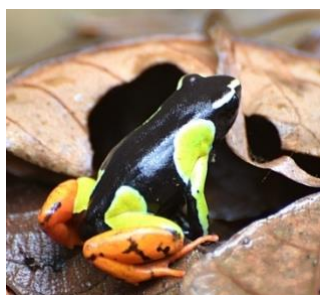


# Madagascar Birding & Nature | Trip Report

November 29 — December 12, 2017 | Written by Carlos Sanchez





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**With Guides Carlos Sanchez & Dalton Gibbs, expert local guides, & 9 participants: George, Laura, Judith, Cheryl, Greg, Martin, Rhoda, Kim, & Will**



## **Fri., Nov. 29**

Many of the group arrived early at Hotel Au Bois Vert, settling down and recovering from the long flight. However, the excitement of finding ourselves in exotic Madagascar and its entirely novel fauna kept our adrenaline levels way too high for any realistic rest. The grounds of the hotel were full of many of the more common endemic bird species, and we quickly tallied an impressive list: Madagascar Bulbul, Madagascar Magpie-Robin, Madagascar Wagtail, Madagascar Munia, Souimanga Sunbird, and Red Fody. Dalton and I quickly bumped into each other and familiarized ourselves with the gardens, running into Kim and Will in the process. They had located a Madagascar Nightjar roosting high up in an introduced *Casuarina sp.* Birds seemed to be in full nesting mode, and a Madagascar Brush-Warbler was nesting right by the restaurant.

Hotel Au Bois Vert itself is a delightful oasis with gardens, a good restaurant, Wi-Fi, and spacious rooms. The staff could not have been more helpful, although English is rare here — good to practice French ahead of any Madagascar visit! As day turned to night, we sat down and enjoyed our first of many French-style meals with a Malagasy twist — bread with a savory spread, Zebu steak, and mousse for dessert.

## **Sat., Nov. 30**

We found ourselves at Lac Alarobia in the early morning — perhaps the most impressive birding site in urban Antananarivo (called Tana by the locals). This avian oasis preserves a series of ponds, thickets, and tree groves. What a wonderful place! As soon as we entered through the gate, we were looking at an impressive rookery of nesting Squacco Herons and Little (Dimorphic) Egrets, both in dazzling breeding plumage and showing off their dazzling plumes. Black Herons formed their characteristic parasols along the shore, hoping for wayward fish to hide under the shade. With a careful scan, Carlos spotted the first of three Madagascar Pond-Herons nesting in the rookery — a breeding endemic that migrates to Africa in the austral “winter.” Sturdy dead branches and pieces of driftwood along the shore served as roosting sites for many ducks, including White-faced Whistling-Duck and Hottentot Teal. A striking male Comb Duck stood proudly among the smaller teal. Meller’s Duck, an endangered species, was also present. It was a smorgasbord of waterbirds!

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We strolled as a group around the pond and gardens, noting how the birds at Lac Alarobia have made so much out of so little. Malagasy Kingfishers in iridescent blue and burnt orange chased each other about, even posing for photographs. As we left, we noted a Madagascar Grebe floating right out in front of the entrance — our last new bird for the day. Returning to Hotel Au Bois Vert, some staked out a Malagasy Kingfisher nesting right outside Greg's room while others tried to catch up with rest. Everyone was in great spirits and ready for the real trip to start the following day. Our local guide informed us that the schedule for Air Madagascar had changed for the following day, so Dalton and I rushed from door to door to let everyone know of the new (much earlier) departure time.

## Sun., Dec. 1

Air Madagascar threw a curveball at us, but we used it to our advantage! The flight was set to depart a couple hours earlier than scheduled, so we found ourselves at the airport in the pre-dawn hours. In the end, the new schedule worked well with our birding plans. We landed at the airport in Toliara, the arid southwest of the country, in the early morning hours and made our way straight to La Table. La Table, an unprotected stretch of arid thorn-scrub, hosts two of the most range-restricted endemics in the country — Verreaux's Coua and Red-shouldered Vanga. The latter was Phoebe Snetsinger's last new bird before her untimely death in 1999.

We also got to experience the unique method used by Madagascar guides to herd birds toward groups of trip participants. It was in this manner that we had incredibly close views of Red-shouldered Vanga — what a bird! And to think it was formally described only in 1997. Also along this road were Chabert Vanga, with the electric blue skin around the eye, and Lafresnaye's Vanga, with their paper thin, laterally compressed beaks. As one of Madagascar's most diverse bird families, the vangas encapsulate within their diversity almost every known bill size and structure. The sun climbed higher into the sky, and we made our way out — but not before Kim spotted Verreaux's Coua sitting in a bush. Wow!

After a dry and dusty bus ride to Caliente Beach, our lodge for the next few nights, we had lunch in front of the shimmering Indian Ocean and a brief siesta to recharge, allowing the day to cool off slightly. We paid a visit to the Arboretum d'Antsokay in the afternoon with an extremely knowledgeable and passionate local guide who taught us about the local uses of many native plants. The local fauna conspired to keep interrupting him though! The green-capped subspecies of Red-capped Coua, a family of Madagascar Buttonquail, and a female Warty Chameleon all tried to steal our attention at various points. With local knowledge, we also saw our first of many lemurs — a Gray-brown Mouse Lemur roosting peacefully in a tree.

## Mon., Dec. 2

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Nosy Ve is a small islet off the southwest coast of Madagascar. Uninhabited and unshaded, the French originally landed at this location in 1888 prior to conquering the mainland. After a rather short boat ride, we were soon walking along the shore in search of nesting Red-tailed Tropicbird. Small numbers of local fishermen, mostly teenagers and young adults, still visit the island daily in order to make a living. They were more than happy to show off their catch to us, and we identified several beautiful reef fish, including a stunning Threadfin Butterflyfish. As we neared the opposite end of the island, we noticed a rookery of Gray and Little Egret in the taller shrubs. A Red-tailed Tropicbird suddenly flew over, and we soon found ourselves surrounded by several of these angelic white birds — a few sat quietly on nests below shady bushes and offered fantastic photo opportunities. After making our way off the island, we made a short stop at the resort of Anakao where we enjoyed some cold drinks and very tame (and very range-restricted endemic) Littoral Rock-Thrush.

After lunch at Caliente Beach and a timeout to avoid the strongest of the sun's rays, we visited a few saltpans near Toliara where we saw Lesser and Greater Sand-Plover, Kittlitz's Plover, Common Ringed Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, and Common Greenshank — all in big numbers. A Gray-headed Lovebird quickly whizzed by — a little teaser for our birding the following day.

## Tues., Dec. 3

After breakfast, we made our journey north from Toliara to Ifaty. Along the way, we passed by various roadside wetlands, which held a small assortment of birds: a lone, juvenile Greater Flamingo was quite the surprise among the plovers and stilts! We also passed by many villages, noticing the thatched roofs and the occasional aluminum roof. Our local guide explained to us that the aluminum roof was a sign of status, even though it is not quite the best material in the hot climate. As we neared Ifaty, we made several stops along coastal mangroves to see if any shorebirds were about. A couple oddly-shaped Terek Sandpipers garnered lots of interest, but several Crab-Plovers absolutely stole the show. These stately black-and-white shorebirds are so unique as to merit their own bird family.

Our accommodations at Ifaty offered comfortable rooms, Wi-Fi, a swimming pool, and good restaurant. Upon our arrival, the staff presented us with a refreshing fruit drink and lunch followed soon after we settled into our rooms. In the afternoon, we paid a visit to the "spiny desert" woodlands near Ifaty, dominated by a completely foreign association of plant species such as baobabs with bulbous trunks, Ocotillo-like *Didierea*, and weirdly wonderful euphorbias. Our local guides from La Table were also present, locating an amazing number of bird and animal species in a short amount of time: nesting Madagascar Sparrowhawk and Hook-billed Vanga; bizarre Sickie-billed Vanga and Subdesert Mesite; unique Mahafaly Sand Snake and Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec. Our heads were spinning with excitement, as this was just a taste of our full day tomorrow!



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## Wed., Dec. 4

After an early morning breakfast, we returned to the fabulous spiny forests outside of Ifaty. Although offered no official protection by the government and highly threatened by deforestation for the use of charcoal, the block of habitat that we visited falls under protection by the local community and efforts by non-governmental organizations. We strolled by a massive nesting colony of Sakalava Weavers just after sunrise. It did not take long for our local guides to locate and then show us the ultimate bird of this habitat (and one of the most amazing birds of all Madagascar) — the Long-tailed Ground-Roller. We had stunning views as it posed mere feet in front of us. Our guides then proceeded to locate a Madagascar Cuckoo, a bird that is common by voice but not always easy to see well. The endemic Archbold's Newtonia and the adorable Gray-headed Lovebird followed soon after. Reptiles included the colorful Modest Day Gecko and Three-eyed Lizard. However, the day heats up quickly around Ifaty. Satisfied with our observations for the morning, we retreated to our lodge for a meal. A few of our group made use of our swimming pool, and even a Madagascar Bee-eater seemed to have the same idea. A spectacular Madagascar Giant Swallowtail Butterfly sailed and fluttered over the treetops as time flew by — it was soon late afternoon and time for one last visit to the spiny forests of Ifaty.

Having already seen almost all the species realistically possible to see at Ifaty on a short visit, our guides had a surprise in store for us. We hiked for a little over half an hour through the sandy terrain, trying to keep pace with the fleet-footed locals. We suddenly stopped. I could hear the calls of a Harrier-Hawk, and there it was — resplendent in appearance and perching stoically on a *Didierea*, the endemic Madagascar Harrier-Hawk. As we navigated through the forest on our way back, we also saw another charismatic denizen of this forest — the Spider Tortoise, a critically endangered reptile due to collection for the pet trade.

## Thurs., Dec. 5

Today was mostly a travel day, as we journeyed inland along highway N-7 (stopping for Madagascar Sandgrouse along the way). We discussed the various environmental issues facing Madagascar and got a passing feel for daily village life as we passed each village. The driver would often throw bottles of water out the window to make people's daily quest for drinking water a tad easier.

We arrived at Relais de la Reine just in time for lunch and some rest after the long drive. This beautiful lodge features a swimming pool, elegant dining, and comfortable accommodations set in a landscape that is reminiscent of the western USA. In the late afternoon, we birded along a strip of native forest vegetation and a secluded pond. We saw our first Broad-billed Rollers, vivid rainbows of color, as well as the odd Greater Vasa-Parrot. The females of this parrot species have bald orange heads and sing from an open perch to attract a mate.

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A mixed feeding frenzy of swifts on the pond included a few fast-as-a-bullet Madagascar Swifts. Dumeril's Madagascar Swift (lizard) were abundant around the lodge entrance. After dinner, our local guide took us owling. We quickly saw Torotoroka Scops-Owl. Rhoda wanted a White-browed Owl to perch on a certain snag by the path, and it did not take long for the owl to do just that!

## **Fri., Dec. 6**

We were on the road early in the morning to reach Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park. This park protects a large tract of deciduous forest, a vegetation type that is transitional to the arid spiny desert of the southwest and the wet rainforests of the east. Our local guides were quick to greet us upon arrival, and they quickly set to work to locate a nesting Appert's Tetraka. Described only in 1972, this species of Malagasy warbler is practically endemic to this national park. Next, we observed a calm and collected pair of Giant Couas strolling along a forest trail. The blue and pink hues of bare skin around their eyes were quite a sight! However, the stars of the morning were a troop of Verreaux's Sifaka, often nicknamed the "dancing lemur" due to their energetic hopping when on the ground. We observed them at length feeding and playing with each other, often at close range. Cuckoo-Rollers were active calling overhead — neither cuckoo nor roller, these giant birds are evolutionary oddballs. A female perched proudly at the entrance to her nest hollow for us. As we headed out, we also managed to see Coquerel's Coua in the dense undergrowth. What a morning!

We enjoyed a picnic lunch in good company, conversing about all the wonderful wildlife we had seen so far on the tour and daydreaming of what was to come. After a break in the afternoon, the group was back on the road on our way to the Isalo National Park Visitor Center. A pair of Madagascar Partridge caused quite the excitement as they crossed the road, and we all eventually got great views. We also had a pair of Forest (Benson's) Rock-Thrush behind the visitor center itself.

## **Sat., Dec. 7**

Today was mostly a travel day. After breakfast at Relais de la Reine we made our way to the montane forests of Ranomafana. The level of deforestation along the way was startling and disheartening. It is hard to imagine that nearly all of Madagascar was covered in forest of some type in the recent past. Now, vast swaths of it are sterile grasslands. However, there are glimmers of hope. The Anja Community Preserve, where we made our lunch



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stop, shows that locals, with the help of non-governmental organizations, can make a difference. With the help of the local villagers, we enjoyed fantastic views of Ring-tailed Lemur and learned of the recently described Anja Stub-tailed Chameleon.

We arrived at our lodge near Ranomafana in the early evening, enjoying our first of several French-style meals. The chef at this lodge has a penchant for geometric shapes, including squares, ovals, and cylinders. Of course, it was all delicious.

## **Sun., Dec. 8**

The wet montane and lowland rainforests of Madagascar hold the vast majority of this country's biodiversity and endemic animal species. We began at the head of the Vohiparara trail, where a brilliant male Forest Fody and an iridescent Madagascar Sunbird made appearances to our delight. A Cryptic Warbler perched far in the distance offered much more, well, cryptic views even through powerful scopes. It did not take long for our local guide to locate the first of many spectacular birds, a Pitta-like Ground-Roller just a few meters from the entrance to the trail. The morning ensued with a long list of colorful and impressive bird species: Sunbird Asity, Madagascar Wood-Rail, Velvet Asity, Nelicourvi Weaver, Madagascar Blue-Pigeon, and more. Around lunch time, many of the group decided to hang back while the more intrepid continued — they were rewarded with great views of the rare Rufous-headed Ground-Roller and Pollen's Vanga. Back at the lodge, a local notified us of a large boa near the river. We located the beast by the river bank, and the whole group got to enjoy excellent views of an adult Madagascar Tree Boa.

## **Mon., Dec. 9**

The following morning, our local guides decided to take us to another trail — Telatekely. It was mostly a quiet morning for birds, although a Crossley's Vanga generated a lot of excitement early on. Although we clearly got to hear it call, no one was ever able to actually see it. Some in the group decided to spend time watching and photographing Greater Bamboo Lemur. The other half joined Dalton and myself on a quest for Brown Mesite. It took an hour or two. After some careful maneuvering, we all managed to see this mythical bird species literally walk between our collective legs — a bird so unique that it belongs in its own order! We felt especially lucky and privileged to have seen this species. On our way out, our local guide spotted a Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko camouflaged on a branch, and a mixed vanga flock held both Ward's (convergent with flycatchers) and Tylas (convergent with orioles) Vanga.

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After lunch and some down time, we headed back up the mountain to visit a wetland bog. These wetland bogs are perhaps the most endangered habitat in all of Madagascar, as their rich and moist soils are ideal for rice growing. They are also the preferred habitat for several endemic bird species. Upon reaching the bog, it did not take long for our local guides to flush a Madagascar Snipe — a larger and darker relative of the more familiar Wilson's Snipe. A pair of Gray Emutails offered only brief views, and a Madagascar Rail was heard only. Although frustrating, we did finally see a Blue Coua in the scope for the entire group.

In the evening, some spotlighting along the road about the lodge yielded a nice variety of chameleons: Cryptic, Short-nosed, Deceptive, and O'Shaughnessy's. It was a beautiful ending to fantastic couple of days of birding in these pleasantly cool and verdant mountains.

## **Tues., Dec. 10**

We boarded the bus and headed out of Ranomafana to Guesthouse Madeleif, a convenient halfway point to our final destination near Perinet. Along the way, we observed several Hamerkop in the rice paddies. These African birds managed to colonize the island millennia ago and seem adaptable enough to manage with the human-altered environment. Further along the road, several migrant Eleonora's Falcon were swooping and diving for insects. These graceful raptors breed only in the Mediterranean region and migrate to Madagascar in the non-breeding season.

Upon arrival at Guesthouse Madeleif, the group settled into their rooms before heading out again to look for a purported owl. A local had been flushing an owl for the past couple weeks in a fallow field behind the guesthouse. It did not take long for the local guides to flush the owl and have it sit in an area where we could all enjoy it. The fading afternoon light lit it up beautifully, allowing for great photography. Dinner was at Guesthouse Madeleif, where we enjoyed some very nice Malagasy cuisine.

## **Wed., Dec. 11**

After enjoying a very beautiful Jeweled Chameleon and some light birding around the guesthouse, we pressed onward to Perinet. After passing through several larger towns and cities (including Tana itself), we finally made it



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to the Mangoro Crossing in the late afternoon to search for Madagascar Pratincole. Although there were no birds at first, I suddenly heard the distinctive calls of shorebirds in the distance. “I hear shorebirds ... wait, I think that’s them and they are heading this way!” He exclaimed as the pratincoles swooped in for a landing on the river rocks. Great scope views were had by all!

By the time we reached our lodge near Perinet, the sun was beginning to set. We enjoyed dinner and talked about our activities in the lowland rainforest for the following day.

## **Thurs., Dec. 12**

Lowland rainforest in the tropics always requires an early rise to get a full taste of what the area has to offer. Our local guide was there waiting for us upon our arrival, and we could hear the mournful, wailing cries of Indri in the distance. Over the course of the morning, we managed to see the shy Red-fronted Coua, a roosting Malagasy Scops-Owl, and a trio of exquisite Collared Nightjar. A troop of Indri offered exceptionally close views, and we also saw a troop of the endangered Diademed Sifaka.

After lunch, we returned in the late afternoon to a much quieter forest. A Madagascar Ibis sat quietly and faithfully on its nest over a secluded pond, and a Malagasy Kingfisher fished over its own little pond in the forest. A female Parson’s Chameleon, the world’s heaviest, allowed for some gentle handling.

## **Fri., Dec. 13**

We had an early morning start in order to reach the more distant Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, a park that protects a large tract of lowland tropical rainforest. We accessed it via a muddy and bumpy dirt road that cuts through the park and allows for excellent birding along the roadside. We observed several Madagascar Blue-Pigeon fly by in the early morning, and we even encountered a small feeding flock that included both Red-tailed Vanga and Common Newtonia. A Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher was unobliging, zipping over the group like a little red dart. After some careful listening and searching, we spied a Short-legged Ground-Roller sitting stoically on a tree branch at length — our fourth ground-roller species.

After lunch, most of the group explored a short forest trail in order to see Indri. Eagle-eyed Rhoda commented that one of the Indri seemingly had a tail — it was a Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur feeding with the Indri! What a great spot. Our final stop was a secluded pond where we got to see the day-to-day activity of various bird species far away from human disturbance. Broad-billed Roller and Madagascar Bee-eater sallied acrobatically for insects, Malagasy Spinetail (swift) zipped and swirled overhead, a family of Madagascar Grebe paddled quietly in

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the back of the pond and a Madagascar Swamp Warbler methodically gleaned through the pondside vegetation for tasty bits.

After dinner, we headed out to do some spotlighting one last time and scored three new species of lemur: Eastern Woolly Lemur, Common Brown Lemur, and Golden-brown Mouse Lemur.

### Sat., Dec. 14

Following a tip from the local guide, we went to a local fruiting tree near the Perinet Reserve for Madagascar Green-Pigeon. The whole area was very birdy. In addition to several very showy Madagascar Green-Pigeons, we also got our first scope views of Lesser Vasa-Parrot in the scope. Not to be outdone, a diminutive male Frances's Goshawk tried to crash the party to frighten off the smaller birds. Cuckoo-Roller, Blue Coua, and Ashy Cuckooshrike were also milling about, but it really was time for us to depart for the long journey home.

We arrived in Hotel Au Bois Vert in the late afternoon. It was almost surreal that we had started our adventure right at this hotel just a couple weeks prior. After our final dinner and heartfelt farewells, we all caught some sleep before our flights the following day.

In reflection, Madagascar is accurately called the eighth continent. Due to its long isolation, the level of endemism found on this island is equal to that of much larger continents. It is also home to some of the most imperiled animals and plants in the world. It is our responsibility as tourists to support ecotourism on the island to encourage locals to save what is still there. There is still so much to see in Madagascar, but it is definitely a place to visit sooner rather than later.



### Photo Credits

Madagascar Harrier Hawk, Carlos Sanchez (CS); Mantella Frog, CS; Tortoise, CS; Ring-tailed Lemur, CS; Collared Nightjars, CS; Giant Coua, CS; Long-tailed Ground-Roller, CS; Hotel Au Bois Vert, Peg Abbott (PA); Madagascar Bulbul, Bob Behrstock; Madagascar Pond Heron, Kim Nelson (KN); Malagasy Kingfisher, PA; Kittlitz's Plover, KN; Gray-headed Lovebird, KN; Ifaty, KN; Chameleon, KN; White-browed Owl, KN; Verreaux's Sifaka, KN; Stub-tailed Chameleon, CS; Blue Coua, PA; Guesthouse Madeleif, PA; Searching for Pratincoles, KN; Group on Nosy Ve, KN.