

Madagascar's Lemurs

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 October - 6th November 2006



Report compiled by Roy Taylor



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Day 1

Saturday 21st October

The group assembled at various times in the Comfort Hotel, near Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris, after regional flights from Southampton, London, Manchester and Edinburgh.

Cath and Bill arrived early enough to take in some sightseeing but most arrived just in time for the last of the evening buffet. We all had delays in catching the shuttle bus from the airport, as the departure point had been switched to a different terminal with no obvious notice!

After a series of hello's and a cold drink, we turned in early ready for tomorrow's long flight.

Day 2

Sunday 22nd October

This morning, post breakfast, we departed for the airport at 7.15 am and moved quickly through check-in and security, with our flight leaving on time at 10:15 a.m.

After an 11hour flight (nice meal) and adjusting to the time difference, it was around 10 pm when we landed in Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. All our bags arrived safely and we completed the formalities of customs and changing money within an hour and a half - this despite one bureau de change running out of money, forcing us to switch exchanges!

After meeting up with Desi, our local guide, and with little traffic on the streets, it was only a 30 minute journey to the Tana Plaza hotel. Thus we were settled into our rooms shortly after midnight.

Day 3

Monday 23rd October

Breakfast was at 4:45 a.m. after a very short night's sleep and we were on our way back to the airport by 5.30am. While Desi checked us in, the group found the first endemic birds of the trip -- Madagascar Mannakin,

Souimanga Sunbird and Madagascar White-eye amongst them. Overhead we watched both Mascarene Martins and Madagascar Black Swifts.

To fly to Fort Dauphin (in the southeast) we first had to fly west to Morondova, then south down the west coast to Tuleur, before finally southeast overland. At Morondova we were able to stretch our legs for 30 minutes and enjoyed a Sakalava Weaver colony but unfortunately Desi could not get a seat on the next leg of the plane journey and had to travel back to Tana and rejoin us at Fort Dauphin two days later!

Then it was onto Tuleur, with another short transit, before reaching Fort Dauphin just after midday - only 45 minutes behind schedule! On the descent into Fort Dauphin some of the group had the unique experience of seeing 3 Humpback Whales from the plane!

A bus and driver from Berenty were waiting for us at the airport and while we waited for the luggage to be loaded we bought some tasty prawns in batter to add to our picnic lunch. The 3 hour drive to Berenty saw us passing through a range of forest types, before descending into the sub arid thorn scrub and spiny desert, typified by Octopus Trees and majestic Baobabs, which eventually gave way to huge Sisal plantations. We made several roadside stops, the first to purchase fruit from the exotic roadside stalls. Bird highlights included Hammerkop, Stripe - throated Jery, Madagascar Buzzard and Alpine Swift.

Arriving in Berenty late afternoon, we had time to settle in and then meet the three species of diurnal lemur - Ringed - tailed, Verraux's Sifaka and Red-fronted Brown - which occur in the gallery forest here. These prosimians, many of which had young babies, were extremely confiding, exceedingly photogenic and provided hours of enjoyment over the next couple of days. Before dinner we went on a short night walk in the spiny forest and using torches had close and prolonged views of both Reddish - grey Mouse Lemur and White- footed Sportive Lemur.

After dinner and following three days of travelling, most of the group were ready for their beds, but Mike and myself, who had further to walk to our accommodation, nearly stepped on a 6 foot long Tree Boa!

Day 4

Tuesday 24th October

All of the group were up early for a pre-breakfast walk in the gallery forest, by which time Jenny had already been out for over an hour! The walk, in nice cool conditions was extremely productive with great views of Giant and Crested Coua's, roosting White-browed Owl, Ashy Cuckoo-Shrike, 3 amazing Sickle-billed Vanga's, Madagascar Green Pigeon and Madagascar Coucal. In an area of dense, mature trees we witnessed a roost of Madagascar Flying Foxes, which bickered noisily in the trees.

Returning for breakfast, we managed to secure omelettes (eggs seem hard to come by in Berenty!), before we were out into the forest again. As it was by now much warmer, bird activity had lessened but with the help of our local guide, found a Totoroka Scop's Owl and watched a Frances Sparrowhawk eating a lizard. Lemurs were now beginning to seek out the shade and provided great photographic opportunities as they assumed communal sleeping postures (the 3 White-footed Sportive Lemurs in their sleep holes were also cute). Notable creepy crawlies included a Hissing Cockroach and several translucent butterflies.

A well earned lunch was followed by a much appreciated siesta, although I did spy Cath and Bill out and about intent on capturing more lemurs on film. Later in the afternoon we visited an area of spiny forest, accompanied by spear carrying locals who located a roosting Reddish-grey Mouse Lemur hidden deep in a Euphorbia. The walk was an excellent opportunity to learn the identity of all the endemic spiny trees and we also found our first (identifiable) herps - Three-eyed Lizard and Warty Chameleon. Unfortunately, a Running Coua did just that and ran too quickly across the path. We also searched some fields where the Madagascar Periwinkle is being grown to produce drugs for leukaemia treatment. This area was very productive for birds, producing Madagascar Sandgrouse, Madagascar Button Quail and an excellent Madagascar Harrier Hawk. However after surviving the spiny forest, Val managed to sit on a Sisal plant and draw blood!

At dusk, a few of the group dropped down into the dry river bed and walked along the edge of the gallery forest. This proved a magical walk with a nice sunset, Madagascar Pond Heron and 6 Madagascar Nightjars foraging over the trees. After dark the whole group went on a mini safari with torches, unearthing some big spiders, an impressive hawk moth and a type of Iguanid lizard. The day finished with an excellent meal and a few much enjoyed cold beers.

Day 5

Wednesday 25th October

After having found most of Berenty's special wildlife yesterday, we decided to start our pre-breakfast walk a bit later today. Highlights were a confiding Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher and a Madagascar Sandgrouse which flew into the river pools to drink. We also managed to tape in a Hook-billed Vanga. By 8:30 a.m. however it was very hot and we were happy to retreat to the shade of the open-air breakfast restaurant.

Packing done, some of the group opted to stay around the camp, while the rest of us took a walk in the spiny forest. Given the heat it was not surprising the wildlife was scarce but we did see an obliging Sakalva Weaver and heard Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo, but got flight views only. Just before lunch Bill and Cath found a Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk which Mike also managed to see before it was time to say goodbye to the lemurs and head back to Fort Dauphin.

The drive took around 3 1/2 hours with stops to purchase carved wooden lemurs and tortoises from a community project in the spiny forest and to stock up on lychee's, mangoes and bananas from one of the fruit stalls. We checked into the Le Dauphin hotel late afternoon and either relaxed in the grounds or headed straight out to the headland, a brisk 45 minute walk away. This took us through an area of sand dunes which Anne decided were best climbed on hands and knees, but not looking up, headed straight into the only bush in sight!

Very strong offshore winds were whipping up the sea and consequently conditions were difficult for whale watching, so it was no surprise when we failed to see any Humpbacks. The wind direction was also wrong for seabirds so apart from Kelp Gull and Greater Crested Tern we saw little. We did however see our first vermilion coloured male Madagascar Red Fody on the walk back to the hotel, where everyone commented that night on the amount of red dust washed off in the evening shower!

Day 6

Thursday 26th October

A combined group of whale watchers and swimmers left the hotel together at 6:30 a.m., the swimmers stopping off at Limbola beach, whilst the others continued on to the headland. With similar weather conditions to last night we again drew a cetacean blank, however the sheltered water in the bay was ideal for the swimmers.

After breakfast and whilst waiting for bus to the airport, a big Malthe Chameleon was found in the hotel grounds along with black and yellow Golden Orb Spiders which had spun huge webs over the thatched, rafia umbrellas by the swimming pool.

Fort Dauphin airport is only a small building, set in a rural location and we passed the time waiting for our plane to arrive by alternatively eating king prawns from the cafeteria (Michael purchasing a big bag to take on board with him which quickly got delegated to Susie to carry) or watching Madagascar Cisticola on the small, adjacent marsh.

At the last moment, our direct flight to Tuleur was switched to take in a stop at Morondova, hundreds of miles to the north. So once again we had a 20 minute transit at Morondovar, before flying south to arrive in Tuleur at around 2:30 p.m, 2 hours later than scheduled.

Well that's Air Mad for you!

We quickly drove to a hotel on the outskirts of Tuleur, where the group enjoyed a cold drink while Desi filled the bus with petrol and collected our picnic lunch, before a brief stop at a roadside pond produced a few waders including Three-banded Plover. We then headed east on the RN7.

The first part of this journey is through the coral rag scrub, which eventually gives way to open savannah, burnt for Zebu, with a complete lack of natural forest cover. However, 45 minutes before dusk we saw the "green carpet" of Zombitse National Park, an isolated forest in the sea of agriculture.

Having been delayed with the flights it was too late to enter the reserve, but nevertheless a walk through the forest along the roadside was most welcome after travelling all day. We also managed to see a couple of new birds for the trip; Madagascar Cuckoo Roller and Greater Vasa Parrot. Less welcome were the horseflies which invaded our bus as we got back in. We had to open all the windows and attack them with baseball hats (Gordon in particular registering the highest number of kills!) to clear the bus.

It was then another 1 1/2 hour journey to Isalo National Park in the dark, driving through several "wild west" sapphire towns. Just before 8 p.m. we arrived at the opulent, new luxury hotel, Le Jardin du Roy, sister hotel to the adjacent Renais de la Reine, both of which have sensitively been designed to blend with Isalo's rocky, sandstone outcrops.

A shower, meal and a few drinks later we retired to our "suites" for a very comfortable night's sleep.

Day 7

Friday 27th October

A few of the group were up and about at 6 a.m. for a bird walk in the rocky outcrops and Pandanus groves close to the hotel. The localised endemic, Benson's Rock Thrush was easily found, but White-throated Rail only showed briefly.

After breakfast we drove the short distance to Ranohira to buy our National Park permits. We parked conveniently close to one of the popular Maki T-shirt shops and most of the group made a quick purchase. A .5 minute drive brought us to the base of the large escarpment which dominates the centre of Isalo National Park. We walked into this sandstone massif by following the gorge which leads to the Cascades de Nemeza. Fortunately some early cloud cover kept the temperature down - but it was hot when we left the gorge 3 hours later!

The walk started well with a posing Spiny-tailed Iguanid and a couple of tiny Reed Frogs on the underside of a palm leaf. We also started seeing some new birds with excellent views of Lesser Cuckoo, Broad-billed Roller, Long-billed Green Sunbird, Stonechat, although the singing Swamp Warbler only showed to a few. The undoubted avian highlight however was a pair of White-throated Rails which provided close, prolonged views on the rocky stream.

Small fry also kept us entertained with finds including Jewel Chameleon, Elegant Skink and a wonderful array of dragonflies and butterflies including a stunning Two-tailed Pasha butterfly.

We completed the walk with a paddle in the cooling waters of the stream, and even the calls of a troop of Ring-tailed Lemurs couldn't persuade us to climb further up the valley sides as by now it was getting very hot, so we decided to return to the luxury of our hotel.

The afternoon was free to relax and people variously went swimming, had a massage, pottered around the surrounding countryside, or went out looking for Madagascar Partridge (but failed). Either way it was a really pleasant day, spent in a wonderful landscape of rocky crags and inselbergs.

Today was Susie and Mike's 28th wedding anniversary, so we had ordered a surprise cake to be brought out to the evening meal, but much to the head waiter's consternation, first Mike didn't turn up (dicky tum), then Susie had to leave early as well - so it was plan B for the cake which appeared at breakfast the following morning!

Day 8

Saturday 28th October

Mainly a travel day today, but a few people were still up early for a pre-breakfast bird walk which produced the regular Isalo species including Grey-headed Lovebird, Broad-billed Roller and a flock of Madagascar Mannakins.

We were headed for Ranomafana National Park and our drive took us over the Horombe plateau - a huge savannah dotted with termite mounds, before we climbed into the highlands and reached the small reserve of Anja. This is a community run project which has introduced Ring-tailed Lemurs into the remaining fragments of forest.

We took a walk through the forest, set amongst large, round granite boulders and enjoyed excellent views of a troop of “Ring-tails” looking thicker tailed and plumper and their relatives in Berenty. We also found our first large Oustalet’s Chameleon and a Lined Snake.

Next stop was lunch at the Bourgainvillia Hotel where we toured the paper factory (an interesting process, which includes pressing flowers into the wet Sisal fibres), bought some nice souvenirs and photographed a further 2 Oustalet’s Chameleons, one of which drew blood on the tour leader’s finger (who received no sympathy from the group), this after Val had said they don’t have any teeth!

We then had an hours drive to the regional capital, Fianarantsoa, passing vineyards and acres of terraced rice paddies, which supported our first dark phase Dimorphic Egrets of the trip. Just after Fianarantsoa we turned off RN7 onto the now paved road to Ranamofana National Park, a drive of just under 1 1/2 hours. As we approach the Park, Eucalyptus gave way to the “knobbly green” canopy of rainforest and a Madagascar Wood Rail ran across the road but it was only seen by Gordon and Desi.

We reached our home for the next 3 nights, Hotel Domain de la Nature, just before dark and settled into the comfy bungalows, all of which had had newly fitted power showers since my last visit 2 years ago. That night, over a wonderful meal and drinks we laid preparations for the exploration of the fantastic forests of Ranomafana.

Day 9

Sunday 29th October

Only 2 people ventured out along the forest road for a pre-breakfast walk, however it was productive with Nelicourvi Weaver, Madagascar Brush Warbler and Chabert’s Vanga all new for the trip, while Mike also found a Forest Fody. At 7am we departed for the nearby forest trails in the area around Belle Vue, while Val and Gordon hired a guide for a walk along the river, finding Short-nosed Chameleon and the bizarre Giraffe-necked Weevil.

Ranomafana supports 12 species of lemur and they didn’t disappoint this morning. Using local guides and with extra young men to scout ahead along the forest trails, we were soon watching the extremely rare Greater Bamboo Lemur, shortly followed by a troop of Red-bellied Lemurs with young. News then broke that Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs had been found, a difficult species to see anywhere in Madagascar and rare in Ranomafana. We set off in pursuit along some steep and sweaty trails but were rewarded with stunning views of 2 “black-and-whites” feeding with a small troop of Red-fronted Brown Lemurs - a privileged experience.

The birding was good too and aided by the local guide’s knowledge of the calls we were able to find Velvet Asity, White-throated Oxylabes, Crossley’s Babbler, Rand’s Warbler, Red-fronted Coua and Green Jery. To cap a brilliant morning, when we returned to the bus a magnificent Henst’s Goshawk flew out of the forest and soared above us.

Driving back to the hotel we were taken to see a large Parsons Chameleon in the village and then found a Madagascar Ground Boa opposite our hotel. That afternoon one group went out early and with the help of John-Chrys had superb views of Pitta-like Ground Roller, Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher and after much walking

and whistling we had brief views of the “phantom of the forest” - Brown Mesite. We were also lucky to see an inquisitive Ring-tailed Mongoose which came out onto the track to investigate us. Just before 5 p.m., we met up with the second group at Belle Vue and experienced close, prolonged views of the habituated Rufous Mouse Lemurs and 2 Fanaloka's. As we left the forest at dusk we re-found the troop of Golden-Bamboo Lemurs (which only a few of us had seen earlier) and an exquisitely camouflaged Leaf - tailed Gecko.

Ranomafana had not disappointed - it had been a brilliant day.

Day 10

Monday 30th October

We were in the forests around Belle Vue earlier today, our quest to find the one special lemur which had so far eluded us - Milne-Edwards Sifaka. Whilst looking for the Sifaka we located several new birds including Pollen's Vanga, Long-billed Greenbul, and a Madagascar Flufftail which despite responding to the tape from only a few yards, was only seen by a few of the group. We also saw Golden Bamboo, Red-bellied and Greater Bamboo Lemur.

Even with 5 “runners” searching for the Sifaka's it still took over 2 hours to locate these animals, but once they were found it was worth the wait. We enjoyed a troop of 5, 1 carrying a small baby, and alternately eating leaves or bounding several metres from trunk to trunk in trees right above our heads. Some of the group voting this animal the most attractive lemur we had seen so far. While the group was engrossed in watching the Sifaka's, Desi saw a Lowland Streaked Tenrec but it disappeared into its hole before he could catch it.

Leaving the forests at 11 a.m., we met with Gordon who had found a Rufous Vanga along the roadside and most of us decided to walk back down to the hotel. The walk provided superb views over the forest and river from the lookout and our first Madagascar Blue Pigeons, but by midday it was getting very hot and we were all glad to reach the hotel, which seemed a longer walk than we had anticipated!

That afternoon some of the group took time out and slept or visited the thermal baths in the village. One small group however went to the higher altitude rainforest at Vohiparara. Our walk got off to an excellent start with a showy Blue Coua and another troop of Milne-Edwards Sifaka's which called noisily at Susie as they plucked up courage to cross the path by leaping from tree to tree just above our heads.

Cath's knee was hurting so we left her by the stream, with camera in hand, on a mission to photograph the tree frogs. The rest of us climbed up a ridge and after sometime enjoyed magic views of the very rare and very colourful Yellow-bellied Sunbird Asity. As an added bonus, during a quick toilet stop Bill also found a Common Sunbird Asity feeding on a flowering bush!

Just before dusk we had one of those magical 10 minutes which makes the Madagascan rainforest so special. First we rounded a corner to find a Short-legged Ground Roller perched on an overhanging branch above the track and then sat mesmerised by a Rufous-headed Ground Roller picking worms off the track at a range down to a few feet.

That night we toasted our success in Ranomafana and had a sumptuous meal including a medley of Zebu, chicken and prawn kebabs.

Day 11

Tuesday 31st October

A travel day today so we had a lie in and didn't leave the Domain de la Nature until 8 a.m. We stopped briefly to look for Grey Emutail on some overgrown rice paddies but drew a blank (the tape had temporarily stopped working) however had excellent views of a colourful Forest Fody.

We then left Ranomafana, rejoined the RN7 and headed north. Val found a nice Jewel Chameleon at our roadside loo stop, and then we picnicked at a set of roadside pools just south of Ambositra. This is a good site for Madagascar Snipe and we quickly found 4, however the pools were starting to be drained and converted to rice paddies and it appears that soon another Madagascan wetland and its wildlife will be lost.

Our next stop was the town of Ambositra, renowned for its woodwork and the group wandered around a souvenir shop and purchased some attractive items - although carved lemurs are still in very short supply. Our final leg of the day's journey was to Madagascar's third-largest city, Antsirabe, a 2 hour drive north.

We arrived just after 4 p.m, giving people plenty of time to take a pause - pause tour of the town, shop for more souvenirs, or swim in the hotel pool. However most of us were jealous of the chocolate pancakes discovered in the hotel snack bar by Linda, Susie and Mike. For the football fans in the group, Antsirabe also provided an opportunity to catch up with the results over the Internet and watch Barcelona versus Chelsea in the hotel room late that night.

Day 12

Wednesday 1st November

We departed Antsirabe at 8 a.m. and drove north towards the capital, Antananarivo, a drive of around three hours. We only really made one stop, at a lake just south of Tana, which supported large numbers of Red-billed Teal and displaying Hammerkops. Driving through the busy streets of Tana, a pause-pause carrying wooden stakes walked into the back of our bus smashing the rear light. Fortunately our driver Julian was able to sort out this incident with the police while we visited the zoo and had lunch.

The zoo was excellent, with a wide range of Madagascar's lemurs and birds. Mike was allowed to quickly photograph the Aye-aye in the nocturnal house, while the other Mike, Susie and Linda were taken into a room and allowed to feed all the baby lemurs!

Our lunch at an Indonesian restaurant was good, but incredibly slow in arriving, so we abandoned deserts and started on the drive east to Andasibe at around 2:30 p.m. The journey took around 3 ½ hours, so we only made two brief stops, one at a river to check for Madagascar Pratincole (which was absent) and the other for petrol and snacks at a garage.

Just before dusk we arrived at Perinet and drove through the rainforest, where excitement levels rose at the thought of exploring these wonderful areas over the next few days. Passing through Andasibe village (and Desi's house) we met our local guide, Maurice, and fixed plans for the morning. Then we checked into the wonderful Vakona Lodge for the next 4 nights.

Day 13

Thursday 2nd November

This morning we breakfasted at 5.30 am and 30 minutes later we were on our way to visit the higher altitude rainforests of Mantadia National Park. A quick stop en route resulted in successfully taping out a Madagascar Rail which gave great views on the edge of a small marsh.

Maurice then walked us a short distance into the forest where we had unbelievable views of a pair of superbly camouflaged Collared Nightjar's roosting on the path at just 2 metre's range!

Next we walked along the road seeing our first Wards Flycatcher and Blue Vanga, with close views of Madagascar Starling and Madagascar Spinetail's hawking overhead. In a small pool by the graphite mine we were watching a pair of Madagascar Little Grebe when a screaming commotion on the above hillside attracted us to the presence of a troop of Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs and we were able to get brief views of at least 2 animals.

Feeling lucky on the lemur front we followed a trail deep into the forest and in less than 45 minutes had located a troop of 8 Diademed Sifaka's, perhaps the most beautiful of the island's lemurs, and followed them for a long time, enabling close observation and excellent photo opportunities.

With our prime target under the belt we turned our attention to the birds and located a mixed foraging flock which contained Nuthatch, Blue, White-headed and Tylas Vanga's! Madagascar Malachite Kingfisher and Blue Coua added a further dash of colour and all the time we were being serenaded by the songs of several troops of distant Indri. Add in catching a small snake, the odd tree frog and a bewildering array of trees, ferns and bromeliads and all told it had been an unforgettable morning in an incredibly rich and exciting habitat!

Post lunch at Vakona Lodge there was a free hour (to sunbath, sleep or read the new lemur book we had purchased that morning) before we headed back to Mantadia. On the drive in we found 2 Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemurs on the roadside (aptly feeding on bamboo) and were later to see another 2 as well. The walk along the road was quieter than this morning, but as always in Madagascar, the "lesser" wildlife keeps you entertained and we enjoyed finding Crab Spider and Giant Millipede.

Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs screamed several times from a distant hillside but were too far away to see, however we did tape in our first Dark Newtonia. Arriving back at the bus, our driver, Julian, was pointing excitedly. Incredibly we were treated to stunning views of a pair of Scaly Ground Rollers feeding in full view in the small forest clearing next to where we had parked! This rare and enigmatic bird had been one of the key species we had hoped to see here and what luck that when we had failed to find them, our driver was to come to the rescue!

As the darkness fell, we gathered our spotlights and walked along the road to look for some of the nocturnal denizens of the forest. Numerous fireflies twinkled in the darkness and we found a Malthe Chameleon before picking out a pair of eyes in the torch beam. This proved to be a Furry-eared Dwarf Lemur and was quickly followed by 3 Eastern Woolly Lemurs before we departed back to the Lodge for a latish evening meal which was disrupted by power cuts and we finished the daily log by candlelight.

Day 14

Friday 3rd November

This morning we visited the forests of Perinet Special Reserve famous for Madagascar's biggest lemur, the Indri. Around the old fishponds we found a mixed flock of Vanga's, in which Mike finally (and to everyone else's relief) caught up with Red-tailed Vanga. Spectacled Greenbul was also a new bird for the trip.

On "indri ridge" we first came across a troop of Common Brown Lemurs who seemed to specialise in urinating from a great height - perhaps they were aiming at the eco-tourists below? We also saw 4 Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemurs, including a mother carrying a small baby on her back. The undoubted stars of the "lemur show" however were a troop of 4 Indri and we spent an hour observing these animals at ranges down to just a few metres. With their "teddy bear" faces, yet long powerful limbs and piebald coat, they really are a magnificent spectacle. Just as we leaving the Indri, a ball of fur in a tree fork materialised into 3 adult and 1 baby Eastern Woolly Lemurs, however they were soon surrounded by tourists, so we moved on to leave them in peace.

On the way down, the Indri's we had left behind began one of their spine tingling territorial "singing" bouts - an evocative memory of Madagascar for us to take home! Dessi caught a couple of the bizarre Giraffe-necked Weevils for our resident entomologist, Michael, to study and we completed a wonderful morning by purchasing Indri souvenirs in the local village.

Post launch, while some of the group slept, sunbathed or swam, Bill and Cath went down to meet the tame lemurs on "Lemur Island". I think it is fair to say that they enjoyed the experience, because when they returned they had grins from ear to ear!

Later that afternoon we all walked down the road at Perinet and found several Short-nosed and Nose-horned Chameleons, some beautiful tree orchids and an amazingly camouflaged Leaf-tailed Gecko, the colour of a mossy lichen.

As dusk fell and with a cold drink, we assembled on the terrace of the Hotel Feon Ny Ala and enjoyed watching 4 very photogenic Furry-eared Dwarf Lemurs feeding on banana pieces placed in a palm tree. We then walked back along the road in the dark finding further dwarf lemurs, a green "Boophis" tree frog and a Preying Mantis. John, alias James Bond, then stepped in with his high tech, night vision monocular to help us find a tiny Goodman's Mouse Lemur which we watched scampering through the low bushes like a dormouse.

From the island's largest lemur, to one of its smallest, it had been another stunning day on the "big red isle".

Day 15

Saturday 4th November

Today one group decided to have a relaxed morning so took a late breakfast (thus including eggs!) then explored "lemur island" and the lodge's small zoo and crocodile farm.

The other group were out early to search for our last few remaining bird species in Perinet. The morning started well with a showy Pitta-like Ground Roller in the orchid garden and 2 perched Madagascar Harrier Hawks. We then walked for around 3 hours looking for Red-breasted Coua, which frustratingly remained silent. However it was a wonderful walk in the reserve's best forest and we had good views of White-throated Rail, Madagascar

Wood Rail (briefly) and caught a “grass” snake which Jenny handled superbly. We were also privileged to find 2 Indri (one of the non habituated groups) sat high in the tree tops.

Just as we were about to give up, Maurice heard the coua call and with the aid of the tape and sat silently in the forest we had the magical experience of one of Madagascar’s most secretive and beautiful endemic birds walking around us at a range of just a few feet!

Re-energised by another excellent lunch at the lodge, most of the group returned to Mantadia National Park in the afternoon. We were incredibly lucky to yet again find Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs and had good views of at least 3 animals moving through the forest on the ridge above us; this being our third sighting of an often elusive lemur.

The birding was generally quiet, but we saw another Pitta-like Ground Roller and a range of forest birds with which we were now familiar. Once dark we spent half an hour searching with torches for Sportive Lemurs but although we failed to find any we did see 7 Eastern Woolly Lemurs.

Over dinner the group voted that their top three lemurs, with the result coming out as follows;

1. Indri
2. Diademed Sifaka
2. Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur

Day 16

Sunday 5th November

We had a slightly later breakfast this morning then headed off into the forest at Perinet to say goodbye to the Indri. We found the same 4 animals as 2 days ago, but this time they were high in the treetops so we settled down to watch them for half an hour. Whilst watching the lemurs we found a Spectacled Greenbul on its nest. Following a short walk around the orchid garden, we arrived back at Vakona Lodge in time to pack and have an early lunch before starting out on the drive back to Antananarivo, where we arrived at the Tana Plaza Hotel around 5 p.m.

This allowed time to explore the streets around Independence Avenue or alternatively have a long bath (a favoured option for many in the group) before we had an excellent goodbye meal in the hotel that evening.

Looking at the final log call, it had been an incredibly good trip. We had seen 18 species of Lemur and out of 123 species of birds recorded, no less than 89 of them were either endemics or regional academics.

I am sure some of us will return again to explore other areas of this ecological jewel of a country!

Day 17

Monday 6th November

Having arrived at the airport around 11 p.m, our flight departed on time at 1:30 a.m. for the 10 hour flight back to Charles de Gaulle airport. Here we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways as people were catching different planes back to Manchester, Edinburgh and London

Species lists

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	October 2006									November 2006				
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
1	Indri	<i>Indri indri</i>												4	2	4
2	Diademed Sifaka	<i>Propithecus diadema diadema</i>										9				
3	Milne-Edwards Sifaka	<i>Propithecus diadema edwardsi</i>									13					
4	Verreaux's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus verreauxi verreauxi</i>	20	50	25											
5	Eastern Avahi	<i>Avahi laniger</i>										3	4	7		
6	Ring-tailed Lemur	<i>Lemur catta</i>	50	100	50		H	15								
7	Southern Black and White Ruffed Lemur	<i>Varecia variegata editorum</i>								2			3		3	
8	Red-bellied Lemur	<i>Eulemur rubiventer</i>								4	3					
9	Common Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur fulvus fulvus</i>											8			
10	Red-fronted Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur fulvus rufus</i>	25	50	25					5						
11	Greater Bamboo Lemur	<i>Haplemur simus</i>								5	1					
12	Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur	<i>Haplemur griseus griseus</i>											4	4		
13	Golden Bamboo Lemur	<i>Haplemur aureus</i>								3	1					
14	Reddish - grey Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus griseorufus</i>	3	1												
15	Goodman's Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus lehilahytsara</i>												1		
16	Rufous Mouse Lemur	<i>Microcebus rufus</i>								5						
17	Furry - eared Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogalus crossleyi</i>											1	6		
18	White-footed Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur leucopus</i>	5	3	1											
19	Fanaloka (Striped Civet)	<i>Fossa fossana</i>								2						
20	Ring - tailed Mongoose	<i>Galidia elegans</i>								2						
21	Lowland Streaked Tenrec	<i>Hemicentetes semispinosus</i>									1					
22	Eastern Red Forest Rat	<i>Nesomys Rufus</i>								3	2					
23	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>													1	
24	Madagascar Flying Fox	<i>Pteropus rufus</i>		30	10											
25	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera nvaeanaliae</i>	3													

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	October 2006									November 2006				
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
1	Madagascar Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus pelzelni</i>											2			
2	Long-tailed Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax africanus</i>		1												
3	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	1									20				4
4	Common Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>						1				1				
5	Madagascar Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola idae</i>		1												
6	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	50	25	30	50	100	100			100	150				50
7	Green-backed Heron	<i>Butorides striatus</i>		2	3						1	3				
8	Black Egret	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>										6				
9	Dimorphic Heron	<i>Egretta dimorpha</i>	20					20			20	10				10
10	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	20		40			1			20	50				10
11	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>					3	2				1	2		2	1
12	Hamerkop	<i>Scopus umbretta</i>	3					4			2	6				3
13	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	2													
14	White-faced Duck	<i>Dendrocygna viduata</i>										10				
15	Red-billed Teal	<i>Anas erythrorhyncha</i>										187				
16	Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk	<i>Aviceda madagascariensis</i>		1												
17	Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptus</i>	30	30	C	C	150	C			C	C				
18	Madagascar Harrier- Hawk	<i>Polyboroides radiatus</i>		1											2	
19	Henst's Goshawk	<i>Accipiter henstii</i>							1							
20	Madagascar Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter madagascariensis</i>		1												
21	Frances's Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter francesiae</i>	2	3												1
22	Madagascar Buzzard	<i>Buteo brachypterus</i>	2		1	3					1	3	1	3		
23	Madagascar Kestrel	<i>Falco newtoni</i>	2	5	10	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C		C
24	Helmeted Guineafowl	<i>Numida meleagris</i>		30	6		1				H					
25	Brown Mesite	<i>Mesitornis unicolor</i>							1							

	Common name	Scientific name	October 2006									November 2006				
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
26	Madagascar Buttonquail	<i>Turnix nigricollis</i>	1	5	1		7									
27	Madagascar Flufftail	<i>Sarothrura insularis</i>								1						
28	Madagascar Wood Rail	<i>Canirallus kiolooides</i>						1	5					1		
29	Madagascar Rail	<i>Rallus madagascariensis</i>										1				
30	White-throated Rail	<i>Dryolimnas cuvieri</i>					5							1		
31	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>											1	1		
32	Three-banded Plover	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>				3					2					
33	Madagascar Snipe	<i>Gallinago macrodactyla</i>									4					
34	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				11										
35	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1	1	1	1										
36	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			2	1					1	1				
37	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>				2										
38	Kelp Gull	<i>Larus dominicanus</i>			1	1										
39	Greater Crested Tern	<i>Sterna bergii</i>			17	3										
40	Madagascar Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles personatus</i>		2	2											
41	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	C	C	C	C	C			C		C	C		C	
42	Malagascar Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia picturata</i>	C	5	10	C	C	C	C					3	1	
43	Namaqua Dove	<i>Oena capensis</i>	C	5	2	C	C	C	C							
44	Madagascar Green Pigeon	<i>Treron australis</i>		4								1	1			
45	Madagascar Blue Pigeon	<i>Alectroenas madagascariensis</i>								2			2	4		
46	Greater Vasa Parrot	<i>Coracopsis vasa</i>				3			5	15	3	1			1	
47	Lesser Vasa Parrot	<i>Coracopsis nigra</i>		10	4							10	5	10		
48	Grey-headed Lovebird	<i>Agapornis canus</i>		20	25		60	10	5							
49	Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus rochii</i>			1		4	H	H	H		2				
50	Giant Coua	<i>Coua gigas</i>	2	8	1											
51	Red-breasted Coua	<i>Coua serriana</i>												1		

	Common name	Scientific name	October 2006									November 2006					
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	
52	Red-fronted Coua	<i>Coua reynaudii</i>								2						H	
53	Running Coua	<i>Coua cursor</i>		1	H												
54	Crested Coua	<i>Coua cristata</i>	4	10	10	1											
55	Blue Coua	<i>Coua caerulea</i>									2			3			
56	Madagascar Coucal	<i>Centropus toulou</i>	1	3	2	3	6	H	2	4	1		1	2	5	2	
57	Torotoroka Scops Owl	<i>Otus madagascariensis</i>	H	1													
58	White-browed Owl	<i>Ninox superciliaris</i>	1	4	1												
59	Collared Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus enarratus</i>											2		1		
60	Madagascar Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus madagascariensis</i>	1	6		H					2						
61	Madagascar Spinetail	<i>Zoonavena grandidieri</i>			1								4	2	2		
62	African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus</i>	2			2	6	10	10	5	5			2			
63	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	4														
64	Madagascar Black Swift	<i>Apus balstoni</i>	10		1												
65	Madagascar Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo vintsioides</i>		1	2		1						2				1
66	Mad' Pygmy Kingfisher	<i>Ceyx madagascariensis</i>							1								
67	Madagascar Bee-eater	<i>Merops superciliosus</i>	10	2	5	4	20	C	5	5		1	4	1	1	1	
68	Broad-billed Roller	<i>Eurystomus glaucurus</i>	1				7		1	1			3	2	2		
69	Short-legged Ground Roller	<i>Brachypteracias leptosomus</i>								1							
70	Scaly Ground Roller	<i>Brachypteracias squamigera</i>											2				
71	Pitta-like Ground Roller	<i>Atelornis pittoides</i>							1						3		
72	Rufous-headed Ground Roller	<i>Atelornis crossleyi</i>								1							
73	Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller	<i>Leptosomus discolor</i>				2	4		H	H	H		2	1	1		
74	Madagascar Hoopoe	<i>Upupa marginata</i>		6	5		8										
75	Velvet Asity	<i>Philepitta castanea</i>							2	2							
76	Common Sunbird-Asity	<i>Neodrepanis coruscans</i>									1		1				
77	Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity	<i>Neodrepanis hypoxantha</i>									2						

	Common name	Scientific name	October 2006									November 2006					
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	
78	Madagascar Bush Lark	<i>Mirafra hova</i>		2	2	5	6	C				2					
79	Mascarene Martin	<i>Phedina borbonica</i>	C					13	10	50	20	20	50	C	C	C	
80	Brown-throated Sand Martin	<i>Riparia paludicola</i>						1									
81	Madagascar Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flaviventris</i>	3				1	10	5	5	C	C	C	C	C	C	
82	Ashy Cuckoo-shrike	<i>Coracina cinerea</i>		2					2	2			2	1	2		
83	Madagascar Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes madagascariensis</i>	2	10	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	
84	Benson's Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola bensoni</i>					5	1									
85	Madagascar Magpie-robin	<i>Copsychus albospectularis</i>	1	5	1		4	1	C	C	C			C	C	C	
86	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		1				3				5		5	5	C	C
87	Madagascar Brush Warbler	<i>Nesillas typica</i>							5	2				4	C	C	C
88	Madagascar Swamp Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus newtoni</i>					1				1	2					
89	Rand's Warbler	<i>Randia pseudozosterops</i>							1	1			1	1			1
90	Common Newtonia	<i>Newtonia brunneicauda</i>	2	2	2				1	1			1	2	4		
91	Dark Newtonia	<i>Newtonia amphichroa</i>											1		2		
92	Madagascar Cisticola	<i>Cisticola cherina</i>			1	3	C	C			1						
93	Ward's Flycatcher	<i>Pseudobias wardi</i>											10	1			
94	Mad' Paradise Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone mutata</i>		10	20		4		2				6	3	10	5	
95	Common Jery	<i>Neomixis tenella</i>	3	20	C	C	C	C	C	C				5	C		
96	Green Jery	<i>Neomixis viridis</i>							1				1	1	3		
97	Stripe-throated Jery	<i>Neomixis striatigula</i>	1						1	1			1				
98	White-throated Oxylabes	<i>Oxylabes madagascariensis</i>							4	2							
99	Crossley's Babbler	<i>Mystacornis crossleyi</i>							2								
100	Long-billed Greenbul	<i>Bernieria madagascariensis</i>								1			4		3		
101	Spectacled Greenbul	<i>Bernieria zosterops</i>												1	5	4	
102	Souimanga Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia sovimanga</i>	4	5		1	3	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
103	Madagascar Green Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia notata</i>					3		5	8		3	2	2	C	C	

	Common name	Scientific name	October 2006									November 2006				
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
104	Madagascar White-eye	<i>Zosterops maderaspatanus</i>	5	10	15		C	C	C	C	C		C	C	C	C
105	Red-tailed Vanga	<i>Calicalicus madagascariensis</i>							1				3	2	1	
106	Rufous Vanga	<i>Schetba rufa</i>								1						
107	Hook-billed Vanga	<i>Vanga curvirostris</i>	1		1											
108	Pollen's Vanga	<i>Xenopirostris polleni</i>									2					
109	Sickle-billed Vanga	<i>Falcoelea palliata</i>		3												
110	White-headed Vanga	<i>Artamella viridis</i>										2	1	1		
111	Chabert's Vanga	<i>Leptopterus chabert</i>							2	1	5		10	5		
112	Madagascar Blue Vanga	<i>Cyanolanius madagascarinus</i>											4	1		
113	Nuthatch Vanga	<i>Hypositta corallirostris</i>											6			1
114	Tylas Vanga	<i>Tylas eduardi</i>							1				4		2	
115	Crested Drongo	<i>Dicrurus forficatus</i>	10	C	C	C	C	C			C	2	C	C	C	C
116	Pied Crow	<i>Corvus albus</i>	C	C	C	C	C	C			C	C				C
117	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	C	C	C	C	C	C	C		C	C		5		C
118	Madagascar Starling	<i>Saroglossa aurata</i>								2			5	2	14	
119	Nelicourvi Weaver	<i>Ploceus nelicourvi</i>							3	2			2	2	C	C
120	Sakalava Weaver	<i>Ploceus sakalava</i>	20		1											
121	Madagascar Fody	<i>Foudia madagascariensis</i>	1	2	1	5	C	C	C		C	C		C		C
122	Forest Fody	<i>Foudia eminentissima</i>							2	1	1		4	C	C	C
123	Madagascar Mannikin	<i>Lonchura nana</i>	10		15		10	50						1	1	

Reptiles

	Common name	Scientific name	October 2006									November 2006				
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5
1	Short-nosed Chameleon	<i>Calumma gastrotaenia</i>							1							
2	Short-horned Chameleon	<i>Calumma brevicornis</i>											2	3		
3	Parson's Chameleon	<i>Calumma parsonii</i>							1							
4	Malthe Chameleon	<i>Calumma malthe</i>										1				
5	Oustalet's Chameleon	<i>Furcifer oustaleti</i>						3								
6	Spiny-backed Chameleon	<i>Furcifer verrucosus</i>			1											
7	Jewel (Carpet) Chameleon	<i>Furcifer lateralis</i>					5				2					
8	Warty Chameleon			1												
9	Gunther's Leaf-tailed Gecko	<i>Uroplatus guentheri</i>							1					1		
10	Four -spotted Day Gecko	<i>Phelsuma quadriocellata</i>				2		10	10		4		7	10	15	
11	Spiny-tailed Iguanid	<i>Oplurus cyclurus</i>		1			2									
12	Three-eyed Lizard	<i>Chalerodon madagascariensis</i>		3	2											
13	Lined Plated Lizard	<i>Zonosaurus laticaudata</i>					1	10					10		10	
14	Elegant Skink	<i>Mabuya elegans</i>					1									
15	Madagascar tree Boa	<i>Sanzinia madagascariensis</i>	1													
16	Madagascar Ground Boa	<i>Acrantophis madagascariensis</i>							1	1						
17	Lined Snake	<i>Liopholidophis lateralis</i>					1	1							3	
18	Reed Frog	<i>Heterrixalus betsileo</i>					2									
19	Varoius Frog spp															