

## **MADAGASCAR 2018**

### **Thurs 25<sup>th</sup> Oct – Arrival in Antananarivo**

Arrival in Tana was smooth, we all found each other & Claude was there. Money change & obtaining local SIM card were hassle-free except that Simon tried to get facility to make international calls & it wasn't explained that he had to use all the local call facility before he could get the international facility. This was explained at a phone shop in Ranohira some days later. Nice to see the name 'Birders Rest' on the front of the buses used throughout the tour. I hadn't anticipated this. Plenty of space in the bus for us & optical equipment etc.

Traffic getting into Tana was very heavy, journey took over 2 hours. We considered the possibility of future tours using a hotel nearer to the airport (see later).

Good food at the Palissandre.

General note on dietary requirements – we could see that these had been communicated in advance to the various places where we would be eating but nothing had been done by these places in advance of our arrival. No problem with vegetarian meals but gluten-free had been poorly understood so that food had been prepared with non-gluten-free additions (as standard) so they had to be re-done without (e.g) sauce containing gluten; and in Morag's case with pepper or onions already mixed in. Some places thought the only ingredient to avoid for gluten-free was flour, not realising that wheat, barley, malt, etc all have to be avoided.

### **Fri 26<sup>th</sup> Oct – Travel to Andasibe**

Left hotel c.7.20 am.

Few stops on route for common species like Hammerkop, Madagascar Kestrel, Madagascar Kingfisher, Brush Warbler etc. Madagascar Pratincoles (distant) at Mangoro Bridge.

Arrived Andasibe 1.30 pm. Mantadia Lodge – new and modern, nice rooms, good food. Long walk to rooms from main building. Not surrounded by native forest.

Birding from 3.10 pm in nearby native forest. Highlights: White-headed, Chabert's & Blue Vangas, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Green Jery, Green Sunbird, Nelicourvi Weaver, Forest Fody, & Common Brown Lemur. Local guide Maurice (who I remember from 2004) found roosting Madagascar Long-eared Owl & Rainforest Scops Owl.

### **Sat 27<sup>th</sup> Oct – Mantadia National Park**

Day in Mantadia National Park. Quite a long drive in 2 4WDs. Passed Vakona Lodge (which seemed to have got more commercialised, catering for non-wildlife people, no sign of marsh where we found Madagascar Rail last time). No ground rollers but Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, both Vasa Parrots, superb views of Indri, Red-bellied Lemur, Black & White Ruffed Lemur, Diademed Sifaka & Eastern Woolly Lemur. Packed lunch at lake with Madagascar Grebes. Spotighting in Park Mitsinjo with Pierre – Crossley's & Hairy-eared Dwarf Lemurs, Goodman's Mouse Lemur. Claude was brilliant at finding & identifying chameleons & other reptiles & frogs.

### **Sun 28<sup>th</sup> Oct - Andasibe**

Day at Analamazaotra Reserve from 6.45 am, back at Lodge for lunch. Highlights – amazing views & photos of Madagascar Flufftail, 2 Collared Nightjars at roost, Red-tailed, Ward's, Hook-billed and a pair of Nuthatch Vangas, White-throated Rail. Spectacled Tetraka on the nest, great views of Blue Couas. 3 Grey Bamboo Lemurs. Spotighting by roadside – Crossley's Dwarf Lemur & Woolly Lemurs. Since my last visit, spotighting in National Parks had been banned.

### **Mon 29<sup>th</sup> Oct - Andasibe to Tana**

Analamazaotra Reserve again, mainly common species but found imm male Velvet Asity; Long-billed Tetraka, couple of the others saw Madagascar Wood Rail, rest just heard it. Lunch at Feon'ny Ala Restaurant. 4 Indris there.

Return by bus to Hotel Palissandre, Tana, leaving 2.10 pm. No sign of Pratincoles at the bridge. 4.30 stop at Manjakadrina.

### **Tues 30<sup>th</sup> Oct – Tana to Fort Dauphin**

Back to Airport for flight to Fort Dauphin (Tolagnaro). Transfer in 4WD vehicles to Hotel Dauphin. Some touring around in afternoon, visit to Botanical Gardens where Ring-tailed & Red-fronted Brown Lemurs looked rather out of place, no significant birds.

### **Wed 31<sup>st</sup> Oct – Fort Dauphin to Andohahela to Berenty**

Breakfast at 3.30 (good for time of day), left 4.20 with local guide (also for Berenty) who was a little slack (forgotten his name), for what I assumed was part of Andohahela National Park in 3 4WDs. Headed west, turned right at Soanierana, along Ifau river, through Ifarantsa & Isaka Ivondro, (where picked up 2 more local guides). Gained altitude, into forest. Chances of finding Red-tailed Newtonia were clearly negligible without knowing either the location or the call of the bird, and not having tapes. Nice area though & enjoyed Grey-headed Lovebirds & Cuckoo Rollers.

Back for lunch & left for Berenty 2.40 pm. Road was terrible, major deterioration since 2004. Got to Berenty 6.05 pm. Humblot's Herons on route.

Spotlighting revealed 3 White-footed Sportive Lemurs, 2 Grey Mouse Lemurs & at least 4 Spiny-backed Chameleons.

### **Thurs 1<sup>st</sup> Nov – Berenty Private Reserve**

Pre-breakfast walk – Ring-tailed Lemurs. Verreaux's Sifakas & Red-fronted Brown Lemurs, Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk just visible on the nest, Hook-billed Vanga & lots of Sakalava Weavers. Layout of Berenty had changed a little, e.g position of dining room. After breakfast drive to open fields where enjoyed Madagascar Sandgrouse with young, Madagascar Lark & Madagascar Cisticola. Giant & Crested Couas common. Captive tortoises.

### **Fri 2<sup>nd</sup> Nov – Berenty to Fort Dauphin**

Walk to Mandrare River till 7.15. birds included both sparrowhawks, White-browed Owl, Pond Heron, Lovebirds, few shorebirds & ducks. 2 pm to airport, flight to Toliara left 4.30. Arrived 5.15, found supermarket for water, bus to Hotel Paradisier arriving 7 pm. Delightful hotel close to the beach.

### **Sat 3<sup>rd</sup> Nov – Reserve Reniala & roadside pools and marshes.**

High quality birding this morning with local guide Dabe in pristine spiny forest. Subdesert Mesite, Long-tailed Ground Roller, Sickle-billed Vanga, Madagascar Harrier Hawks at nest, Running Coua, Archbold's Newtonia, Thamnornis etc. Roadside stop for Madagascar Plover, Kittlitz's & distant shorebirds.

Roadside birding around Tsivonoy from 3.30 pm – many shorebirds including Three-banded, White-fronted & Ringed Plovers, Terek & Curlew Sandpipers.

### **Sun 4<sup>th</sup> Nov – Toliara to Tsinjoriake, then to harbour, boat to Anakao**

Left before 5 am, back to Toliara. Right turn off N7 16 kms NE of Toliara. Birding in scrub below the Tablelands, succeeded with Verreaux's Coua and Red-shouldered Vanga. Back to Toliara and to harbour c.11 am for boat to Anakao. Open boat with c.30 people on board left 11.30 & stopped to take people ashore at 3 (apparently basic) hotels, wet landings. Got to Ocean Lodge 1 pm, considered by far the best quality place to stay. Lunch, Littoral Rock Thrushes around. By now strong onshore wind meant not safe to cross to Nosy Ve. Chance tomorrow morning but the only boat back to Toliara leaves at 7.30 am so Claude said we could only do a very early morning visit, returning at 7 am.

We discussed options, considering the additional time we would have at Isalo. Maybe we could get another boat from somewhere? We could postpone Zombitse to Tuesday. I spoke to the charming Manager, Hanitra, & asked if we could charter the Lodge's boat (a nice covered boat) to get back to Toliara. For extra 37 euros each we all agreed to the option to go to Nosy Ve after 7 am breakfast, stay as long as we like & then continue back to Toliara.

### **Mon 5<sup>th</sup> Nov – Anakao, Nosy Ve, back to Toliara, & up N7 to Relais de la Reine**

Yesterday's plan went ahead. Out to Nosy Ve. Time for snorkelling off the island, came ashore & walked length of island, saw Red-tailed Tropicbirds, Lesser Crested Terns, Dimorphic Egrets, White-fronted Plovers etc. Back to Toliara c.12 noon. Headed out for 11 km on N7 again to Auberge de la Table / Arboretum. Lunch there, then guided walk till 3.20 pm.

Back on bus & travelled north-eastwards up route N7 past Sakaraha to Relais de la Reine, arriving 8.10 pm. Generally a good road (compared with 1992 visit). Flock of sandgrouse seen on route.

### **Tues 6<sup>th</sup> Nov – Zombitse Forest, hotel area close to Isalo National Park**

Left 5.15 for Zombitse Forest – good local guides met on site. Birds included Appert's Tetraka, Rufous Vanga, great views of Cuckoo Roller, Giant & Crested Couas, 2 White-browed Owls together.

Back to hotel for lunch, walk in surrounds to hotel later, no Benson's Rock Thrush but Hoopoes, Madagascar Larks, 16 Red-billed Teal, Bee Eaters, etc. Second night at the hotel was welcome and appropriate in view of Zombitse needing to be postponed to this morning.

### **Wed 7<sup>th</sup> Nov – Isalo NP to Ranomafana**

Left hotel 7.40, passed through Ranohira 8.15. Sudden roadside stop at km post 671 to enjoy great views of a female Madagascar (Reunion) Harrier close to isolated occupied house. On through Ihosy & to Ambalavao.

Anja Lemur Reserve 1 to 1.40 pm. Great views of Ring-tailed Lemurs & Oustalet's Chameleon. Lunch at Bougainvillaea Hotel, Ambalavao. Drove on, through Fianarantsoa, reached Ranomafana 6.50 pm, earlier than expected. Checked in at Centrest. The rather poor reviews on the food at this place on Trip Advisor were not in our view justified.

### **Thurs 8<sup>th</sup> Nov – Ranomafana National Park**

Early breakfast, left 6.35 am, drove back up road for c.5 kms to trails at Vohiparara which reached quite high altitude. Met guide, Jean-Chrys, he was no doubt knowledgeable but while in the forest he said virtually nothing so he did not know what our target species were unless we made a point of telling him & even this was hard. He had to be asked what tapes he was playing. He appeared to speak reasonable English. Birds were sparse but we spotted some ourselves.

Highlights were Wedge-tailed Jery, Grey-crowned Tetraka, Common Sunbird-Asity (& a possible Yellow-bellied), Milne-Edwards Sifaka, Red-bellied & Red-fronted Brown Lemurs, also a Painted Mantella Frog.

Back into the forest at a different location mid-afternoon, saw 2 Golden Bamboo Lemurs and after much effort by 2 young teenage guides (Dela and Sinda), we managed to see a Pitta-like Ground Roller in the fading light.

Spotlighting along the road produced Brown Mouse Lemur & a few Greater Dwarf Lemurs.

### **Fri 9<sup>th</sup> Nov – Ranomafana to Antsirabe**

Birding again along the lower trails at Vohiparara, guided by Zo (Jean-Chrys's son) and the keen youngsters from yesterday, Delo and Sinda. Again, birds were sparse – a perched Madagascar Buzzard, Blue Couas, Green Jery; then real excitement when we found a female Pollen's Vanga closely at eye-level. A pair of Velvet Asities performed well, one White-throated Rail in a stream & more Milne-Edwards Sifakas giving better views than yesterday. Left Centrest at 9.50 am, heading for Antsirabe. A rural toilet & picnic table at Vohitsoa sufficed for our packed lunch. Stopped again at the Grand Hotel, Ambositra for a tea, accompanied by some good local live music.

Arrived at Antsirabe at 5.15 pm, checked in to La Residence Camelia, another nice place to stay.

### **Sat 10<sup>th</sup> Nov – Antsirabe to Antananarivo – Ivato Airport**

Breakfast at 4.30 (a good spread for that time in the morning), left at 5.10 am. It was 168 kms to Tana but we were stuck in stationary traffic on the outskirts of the city for more than 2 hours. Got to the airport at 12 noon but since it was a charter flight to Majunga, there was no problem – very friendly little airport office and transport to the plane with ourselves & 4 others on board.

Took off at 12.25, arrived Majunga 2 pm. It was particularly hot and sticky. Two 4WD vehicles transported us (via a supermarket for water) to our lunch stop, a nice restaurant by the sea front. We were rather frustrated at this as none of us were really hungry and the service (as often on this trip) was very slow and laborious. Claude explained that it was already paid for by voucher. We would rather have headed off to Ankarafantsika at this point, enabling arrival in daylight and some birding. We arrived after dark at 7.45 pm and checked in to our cabins.

### **Sun 11<sup>th</sup> Nov – Ankarafantsika National Park**

Started with a pre-breakfast walk into the forest behind the main buildings. Productive with Coquerel's Sifakas, Mongoose Lemur, Common Brown Lemurs, White-breasted Mesites, Red-capped Coua, Rufous Vanga, also a large Hog-nosed Snake.

8.30 breakfast, then out to forest other side of road & beyond lake. 9.30 – 11.45 am. Great views of Schlegel's Asity near the nest; also Coquerel's Coua & Fish Eagle by the lake. Boat trip around Lake Ravelobe later got us better views of Fish Eagle, lots of water birds including Reed Cormorant,

Humblot's Heron, Jacana & Little Bittern. Good birding in the Lodge grounds later – Sickie-billed Vanga, France's Sparrowhawk.

Spotlighting 300m up the road – Golden Brown & Grey Mouse Lemurs, Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur briefly, Tuft-tailed Rat & chameleons & geckos.

### **Mon 12<sup>th</sup> Nov - Ankarafantsika National Park**

Same trails as yesterday morning from 5.20 am, saw Van Dam's Vanga (a pair) & Rufous Vanga, also Red-capped & Coquerel's Couas but no mesites today. Two large Hog-nosed Snakes. After breakfast crossed suspension bridge to forest behind lake, Pygmy Kingfisher, pair of spectacular baobab trees, Greater Vasa Parrot in the scope. Left 1.30 pm to return to Majunga, stopped at huge roadside lake in the blazing heat, lots of Red-billed Teal but nothing else. Checked in at Hotel Roches Rouges - very nice but not recognisable from 2004, now built up between road and sea shore.

### **Tues 13<sup>th</sup> Nov – Majunga, Betsiboka River trip**

Great news midday yesterday that our flight back to Tana had been delayed to c.5 pm. This meant that we had all morning to get a boat upriver for some good target species. Leisurely breakfast – Madagascar Mannikin in view, left 9 am for the harbour. The Katsepy car ferry was there.

Ours was a comfortable covered boat with soft cushions. Headed off across the bay to the south & along coastal mangroves & bare rocky & sandy ground. Flocks of birds on the shore in several places, good variety of species. Great views of c.100 Crab Plovers, many Lesser Crested Terns, smaller species with them thought to be Saunders' Terns but some larger, perhaps Common or Roseate. Waders included Common, Terek & Curlew Sandpipers, Whimbrel, Ringed, Grey, Greater Sand, Three-banded & White-fronted Plovers; lots of dark Dimorphic Egrets, Black Heron, etc. Shoreline of a more vegetated island further on produced at least 5 Madagascar White Ibises & a pair of Bernier's Teal conveniently landed to feed on the mud at close range.

Flight back to Tana & returned to Hotel Palissandre, the final night for those not on the extension.

### **Wed 14<sup>th</sup> Nov – Home for some, Maroantsetra for others**

Those flying home had lie-in, those on the extension left c.6 am for the charter flight office after an early breakfast. It was a different office from last time but as before, it was a pleasure to deal with friendly staff on a personal basis rather than mingling with a mob somehow ploughing through the security procedures.

So it was just our group – Simon, Morag, Claude & myself - and another couple on this flight, taking off at 7.40, arriving at 9.15. Activities from here on were arranged by Masoala Forest Lodge under direction of a likeable American guy called Dash. A bus took us to the quay where a gazebo shaded us from the sun and beneath which was a late breakfast for us, prior to boarding a nice covered boat which took us and a group of others to Nosy Mangabe. Although short on birds there we enjoyed Black & White Ruffed and White-fronted Brown Lemurs; also Green Mantella Frogs, a large Hog-nosed Snake, a Panther Chameleon & a tiny 'Brookesia' chameleon.

After a buffet lunch our group headed off in an unappealing open boat to what I assumed would be Maroantsetra but in fact we headed a long way east in increasingly rough and wet conditions, eventually to a remote beach where landing, complete with all our baggage covered by a tarpaulin, was a hair-raising experience. This was Farankaraina, the cabins and main building were just beyond the trees fringing the beach. On the crossing we had seen a booby which Claude thought was Masked but I thought was Red-footed.

Farankaraina was basic but that didn't worry us, food was good and the bed was comfortable. Birding in the vicinity produced a few White-headed Vangas but little else, also Grey Bamboo Lemurs. This was expected to be our only chance for Aye-Aye and sure enough we saw 2 of them very high in the trees where the torch beams struggled to reach.

### **Thurs 15<sup>th</sup> Nov – Farankaraina to Masoala Forest Lodge**

The next morning a little early birding found me a Red-breasted Coua & I was shown a nicely camouflaged Leaf-tailed Gecko on a rock. We left about 8.50 am in the boat we arrived in, making the 2 & half hour journey to the Lodge in calmer but nearly birdless conditions (Lesser crested Terns, egrets).

Masoala Forest Lodge was a remarkable, top quality lodge with charming staff, lovely cabins consisting of tents on stilted wooden structures and luxuriously fitted out. Most of the drink including a variety of rums was free, as was a massage – I couldn't turn that down.

Our guide was Elyse who was good and knowledgeable. Birds were a struggle to find but we didn't do too badly. Afternoon birding produced a Helmet Vanga, also Tylas & Madagascar Cuckoo Shrike.

Spotlighting at night only a short distance from the Lodge gave us a surprise when Claude spotted an Aye-Aye, giving better views than the Farankaraina one. Later a mouse lemur ran across the inside of my tent.

### **Fri 16<sup>th</sup> Nov – Masoala Forest Lodge**

Breakfast in the 'Sea Room' 6.30. One Madagascar Pratincole on the rocks (2 more later). Boat north to the National Park at 7.20 (the Lodge is on private land). Quite long walk up some steep trails, rained much of the time. Birding quite good, superb views of Helmet Vanga, Blue Coua, 4 Red-ruffed Lemurs at eye level and a pair of Scaly Ground Rollers seen quite well but kept under cover. White-fronted Brown Lemurs. Very wet boat ride back, leaving me with no dry boots, socks, trousers, hat or rucksack.

Relaxed in afternoon, attempt to dry out.

Spotlighting again but later; no Aye-Aye found.

### **Sat 17<sup>th</sup> Nov – Masoala Forest Lodge**

Walked north along coast, through a village and into different forested area. At least 3 Mascarene Swiftlets identified here. (Rockjumper tour guide who we had met earlier said there were some here, blown in by recent storms). Highlight of the morning was a Brown Mesite on the nest.

In the afternoon, some of us went snorkelling off the beach, quite good near the rocks for an area so close to shore.

Birding again from 3 pm, reached an isolated rice paddy in the forest. Single White-faced Whistling Duck, France's Sparrowhawk, Stripe-throated Jery, sunbirds.

Even better views of the Aye-Aye this evening. Mouse Lemur in my tent again.

### **Sun 18<sup>th</sup> Nov – Masoala – Maroantsetra – Antananarivo**

Early bird walk with Elyse and Morag – finally saw Red-breasted Coua at this locality. Left in the comfortable covered boat at 7.10 am, reached good speed so back in Maroantsetra at 8.30 am. Flight left c.10.30, Dash also on board for 10 day break. Arrived Tana 12.10 pm. Lunch at the very nice Hotel Relais des Plateaux, just 5 minutes from airport. There was at least one other quality hotel nearby and we felt that future trips should use these instead of suffering the long journey to the city for our short one-night stops here.

Claude had prearranged transport to go to the hotel via Lake Alarobia, ascertained that we could get permits on site (office closed on Sunday). Spent 3 to 4 pm here. Prolific bird life by the lake, lots of White-faced Whistling Ducks, Red-billed & Hottentot Teal, 4 Meller's Ducks, a variety of herons including Dimorphic, Black, Squacco, Striated & Black-crowned Night Herons, White-throated Rail, 7 Malagasy Kingfishers and our first Madagascar Swamp Warblers for the trip.

One final night at Hotel Palissandre; although with an early hours flight, I was already on route to the airport by midnight, Simon & Morag left next morning.

Considered by all to be a high quality and enjoyable trip.