

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



MADAGASCAR Land of the Lemur 1 – 14 September 2016

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Barrie Cooper

Another fascinating trip to this amazing country. It is a privilege to experience the unique wildlife of Madagascar. Many people associate Madagascar with lemurs and these charismatic animals never fail to provide wonderful memories, from dancing sifakas to the sound of the indri. But this country has much more to offer with some fantastic endemic birds, reptiles, amphibians and other fauna and flora. Madagascar is a magic place to visit and it needs to be experienced to fully understand what it has to offer....and it has ring-tailed lemurs!

Day 1: Thursday 1 September

The Air France connections went according to time, however it was late in the day when we arrived. After passport control and visa purchase we met Guy our local guide who greeted us with the news that the afternoon flight to Fort Dauphin had been brought forward to six o'clock. So we had less than three hours for sleep at the hotel before needing to return. However, the negative would turn into a positive as can be revealed below.

Day 2: Friday 2 September

Cloudy am, sunny pm 22 degrees

- Tana Airport
- Fort Dauphin to Berenty
- Berenty Lodge

The condition of the road from Fort Dauphin to Berenty prevents fast driving which can bring positive benefits when looking and stopping for wildlife. The drive this morning was full of wonderful wildlife that made the journey pleasant and enjoyable despite the condition of the road. Endemics included Madagascar buzzard, kestrel, bulbul, turtle dove, coucal and buttonquail, plus Souimanga sunbird, lesser vasa parrot, mascarene martin, crested coua, crested drongo and common newtonia. There were also an obliging chameleon and lizard vying for some camera time. After checking into the lodge we sat down for lunch. We didn't have to wait long for the entertainment to start. A group of seven ringed-tailed lemurs adopted a variety of poses to halt our eating. After dessert the other wanted lemurs put on a show – a group of eight Verreaux's sifakas did what they do – 'dance' from one set of trees to another. It was a brilliant display from the two prize species that the lodge is famous for.

The afternoon walk produced more Verreaux's and ring-tailed lemurs, but with several groups of red-fronted brown lemur to add extra variety. Birds included Madagascar white-eye, common jery and ashy cuckoo-shrike and some very obliging specialities – France's sparrowhawk, white-browed owl and giant coau. The evening walk produced Madagascar nightjar, Totoroka scops owl, white-footed sportive lemur and grey-brown mouse lemur. The Milky Way was stunning and the Small Magellanic Cloud, the Southern Cross and a variety of nebulae added to the magic of this amazing location.

So after the early start courtesy of Air Madagascar, things actually worked out better and we had a full and wonderful day of wildlife watching.

Day 3: Saturday 3 September

Sunny and around 24 degrees

- Berenty gallery forest and spiny forest
- Road from Berenty to Fort Dauphin

A pre-breakfast walk had love in the air; to be more precise it was the sight of several small groups of grey-headed lovebirds leaving their roost sites to forage for the day. A stick snake and a few stick insects were also seen in the open area where we searched unsuccessfully for sandgrouse. Breakfast also included a few sunbathing ring-tailed lemur – another photographic opportunity. The rest of the morning was spent walking through the gallery forest and then the spiny forest. In addition to the three diurnal lemurs we also had good views of roosting white-footed sportive lemurs – nice to see them by daylight rather than torchlight. A few sightings of Madagascar sparrowhawk were the bird highlight in the gallery forest. A female warty chameleon and a couple of geckoes added to the reptile list. The spiny forest had a few Madagascar magpie robins, sub-desert brush warbler, common newtonia and a roosting totoroka scops owl as well as a six hundred year old baobab tree. After lunch it was the journey back to Fort Dauphin where it was dark when we arrived. An interesting black and white snake was found at the hotel after dinner.

Day 4: Sunday 4 September

Sunny and around 21 degrees

- Flight from Fort Dauphin to Tana
- Wetlands in Tana

A Madagascar lark was on the tarmac in front of the departure lounge at Fort Dauphin airport. Meanwhile Mascarene martins were flying around Tana airport as usual. After lunch a drive to Tamboho Lake and some roadside paddyfields gave us a few wetland birds including Madagascar kingfisher, Madagascar cisticola, red-billed teal, white-faced whistling duck, squacco heron, great, little and dimorphic egrets. Madagascar nightjar and barn owl were in the hotel grounds when we returned at dusk.

Day 5: Monday 5 September

Sunny and around 26 degrees

- Tana airport
- Tulear to Ifaty
- Spiny forest near Ifaty

The morning flight arrived on time into Tulear so we were quickly on the road to Ifaty. One of the first good birds seen once we left Tulear was Madagascar harrier, conveniently soaring around for a couple of minutes. A small wetland had Malagasy pond heron, three-banded plover, Kittlitz's plover, greenshank, black-winged stilt and Madagascar cisticola. The track from the road to the hotel had Madagascar lark. After lunch we had the drive to the local spiny forest, however a stop at a small area of water had the prize wader for here – Madagascar plover. Walking wasn't easy in the spiny forest and the birds were few in number, but we did see two of the star birds – sub-desert mesite and long-tailed ground roller. Other birds included running and crested coua's, Archbold's newtonia, Chabert's vanga, subdesert tetraka and Madagascar brush warbler. It was a good collection of endemics and on returning to the hotel another endemic – Madagascar nightjar was singing and showing well. A beautiful sunset over the adjacent ocean with a crescent moon, Venus and Jupiter brought the daylight to an end.

Day 6: Tuesday 6 September

Sunny and around 27 degrees in Ifaty.

- La Table spiny forest
- Wetland near Tulear
- Zombitse National Park

The spiny forest at La Table south of Tulear was our first destination and it didn't take too long to find our two main target species – red-shouldered vanga and Verreaux's coua. We then visited a relatively large wetland that held a good and interesting range of species including hottentot and red-billed teal, red-knobbed coot, Baillon's crake, Madagascar swamp warbler and manikin. Waders included painted snipe, Kittlitz's and three-banded plovers, greenshank, black-winged stilt and a flying flock that were too distant to identify. Scanning of the ducks on the distant far side enabled a solitary greater flamingo to be found while a Caspian tern made a brief fly over. It was only a quick visit but was surprisingly good and a site that will be included in future trips.

We then made the drive to Zombitse forest where a very obliging group of giant couas were close to the entrance. A male Oustalet's chameleon posed on a branch and a small group of Verreaux's sifakas were close by. However the prize lemur here is the Zombitse or Hubbard's sportive lemur and one of this nocturnal species posed at its hole in a tree. A solitary Madagascar green pigeon and three lesser vasa parrots were next on this part of the trail, but we hadn't found the bird that this forest is famous for. So we crossed the road and searched another part of the forest and eventually two Appert's tetrakas were found with close views as they moved low through the undergrowth. A roosting white-browed owl and common newtonias were also in this part of the forest. An excellent butterfly with a transparent lower wing was quite numerous and obliging. After a successful couple of hours at Zombitse it was time to move onto our hotel in the spectacular Isalo National Park.

Day 7: Wednesday 7 September

Sunny and around 22 degrees

- Drive from Isalo to Ranomafana

Today was a travel day with a long drive from Isalo to Ranomafana. The scenery through the highlands is quite spectacular with large granite domes dominating the landscape at times. The first comfort stop was conveniently at a place where a Madagascar buzzard was flying around and then alighting on the ground about 100 metres from the road. Half an hour later an impromptu stop was necessary because alpine swift were seen through the bus window. Once out of the bus we were treated to a close fly past by a couple of these magnificent birds. Lunch was at a restaurant adjacent to a 'factory' that makes paper by hand from the bark of a local tree. Immediately after lunch we had a brief tour of the small 'factory' where they produce silk scarves and other garments. The only birds of note during the afternoon were a few dimorphic egrets. Unfortunately the journey had a delay of about thirty minutes while repairs were made to the road, consequently it was dark when we arrived at the hotel next to Ranomafana National Park.

Day 8: Thursday 8 September

Sunny and around 22 degrees

- Ranomafana National Park

An early breakfast prior to our productive morning hike in Ranomafana National Park. Eastern red forest rat was the first notable species of the day. But a stunning scaly ground-roller was much more photogenic and great views were had of this skulking endemic. Velvet asity, spectacled tetraka and Crossley's vanga were less showy than the ground-roller. Bamboo lemur was the first lemur of the day, but we appeared to have found them when they were having a morning nap. A pair of red-bellied lemurs was more active and were happy to feed while we watched. A group of three red-fronted lemurs were resting on a large horizontal branch. Nelicourva weaver put in an appearance before a female giraffe-necked weevil was found and quickly followed by a superb male. We had a good number of endemics as soon as we crossed the bridge to return to the park entrance. First up was Malagasy spinetail, followed by Chabert's vanga, Ward's vanga and green jery. It had been a strenuous walk but worth the effort thanks to all the quality wildlife we had seen. When we returned to the hotel for lunch, a small group of greater vasa parrots were hanging around. Immediately after lunch Madagascar wagtail and green sunbird were found in the hotel gardens.

We had a call to say that a group of golden bamboo lemurs had been found so we changed our plans for the afternoon walk in the hope that we could see the lemurs. We were not disappointed and the lemurs were found after 30 minutes walking. After enjoying reasonable views of those golden bamboo lemurs another two were seen fairly close by. Another scaly ground-roller showed incredibly well on the trail and stayed around for several minutes to provide everybody with privileged views. It had been a very satisfying day in Ranomafana National Park.

Day 9: Friday 9 September

Sunny and around 23 degrees

- Ranomafana to Antsirabe

Another travelling day. A stop at a local waterfall for pictures also had nesting Madagascar wagtail and a colourful orchid growing from the roadside bank. Next stop was for a group of six blue couas showing well at the side of the road. It was great to get such views of a magnificent bird. One purple heron flew over while we were there. A stop for a stonechat that is either a full species or endemic subspecies – either way the male is a photogenic bird. A Madagascar buzzard soared around for several minutes while at the stonechat site. Final notable birds for the morning were a flock of red-billed teal and a few Madagascar brush warblers. Lunch was taken at an artisan hotel in Ambositra where a local dance and music group entertained us. A visit to some local craft shops immediately followed lunch. Brown-throated marten was the only notable bird of the afternoon, unless you count the various egret species. Prior to checking in at the hotel in Antsirabe we visited some local craft shops and a gemstone shop.

Day 10: Saturday 10 September

Sunny and around 24 degrees

- Antsirabe to Andasibe
- Night walk at Andasibe

A journey of a few hours with the morning punctuated with stops at a couple of wetlands. Species of note were black herons feeding in their characteristic way, plus squacco heron and hammerkop. Mascarene and brown-throated martins flying alongside each other provided an interesting size comparison. Madagascar wagtail and stonechat were seen in several places. The most notable species after lunch was Madagascar sparrowhawk. A visit to Lemur Island provided close views of some species of lemurs, but the absence of any conservation messages was disappointing. An evening walk provided excellent views of Parson's, short-horned and nose-horned chameleons, green bright-eyed frog and Eastern woolly lemur.

Day 11: Sunday 11 September

Rain and drizzle at times, cooler maybe around 16 degrees

- Analamazaotra National Park
- Voi Amama reserve

It was misty as we had breakfast and the morning would get wetter during the next few hours. Chabert's vangas and mascarene martins were around the hotel before we set off to Analamazaotra National Park. Paradise flycatcher was one of the first birds seen there, however we soon heard our main target. Eventually we found three indri perched high up in a tree. They soon started calling and their magnificent sound was almost ear shattering such was its intensity. This really is the sound of Madagascar and it was a privilege to hear it so closely. We watched the lemurs for quite awhile before moving on. A male giraffe-necked weevil under a leaf and sheltering from the rain wasn't quite as obliging as the ones the other day. However, two Eastern woolly lemurs resting in a tree provided very good photo opportunities. A rainforest or Malagasy scops owl roosting under the dome of a bushy tree was in exactly the same location as seen on last year's trip. Our final good species of the morning was a pair of nose-horned chameleons in the grounds of the national park visitor centre. The female was about half the length of the six centimetre male. An early return to the hotel to dry out ended the morning.

The afternoon walk was in the Voi Amama reserve, run by a local village NGO. A Parson's chameleon, Madagascar blue and green pigeons were all showing in the car park before we ventured into the forest, which was quiet initially. But then a blue coua put in a brief experience, followed by a large male Parson's chameleon. Things livened up with a mixed flock of birds that included Ward's, blue and white-headed vangas, green jery and common newtonia. A few brown lemurs moved through the forest. Three indris resting in the fork of a tree were seen from the road before we headed back to the car park. Three Madagascar bee-eaters were around the car park as we arrived for the end of a productive walk.

Day 12: Monday 12 September

Overcast and around 18 degrees in the morning, sunny and around 21 degrees in the afternoon

- Mantadia National Park

A four-wheel vehicle journey into the national park brought us into some very good primary forest. A short walk while we waited for the permits to the park enabled us to see a Henst's goshawk flying over. A small flock of birds in the forest included long-billed and spectacled tetrakas. The group had made the diademed sifaka the priority and eventually our local guide found a group of five that included a mother with one young. The group were feeding high up in the trees, but occasionally they jumped through the trees. After watching them for around twenty-five minutes we lost them. However, after a few minutes of searching we found them again and one or two of the sifakas were showing even better than the first sighting. We left the group to look for other wildlife and after further walking we discovered a mixed flock of birds. One of the first birds to be identified was the appropriately named nuthatch vanga as it moved along a tree trunk and then a large branch. We saw at least two individual nuthatch vangas and blue vanga was also in the flock. As we made our way back to the bus for our picnic lunch a sleeping red-bellied lemur was found in the fork of a tree. While eating our lunch we could hear indri calling and also black and white ruffed lemurs sounding rather agitated. Our guide went off to find them and soon returned to say they had been

located. At least four or five of the lemurs were high up in a tree, some were resting while one or two were feeding. A short drive to a small reservoir had one Madagascar grebe while a couple of Malagasy spinetails flew overhead. On the drive back through the forest a red-fronted coua ran in front of the vehicle and a couple of Madagascar sparrowhawks were seen. A brief evening walk around the grounds of the Vakona Lodge was productive. Male and female lowland streaked tenrecs were the highlight with wonderful views of them both. Short-nosed and big-nosed chameleons and a tree frog completed the line-up from the forty-five minute walk.

Day 13: Tuesday 13 September

Sunny, approximately 21 degrees

- Andasibe to Tana
- Parc Tsarasaotra

Our drive back to Tana was soon brought to a halt as hook-billed vanga could be heard as we passed through Andasibe. We got out of the bus and immediately found a pair nest-building in the fork of a large tree. Very good views were gained of both birds as well as bee-eaters and indri could be heard from the nearby national park. It was great to see another species of vanga and to hear the indri for one last time. Our next stop was near a bridge over a river where common sandpiper and Madagascar wagtail and kingfisher were seen. We called in at Parc Tsarasaotra where we had a sandwich before enjoying the birdlife. Birds included red-billed teal, hottentot teal, Meller's duck, white-faced whistling duck, squacco heron, black heron, other egrets and a pair of kingfishers. It was a good way to finish the trip before we went to a local hotel to rest prior to our evening flight back to Europe.

Day 14: Wednesday 14 September

We arrived at Heathrow after seeing some amazing wildlife in the land of the lemurs.

A selection of photos copyright Barrie Cooper



Ring-tailed lemur © Barrie Cooper



Tour leader sunbathing with ring-tailed lemurs © Barrie Cooper



Ring-tailed lemur © Barrie Cooper



Tour leader sunbathing with ring-tailed lemurs © Barrie Cooper



Verreaux's sifaka (dancing sifaka) © Barrie Cooper



Verreaux's sifaka © Barrie Cooper



Diamed sifaka © Barrie Cooper



Red-fronted brown lemur © Barrie Cooper



Grey-brown mouse lemur © Barrie Cooper



Eastern woolly lemur © Barrie Cooper



Scaly ground-roller © Barrie Cooper



Giant coua © Barrie Cooper



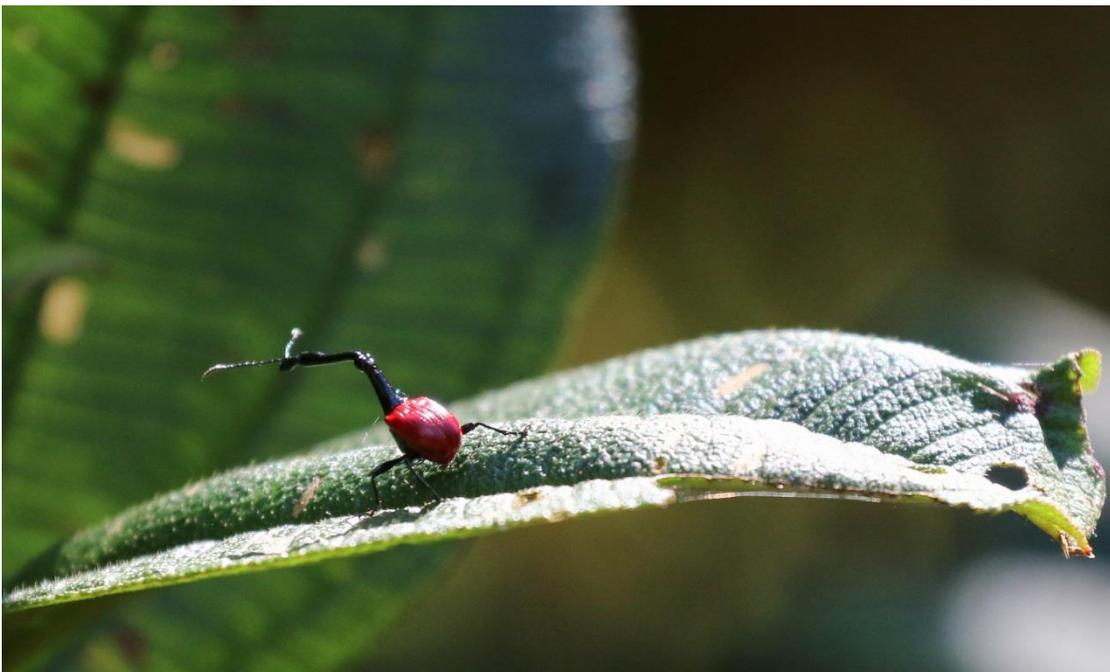
Hook-billed vanga © Barrie Cooper



Collared nightjar © Barrie Cooper



Parson's chameleon © Barrie Cooper



Giraffe-necked weevil © Barrie Cooper



Red clearwing butterfly © Barrie Cooper