

# Madagascar: Eighth Continent | Trip Report

## Nov. 4 –18, 2023 | by Bryan Shirley



With guides Bryan Shirley and Dalton Gibbs and many wonderful local guides, and participants: Debbie, Kathy, Carol, David, Lise, Steve, Randy, Pat, Cathy and Trina.



### Sat., Nov. 4                      Antananarivo (Tana)

Our pre-tour birding outing to Parc de Tsarasaotra (Lac Alarobia) departed at 7AM. After a 30-minute drive, we arrived and immediately found tons of birds right in front of us. White-faced Whistling-Ducks and Red-billed Ducks were everywhere. The island of vegetation was packed with egrets, and we started scanning through the Squacco Herons, Cattle Egrets, Little Egrets and Great Egrets looking for our target bird here: Malagasy Pond-Heron, which wasn't cooperating. Mixed in with the Whistling-Ducks we found one Knob-billed Duck roosting on a log (without a knob-bill since it was a female). We slowly made our way around the lake scanning for the pond-heron and other ducks. Passerines were few, but we did come upon a flock of Red Fody and a several Mascarene Martins. Patience finally paid off as Bryan located a pond-heron on the island that we watched as it preened for about 15 minutes before it disappeared into the vegetation.

After birding we had a relaxing afternoon as we waited for the rest of the group to arrive. We enjoyed our first dinner together, and Dalton shared some fun questions to help us get to know each other.



## **Sun., Nov. 5**                      **Lac Alarobia | Flight to Tulear**

Typical for Madagascar, our early morning flight time changed overnight, and we were now scheduled to fly in the late afternoon. The delay worked in our favor as we were able to return to Lac Alarobia with the whole group. Besides all the herons and ducks from yesterday, we found a Malagasy Kingfisher perched overlooking the marsh, which was a highlight. We also coaxed a White-throated Rail out of the marsh (heard but not seen the previous day).

After a nice lunch we made our way to the airport for our flight to Tulear in the southwest corner of Madagascar, arriving just before dark. We met our wonderful driver, Henry, and were glad he was doing the driving as we navigated the way through a chaotic mass of pedestrians, bikes and carts.

## **Mon., Nov. 6**                      **Nosy Ve | Arboretum d'Antosokay**

This morning, we woke early and after a short drive we found ourselves on a boat zipping along the coast of western Madagascar. The shelf is quite far from the coast here, so we weren't likely to see any seabirds, but the seas were calm, which made for a pleasant trip. An hour later we were approaching Nosy Ve – our birding destination for the day. We quickly happened upon one of our first targets for the day: 13 Crab Plovers on a white sandy beach. Bryan was excited to see this species, a monotypic family that is only found along the east coast of Africa and occasionally in Madagascar when not breeding. Lesser and Greater Crested Terns roosting together made for a nice size comparison. We took a walk across Nosy Ve Island and found our first Madagascar Cisticola of the trip along with the occasional Red-tailed Tropicbird floating by. Our local guide pointed out a tropicbird perched on a nest under a bush.

It was getting hot, so we got back on the boat and cruised to the resorts on the mainland for a cold drink. Feeling refreshed, we did a bit of birding here looking for Littoral Rock Thrush – a beautiful species endemic to the SW coast of Madagascar. We took the boat back to Tulear for lunch and a well-deserved siesta at our hotel, then met for some evening birding. We had a wonderful walk at the Arboretum d'Antosokay, appreciating our local guide's wealth of knowledge about every plant there, and his non-stop smile was infectious. The birding was excellent too. We enjoyed awesome views of Green-capped Coua, our first of this endemic family, plus Madagascar Buttonquail and a Madagascar Kestrel pair perched and keeping a close eye on their nest.



## Tues., Nov. 7 Tulear Area | Ifaty Spiny Forest

We set out early to get in some birding before it got too hot, driving away from the coast up onto the high plateau above Tulear. Here we explored a patch of dry forest where one of our main targets can be found: Red-shouldered Vanga, a recently described species whose entire distribution is a tiny dot on the map here. While we searched for it, we were treated to views of lots of other great birds like Verreaux's Coua, Madagascar Bee-eater and Chabert's Vanga. Eventually our guide heard a Red-shouldered Vanga, and we followed it around through the scrub until we'd all had satisfactory views. Another great find here was Lafresnaye's Vanga, a species that has become quite difficult to find due to habitat loss.

We returned to our hotel to escape the heat and enjoyed a short break before lunch. Then we loaded our luggage and set out north toward Ifaty, making a few stops along the way for some good birds like Madagascar Swift and Madagascar Plover. Our hotel was situated on a beautiful beach with white sand and palm trees – it looked like a postcard. Even in the heat of the day, the gardens were quite active with some of the more common species like Madagascar Bulbuls, Bee-Eaters, Souimanga Sunbirds and the introduced Common Myna. We took a night walk in the spiny forest and found our first Lemur of the trip: a White-footed Sportive Lemur. We also had a great look at a Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec, one of several endemic mammals that resemble hedgehogs. A Madagascar "Tototoroka" Scops-Owl was singing up a storm, but we were never able to locate it.

## Wed., Nov., 8 Ifaty Spiny Forest

Another early start today so we could explore the spiny forest before it got too hot. We were birding by 5:30, and our guide took us to the nest of a Long-tailed Ground-Roller, a member of another family of birds endemic to Madagascar, the Long-tailed is only found in the arid southwest where it nests in an underground burrow. We were all gathered around the hole in the ground when suddenly the bird surprised us when it came running out of its burrow! It stayed nearby, posing for photos as we all oohed and aahed at it. This was voted the favorite bird of the trip for several members of the group. We found another endemic this morning, a Subdesert Mesite that perched on a branch motionless for several minutes just a few feet from us. We also saw several *Coua* species including Gray-headed Lovebird and the aptly named Sickie-billed Vanga. Besides all the wonderful birds, the scenery here was remarkable, with huge Baobabs dominating the landscape making for an otherworldly



experience. By 7:30 the heat was already setting in, so we returned to our hotel for a late breakfast followed by a short excursion to explore some salt pans and wetland areas. Our target here was the endemic Humblot's Heron, which we located quite quickly! The wetlands held surprisingly few other birds, although we were able to add a few migrant shorebirds to our growing list including Curlew Sandpiper and Bar-tailed Godwit. After a good lunch and a long afternoon siesta, we returned to the spiny forest. While the birding was, predictably, slower than it was in the morning, we were happy to spend more time in this unique habitat.

## **Thurs., Nov. 9                      Travel to Isalo**

Today was scheduled to be a long travel day. It rained overnight and into the morning and the road was crowded with locals taking advantage of the rain to fill buckets from the puddles on the road. This scene brought to life the depths of the poverty in the region. We made a stop along the way to search for Madagascar Sandgrouse. Our local guide took us for a 30-minute walk into a valley along the road, and we eventually flushed a large flock of about 30 sandgrouse! We had great looks at them as they flew around the valley. Just before we arrived at our hotel, we were fortunate to spot two Madagascar Partridge foraging along the roadside. Our hotel was gorgeous, surrounded by huge granite cliffs and domes with beautiful gardens and trees. Several Madagascar Hoopoes were foraging in the grass as we got settled into our rooms.

## **Fri., Nov. 10                      Zombitse NP**

Another early start and we were on the road to Zombitse National Park. On the way, Dalton spotted a Madagascar Harrier, one of the most difficult birds to find in this area. Unfortunately, it was gliding down a river valley away from us, and not everyone saw it. Upon arrival at Zombitse, we met our local guides for the day and set out into the park. Appert's Tetraka is only found in Zombitse and can be a bit tricky to locate, but today our guides picked out their call soon after we entered the forest, and after a few minutes we all enjoyed great looks at them. We made up for missing the Scops Owl in Ifaty by finding one on a roost this morning and also saw a White-browed Owl after several trips past the hole it was roosting in. Cuckoo-Rollers were singing loudly as they displayed high above the forest (eventually we even got to see one perched!). We had a good bunch of vangas today including Hook-Billed, Rufous, Red-tailed and the eye-popping Blue Vanga. Oustalet's Giant Chameleon, one of the largest Chameleons in the world, was an exciting find, as were a few Verreaux's Sifaka that were moving through the treetops. Back at the hotel we had a nice lunch followed by an afternoon break before we



reconvened for a short walk along the river and around the hotel property. A White-throated Rail called near the river and eventually we found it and two chicks! They were close and not moving much, which allowed us to get the scope on them and provide great looks for the whole group.

**Sat., Nov. 11                      Anja Reserve | drive to Ramanofana NP**

It was hard to leave such a beautiful place, but we had more places to explore, and even though the day would be a long travel day, we still had a few planned stops to break it up. Our first was only a few minutes from our hotel at the Isalo NP Information Center that offered some nice exhibits inside the museum. Afterwards it only took us a few minutes to find another exciting bird here – the “Benson” subspecies of Forest Rock-Thrush that until recently was considered a full species, but recently was lumped with Amber Mountain Rock-Thrush. Our next stop was at the Community Reserve in Anja where we had a picnic lunch and then walked a few minutes into the forest to view the Ring-tailed Lemur. This lemur successfully demonstrates the potential benefits of eco-tourism. The local people decided to protect the forest and the Lemurs, and today the Community Reserve is a popular tourist destination (several other groups were there besides us). The lemurs are used to people, so we were able to watch and photograph them from only a few feet away. We also saw another Oustalet’s Giant Chameleon, and later in the forest we found the tiny Anja Reserve Stub-tailed Chameleon. We could have spent hours watching the lemurs, but since we still had a long drive, we had to pull ourselves away. We arrived at our next destination, Ramanofana, just after dark.

**Sun., Nov. 12                      Ramanofana**

Today we explored the upper part of Ramanofana. The hike was a bit challenging as it had some steep uphill sections, but the birding was great. Perhaps the bird of the day was the Rufous-headed Ground-Roller. It was perched in the open just as the first half of the group arrived, but unfortunately it flew before the rest of the group arrived. Our guides worked hard to re-find it, eventually succeeding so that everyone ended up seeing it well. As this hunt was taking place, some in the group briefly glimpsed a Brown Emutail, and a Madagascar Wood-Rail was seen crossing the trail a few times.



We found several vangas including Pollen's, Tylas, White-headed and Red-tailed. We also saw several Velvet Asities and a few Common Sunbird-Asities, meaning we now had seen all the endemic Madagascar families. We had a late lunch back at the hotel, then set off to go birding near a small village, which provided a unique experience to say the least. As soon as the bus stopped, we were surrounded by about 50 kids and lots of adults too. We all walked through the rice fields to a small hill overlooking yet more rice fields, where we waited as the kids ran through the fields and marshes until they flushed a Madagascar Snipe for us! I don't know which was more fun, seeing the snipe or seeing how excited all the kids were! We also spotted a Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk soaring above us, a rare sighting that was a nice surprise!

That night we took a short walk along the road on our way back to the hotel finding several chameleons and a Rufous Mouse Lemur eating on a branch right in front of us!

## **Mon., Nov. 13                      Ramanofana**

Today we explored the middle section of Ramanofana, and while it wasn't as birdy as yesterday, we eventually were rewarded with great looks at Pitta-like Ground-Roller along with three species of Lemur. A small group of Red-fronted Brown Lemurs worked along the ridgetop and part of our group glimpsed a Golden Bamboo Lemur in bamboo near the river. In the afternoon we took a short walk along the road finding the "Forest" subspecies of the Forest Rock-Thrush, having seen the "Benson's" subspecies in Isalo a few days earlier. A Crossley's Vanga got to within a few feet of us before it flew out of the brush, giving us a quick view as it flew away.

## **Tues., Nov. 14                      Ramanofana | Antsirabe**

Another travel day, but we started with some productive birding along the road above Ramanofana. We had heard several Madagascar Flufftails, and a couple of people had brief views, but this morning we finally found one that showed a little bit better. We also saw a Cryptic Warbler that was singing from the top of a small tree while we waited on the flufftail. In the rice fields along the road, we spotted a few Hamerkops – a unique species of wading bird that is distantly related to the Shoebill and to pelicans.



We broke up the drive with a picnic at a small community reserve. Although the ponds didn't hold any waterfowl as we were hoping, we did see a pair of Madagascar Swamp Warblers. We arrived at Madalief Hotel in time to do a little birding around the property. The introduced pines near the resort held a Barn Owl – a lifer for some in the group. We searched for a Marsh Owl with no luck but had great looks at a Stonechat as a consolation prize. There were many Madagascar Swifts flying around and we were surprised to see one Alpine Swift mixed in.

### **Wed., Nov. 15                      Travel Day to Andasibe | Mantadia NP via Tana**

In the morning, we birded a bit around the hotel, then were back on the road, arriving in Tana by midday where we found a nice restaurant for lunch. While we ate, Henry and our drivers moved our bags from the bus into the waiting 4x4 vehicles we would use for the remainder of the trip. We said goodbye to Henry then continued to Andasibe/Mantadia National Park – our home for the next three nights. As we walked to dinner, we discovered that several of the palms were flowering, and Gmelin's Woolly Lemurs were feeding on them. It was nice to see something fun after our long day on the road and we were all excited to explore in the morning.

### **Thurs., Nov. 16                      Andasibe | Mantadia NP**

We began the morning walking the Tsakoka (Ground-Roller) trail in Mantadia NP. We hadn't gone far when we found a GORGEOUS Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur. As we watched, we realized that it was traveling with a bunch of Common Brown Lemurs. Their ability to jump and move through the canopy is truly amazing. Then several Indri started singing, and though we couldn't see them, it was a special experience to watch lemurs in the misty forest while surrounded by singing Indri. A bit further down the trail we heard a Scaly Ground-Pitta, and after some searching it suddenly flew in and landed right next to us! What a great bird! Not surprisingly, it was the bird of the trip for a few people. Later we also found a Short-legged Ground-Roller and were surprised at how high it was in a tree, though apparently it is not unusual for this species.

After a nice picnic lunch, we started working our way back down the road toward the hotel. We got out of the vehicles and walked a section that our local guide said was good for Indri, and we were ecstatic to find three! A bit further down the road we stopped at a marshy area and called in a Madagascar Rail, another difficult-to-see



endemic. Our guides had cut the reeds in a small section of the marsh making a rail viewing site that worked perfectly. We returned to the hotel in late afternoon and some free time before we met for the daily checklist and dinner.

## **Fri., Nov. 17                      Andasibe | Mantadia NP**

In the morning, we set out to explore the main section of Andasibe National Park that, as expected, had many other tourists around -- more than any other day on the trip. There were still some birds we had yet to see, and everyone was hoping for additional lemur sightings.

We began with an amazing experience viewing a group of Indri. Although we had heard them calling before, today they were in the trees right above us and it was amazing how loud they were. Another terrific sighting was a small group of Diademed Sifaka, not as big as Indri, but the beautiful coloring made them the favorite for several of us. Even though we had seen Common Brown Lemur before, it didn't compare to the views we had today. At times they were all around us, sometimes only a few feet away. We also got to watch an Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur chomping on bamboo so close we could have touched it if we tried.

The birds were good too. Before we entered the national park, we stopped for a Madagascar Scops-Owl on a roost (here it is the Forest subspecies). We also had a distant view of a Madagascar Owl, but the distance and position made it hard to even tell it was an owl. In the forest our local guides took us to a roosting site for a Collared Nightjar. Talk about good camouflage -- even though it was in plain sight just a few feet away, it was hard for everybody to see! We were searching for a good mixed flock of birds because that would be our best chance to see the only remaining vanga species in the area: Nuthatch Vanga. This species can be quite difficult to see, but we managed to find one in a feeding flock that was hopping up the trunk of a tree -- just like a nuthatch would. Unfortunately, not everyone got a good look, and we were unable to relocate it before the flock moved on. However, a stunning Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher that perched directly overhead was a great find.





After lunch we went back out into the Andasaibe community reserve. Our last target was the Madagascar Ibis – a crazy looking bird that is very shy and hard to find. Our local guides took us to a known nesting site, but the ibis wasn't around, so we had to do it the hard way and look for it in the forest. Our guides spread out and searched while we birded, and eventually word got out that they had found one. We dashed through the forest and up the road and were presented with a stunning view of a bird perched on a log over the river! Luckily it stayed put long enough for all of us to view and photograph it before it flew back into the forest. What a bird to end the tour on!

## Sat., Nov. 18                      Return to Tana

We had an optional birding walk around the lodge before breakfast. We looked for Madagascar Starlings without luck, but the insects and moths that were attracted by the moth light were amazing, and there were lots of birds feasting on them including a Ward's Vanga. As we searched the trees in front of the cabins, looking for a chameleon that had been seen there yesterday, we found a Comet Moth that was really cool. After breakfast we drove back to Tana arriving just in time for lunch. A visit to the craft market was quite an adventure and we all practiced our negotiating skills, adding a few souvenirs to our suitcases. We returned to our hotel near the airport where some overnighted and others refreshed and repacked before heading to the airport for flights home. This is not an easy tour, but the mammals, birds and insects were unbelievable, and I think it is safe to say that we all departed full of wonderful memories of this amazingly biodiverse country!

*Photos: Group (Bryan Shirley - BS), Madagascar Kestrel (BS), Ring-tailed Lemur (David Jaffe - DJ), Chameleon (Debbie Hall - DH), Red-tailed Tropicbird (DJ), Little Egret (DH), Running Coua (Hector Jackson - HJ), Madagascar Kingfisher (DH), Chabert Vanga (HJ), Madagascar Crested Drongo (DH), Madagascar Nightjar (BS), Long-tailed Ground-Roller (BS), Madagascar Sandgrouse (DH), Madagascar Cuckoo Roller (BS), Blue Vanga (BS), White-browed Owl (DH), Hubbard's Sportive Lemur (DH), Sickle-billed Vanga (DH), Madagascar Hoopoe (DH), Verreaux's Sifaka (HJ), Chameleon (DH), Madagascar Green Sunbird (DH), Ring-tailed Lemur (DH), Common Sunbird (BS), Rufous-headed Ground-Roller (BS), Rufous Mouse Lemur (DH), Baron's Mantella (BS), Crosley's Vanga (DH), Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur (DH), Madagascar White-eye (BS), Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemur (DH), Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher (DH), Madagascar Scops Owl (Rainforest Subspecies) (HJ), Madagascar Pygmy*

*Kingfisher (BS), Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko (BS), Madagascar Red Fody (DJ), Madagascar Bulbul (HJ), Group Birding (BS), Spiny Forest Scenic (BS)*

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