along the way. Our stops were at small ponds where we noted

Black-winged Stilt, Three-banded and Kittlitz's Plovers, quite a few Curlew Sandpiper, and overhead, Pied Crow.



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As sunset played its magic light on the ocean, we pulled up to our simple hotel, where warm hospitality and cold beers were waiting. While they took the bags around, we enjoyed sunset on the patio, and locals came to sell us carved gourds and other handicrafts. Dinner had local fresh fish and other options including Zebu filets. Rooms were the most basic of the trip as we wanted to be close to our field location, but we were beat and took advantage of rest as offered!

## Sat., Nov.19 A Morning Surprise / Spiny Forest / Return to Toliara



We started very early this morning since the habitat we planned to visit would be toasty by 9:00 AM. At first light, we headed to the bus, only to be directed to our alternate local transport option — Zebu carts! What fun, and Alastair pointed out that we had luxury cushions. The ride was soft and pretty smooth as the Zebu trotted along, three of us to a cart, across the highway to a fabulous community reserve.



It was still early light as we parked and entered the private reserve, a community conservation project locally known as the Forest of the Baobabs. We met our excellent local bird-spotting trail guides at the village adjacent to the reserve. The spiny forest is fast disappearing to Madagascar's well-entrenched charcoal economy and to date there is no national park or strict reserve in the area, so this type of community project is vital if anything of this unique habitat is to remain. It felt good to be supporting the effort.

Birds were spotted fast and furiously; the first one being of the most difficult to spy: Long-tailed Ground Roller. What a bird! Our local guides worked hard to find it, and with their style of encircling at a distance, kept it where we could peer through the brush for pretty decent looks. Next was a Green-capped Coua, followed immediately by a perched Running Coua — this one out in the open. Soon we spied a Lafreysne's Vanga preening in the sun atop the stalk of an

Birds



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Octopus tree. Reminding us of Cactus Wren, a pair of *Thamnornis* duetted from atop a spikey columnar Octopus tree, perched long enough for us to have scope views. We had good looks at a Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk with his large eyes staring down upon us before it was chased off by some rather agitated Sickie-billed Vanga. A pair of Crested Coua were a lovely find, easier to see than the other coua species, and put on a good show. The cute Archibold's *Newtonia* was seen and provided background song for much of the walk in this bizarre "forest" landscape of red sand, chunky baobabs, and spiny bushes.



The species we worked the hardest to find, walking at a good pace for a mile or so, was Subdesert Mesite, surely one of Madagascar's strangest and most unique birds. We were well rewarded seeing both a male, and later a female, both in alert poses with tail held higher than their heads. We got the scope on them for good views. A pair of the massive Sickie-billed Vanga were also seen at the nest, providing great views of this iconic Madagascan species.





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We had two lemurs this day, first another Rufous mouse lemur, then a Sportive Lemur, wow! The latter was a female with a baby, staring down at us with great big eyes. This particular one has

dark black shoulders and its exact species name is uncertain! Our first Lemur encounter had been at the Zoo, where acclimated individuals came to check us out with hopes of honey, quite an experience....

The grand finale was a Madagascar Sparrowhawk, a streamlined beauty that had a commanding presence near its nest.

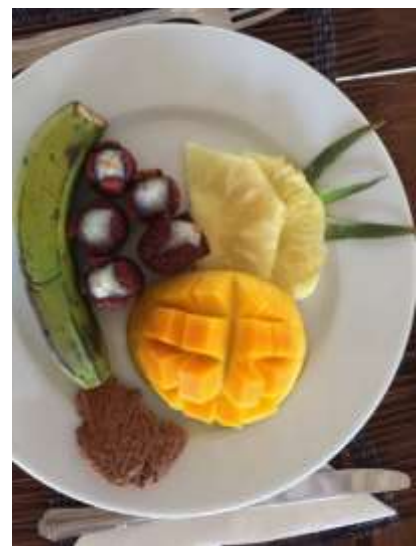


The heat was closing in, and we walked a total of about three miles on the sandy soil base, so it was time to return to the small village at the start where our Zebu carts waited. To our amazement, the child with one string of beads to sell that we saw at dawn had morphed into an entire mobile shop, full of cloth wraps, carved gourds and animals and other handicrafts. There were throngs of kids (all selling) and women showing off colorful wraps.



Peg dove right in and was immediately surrounded. We did our part for the local economy. Amid the chaos, John spotted a big communal nest of Sakalava Weaver; their bright yellow heads looked like

decorations as they went to and fro. Navigating the vendors, we got back to view the nests. We then hopped into our Zebu carts to avoid





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the frenzy and returned to our beachside hotel, where for the rest of the morning we swam in the sea, showered, had lunch, and enjoyed some down time ... nice!

In the afternoon, we returned to some of the ponds, searching for Madagascar Plover, which we had luck with today. Almost right out of the bus Gail spotted two, which turned out to be three, and we had ample time to watch them. They were in the vicinity of some Ruddy Turnstone, and in the salt ponds filled with water we found Common Greenshank and Whimbrel. A walk to a small dune lake was hot, but delivered Little Stint, loads of Little Grebe, and our first look at a Madagascar Lark. Barn Swallow floated over the marsh, a scarce bird in Madagascar.



meals were divine!

Towards sunset we landed at our lovely beach hotel where we had spacious rooms, a gracious host, a seaside bar and restaurant, and a nice pool looking out to the jade waters of the Mozambique Channel. It seemed almost over the top after our previous night, but no one complained! Particularly nice here were the staff, and the fact that no fence separated us from the local village where most of the hotel's workers lived. This was a quiet area where we could walk the beach and gardens and feel most welcomed. Fresh fruits at

## Sun., Nov. 20 Boat Trip to Nosy Be / Walk to La Table



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This morning felt very leisurely; a fresh breeze woke us up with the sun and early birders walked the gardens listening to Souimanga Sunbird and Madagascar Cuckoo, as well as noisy Crested Drongo and Common Myna, which are ever-present across the country. Breakfast was served in view of the sea and soon afterwards a boat arrived to take us an hour or so out through the barrier reef to Anakao and Nosy Ve. The wind was in our favor for the morning, so the crossing was relatively easy with bright sun for photos of colorful sails on local fishing boats.

We saw a good number of outrigger canoes and landed at a local fishing port that was just filled with them. A local beach lodge had set up a nice small trail through the dunes, which we walked with hopes of finding Littoral Rock Thrush.

Bingo, a pair was seen within ten minutes'

time; we got good views and watched their flycatcher-like behavior. It was nice to have such a local species perch up for photos and inspection. There were plenty of other good birds seen in a short space of time, too.

That species found with ease, we headed over to the island. A friendly goat greeted us upon arrival. Gail and John wanted to stretch their legs and took off to circumnavigate the shoreline over the next few hours. The rest of us followed Fidson into the shrubbery, again much in bloom, and were delighted to see Red-tailed Tropicbird nests. They were lovely flying overhead, banking in circles and at times, quite close. We learned that the island had been “de-ratted” in a major conservation effort and the tropicbirds were already showing a good comeback. Much of the morning we enjoyed watching three to five of these exquisite aerial gliders. We did not linger long at either nest, not wanting to attract the attention of Pied Crow.

We made a circuit back out to the beach, walking slowly to admire the many shells. Strict laws forbid shelling, so we contented ourselves with photos and looks before returning them to the sand, sort of “catch and release” shelling. We were delighted to find a pair of White-fronted Plover that afforded us scope views.





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In the distance, we spied a heron; we hoped for Humblot's but it turned out to be a Gray, albeit our only Gray of the trip. We also spied a cluster of terns and Crab Plover, and made a slow saunter up for closer viewing. There were mainly Lesser Crested Tern, but one tiny Saunders's gave us good scope views at the front of the pack. Six or more Common Tern hung off to the side. A passing boat put them up so we had beautiful images of them swirling back in to land with the cerulean colored sea making waves behind them.



We kept our distance, but counted 41 Crab Plover — wow! This impressive species stands taller than the terns, and we watched them for some time. A single Sanderling joined the crowd, too.

Our boat came down to pick us up, giving us the most beach time possible. As we rounded the now choppy point that held the terns and plovers, Peg spied three Bridled Tern. Sadly, they were quick so they were only seen by those of us facing the shore, despite a quick return pass-by to try for them again.



We headed back across the channel just in time, about an hour's crossing, as a strong afternoon breeze picked up the chop. The swells made for a sporting ride. We were dropped at our hotel where we relaxed over lunch and had time for a siesta or a swim.



In the mid-afternoon, we boarded the bus with Danny driving us not all that far to another beachside fishing area. Here there was a road that wound up on a limestone plateau with spiny forest of a much-reduced state (due to change in soil type) to that we'd seen near Ifaty. However, it was still quite interesting. Right where we parked we found a Chabert's Vanga on its nest in a columnar Moringa tree ... lovely! We spent most of our time here in search of a Verreaux's Coua, which is extremely range restricted. Walking up a steady grade, we watched Crested Drongo (also on a nest) and Madagascar Lark, and admired many of the plants.

There was a steady stream of locals coming and going.

One family was collecting rock building blocks they had likely quarried out by hand, which now lay

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stacked on the hillside above. Both parents were moving rock; the children were too young to help, yet sat quietly and watched. It was hot, heavy work on a steamy day and it showed us vividly that this side of the country is remote and harsh, and that eking out a living in any way aside from the tapping the riches of the sea, is a real challenge.

We heard and then saw two Verreaux's Coua, keeping our successful track record. We did dip on our next try, Red-shouldered Vanga, a very local and elusive species more often encountered by chance since it rarely vocalizes. We walked the road, listening and at times trying the call, but at the end of a lovely, but long day, our stamina faded and after a decent effort we got back on the bus, making one stop at some local grottos where Mascarene Martin nested.

Then it was back to dinner in the outside dining area with a nice sea breeze. A few went for a short night walk around the garden, finding some Warty Chameleons.

## **Mon., Nov. 21 Toliara to Isalo**

We had a lovely final breakfast with fresh fruits (including in-season mango and lychee fruits), eggs, and homemade breads before loading up to start our two-day drive across the country. We broke this drive up with some birding, and a two-night stay at a spectacular geologic area at Isalo.



We stopped at Zombitse National Park, an area of mature dry forest on the major road angling northeast through Isalo. There are no lodges near this excellent park, so it makes visiting a bit tricky. We



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arrived right at noon so we had our picnic lunch under the shade of trees: large sandwiches, cheese and tomato or Zebu slices, a nice pasta salad with fresh carrots, green beans, and onions.



Our local guides arrived and seemed delighted to have our plastic cutlery and paper plates, treasures for people living so far from anywhere. Peg shared dark chocolate gleaned from the wares of a gas station. Fortified, it was off to explore.

We had two young women and one man as our local guides, and each were excellent spotters. Before getting on the trail, we had flight views of Madagascar Cuckoo Roller, which actively displayed and called. Once on the trail, we promptly found Giant Coua and had really good looks as it fed on the forest floor and crossed the path twice with the encouragement of our guide team.



There were female Paradise Flycatcher and Gail found a monster size Oustalet's Chameleon perched high. We were about to scope it when Bertrim called, "Sifakas!" and off we went. This was our first large lemur, Verreaux's Sifaka, one of



the species known for dancing. What a treat to get into a family group, not bothered by our presence. They were feeding on delicate new leaves on some shrubbery; there were about ten in total, and one was carrying a small baby. They made great sideways leaps, which all of us had only previously seen on television. Michael got a great video. One was particularly curious, first checking out one part of our group and then leaping to a vertical tree on the trail edge to view the other; our close-up photos show big smiles on everyone's faces!

Other highlights of our walk included very close looks at the highly local Appert's Tetraka, found mainly here at Zombitse. At first it seemed like a vireo or greenlet to our New World eyes, but then it started hopping branch to branch like a small thrush before it went to

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ground and moved in jerky motions from leaf litter patch to leaf litter patch, probing. It was one very active, queer little bird!



We honed in on our sixth species of coua for the trip, the smaller Coquerel's, which was again feeding on the forest floor. A Madagascar Hoopoe was a treat to see, and its activity pointed us to a Long-billed Bernieria. In a short portion of the canopy we had Red-tailed Vanga hopping about, and in time a perched Madagascar Cuckoo Roller that was large, spectacular, and calling ... wow! Our guides knew a roost tree for a Sportive Lemur which came up to peek at us, it feeds nocturnally so likely went back to napping after our view. We had more

views of Sickie-billed Vanga nesting in a massive Adansoniabaobab tree, as well as "dancing geckos" and another truly massive Oustalet's Chameleon to wrap up a very productive session in this special forest.

We hated to leave Zombitse, one of Madagascar's vitally important national parks. It's a forest that seems young (save the very huge baobab trees 800+ years in age), yet so productive. The road bisects the forest here to allow access. In the distance, we saw other small patches of forest and can only hope someday linkages connect them.

Continuing down the road, not long after we began to see hints of the remarkable Isalo landscape, we began to see impressive sandstone features as we climbed an impressive grade; soon we had to stop for photos. Utterly fantastic and other worldly was this landscape! We walked the road for a bit just to take it all in. Rain was coming, giving a rich freshness and excitement to the air.

Our hotel, Jardin du Roy, was right in the middle of this wonderland! The building's amazing stonework wowed us





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at a grand entry. The staff could not have been more friendly, waiting there with cool cloths for our faces and a welcome fruit drink. In time, we found out this hotel complex provided work to 120 people



and is largely self-sustaining through solar energy and a huge kitchen garden, fish pond, and more. The buildings were laid out in harmony with the rock setting. The pool was shaded by a huge Marula tree and a couple of flowing Jacaranda. Frangipani was fragrant, along with bougainvillea abundantly in bloom. The pool had a view of some of the finest rock features, and we looked out onto native palms and grassland.

and went over our bird list ahead of dinner.

Happy that we had two nights here, we met for cocktails

## Tues., Nov. 22 Isalo Area



We met early in the morning to beat the mid-day heat and enjoyed a fine walk among the rugged rock features. We found Madagascar Periwinkle in bloom, a plant used to help cure childhood leukemia. We found two tall orchids, *Eulophia livingstoniana*, growing in the shade of rocks. Peg spied a nest of African Palm Swift tucked up in the fronds of a stately *bismarckia* palm. Continuing the walk, we had a pair of Madagascar Kestrel close by, and in the distance, sighting and scope views of a breeding-plumage Malagasy Pond Heron in a low-lying wet area. We could not get closer due to the pandanus thicket, but at least we had a view.

We circled back around, crisscrossing over a small stream, where we found shade and several colorful dragonflies: Blue Emperor was the showiest, but many of us found the Widow quite fascinating with its smoky blue, broad wings. There were Red-



veined Dropwing and at least two species of skimmer.

We had a flowering Croton tree just covered with wasps busily pollinating it. Above us we heard loud calling as two Greater Vasa Parrot flew overhead. They were courting, and together landed on a perch. She had an almost bald head and bowed and beckoned attention from the male, which rhythmically plucked more feathers for quite some time during a repeated behavioral sequence. The other top bird here was the vocal Broad-billed Roller.

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In the afternoon, we drove out of the hotel complex and parked on the side of the road to explore a patch of Tapia woodland, a habitat type quickly disappearing in Madagascar. Common Jery noisily greeted us, and two Madagascar Buttonquail were feeding in the leaf litter alongside two Madagascar Wagtail. Gail found a Yellow-billed Kite building a nest and a Madagascar Cuckoo posed out in the open for viewing, not its typical manner! We were on the lookout for silkworm cocoons particular to this woodland type and important to the culture to use for spinning precious burial shrouds. Tapia woodlands host the silkworm, *Borocera madagascariensis*, which has a fiber more course than the Chinese silkworm but equally pliable and insulating, often called wild silk. Cocoons are boiled for several days before drying. The weaving is artisanal and there is no cultivation of the silkworms, so all are collected in the wild. Shawls and scarves feature natural and chemical dyes, and sell for \$10 – \$40 USD on average. It took some time for us to find a cocoon; Alastair explained that before the rains the pupae provide needed protein and are gathered for food.



Alastair talked to us about taboos, and how forest patches that remain in the highlands are often considered taboo, a defacto preservation system that in places is the only way wildlife has survived. Taboos are deeply ingrained in local culture and change radically as you travel around the country, so even a local guide would not be familiar with all taboos. An example relating to the Tapia woodland we visited was how one can eat the sweet ripe fruit of the tapia (it is okay to eat the fruit off the ground, but not taken off the tree).

We then drove part of the way back, and Danny dropped off those that wanted to walk across this unexpected bold landscape in the beauty of the late-day light. The sandstone buttes and monuments encircled us, reminiscent of Monument Valley, parts of Nevada, or sections of Capitol Reef — sort of — it is just a grand landscape of its own. The weathered sandstone was mostly gray but in places held rich veins of red and tan. Iconic palms (*bismarckia*) were common, some single and some in groups, all wearing a gray cast to the leaves that shone in the late-day sun. Grasses were tall, and we walked through them hoping to pop up some partridge or a Marsh Owl. We had success, with one owl flying up, making a long slow flight into another tall grass area; it was quick, but offered good views and photos — wow! We also had time to admire the many Madagascar Cisticola perching atop the waving stalks.



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Later in a short grass area we had fine looks at two Madagascar Partridge, a pair, and we saw the patterned face on the male. We found gaudy huge grasshoppers (some that feed on plants of the milkweed family) paired two by two in mating, and to our surprise, a large snake! It crossed the sand track, affording good views and photos; later we looked it up and decided on *Leioheterodon geayi*. It had been digging, and its blunt head seemed ideal for that task.

Some other hotel guests had climbed a prominent rock by the lodge to watch the sunset. We went right to our favorite perch on the outside porch of the bar, where local THB beer and gin and tonics hit the spot. For dinner, we had a choice of calamari, zebu, or a nice vegetarian dish Elaine suggested of mashed potatoes and mushroom sauce with carrots, green beans and zucchini. Starters and desserts to boot ... no losing weight on this trip!

After dinner, our night walk group was a fraction of the size, but diligent to go out to find White-browed Owl. One was calling outside Peg's door; we found it with relative ease as it called to two others further down the drainage. An easy night walk! We ventured a bit farther, admiring a fireworks-like show of heat lightning, thousands of stars (including fine views of the Pleiades and Orion), a couple of Oustalet's Chameleon, and the winged adult Ant Lion that was large and impressive.



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## Wed., Nov. 23 Travel Day: Isalo to Ranomafana

As our friends and families back home started treks to see family for Thanksgiving, we woke to fresh morning air in Madagascar. Quite close to our cabins a family of four Madagascar Hoopoe were feeding near the horse corral. They fed two adult-sized chicks, taking no chances on a successful brood, despite the chicks' ability to feed quite efficiently on their own. Their corner of the world had shade, a rock to sunbathe on, bougainvillea and native trees, and corral pickings ... they did not venture far! A Crested Drongo pair fed a just-fledged chick here, too, smoky gray with wing bars and begging for food.

We had breakfast in the lovely rock and wood dining room; fresh plates were heaped with fruit — papaya, lychee, strawberries (just a few!), bananas, and passion fruit. There were excellent croissants, some of which were filled with a rich chocolate, yum.



Soon we had the bus packed and were on our way, sampling stretches of roads with potholes and some that were straight and let us fly. Danny was a great driver so when he veered we all looked up — huge chameleon on the road! Normally we would not pick them up but a rescue was in order here; just a few minutes more and a large truck would have squashed it. We drew quite a crowd as we put it back into a patch of prickly pear, with kids running in from all directions to watch us release it.



The highlight to break up our very long day of driving was a stop at a community reserve at Anja, where taboo had prevented harm to a local population of Ring-tailed Lemur that now thrive in the most scenic location! We left the sandstone spires and buttes of Isalo, passed through some open grassland where Peter and Gail spotted a Madagascar Stonechat; we had no luck in spying a harrier despite keeping our eyes peeled.

We crossed out of the dramatic rock region, then climbed back into a whole new realm, the Central Plateau, full of agriculture, villages, and just stunning domes of granite. The granite grew more and more spectacular until finally we stopped to admire the Bishop's Hat, a dome so sheer it reminded us of El Capitan in Yosemite. The granite had weathered like onions peeling, revealing different colors, some faces collecting dark mineral stain. Madagascar Kestrel called loudly as we walked down an open stretch of the highway to stretch our legs and admire. Rice fields terraced into the hillsides were now common; the whole region felt more prosperous.

Anja held a well-watered oasis. As we turned in we found it to be a day of celebration, the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the community project. In 2001 the two-year fledgling project officially became a tourism



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site. There was a band and as people who were all dressed up waited for them to start, a loudspeaker belted out music to make you want to dance. Fidson and Alastair shimmied and shook as they stood in line for our tickets; we took some unobtrusive photos. It was lunchtime, so we started off with a picnic, simple fare of cheese sandwiches, hard boiled eggs, chicken, and rice for those that wished, and fruits.



Our local guides met us and spoke good English, wanting to tell us about the lives of the Ring-tailed Lemur of their well-forested, impressive granite home. We walked a beckoning trail into the forest, hearing the curious mix of barks and squeals of the lemurs. It was about 15 minutes until we found them, and at first, they were high in the canopy. With binoculars, we could discern that several had small babies, which the guide said were about two months old. Gail said immediately, no wonder these are the poster species for Madagascar!

For the next twenty minutes or so we watched them, transfixed. At first they stayed high, dismaying our photographers who tried to shoot up at gray light, but eventually they came down to us. They came right down the rocks past Peter, and one dropped right to the ground in front of Peg. Acclimated, they paid us little mind. They were not particularly curious, but wanted to feed on the plentiful fruits in the grove. Three small ones scampered and



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played. The adults moved around, feeding and lifting their tails high, at times alert and making sounds. It was magical!

Walking back out the trail we found a large Oustalet's Chameleon and then a tiny leaf-litter chameleon, genus *Brookesia brunoi*, newly described. We also found a gaudy dragonfly, the female *Thermothemis*.

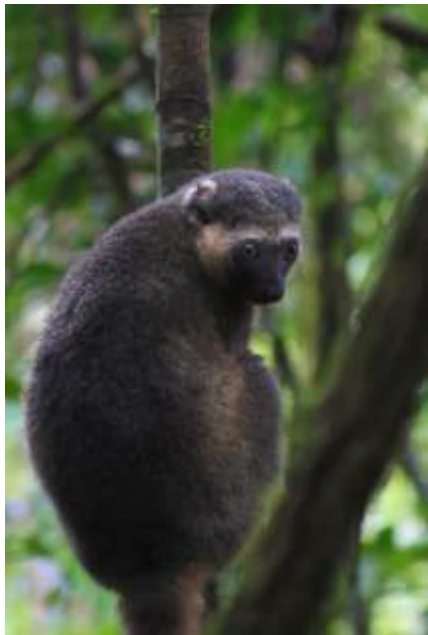
Back on the bus, we still had hours to go. We made a gas station stop for ice-cream and treats, passed through several villages where we could see markets and local life on the fly, and finally we wound down into the deep forest of the eastern side, at Ranomafana at last!



The road that descends into Ranomafana is memorable — the highway parallels a ridge with lush, unbroken forest for many miles. There was a spectacular gorge and huge granite boulders dotted the river bed. The park was created in 1991, largely due to the presence of two species of rare bamboo lemurs that we would look for the tomorrow. This park is known for lemur diversity — we couldn't wait to start looking for the park's 12 different species!

Our hotel was relatively new, comfortable, and located at the edge of town.

## Thurs., Nov. 24 Ranomafana Talatakely Section at the Lower Elevations



We got an early start to explore an extensive trail system in lush forest on the eastern side of the divide at Ranomafana National Park. We picked up local guides at Ambatolaty, a small village near the park. Chantelle spoke English well, and wanted to learn more; she had a keen eye and a lovely smile and showed us many species. This part of the park was very birdy.

Right at the start as we crossed the bridge, we saw Madagascar Wagtail. We had Long-billed Bernieria in shrubbery alongside the trail and then heard the excited voices of our local guides, "*Ici, ici*, here here." They had found a troop of Golden Bamboo Lemur! We saw them in the distance, but with luck the group was moving our way. We were delighted as they leapt sideways tree to tree, then fed on tender shoots of small branches. They reminded us of New World Tamarin monkeys with their high level

of activity. The varied colors of their coats shone in dappled sunlight and their small faces held such big eyes — engaging! This was high season in the park





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and several other groups came through, took quick looks and left. We patiently stayed to observe until they left us and went downhill. Chantelle spotted a small black bird in the middle of the troop activity



and with luck we all got on it: a male Velvet Asity! This male had emerald green “eyebrows” and was at close range, wow!

We then had a treat ... a chance to spend time with two Greater Bamboo Lemur. Although not as showy as their golden cousins, they are larger and able to feed on the stems of the bamboo. Park wildlife spotters had acclimated a small family by cutting stems for them to feed. We watched a father and daughter suck on the stems, and rip into them with delight — it was sort of like watching a child with ice cream. One was shy and stayed up in a tree, the other didn't care much that crowds were admiring it and moved as it wished not far from the trail. Their forest is beautiful with varied plant life, including large archaic-looking tree ferns. Many of the trees are completely coated with moss, lichens, orchids, and liverworts, giving the pathways a mythical feeling.

The first of two big bird parties were then encountered and was it ever fun! As we climbed up a hill, Peg saw the first Tylas Vanga of



the trip. It was joined by Madagascar Cuckoo Shrike, Red-tailed Vanga, our first Blue Coua (wow!), and John had a Blue Vanga down the trail. The flock moved through quickly and quite a number of Madagascar Bulbul joined in, causing confusion.

A Red-fronted Coua called loudly down a side trail and Chantelle led a few down a steep slope to get a view while others lingered with the mixed flock. As the group reconnected, we found the bizarre Satanic Leaf-tailed gecko that was an amazing mimic; with its head hanging down it was just a miracle to find.



We kept walking up and down small ridges, on one round we spied the Pitta-like Ground Roller — it was Peter who found it, earning himself a nice cold beer later in the day. We spotted Spectacled Tetraka in route, topping out at the Mirador where a habituated Ring-tailed Mongoose stole the show. It truly resembles a mongoose, but is an endemic Madagascan carnivore. With luscious colors, particularly in the tail, and weasel-

like curiosity, it held its distance but in general was pretty bold. From this high point, we found a couple of Greater Vasa Parrot and a trio of endemic Blue Pigeon, very striking birds with red feet and faces. A

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pair of Madagascar Starling flew passed us, and on the railing, we had close-up views of Peacock Day Gecko. Almost everyone devoured half their lunch, even though it was only ten o'clock; we had done the equivalent of about 42 flights of stairs (measured on Pat's phone).

The next trail treat was Milne-Edwards Sifaka. We had two males, one of which did the classic hang-down position. They did a lot of grooming, showing us moves that any yogi would admire.

Lunch was literally a plop-down on the trail, our energies needing a refuel. It was wonderful to be able to lie down on the forest floor here — no chiggers or poisonous snakes! Best of all, a huge mixed flock came to us, with Nelicourvi Weaver, Ward's, Red-tailed, and Pollen's Vangas, and a great find by David who described a "tree creeper," a male Nuthatch Vanga working its way up a tree. This was not an easy species to find, or to follow once found. A pair of Madagascar Cuckooshrike was with them, and a Madagascar Cuckoo Roller came in and perched for views.

Just in time for a post-lunch rest, we encountered a mixed group of lemurs feeding on *Strongylodon* flowers — large, tubular, and nectar-rich yellow flowers of the canopy. It was like sitting under a rain of petals as they knocked them down in their busy feeding. Peg started a trend: lying flat to view the troop without neck strain. Soon the forest floor was littered with bodies. We viewed two species from this belly-up angle: Red-bellied Lemur and Red-fronted Brown Lemur, of which the male is gray. This was an amazing day for lemurs! We also heard Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur in the distance, but just could not get to them due to the topography.

We found another gecko down by the river and were busy photographing it when Fidson saw a France's Goshawk. We missed its quick pass across the stream and back into the forest, despite his calling. Our muscles were barking as we climbed back on the bus — no flat trails in this stunning forest!

We then returned to the hotel where we refreshed with showers, sent Thanksgiving greetings to loved ones via Wi-Fi, and Gail, John, and Peter went down to scout out the women's weaving cooperative, where a dozen or so looms were set up with silk, cotton, and blended weavings ... lovely!





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We had a 5:00 PM call for those wanting to go on a night walk, an easy roadside stroll on which Chantelle outdid herself. We saw a Rufous Mouse Lemur and five species of chameleon, some of which were very colorful. She was an excellent guide, and spoke of her family of three children with pride; one was studying to be a guide, another was just about to take his Level One driver's exam to be a bus driver.

Dinner was our choice of lamb or seafood. This was the first lamb of the trip and it was actually very good — tender, with a nice sauce. They had vanilla ice-cream for dessert (almost pure cream). Verified again, no weight loss on this trip.

## **Fri., Nov. 25    Ranomafana Vohiparara Higher Elevations**



We got another early start, driving back up through the park to another trailhead, this time with local guide Emile. Emile was on a mission to find us some of the rarest birds of the forest. Over time, with patience and use of his tape recording, we found Rufous-headed Ground Roller, Brown Emutail, and eventually Brown Mesite, which the guys herded up a very steep hill to cross our path in fine view.



Today we earned our stripes with every bird, but the effort resulted in seeing both Common and Yellow-bellied Sunbird Asitys at their respective nest sites. The first nest was in a very large area of the river bottom, a hanging nest with a dangling tendril. We saw them coming and going as they were still building; the male's colors were in prime condition. We silently found our own "nests" on the forest floor for the second one, waiting for hopeful views of the male, but we had to be happy with good views of the female. This pair was obviously incubating eggs, and intervals of visits were

longer than we could wait.



It was a good day for herps, too; we found chameleons, geckos, and several species of frogs. We crossed through an otherworldly section of forest with many large Pandanus trees. In a low-lying wet section of the forest, Emile was the first to find bright Mantella frogs, very similar to Poison-Dart frogs of the New World with their brilliant colors.

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Dave, a retired park ranger, enjoyed a conversation with Emile who was an accomplished guide of 33 years, first working as a ranger in the fledgling Ranomafana National Park. He knew the plants, herps, spiders, and birds so well. We wanted to see Giraffe-necked Weevil after watching the David Attenborough film where they are depicted so well. He took us right to a fine patch of melastome plants that they frequent and we were able to see males and females — fun!

The day held less species than yesterday, but the species we encountered were sort of the “million-dollar specialties.” We stopped at the park’s little shop en route home to pick up T-shirts and baskets, a bit of support to the local economy.

Dinner was at our same long table in the dining room; we met first for the bird list and drinks. One of the options was a vegetarian plate with many small dishes, something different and popular tonight, though several stayed with the tender Zebu offered at almost every meal.



## Sat., Nov. 26 Travel Day / Lunch at Market Town of Ambositra

Alastair offered an early morning amble from the hotel; the highlight was scoping a nest of Madagascar Harrier Hawk. We walked down to the river and found Malagasy Kingfisher, a few flyover Madagascan Mannikin, and our daily Crested Drongo.



We had a long drive today, punctuated by a particularly bad stretch of road with construction. We did a quick stop for a raptor sighting that turned out to be our second Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk of the trip. We drove quite a way then, passing picturesque Malagasy highland, two-story brick homes situated in clusters on the hillsides, grouped above impossibly green rice fields with a backdrop of mountain peaks. It is ecologically depauperate, but has a storybook look to it and is not without beauty. Around each corner (there were many corners!) the scene was presented again, variations on a picturesque theme. While we mourned the loss of forest cover, the landscape did hold many charms at this time of year as the rains began.



At a small lake, we stopped to find Madagascar Snipe, and with some walking the dikes between ponds, and help of small children that took up the cause with Fidson, our local guide, we flushed three in total, which handily flew off to other sides of the pond, giving us

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good views. The place has a sign indicating it was now a community reserve. We paid a small fee to use the restrooms, and while we waited we found a colorful Jewel Chameleon beaded with black and orange, about four inches long. While we watched, it zapped a moth with its long sticky tongue! There was also a Three-banded Plover here and a good variety of dragonflies: Blue Emperor, the same smoky-blue colored Widow, and several skimmers in a variety of colors. An electric orange butterfly was common in the reeds. In future years, we hope to learn more about this place; it seemed to have a small native plant nursery for reforestation and they had started on some trails.

We continued on to lunch at a tourist hotel in the market town of Ambositra ... it was one busy place on a Saturday. From street foods to fruit, clothing to shoe stands, vendors sold many wares; this month plums were ripe and they were for sale everywhere, piled high in baskets. We ate pizza at the Artisan's Hotel on a lovely patio with a view of the city. It was a nice break and they had a local group of young dancers, colorful and fun.

Nature was not far away, evidenced as Pat came back from the women's room saying we had to see the spider out the window of one of the stalls. After several "Oh my God" reactions, all piled into the bathroom regardless of gender for a view of this very large, red dappled wonder.

Fortified by espresso, we ventured on, thankful the stretch of pavement was actually pavement and we moved right along.

We had a photo stop near some picturesque rice fields backed by a waterfall. As if on cue, nature supplied a full rainbow and a contingent of local women came down to work the field, walking one of the dikes with baskets on their head as rays of sun broke through the clouds — nice!

We got to our very unique hotel, which, through the lodge Residence Madalief (and other fundraising mainly in the Netherlands), supports a local orphanage and canteens at local schools to feed almost 1000 children several times a week. It was located in a quiet area out of town, and trees on the property brought in birds. We enjoyed some free time to walk





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around the grounds and Gail spooked up a Barn Owl in the planted pines that line the entrance road. There were Madagascar Mannikin in the open grass lawns and Madagascar Stonechat were common.



Dinner was one of the best of the trip, and the delightful owner, Remi, gave us some of the recipes, which contained some good Malagasy touches. We loved the lentils cooked with garlic, onion, and coconut milk and shavings, and enjoyed both a meat and vegetarian option with watercress sauce, yum! The starter was a soup of lentils and potatoes with French mustard to give it a bite. The dining room was a round building with windows all around, great to watch lightning flashes as a storm gathered.

Before the rain hit we had a special visitor, a Torotoroka (Madagascar) Scops Owl came calling and perched right next to the building in a large spreading tree! Again, this was our kind of owling, close and handy. A pair called for much of the night.

## Sun., Nov. 27 On to Andasibe National Park

We met this morning for an optional pre-breakfast walk. Though early, light comes early here (by 4:45 AM, it's pretty bright) so by 5:30 AM many of us are up anyway. We hadn't gotten far before Alastair spied a Green Sunbird on some lovely purple flowers in the garden. It was dazzling to watch it feed there and at two nearby bottlebrush bushes. We would see it more often in coming days, but this was a first for the trip.

We strolled down the entry road, looking for the Barn Owl that Gail had found on her walk last evening. No luck, but we did find a beautiful owl moth and Helge got to play a joke on Peg, pointing excitedly to the group clustered around it saying "Fosa track!" That sure picked up her step. Madagascar Coucal called, Madagascar Stonechat and Wagtail perched up and sang, and Madagascar Kestrel were displaying on the wing.



Michael got a run in while we birded, enjoying his pace through a local village and some farm country. The local church bell sounded loudly at 5:30 AM, urging all to be thankful for the day.

We said our good-byes to Remi and several left a contribution to her work that improves the lives of



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local children. The place she's created has peace and beauty, and it's obvious she loves to share it. At breakfast, we got to try the local plums, and in our fruit cup was fresh, ripe avocado.



The day was a long one and for the most part it was on the bus; this second day on the bus seemed even longer than yesterday. From the window we saw a thousand variations on the view: two-story brick houses clustered on a steep hill or near a ravine alongside the road. Rice fields were as far as the eye could see, some filling whole valleys and others just small pocket enclaves where water seeped out from the clay soils. Markets were going strong, it being Sunday, with baskets of fruit, long loaves of bread, unrefrigerated meat, piles and piles of clothing, strings of shoes ...

We stopped for lunch at a new Madagascan fast food place available on the new ring road circumnavigating Tana. It was fast, had clean bathrooms, and the food was safe and reasonably good — the same recipe for success as it is at home. There were mostly Malagasy families there, so people watching was fun, too. They watched as we tourists had ice-cream first, enjoying a cone as we waited for our to-go meal.



We soon turned off on national Highway 2 to Andasibe and it seemed like a tourist route for locals as well; little parks with picnic areas alongside a rushing stream, plantations of pines between rice fields, river sands, and boulders where people could swim.

Finally, at about 3:00 PM we got out of the bus at the visitor center and spent the rest of the afternoon walking down the road from the park towards our hotel. In the distance, we heard the first wails of Indri! The birds were busy; we watched a close-by pair of Crested Drongo, Stripe-throated Jery, and along the river, Madagascar Kingfisher. Michael spotted Common Brown Lemur, our first for the trip. This group was a trio with one being a very small baby. The mother almost instinctively kept it pointing away from us, tightly wrapped on her belly, but we had peeks and it seemed inquisitive about us — fun!

The hotel was lovely — big rooms with natural wood floors, tall ceilings, lots of space, good showers, and nice furnishings. The view was of a river on one side, forests on two sides, and the village in the distance. Gail got right in the pool, some of us had a beer on the patio over the river, and others unpacked and reorganized. Soon it was checklist time and dinner, which tonight was veal, curried fish, or coconut lentils with rice.

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## Mon., Nov. 28 Andasibe National Park

We did wake to the sound of wailing Indri! Beginning at 5:00 AM, and lasting for about twenty minutes, they called and called. The sound was iconic in the way that coyotes are in our country. They stopped for a while then gave short bouts for those who did not catch the first verse. Upturned sounds suggested questions, while the even-toned descending tones sounded more melancholy. Imagine waking to that every day, and how sad it would be for that sound to go quiet in the world. Having this charismatic, flagship species, the park had a nice visitor center and the obvious support of conservation organizations. In the section we would explore tomorrow, two species of lemurs have been successfully reintroduced.

Andasibe is the best place in Madagascar to see Indri, but it holds other treasures, too, including some fine birding. We left after breakfast to explore. Starting from the park entrance station, keen-eared Fidson picked up the call of Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, a forest kingfisher, and worked with local guide Jean Claude so that we could spot them. We found the pair; one was being fed by the other — courting time in Madagascar. The light was tough so we did not get the full scope of their rich color, but it was nice to record this species.



Along the trail, and right on the trail below eye-level, we had a pair of Paradise Flycatcher feeding young. You could see the chicks raise up in the nest, and both male and female were making feeding stops. It was hard to pull us away! Just down the trail, a familiar whistle alerted us that Crossley's Vanga were in range. We tried hard to see this little cocky-tailed forest denizen and several of us managed looks, but none of us had cracking views in the dim light.



Our trail route went alongside a small lake, and with rather amazing luck our timing matched that of an increasingly rare species to find, the Madagascar Crested Ibis. We had a glimpse of it and it flew off, but then it appeared in front of us on the trail and we walked with it quietly around much of the lake edge. No sooner was it out of sight, then a White-throated Rail came to the water's edge with two chicks. We admired it, but wailing tones of an Indri group beckoned us onward and upward to more steps in the woods ... off we went.

We were patient, outwaiting several groups passing through, and got fine looks at three Indri, though they stayed high for some time. Eventually they moved off to some orange flowering trees and we realized the group was larger. We were able to see them leaping, feeding, and interacting.



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Jean Claude was quite focused, trying to find us other key species. We were distracted by the myriad fascinating small life forms, including mantids, bark spiders, dragonflies, butterflies, ferns that included the huge bird nest ferns high in the tree tops, and more. We did get on to a troop of Diademed Sifakas, perhaps some of the most beautiful, with a rich caramel color in their arms and legs along with a mix of black and white. The troop was down on the ground feeding voraciously on hard seeds. We could watch them dig at close range, including a female with a very young baby holding on tight. They would crack the seed and dig right away for another. They tolerated us for just so long and then whoosh — they were gone.



The morning went all too quickly but was packed full of wondrous things. Lunch was served leisurely, broken up by Peg spotting a Short-horned Chameleon and Gail finding a nesting Crested Drongo. Mascarene Martin were constantly coming and going to nests under the gazebo that was built over the water, and with some patience the Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher put on a show.



There was time for a nap or a swim and then we were back at it, driving down to the small village and beyond to another restaurant perched on the water. We parked there, made a walk into the woods where Jean Claude had a known roost area for Madagascar Long-eared Owl (success!), and then returned to the deck where we hoped to see a number of species as they passed to roosts. One Purple Heron was the main show on this quiet afternoon, but the coffee and tea fortified us to do a night walk from about 6:00 – 8:00 PM. It started to sprinkle and some returned, having already had a long day. Those that persevered saw a young Parson's Chameleon, and two specialty lemurs of the area: a Crossley's Dwarf Lemur and a Goodman's Mouse Lemur.



Then it was dinner, dessert, and off to bed!

## **Tues., Nov. 29 Mantadia National Park**

We left early this morning, traveling in four-wheel drive vehicles; we quickly learned why — the road was dirt and full of potholes ... too severe for a bus. We drove for over an hour at slow speed, passing the guard

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skulker awaited us near its nest hole, a Scaly Ground Roller with intricate pattern and colors. We all got good views and this boded well for the day.



among other factors like loss of wetlands. We saw one and then its partner, and once together they called loudly. They came and went, feeding and passing through vibrant reflections to the delight of our photographers. Great and Lesser Vasa Parrots called loudly all the while and were seen by most in flight and perched. The cloudy conditions really kept the forest alive as both Indri and the Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur called all day — what a treat!

We found a Common Moorhen with chicks, and in time a pair of Meller's Duck came into view. Madagascar Swamp Warbler and Madagascar Wagtail worked both sides of the pond and at times

station, where Alastair noted with concern that the land adjacent to the park had been cleared and burned since his visit five weeks ago. Lack of a buffer zone here is serious; a small village exists now post-mining, and with the closing of a graphite mine (and the jobs that went with it), residents turn to the forest for resources. Indri were wailing their lonesome territorial calls. We passed a couple of trailheads but continued on to an area of lush, primary forest.

Almost immediately upon entering the forest, another

The forest was mythical in feel, with abundant bird nest ferns, tree ferns, old man's beard lichen flowing from prominent dead snags, and some really huge trees — one Jean Claude estimated at over 400 years in age. We could hear both Green and Stripe-throated Jeries and we got views of Madagascar Yellowbrow. Perhaps the sighting of the day belonged to the family of impressive Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur. Initially they were tricky to watch very high against the white light, but soon they moved right across us and into a profusely flowering Symphonia tree where we had superb views and heard them call, too!

We eventually made our way to what was once a graphite pit, now a sylvan glade. Nice cloud cover kept it cool, so we could rest on the shore and watch the birds. A pair of Broad-billed Roller made several passes and eventually one settled into its nest hole, high in a snag protruding from the edge of the pond. To our delight there was a pair of Madagascar Grebe, a species in rapid decline due to competition from Little Grebe,

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landed on purple water lily pads at close range. Again, we saw some outrageous dragonflies that included more Blue Emperor and a Lucia Widow-type. Peg spotted some colorful green and red orchids, *Cymbidiella pardalina*.

While all this was going on, one of the grebes (the female) slipped onto what turned out to be a nest, a collection of leaves and mud domed up under some overhanging branches. The male came over to visit, greeting with a call and very quickly hopping up for a round of mating. We were glad to see this rare species setting up to add to the numbers!

We enjoyed our picnic lunch here, and hated to leave the Eden-like setting of the pond, where we added yet another endemic when Peter spied two small swifts, Madagascar Spinetail, overhead. We walked the road back to the car park, and some elected to return to the hotel at this point. The rest of the group walked a leisurely pace back and found some good birds investigating spiders, spittle-bugs, a jumping worm, bamboo lemur, and a variety of butterflies on the wing. We made a stop outside of the park en route back to try for Madagascar Flufftail, which appeared to a call at very close range, scooting out from dense grass and dashing back in, several times, for all to see.

We enjoyed the local beer and comradery out on the patio as the sun went down, then tallied our list ahead of dinner.

## Wed., Nov. 30 Andasibe & Return to Tana

Today was the final day of our tour, and one of our flock, Elaine, left on an earlier transfer back to catch the 3:00 PM flight to Johannesburg and then connection home. The rest of us were to overnight in Tana, so had the luxury of an additional morning in the park. We returned to Andasibe National Park, and started at the Visitor Center, walking the Indri Circuit. We had good looks at both Red-fronted and Red-breasted Couas, meaning we had successfully seen all the couas of Madagascar ... score! We had good



looks of Blue Coua again, and several mixed flocks to work for sightings of several vanga species, including Nuthatch and finally, looks for most of the group at Blue Vanga, although they were quick views. Ward's and Tylas were other members of the group, along with Madagascar Cuckooshrike.

We found more bark spiders, and Alastair described one as a Darwin's Spider, one that has the highest known silk strength. It often makes bridges of webbing 25 feet across stream beds; we found ours just off the trail bridge. Pat got a video of the spittle bugs (large!) which are so prolific here they make puddles in the trail one could confuse for rain. We found Giant Forest Damselflies just ahead of a small troop of Diademed Sifakas (perhaps the same troop we saw the other day, evidenced by a mother with small baby again). Indri wailed from close by and off we went — in time we got absolutely wonderful looks at them making grand leaps and feeding. They came down lower so we



# Madagascar Trip Report

November 17 – 30, 2016 with Guides Peg Abbott & Alastair Kilpin

could study their queer hands and feet and get the essence of their gaze.

The morning passed way too quickly and soon we had to force ourselves to go, making a quick stop for close-up views of Gray Bamboo Lemur snacking on its favorite good. Back for showers, an all too ample lunch, a good show put on by a male and female Short-horned Chameleon, and it was time to go. Danny packed the gear atop the bus so we'd once again have lots of room inside. This had been a wonderful relaxing hotel; after a three-night stay we had settled in pretty well!

Going back to Tana we made a stop along a large river where we got a distant Madagascar Pratincole in the scope. We were glad our guides knew where to look; this was an impressive species!

Back at Au Bois Vert, now very familiar, we reveled in showers, a clean-up, and a final dinner with thanks all around. Thankfully there was no agreement on the best bird or mammal of the tour, just a raft of great suggestions of equal measure! Until the next adventure!



Three went on with Fidson to another national park for three additional days of birding, exploring, driving (too much driving!) and seeing the stunning Coquerel's Sifaka.



*Lemur with baby and Marsh Owl by Michael P. Anderson. Other photos by Peg Abbott*

Having started our journey the day after the presidential election, our task was to return to the USA and adjust. Thankfully our perspective will always be influenced by these days on Madagascar, and a part of our heart remains there.

