

Madagascar – The Eighth Continent

Nov. 4-18, 2025 | Trip Report by David Jaffe (DJ)



With local guide Dalton Gibbs. Our clients included James, Brenda, Don, Donna, Jeannie, Janet, David, Kay and Dallas.



Madagascar is often dubbed the "eighth continent" for its staggering biodiversity and long geographic isolation. Many would refer to it as a naturalist's dream. Over 90% of its wildlife is found nowhere else on Earth, making it one of the planet's premier destinations for bird watching and natural history exploration. During this extraordinary journey, we ventured deep into some of Madagascar's most iconic national parks—Andasibe-Mantadia, Ranomafana, and Zombitse—each home to a dazzling array of endemic species. From the haunting call of the Indri echoing through Andasibe's misty forests to the colorful vangas and elusive ground rollers of Ranomafana, the island's avifauna is as rich as it is unique. Zombitse ecosystem is transitional dry forest ecosystem and it offered us yet another opportunity to encounter rare birds and lemurs found nowhere else on Earth.

Beyond its natural marvels, Madagascar also offered us a window into a vibrant and layered cultural history shaped by African, Asian, and Arab influences. As we traveled through the island's diverse landscapes, we encountered the traditions, music, and daily life of the Malagasy people, whose strong connection to the land and ancestors added depth to every experience. Whether walking through rainforest on time tested trails, listening to the stories of our local guides or visiting a highland village and vanilla plantation, this trip was a profound immersion into one of the most biologically rich and culturally unique places on the planet.



Early Arrivals

Several participants chose to arrive a couple days early, with Jeannie arriving a full 3 days earlier. Considering the travel distance and the time difference between our homes, arriving a couple days early could be helpful. However, that is not to say one cannot arrive at the 11th hour, literally, as did the Coopers and Dallas rolling in just before midnight on November 3rd. Although David and Janet had planned to arrive a full day early, flight issues changed those plans, and they also arrived at 'the 11th hour'. However, we all made it safely to Antananarivo, locally known as "Tana", and were relieved that the challenges experienced from the political demonstrations had been quiet for several weeks. One would never know such things had occurred from simply passing through the streets of the capital.

This day, November 3, was not only my birthday, and therefore a great way to bring in my next year, but was also a great time for folks to relax in the hotel and continue to nurture their excitement about the upcoming adventure!

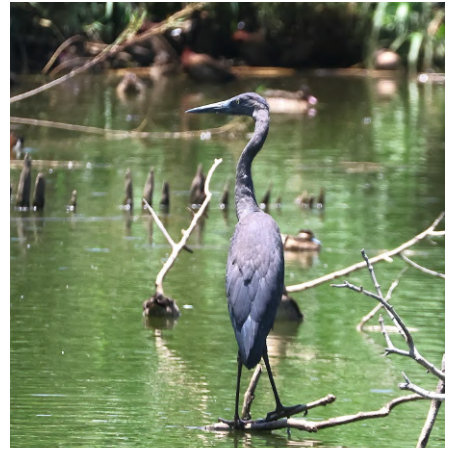
Four of the participants, Jim, Brenda, Jeannie, and Kay all met Dalton and myself for dinner this evening at the restaurant in the San Cristobal hotel. We enjoyed conversations that ranged from the creation of the first clocks to when does behavioral adaptation become part of our genetic code and, of course, we discussed the incredible natural history of Madagascar.

It was a very enjoyable and very comfortable evening of conversation, laughter, and excitement about the upcoming trip. Before we parted the table, we expressed our hopes for smooth travels for the other five participants that were scheduled to arrive that evening at about 11 PM. Thankfully, everyone arrived safely, on time and excited to begin their adventure.

Tues., Nov. 4 Arrivals | Lac Alarobia

We started in the morning at about 9 AM traveling through Tana's bustling streets arriving at Lac Alarobia about 30 minutes later. As we left the urban environment, we headed out into a more rural landscape with pastures and some large wetlands where we saw several folks harvesting water hyacinth for their cattle.

As we approached the lake, it became clear why this site is a designated Ramsar site. There is very little similar habitat in the area, and therefore this preserved land serves as a very important site for hosting an abundance of birds, particularly waterfowl.



Before we even began to navigate around the lake, we were stopped in our tracks, barely getting past the entrance gate. We saw hundreds of birds and immediately got the scope on a number of Red-billed Ducks, White-faced Whistling Ducks and the endemic, highly-endangered-hard-to-see Meller's duck. Before we moved too far, we laid eyes on many Little Egrets, Black-crowned Night Herons, several Squacco Herons and Great Egrets. Although we searched for the Madagascar Pond Heron, we did not see it at this first stop. Not yet at least... However, we did see the brilliant Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher before walking on. Some of us got a scant view of the Madagascar Hoopoe as it flew away from us.

As we continued around the lake, we saw several species of butterfly, including the Blue Admiral Butterfly, a Swallowtail butterfly and the African Monarch. In addition, we also saw several quite large and somewhat intimidating, Golden Orbweb spiders. They get the name because their silk has a bit of a golden hue to it, which is quite pretty. In one location, we observed a 'complex' of these spiders. There were probably about 30 spread across a large web. They seemed to all be sharing the space and we wondered how they divided the prey? Were there territorial boundaries or was it a first come first served kind of thing when an unlucky victim got caught in this huge web-matrix? We did not see any prey succumb to this 'web of death' and therefore did not have an answer before moving on.

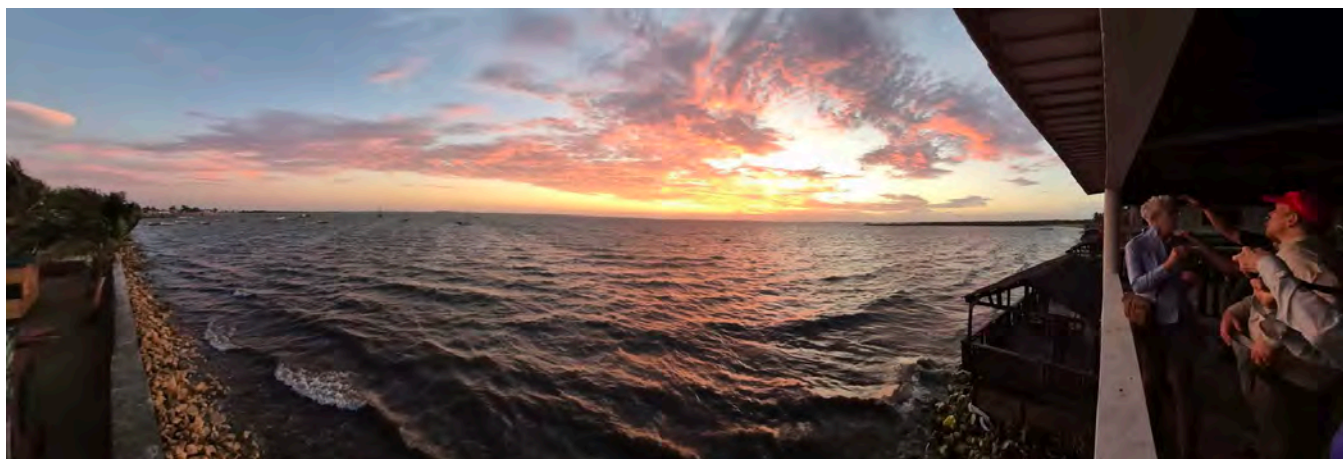
But, before we left the scene of the spiders entirely, our local guide, Fanairy, spotted the hard to find and endemic Madagascar Pond Heron. This elegant bird is a crisper white than the white of the Little Egret and has a beautiful blue coloration to its bill. With this excitement, we stayed and watched the heron for a while as a Madagascar White-eye and Madagascar Brush-warbler presented themselves in a nearby tree.

Before heading back to the bus, we heard the White-throated Rail calling off in the distance. So, of course, like any engaged birder at a Ramsar site in Madagascar would do, we went looking for it, but to no avail.

However, with all that we had seen and experienced, we left feeling fortunate for our first birdwatching morning seeing about 20 species, seven of which were endemic to the island!

After lunch and a siesta, we all met for our formal introduction and briefing at 5:00 pm. Dalton and I discussed the details of the itinerary, why Madagascar is such an amazing place, some safety concerns, and answered questions as well. Following this, we went over the first bird list of the trip and then shared our first formal meal together.

All in all, a wonderful start to what turned out to be an amazing trip!



Wed., Nov. 5 Thurs., Nov. 6 Flight to Toliara | Bay of Augustin | Anakao

We gathered informally for a nice breakfast at the San Cristobal Hotel. We dined on fresh fruits and croissants, omelets, waffles, crepes and some local fresh juice. Conversations were lively and we received our daily update on the whereabouts of Kay's iPad.

Since leaving it on the plane upon her arrival, she had been tracking it using the 'find my' app. This morning it was in Thailand. She would like to have it returned, of course, although at this point it might be that she was more interested in the tracking process and the entertainment it provides than receiving it back anytime soon.

After the update, we returned to our rooms, finished packing up and were ready to roll by about 10:00 am for our 12:30 pm flight to Toliara in the southwest of the island. Today was a travel day: from Tana to Toliara. From the window seat of the plane, I watched as the landscape transitioned from the relatively moist landscape of the central highlands to the extreme dry landscape of the south and west part of Madagascar.

We retrieved our luggage and took a short half hour drive to our hotel. We checked in and were seated for our first meal in the lowlands. A late lunch, but refreshing after a morning of travel. Following lunch and a short break, we made our way down to the beach for a sunset drink. The Cooper's, Zens, Dallas, and I all got into bike-powered rickshaws. Of all of the rickshaw drivers I could choose from, I chose the one in the Spider-Man outfit! Of course I would, wouldn't you? Kay, Jim, and Jeannie took the bus along with Fani and Dalton. Brenda relaxed at the hotel.

We arrived at the Recif Hotel and immediately ascended the stairs to have a commanding view of the ocean, and the sun looking west as it dipped below the horizon. A strong on shore breeze kept us cool and hanging onto our hats in the late afternoon sun. As we shared drinks and conversations, a small flock of Little Egrets flew north to the nearby mangroves.

We would spend the next 4 days exploring this area which is known for the Spiny Forest. We would then continue our explorations by slowly making our way north and east, through the highlands and down to the eastern side, the wet side and its thick rainforest.

However, even before our Spiny Forest adventures, we spent some time right around Toliara visiting Nosy Ve. 'Nosy' means island and this island is a beautiful tropical island with white coral sands, and one of our target species for the island was the Red-tailed Tropicbird.



To get to the island, we boarded a speed boat for a one-hour ride that took us across the Bay of Augustin. But first, since the speed boat couldn't get right to the dock, we had to get to the boat. To do this, we all got on Zebu drawn carts. We loaded about 4 to a cart and traveled the short distance from the concrete dock to the speed boat. Loading these carts brought smiles and future stories for sure.

Once safely on the boat, with lifejackets donned, we began our one-hour journey across the bay. Upon arrival to the area, we looked at a small separate piece of Nosy Ve which had about 30 or 40 Crab Plovers, another target species: an endemic and monotypic species to start our venture! We went a little bit south to the main part of the island to search for some more of our target species with our local guide Roger.

Shortly after landing on the southern portion of the island, we quickly spotted the Red-tailed Tropicbird in flight. We would see several more nesting as we hiked from the northern part of this island to the southern part.

At one point while we were standing around looking at tropicbirds, Jim very nonchalantly said, "Oh there's a little brown bird". Little did he know this LBB was the Madagascar Cisticola, another target species for the day. After a little bit of diligence and some patience, we all got some decent looks as the bird showed itself for all of two seconds on the top of some vegetation. A brief viewing, but long enough for everybody to get a good look at it. After a few more views of the tropicbirds, and having seen all of our target species, we made our way to the beach, where the low tide exposed some fringing reef. Therefore, the speedboat was not able to reach the beach, and some outrigger canoes brought us from the edge of the fringing reef to the boat from there. We started with the adventure on zebu carts and ended on outrigger canoes...so we thought...

Due to a pick-up of the wind, we made the call to go directly back to the landing instead of looking for the Rock Thrush, as we had originally planned.

Going with the wind as we returned to shore was smoother than the way out. After about an hour of transit, we returned to the beach at an extremely low tide. Too far for the zebu carts. So we wound up taking a tractor with a large buggy that was large enough to fit us all and bring us back to land.

After a short ride in the bus to our lunch restaurant, we rehydrated and dined on some very tasty pizza and some nice fish in the shade of a bamboo canopy with a gentle breeze.

Following our lunch, and a short ride back to the hotel, we had a siesta until about 4:00 pm. We loaded back up in the bus and made our way to the arboretum to learn about some of the local vegetation as well as see what birds we could see. We arrived at the Arboretum D'Antsoky about 30 minutes later. Zanto guided us for about an hour through the arboretum. He shared some wonderful information about some beautiful plants, many of



which are not only endemic to the island, but endemic to the Spiny Forest, which itself is an endemic floristic community!

Before we even left the visitor center with Zanto, we saw the Sakalava Weaver, Crested Drongo and Souimanga Sunbird. What a great start! Further exploring revealed the Sub-desert Brush Warbler, the Olive-capped Coua and a beautiful sleeping Madagascar Nightjar. At one point we had a really good look at the Olive Bee-eater.

Upon returning to the visitor center, we had engaged in a quick shopping spree before we loaded on to the bus at about 6:20 pm for our journey back to the hotel for dinner.

Fri., Nov. 7 Ifaty | Toliara | St. Augustin Bay

We had an early start today with wheels rolling at 5:00 am to get out into the forest as early as possible to beat the heat and search for the Red-shouldered Vanga.

Along the drive, we saw another Crested Drongo, some Namaqua Doves and, new for the trip, the Madagascar Green Pigeon. Our drive continued through some incredible village scenes along the Bay of Augustin. We arrived in the area called 'The Table', so named for the uplifted limestone of the area. Out of the vehicle and into the landscape, we began our search for our target species. Our first species sighted was the Souimonga Sunbird followed by the Striped-throated Jery, which was new for the trip.

Not quite the Spiny Forest proper, this desert scrub is a habitat completely different than any we had visited up to this point on the trip. And because of that, it produced several species for us that we had not yet seen.

We heard our first Red-shouldered Vanga at about 6:50 am. Almost everybody got a look by 6:56 am. However, we continued to search for this Vanga so that everybody could try and get a really good look at this special species. This would be the only opportunity we would have to spot this highly localized species. Our local guide, Railatsa, tried to valiantly to bring the Vanga back into our view, but our one scant look was all we were given this morning.

As is typical in such environments, as the heat increased the morning bird chorus decreased. And after a little more looking for other birds and a really good view of two Chabert Vangas, we loaded up the vans and began our journey back to town.



Before leaving the dirt road we made an obligatory stop at the Tropic of Capricorn for a group photo. Two large 'horns' protruded from the sculpture, representing Zebu horns. A short photo op and then back in the bus. Back to hotel for breakfast, packing up and then back out for the journey to the Spiny Forest! This wouldn't be our last journey through the apparent chaos of bike rickshaws, wagons fully loaded with grasses, wood being carried on heads and various and sundry other village scenes. But within about 15 minutes, we were well out of the city into the rural landscapes of Madagascar. Time to settle in for the hour-long drive to Ifaty.

After a quick check-in process, we ate lunch with a beautiful view out to the ocean with some beautiful bougainvillea's presenting peach and fuchsia. Before our afternoon siesta, we moved to the comfortable couches in this beautiful open-air lodge and caught up on our bird list for the last couple of days. Even while doing the list, we picked up a new species for the trip, the Madagascar Bulbul. That was probably a new bird *species* for many, but by seeing the Vangas this morning, not only did we pick up new species, but we picked up an *entirely new family*! Unless you've been to Madagascar, you have not seen Vangas in the wild!

After a nice long siesta and enough time for the sun to dip low into the sky, we left for the Spiny Forest in the cooling afternoon. This would be our first visit to this endemic ecosystem and we observed quite a few target species including the Olive-capped Coua and Archibald's Newtonia. The target species that we didn't see this evening, would be sought after the following morning.

As we drove through the village of Ifaty towards the Spiny Forest Reserve, little boys and girls were literally jumping up and down with glee to wave to us as we passed in our bus. Such a joyful site! As we wandered through the Spiny Forest, we were all amazed by the Baobabs and the Octopus Trees. We commented that a photograph of the silhouette of this forest could not be mistaken for anywhere else in the world, so distinctive.

The first creature we saw on our walk was the White-footed Lemur followed by a scorpion a gecko, a Sand Snake, a Madagascar Kestrel, and a Hedgehog Tenrec as the grand finale. Dalton made it very clear, on numerous occasions, this animal has absolutely no relationship to hedgehogs with which we are familiar. In fact, they are an ancient lineage that is endemic to this island and therefore occur nowhere on the planet.

Before leaving the forest, we wrapped ourselves around one of the larger stems of the Baobabs guessing how many people we thought it would take to circle the tree. One guessed eight, some guest six it actually took three. But still, an impressive stem! Then back to our hotel as the stars began to show and the moon slowly rose over the eastern horizon. Tomorrow would start in the same forest.



Sat., Nov. 8 Ifaty | Spiny Forest exploration

The bustling community of Ifaty that we drove through last night on the way to the Spiny Forest was hardly active at 5:00 am. Some folks were getting their stalls ready and others were walking along the side of the street, but the activity of the pre-dawn morning was nothing compared to the evening prior. We arrived at the Spiny Forest Reserve at dawn, the sun was not even visible yet. The silhouettes of the Baobabs created a beautiful pattern in the brightening sky.

We were out of the bus and greeted by the numerous venders in the parking area a little after five. We didn't stop to shop this morning; we had work to do! This was our final day in this endemic forest community and we had at least five or six endemic species to locate.

We had good luck at this morning finding two more endemic family members, including the Long-tailed Roller and the Sub-desert Mesite. These are extremely specialized to this forest community and we were very fortunate to have such great looks at both of these beauties! In addition to a lovely morning sunrise in the forest and great birds, it was just wonderful to be out in this environment again.

After breakfast, we took a run out to a local pond environment where the locals make salt. However, we were not searching for salt, we were on search of the Madagascar Plover. Not only did we find this special plover, but we also found the White-fronted and Common Ringed Plovers, the Black-winged Stilt, a Greenshank, and a couple Madagascar Kestrels. All in all another productive, although short, stop. Now it was back to the hotel for some R&R before lunch.

After a long siesta, we made our way back out to the Spiny Forest for one more sunset exploration. Immediately out of the bus we spotted the Crested Coua and the Madagascar Coucal, two new species for the trip and life birds for most of all of us. As we wandered through the forest, our guide was able to stir up another Archibald's Newtonia, which only a couple of us saw the other day. So, another short, productive adventure into the forest... our last visit to the Spiny Forest Reserve...For this trip!

Sun., Nov. 9. Travel day from Ifaty to Isalo

Today would be the first day of our long drives leaving Ifaty at about 7 am. We were bound for Isalo, passing through Zhombitse National Park on the way.



After traveling through several small communities and tiny villages, we had a picnic lunch in the shade of a large tree. In a nearby tower, looking down on us and us looking up at it was a Madagascar Kestrel. About a half hour after lunch, we began our travels through Madagascar Sandgrouse territory. We stopped at one point and asked a couple individuals at a checkpoint if they had seen the Sandgrouse, they had no idea what we were talking about. So, we stopped at another location at a shop on the side of the road and two individuals thought they knew where the Sandgrouse were. The territory is so large that we would not be able to find them on our own, so that's why we enlisted the help of local scouts that know birdwatchers are interested in finding this specialty species.

A little while after our guides went in search of the birds, one returned to tell us they had located some birds. Dalton, DJ, Jeannie, Jim, Don, and Donna started off through the scrubby grassland on an old two-track road. After about 20 minutes walking Don and Donna returned to the bus. After about 40 minutes of hiking and searching, those remaining did not see one. The birds had flushed from the original location. Immediately after Jeannie and I said "OK it's a wrap. Let's head back to the bus..." A single Sandgrouse flew right in front of us. Satisfied with that view, our decision to return was solidified. As we began heading back to the bus another one flew in front of us. And then two more. So, all in all, we saw four endemic Madagascar Sandgrouse on this adventurous excursion off the side of the road with our "local guides". We dropped our guides back off in their small village and continued on our way. Another bonus sighting we shared from the bus was the Hammerkop, a bird that comprises it's own family!

A few hours later, and at the completion of a long travel day, we made it to, and checked in to our hotel. After a quick settling in and freshening up, we all met for a meal in a lovely dining room. We shared our stories of the day and rejoiced in how wonderful it was that even though it was a long bumpy ride it was amazing to see the villages, children, and all the sites that we saw as we traveled from Ifaty to Isalo

Mon., Nov 10- Zhombitse National Park

In order to be in the forests of Zhombitse National Park for sunrise, and maximize our wildlife viewing opportunities, we left well before sunrise. Before we boarded the bus, due to the lack of light pollution in this exceptionally remote location, we had some really great looks at the Southern Cross, Orion, Cassiopeia, and the Big Dipper. Through our binoculars, we could see at least four, maybe six moons of Jupiter. And this was all with a halfmoon; I can only imagine what this landscape with limited light pollution would look like with a new moon, the stars would be amazing!!



Again, traveling at this hour through the communities that are bustling in the evening is a very different experience as they slowly wake up before the first light of the day.

Just after the sun crested the horizon, we came over a small rise and entered the forest of the park. Shortly after entering the forest, the bus pulled over and we viewed our first bird of the day: Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk. Less than a minute later, we all disembarked, met our local guides and prepared for our early morning adventure.

Local guides at the park are excellent insurance for our target species: Apperts Tetraka! But it didn't stop there...they showed us two owls (the Madagascar Scops and the White-Browed), the Madagascar Flycatcher, which was Kay's target species for the trip, a Giant Coua and two species of Sportive Lemurs, the Zombhitse (endemic to this park) and Hubbards.

After a short break and water refilling stop at the bus, we journeyed above the road to finish our time here in the park in search of the Veraux's Sifaka. We left the bus at 7:56 am. Within 20 minutes, we were looking at a small family of Sifakas. After some time with these wonderful lemurs, snapping photos and feeling gratitude for our experience, we returned to the bus and were rolling back towards our hotel by a little after 9:00 am. Indeed, a successful morning at Zombhitse National Park

The quiet communities of pre-sunrise Madagascar were now bustling communities of mid-morning Madagascar. Especially bustling with folks was the river that was crowded with miners. We saw about 200 people rinsing gravel they mined in the fields. They brought these large sacks of gravel to the river where they would rinse and look for sapphires. They would then sell these precious stones to the numerous buyers in the surrounding communities. These buyers would then export them, mostly to Thailand, where they were processed. Very few would make their way back to Madagascar where they were first extracted.

After a delicious lunch, a swim for some, and a long siesta Jim, Brenda, Janet, David and Kay ventured out with Dalton and DJ around the property through various habitats to look around to see what we could find. One new species observed was the Broad-billed Roller

We crossed a small drainage that supported a completely different habitat than that of which we were in this morning. This was almost tropical forest compared to the dry forest of the morning. When we emerged from this narrow band of dense vegetation, we climbed up onto the sandstones that were deposited in streams of the Triassic and Jurassic into Morondova Basin that cover a large portion of central-western Madagascar.



The big attraction on this walk wasn't so much the birds, although we did see some interesting species. The big attraction on this walk was the beautiful sandstone formations, cliff faces, colors and patterns in the sandstones.

We returned the same way and when we passed back through the wetland we searched for the White-throated Rail...But no luck...

Tues., Nov. 11 – Thurs., Nov. 13 Ranomafana National Park

After another lovely breakfast of fruit, eggs, and fresh juice we were on the road traveling through the beautiful landscapes by 7:00 am. By 7:20 am, we were at the Isalo National Park visitor center looking for the Forest Rock Thrush. Within minutes, we found a pair, our target species for the morning. The first of the two was the female carrying nest material. Shortly after we spotted the male on a post nearby. After spotting these two, we spotted a couple Pied Crows and Black Kites. We then spent a bit of time in the visitor center learning about Isalo National Park and the local flora and fauna.

Before we left the parking lot of the visitor center, Dalton brought a pair male and female Milkweed Locusts on to the bus. He explained how they feed on poisonous plants and are able to repurpose that poison to protect themselves from predators. As such, they have black and orange coloration, typically such patterns are indicative of danger to would-be predators.

By 11:00 am we were passing through the town of Ihosy. It didn't take long for us to get out of the city and back into the Madagascar bush. Dalton took out his large portable speaker and played music requests as we traveled through countryside. Van Morrison, Paul Simon and CCR were some of the requests that received some airtime. The cooler temperatures, partial cloud cover and nice breeze made for pleasant travel. As we traveled west, we left the sandstone of the Isalo Massif and entered the granites that run the spine of the country.

These mountains are also what stops the moisture from reaching the western portion of the island. As the warm moist air travels across the Indian Ocean from east to west and contacts the eastern slopes of Madagascar, it is forced to rise in elevation. As it rises, this warm, moist air cools, and the moisture is condensed out of it, dropping that moisture on the east side of the mountains and leaving hardly any rain for the west side of the mountains. That is why you have extensive rainforest in eastern Madagascar and extensive drylands, such as in the Spiny Forest on the western side of the island.



At about 1:30 PM, we stopped at the Anza Reserve where we ate lunch and then walked through the small forest area looking for Ring-tailed lemurs. On the way we in found a branch full Flatid Leaf Bugs in all their pink glory. We also got eyes on an Oostelata Chameleon and shortly thereafter numerous Ring-tailed lemurs. They were not shy and had no problem moving around, between and within a foot or two of us. We saw several with babies, some from last year and several from this year. Too cute!! This stop was indeed a big hit!!

After a bathroom break, we were back on the road to Ranamafana. Although the drive to the hotel was long, we were pleased to arrive and excited to start exploring the forest first thing in the morning!

For the first time on this trip, we went to sleep and woke with the sound of running water. We wouldn't see the lush green forest until the sunrise the next day, and it was a refreshing difference from the desert we had been experiencing the last week.

After an early breakfast, we picked up our local guides, Chantelle and her son, before heading 10 minutes down the road to the entrance of Ranamafana National Park.

In the forest, we were hiking by a little before six. Just after six we saw our first bird, which may have been the star of the day: the Pita-like Ground Roller. This is a beautiful bird that gave us good looks of both its front and back as moved from perch to perch. A few more highlight species this morning included a member of new endemic family for us: the Velvet Asity, and also the Crossley's Vanga, Scaly-ground Roller, and the White-headed Vanga. Among the mammals, we observed the Red-fronted Brown Lemur and the Ring-tailed Vontsira, a hunter of lemurs and related to the mongoose of India, but NOT the mongooses we are familiar with in North America. In addition, we were fortunate to see one of, if not the most incredible camouflaged creature on the planet: the Satanic Leaf-tailed gecko. It's amazing the guides were able to spot a creature that blends in so well with its surroundings. On the way in and out of the forest, we observed Giraffe-neck Beetles. One of the females of the group was making a nest by cutting the midribs of the leaf, and folding it in half where she would lay her single egg. The male kept vigil during this process. Upon completion of the nest for the egg, she would chew the leaf stem, separating it from the tree. It would fall to the ground where the one egg would hopefully develop and hatch. A lot of effort for one egg!

We ascended the last group of stairs and returned to the parking area. This area contained shops that were closed when we arrived. Now open, Jeannie, Janet, and Brenda picked up some beautiful artwork. Dalton picked up a guide to Madagascar lemurs while others enjoyed perusing the items available for sale. After this short shopping experience, we all loaded up onto the bus and were heading back to the hotel by a little after 11 am. What a successful morning!!



After a short break, we reconvened before lunch to go over our bird and animal list. Then we gathered again at 4:30 pm for an afternoon bird walk and search for the Rufous Mouse Lemur. While still broad daylight, we saw some familiar friends like the Madagascar Bulbul, the Crested Drongo and the Forest Rock Thrush. As night fell, we waited for the arrival of the lemur. Another successful search! We all rated this tiny lemur as a '10' on the cuteness scale. Following some time with a couple lemurs, we got back in the bus, headed downhill to a location where we would search for chameleons.

Immediately off the bus, we also saw a 2 ½ inch Stump-nosed Chameleon. Shortly thereafter we saw the O'Shaughnessy Chameleon and the Blue-legged Chameleon. These beautiful cryptic creatures gave us ample opportunity for photographs while marveling at their ability to change color in just a few minutes before our very eyes. We also observed a tiny tree frog from the Bufus genus.

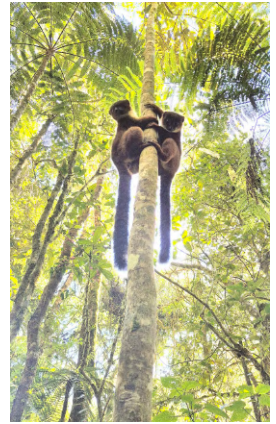
The next morning started at the same time, in the bus driving by about 5:45 am heading up into the higher elevations of Ranamafana National Park. We were in search of the Madagascar Flufftail, the Cryptic and the Rand's Warblers, a better look at the Velvet Aisity, and any looks at the Brown Mesite and Blue Pigeon.

We started walking the road and saw a few of our familiar, although still endemic, birds of the island, including the Madagascar Bulbul and the Crested Drongo.

Once we left the sound of the highway and entered the calmness only a forest supports, we were serenaded by the gentle music of a small creek. It was so pleasant to listen to this creek while we searched for some of our target species.

Among the incredible bird species we observed in the forest, we also got some really good looks at some very curious Red-bellied Lemurs that came within about 10 feet of us on some nearby trees. They seemed as curious about us as we were about them. Another wonderful sighting started as a game, "...There's a frog on this tree somewhere. Can you find it?" The Madagascar Fringed Frog, as the name suggests, has incredible camouflage, maybe even better than Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko we had seen previously. It took some folks several moments to locate this frog while others were not able to locate it at all, and it needed to be pointed out.

But probably from all of the experiences from this morning, the one that will gain the most "airtime" with the friends of participants will be the epic search for the Brown Mesite which was about an hour of trekking off the main trail on a much less maintained trail, over and through, around and about. But it should be known that this bird is one of the most difficult birds to see in Madagascar, and the most difficult of the family. After about an hour of the scouts running through the understory, looking for the bird and trying to send it our way, we eventually got some good looks as it crossed the trail. That is, of course, for the folks that stuck with the group



until the end of the adventure. A couple folks returned to the main trail after about 45 minutes of searching... And they can't be blamed, as it was a bit of a "wild Mesite chase" with an uncertain outcome.

Upon return, we saw the tiny beautifully colored frog, Beron's Mantella. While in the distance a Cuckoo Roller was calling. The group returned to the open meadow we stopped at earlier on this walk. We had a really good look at the Cuckoo Roller in flight. The black edges on the wings mingled with the very identifiable call making identifying this bird an easier task. We continued back to the bus where we had a quick bathroom break, and returned to the hotel for a short break before we met for our bird list and lunch.

Following lunch and our long siesta, we made our way down into the town of Ranamafana, and the vanilla plantation operated by our guide, Chantelle. We met Chantelle's assistant and began the walk through the village to the plantation. We traveled past some stalls selling local foods, a few houses, and a group of high school students walking home from school. After about a 15-minute walk, we found ourselves in the plantation where we met Chantelle.

Our first stop on the plantation was some really good looks of the Parson's Chameleon. This is the largest chameleon in the world and we were within inches of its independently rotating eyes and curled tail. Chantelle was very skillful in giving us time to and ooh and ahh over this beautiful chameleon, before she told us about the amazing work she does on the vanilla plantation. She explained how the plantation started, the work required to plant the trees that would host the vines of the vanilla, and then how every individual flower had to be pollinated by hand in order for them to produce the vanilla bean.

And that's just the beginning! Eight months later, when the beans are harvested, it goes through an intensive process of being placed in hot water at 65°C maximum for no more than three minutes, then it is covered in cloth for some time, and then it needs to be laid out in the sun for three hours every day between 10:00 am and 1:00 pm. No more than three hours. After that, it is put back in the cloth. This process continues for five months. As a vanilla bean dries out it will curl and each individual vanilla bean needs to be straightened by hand, so if you have 10,000 vanilla beans, you can imagine the amount of work this requires.

Her and her team then vacuum the vanilla pods in plastic that is sold at her little stand that is not open to the public, but only the visitors to her vanilla plantation. The proceeds for the operation go to buy supplies for the local school children.

So, in addition to being an incredible naturalist, full of enthusiasm and excitement and passion for the work she does in the field, she has this incredible "side project" run predominantly by volunteers that helps the community in tremendous ways. The kind of person that you love to support.



After her explanation, we spent some time in her small shop and we all left with vanilla gifts for friends, family, or ourselves!

Fri., Nov. 14 Antsirabe

After one more hearty breakfast at our hotel, our bags were packed on the roof of the bus and we began our drive through the rainforest countryside for our day of travel to Antsirabe.

After about an hour or so on the road, DJ read a piece by Loren Eiseley called "How flowers changed the world". This prompted a discussion about the significance of nectar and pollen, the rise of flowers as well as the importance of pollinators. While reading, Dalton pointed out a Great Egret in one of the rice patties we were passing. On this route, we also saw a Pied Crow, the Common Myna and perhaps the star of the show was an Euleonora Falcon being hawked by a Pied Crow.

After the reading, DJ offered a short lesson on iPhone photography and camera usage. This gave people a stronger foundation in the capabilities of their phone cameras and provided some things for people to consider when they were out in the field with their camera phones.

At about 11:30 am we stopped at the preserve Villageoul D'Ankazomivady to search for the Madagascar Snipe and to have lunch under the shade of thatched-roof gazebos. A relatively constant breeze and cloud cover made the air temperature quite comfortable, if not a bit on the cool side. We did not have luck finding the Snipe, but the break was welcome.

Shortly after lunch, we loaded back into the bus and continued on our way to Antsirabe with a few quick stops, including a stop for gas and snacks and a few spots to stretch our legs.

Between one of these stops, to go along with the Hammerkop citing from the other day we had from the vehicle, today, we saw the huge nest of the Hammerkop. The nest was tightly knit and about one meter tall by about the same wide. This was an impressive feature to find.

A little further down the road, and through a few villages we eventually made our way to the community of Antsirabe

Nov 15-17 Antsirabe to Andasibe

Today is another travel day from Antsirabe to Andasibe. About two hours into the drive, DJ presented a reading which was an excerpt from Indira Gandhi's speech made at the UN convention of the Environment in 1972. This



promoted another engaging discussion about the human use of resources, endangered species, and working towards a global community.

Following this discussion, DJ lead part two of the smart phone discussion, “How to edit images on your smart phone”. This gave folks the tools to work with all the images that they have been making on this trip. There were a lot of great questions, answers and input from folks using different editing features and with different goals for their images.

A little later, we stopped alongside the road at a craft stand filled with various products made from local materials. People returned to the bus with placemats, baskets, and purses.

We were at La Verduce restaurant for our lunch stop by 1:00 pm. Pizza! Following lunch, we stopped in Tana to change out our bus for the four-wheel-drive vehicles that we would need further north. Before we left the town, we stopped at an ATM for folks that wanted to pick up some local currency before heading north.

We made one stop to search for the Madagascar Pratincole on the Morongo River. No luck, but we did see a Common Sandpiper and a couple of Madagascar Wagtails on this short stop. One noteworthy event was the Brown Lemur that ran between the second and third vans. It scurried across the road with incredible speed, our viewing was scant, but no doubt it was a lemur and ‘brown lemur’ confirmed by our driver.

After a long and beautiful drive, we finally arrived at the Vekona hotel. Even though it was dark when we arrived, we could tell it was beautiful, and we were excited to see the area in the morning light.

There’s always a bit of a sweet sorrow arriving at a place after dark. The sorrow is that you don’t see where you are arriving to, but the sweetness is waking up, in this case, in beautiful rainforest environment. This was a lovely way to start the day! Following our breakfast, we were on the road by about 6:45 am making our way to Andasibe National Park where we met our two guides.

Patrice and his son Mike met us at the parking lot and immediately brought us down the road and into the forest. We walked down the road about 10 minutes passing some healthy-looking forest, which was most welcome after traveling through a countryside that had been heavily affected by humans. Even though the forest was not 100% native, it was forest! Before we even left the road, we had sightings of the Red-tailed Vanga, Nelcourvi Weaver, Crested Drongo and Madagascar Bulbul.



Then we began to hear the 'spirit of the forest', the namesake of the Lemur: the Indri. For this is the call for which all lemurs have been named, although no other lemur has this kind of call...

Shortly after leaving the trail, we encountered a Long-eared Owl! A rare endemic owl for the island. Follow this great sighting, but before we went looking for the Indri, we tried our luck at the Shirt-legged Ground Roller, another member of one of the six endemic families on the island. All of which we have seen to this point!

We then entered the National Park proper and began our walk through the rainforest that has been even less impacted than the forest along the road. Our first major sighting was the Madagascar Forest Rail. Our guides worked with this bird through the thick canopy of the forest so the bird eventually showed itself on the trail for what seemed like a very long view for what is typical of this bird. A usual view might just be very scant and maybe even a partial view. Instead, we got a full view for multiple seconds! Immediately following this we heard the call of the Cuckoo Roller and saw the male circling overhead. Then we continued on in search of other specialty species of this forest. This included the Malagasy Pygmy Kingfisher. But first, our guides found us a Diademed Sifaka, a very beautiful member of the primate group.

We heard the call of the Indri again and this time went looking for it. It wasn't long before we tracked down a couple members of two different family groups. We all got some really good looks of them resting and moving through the forest canopy. This was the target species for Dallas and many others.

With some effort, we all got looks at the Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher. We found this bird perched in deep rainforest, which is not typical for where North Americans are accustomed to searching for kingfishers. After some great looks of this difficult to see kingfisher, and some good photo opportunities, we continued on through the forest and searched for another target species: the Short-legged Ground Roller. As we walked along the trail, we saw large aggregations of the Madagascar Giant Pill Bug which Jeannie later learned is the only entirely terrestrial crustacean.

We did not find the Ground Roller on the way back however, we did realize that every single bird species we saw on our walk was endemic to Madagascar. And that's not something one can say every day. Upon return, we spent a little bit of time in the shop supporting some local artisans before making our way back to the lodge for lunch.

After a short break, we returned to the vans for our afternoon excursion in search of the Madagascar Ibis and the Collared Nightjar. Immediately out of the van and about 30 seconds off the road, we were looking at the rainforest variety of the Scops Owl



After about 10 minutes of further walking through the forest with our guide, they showed us a Collared Nightjar on its day nest in a large birdnest fern. Such a beautiful bird!

Our third target species for the afternoon, the Madagascar Ibis, was sitting in large, slightly obscured nest, but not so obscured that you could not see the red flesh of its head and the whiteness of the bill stretching away from the beautiful rufous body. Another incredible site for our time in this park.

But that wasn't the last of our sightings of this bird. We entered an open area and saw an Ibis sitting right out in the open on an exposed branch. Amazing!! But before we left the forest for the evening, we had a close and personal look at a gorgeous chameleon. This was a subspecies of the Parson's Chameleon, called the Christopher's. As the light faded, we left the forest for our final time, got back in the vehicles and returned to the lodge where we did the bird list and ate dinner.

Our last full day in the field began after breakfast when we met our drivers in the parking lot who had already picked up our local guides, Patrice and Mike. We made our way slowly into Mantadia National Park. We traveled slowly not necessarily because we were looking for wildlife, but because the road mandated slow progress. That is why we swapped out our bus for the three four-wheel drive vehicles.

Right at the entrance station to the park, folks in my van saw the Ward's Vanga. Our first formal viewing for everyone, where we got out of the vans as a group, was to get a good look at the Madagascar Starling, which is not nearly as easy to see as the more familiar European Starling. About 20 minutes later, our next formal stop was to search for the Short-legged Ground Roller. While Patrice was searching for the Ground Roller, some of us got some really good looks of the female Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher

We walked the road for about a half hour while Patrice searched below the road in the forest for the Ground Roller, but without luck. While we walked, we saw some incredible butterflies and a beautiful Sprite damselfly that iridesced green or blue, depending on how the light hit it.

Back in the van by nine, the search continues...

We started our "big" walk by about 9:10 am. This is where we dropped into the forest to search for our target species. About an hour later and maybe 200 vertical meters up we found our main target for the day: the Short-legged Ground Roller. Our guides worked hard to find it, even harder than we did! But we were all elated to finally have a good luck at this extremely elusive and rare Ground Roller.



As we slowly made our way back to the van through this primary forest, meaning that it has never been cut before in the history of humanity, we took an offshoot to look for the White-throated Wood Rail. Finally, after hearing it earlier in the trip and searching for it multiple times, we found it! It was darting about, crossing a small river, in and out of the sunlight so we all got some good looks of it both in the shade and in the sunlight. It's beautiful cinnamon brown back and white throat mingled eloquently with the two-tone bill. It was a lovely sighting.

Just before we reached the trail, we had another good luck at the Paradise Flycatcher, this one with a long white streaming tail. Quite elegant indeed.

After this sighting, we started to hear some large cracks of thunder. We made it back to the vans and were heading towards our lunch spot by 11:45 am

After lunch, and about halfway from the lunch spot to the entrance station, the guide, Mike somehow spotted a Stump-nosed Chameleon off the side of the road. We all got out to have a look. After we got a good look at the chameleon we tried to call in the Madagascar Flufftail. It took a few minutes for it to respond to the callback, but eventually it crossed in front of us for all of may be a quarter second!

Back in the car for our final target of the day: the Madagascar Rail.

We stopped about 10 minutes later just outside the park boundary in order to look for our rail. As soon as we stopped, Patrice ran ahead to see if he could call in the bird while we waited on the road by the vehicles.

Two minutes later, we got the call: come! Several of us climbed off of the road down into a meadow environment where our guides tried to call in the rail. We heard it coming slowly towards us through the vegetation and eventually it gave us a view... 'a rail view'. This was a view similar to that of the Flufftail. Actually, maybe twice as long, at a half a second!

As we stood waiting, hopefully for another view of the Madagascar Rail, the thunder got louder, indicating the storm was closer. The sky darkened and it became obvious we were in for a big storm! And it came... It came just as we were getting out of the vans to walk back to our cabins at the hotel. Everybody retired to their rooms, to dry up and hopefully rejoice about the day's events. Another day of endemics only!



Tues., Nov. 18 Drive to Tana | Departures

Our final morning began with a short birding session with Dalton, Kay and Janet before breakfast. Folks saw the white morph of the Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher along with a Madagascar Bulbul sitting on its nest as well as the Mascarene Martins that have been with us every morning since our arrival.

Following breakfast, DJ facilitated a closing ceremony where participants would choose a small item like a pin, magnet, or keychain and present that to another member of the group and express something that they appreciated about that person or a reason that person enhanced their trip. After all the items were chosen and appreciations expressed, DJ shared a reading about the value of sharing nature with others and how important this is these days. A few more folks expressed gratitude to the group for various reasons before we loaded the vans for our drive back to Tana.

Our first stop was at the 'Pratincole Bridge' where we tested our luck again searching for the Madagascar Pratincole. No luck this time either.

From here, we continued on to our lunch spot on the outskirts of Tana. Following lunch, we visited a group of stores that were very conveniently located immediately across the street providing a perfect opportunity for a last minute shopping spree before returning to the San Cristobal for an afternoon to relax, repack, and rejoice!

As we all began our journeys home, it was quite obvious we were feeling so much gratitude for sharing such an incredible experience with so many wonderful travelers. An experience we will all cherish for the rest of our lives. This is the power and value of visiting a place as special as Madagascar!

Photos: Group Photo (David Jaffe - DJ), Humblot's Heron (Dalton Gibbs - DG), The sun sets over the Mozambique Channel (DG), Zebu cart to boat (DJ), Crab Plovers (DG), Madagascar Cisticola (DG), Red-tailed Tropicbird (DG), Madagascar Buttonquail (DG), Souimanga Sunbird (DG), Madagascar Turtle Dove (DG), Madagascar Nightjar (DG), Crested Drongo (DG), Drive from Ifaty to Relais de la Reine Hotel (DJ), Hills at Jardin de la Roy (DG), Madagascar Scops Owl (DG), Broad-billed Roller (DG), Ring-tailed Vontsira (DG), Striped Day Gekko (DG), Pitta-like Ground Roller (DG), Brown Lemurs (DG), Mantella baroni (DG), Travel Day (DJ), Indri (DG), Madagascan Pygmy Kingfisher (DG), Dalton handling Collared Bright Snake-poss (DJ), Madagascar Wood Rail (DG), Scenic (Kay Rhoads - KR), Short-legged Ground Roller (DG), Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher (DG), Market lane (DG)