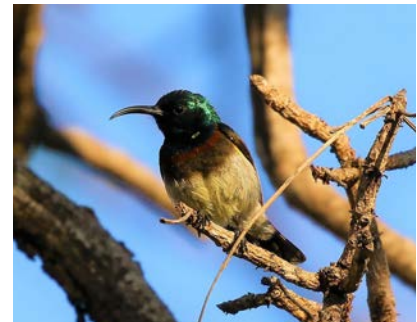


Madagascar – The Eighth Continent | Oct. 31- Nov. 14, 2024 | Trip Report by client Karen W.



With guides Greg Smith and Dalton Gibbs and our participants Kate, Fiona, Karen, Wendi, Sheila, Peter and Alan



Thurs., Oct. 31

Antananarivo

We landed in Antananarivo, a city of five million in a country of 29 million people. It is the capital and also the largest city in Madagascar. The city is in the highlands and the people are mostly Indonesian and Malaysian, though this varies widely, depending on where you are on the island. In the East most of the people come from the Philippines and Borneo. In the West, from Africa.

At the Hotel San Cristobal in Antananarivo, our guides Greg Smith and Dalton Gibbs introduced themselves and our local guide Faniray (or Fan). Dalton gathered us around maps of Africa to describe the epic 160 million year long journey Madagascar has made from being a chunk of Eastern Africa to its current place of isolation in the Indian Ocean. It shares iguanas with South America from when the Gondwana landmass existed before it separated from the coast of

Toliara had more rickshaws than cars, and the street scene was equally bustling, if not more so. The Hotel Moringa was an elegant and interesting structure made from the limestone prominent in the area. After a spectacular nap, we gathered to update bird lists and enjoy excellent food (calamari cooked in a curry sauce - delicious!).

Sat., Nov 2 **Nosy Ve | Anakao**

This morning, we bussed down to the quay, and awaited our boat to Nosy Ve, a small island somewhat south of Toliara. Up and down the shore, small boys drove ox carts in the shallow water, picking up and delivering passengers to the waiting boats. They jostled for position dockside, lining the back of their carts up so passengers could step directly in, sitting our unaccustomed backsides down on the narrow edge of wood provided by the cart sides. As we waited, three of our jaws dropped open when, who should be approaching via cart but two folks from our previous Mongolia trip. Small world for sure!

The boat ride to Nosy Ve was thrilling. It was a beautiful morning with a breeze and the wind had yet to pick up. We boated through shallow water out past a long industrial pier, before picking up speed and flying to Nosy Ve, about a 90 minute ride. A small offshore islet close to shore hosted an assortment of birds, including Black-bellied (or Grey) and Crab (!) Plover, and Great Crested, Little, Common and Lesser Crested Terns.

The beach was made of sand the texture of cornmeal, from the ground coral that created this island. Here and there we could see the footprints of ghost crabs, leading down into their holes. We walked past a few beachside shade structures onto a boardwalk that crossed the island. In some areas, euphorbia scrub habitat has been overtaken by agave plants, perhaps brought to this area and cultivated for sisal (a fiber used for rope or matting). The euphorbia trees themselves are tall, thorny and striking. A Madagascar Cisticola hovered above the scrub in a mating display, and several Little Egrets, including two Dimorphic, flapped and preened in the taller vegetation. Under several bushes, our guides pointed out Red-tailed Tropicbird chicks, one as young as four months, another 8 months, and a mother, on a nest. It seems to be a long breeding season! Tropicbirds were constantly flying overhead, their streamers sailing along behind them.

After a brief interaction with locals selling drinks and small wood carvings, we boarded our boat for the mainland. We landed at Hotel Ecolodge near Anakao, which offered us beverages in the shade of a thatched roof. But before our drinks could arrive, Dalton had already found us a Littoral Rock-Thrush sporting a fine-looking red breast. It has a very limited distribution inhabiting the thorn scrub along this narrow strip of Madagascar's coast. We got close looks at the third eye of the Madagascar iguana and were awed by the size of the euphorbia trees here. A Subdesert Brush-Warbler was icing on the cake.

After drinking our cold and refreshing piña colada mocktails Greg bought us, we loaded back up for the trip home, just as the wind was starting to pick up. The tide had gone out and our oxen ride back to the dock was more of a gallop than a wade this time around.

In the afternoon we soldiered off to the Arboretum, a fine garden that was truly a treat with over 900 species of plants and 100 species of euphorbia alone. The Octopus tree looks like a Dr. Seuss character, with its brightly green-leafed arms and underlying thorny countenance and we got our first up close encounters with baobab trees. Our guide told us about the relaxing tree, the euphorbia used for boat building, and the hollow Elephant tree that is essentially a tank of water.

We were greeted at the entrance by nesting Crested Drongos and Sakalava Weavers. Perhaps one of the favorite birds here was the Paradise Flycatcher, not only because of the showy plumage of both the male and female, but also because of their tail fanning behavior. Souimanga Sunbird and Madagascar Coucal were also highlights, as was the sleeping, grey-brown Mouse Lemur!

Sun., Nov 3

Les Dunes d'Ifaty | Coastal Wetlands | Spiny Forest

We left Toliara in the morning and headed up the coast to Les Dunes d'Ifaty near the village of Ifaty, with a few stops en route to look for Madagascar Plover, which eluded us, but the Kittlitz's Plover did not!

Our lodge was beautiful, made of chunked limestone, Madagascar hardwoods and open-air thatched roofs. The pool is perched above the ocean; it's truly a tropical paradise. After we settled in, we went out for our first foray into the Zar spiny forest just as the sun was setting. The red of the sunset struck the baobabs and lit them up in a warm glow. It was magical. We walked past women and children selling handicrafts in the dimming light, and plunged into the spiny forest. Nightjars dodged through the canopy of baobabs and the eyes of spiders and other small creatures lit up in the glow of our head lamps. We located another Grey-brown Mouse lemur just as the light was fading from the sky. Later, our guide flipped a piece of bark and uncovered a Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec, a new family and species for all of us.

Mon., Nov. 4

Zar Spiny Forest | Coastal Wetlands

This morning, we left very early for further exploration of Zar spiny forest. It is botanically astonishing with its ancient caudiciform trees - baobabs and euphorbias (elephant tree) - with their trunks serving as enormous storage tanks for water. The elephant tree especially has a satisfying thump when you give it a smack, like a ripe watermelon. Some of the baobabs have footholds cut in them from ages ago; people climb them to harvest the large velvety fruits.

We were treated to many new birds, with a favorite being Running Coua. But there were many others equally wonderful, including Souimanga Sunbird, Crested Coua, Grey-headed Lovebird, Greater Vassa Parrot, Long-tailed Ground Roller, Madagascar Cuckooshrike, Hook-billed and Sickle-billed Vanga, Madagascar Harrier-hawk, Madagascar Buzzard, and the uncommonly seen Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk. And, we're not sure how he did it, but our guide ran off the trail straight to a white-footed sportive lemur, blinking quietly at us with his big golden eyes from a cozy snag in a tree.

Home for lunch and naps, and then a trip back to the coast to locate the highly endangered Madagascar plover - success this time! Then we went back out in the later afternoon for another look at the spiny forest. We left our bus driver at the parking area with our bus stuck in the sand, confident he'd figure it out (and he did!). We had a quick look at a Green Sunbird, and saw a hen Madagascar Harrier-hawk circling near her nest in a baobab tree, where we could just see the head of her chick. Then our guide took us off at a fast pace across the forest where his scouts reported (and we saw) a Subdesert mesite sticking tight to her branch hoping we mistook her for a bit of wood. She barely moved. Other denizens included White-bellied Robin, Green (or Olive) Capped Coua, Malagasy Bulbul, and Button Quail.

Karen was tired but Greg convinced her to stick it out for dinner, where to her surprise, a truly delicious trifle-style cake arrived at dessert time. A rare and wondrous birthday in a wild and wonderful country!

Tues., Nov. 5

Travel from Les Dunes d'Ifaty to Isalo

Today was a big travel day, heading south and East to Isalo. We left our beautiful lodge at Ifaty and headed back south to Toliara, where we hit tuk-tuk rush hour. Streams of colorful bicycles pedaling by our bus, and alongside the small stalls of the vendors already bustling at this hour. Farther south we headed up onto the limestone plateau into short scrubby brush land, home of the Forest Rock-Thrush. We also saw Madagascar Larks from the bus, then traveled down a side road where we got to see Verreaux's Coua, who is found only in a highly localized area on the plateau. We also had a good look there at a spiny chameleon, sitting quietly and cryptically on his branch.

Traveling farther east we left the plateau and entered a stretch of extremely disturbed land. Dalton says it has been disturbed for a very long time, and that the three species of elephant bird here were extinct before the French arrived. It's unclear what the original landscape looked like prior to human habitation. Small villages here and there were surrounded by prickly pear fences, with mango trees and eucalyptus scattered around. Wild oats and other weedy plants dominated the landscape where fields were not cultivated, and the area seemed very impoverished. Houses were mostly rudimentary single room structures made variously of thatch, mud, mud brick, wattle, sticks and stones. Occasionally a village had a few more prosperous-looking plastered houses, often in towns where a church was present. People relaxed or worked under shade structures with goats and chickens scattered around, and children raced our bus, always hopeful for a handout. Some women wore clay as sunscreen and most were dressed in bright western style dresses. We would occasionally travel through areas with more water, where rice, bananas, and other crops look healthier and more plentiful. Some villages had stills and specialized in rum making.

At one road junction, our driver stopped, and Fan asked the locals to take us to see the Madagascar Sand Grouse. Sure enough, they trotted off barefoot in the blazing heat across a drainage and up the far slope, and headed straight to the two birds moving quietly in the underbrush. Of course, they were reimbursed for their efforts, which is a good way to encourage protection. In 2018 a group of French hunters came through this area and wiped out the vast majority of the population in a single hunting spree. This bird always nests within distance to water. The parents fill their hollow breast feathers with water and fly back to give their babies a drink. And a bit down the road we had a good look at Merrem's Madagascar swift (an iguana), *Oplurus cyclurus*.

We drove through the bustling town of Sakaraha, where every third shop seemed to be selling gems. This area is mined extensively for sapphires and many of the businesses are owned by Thai dealers. Beyond the town the landscape is potholed with dig holes. From here we moved through some more diverse landscapes; first seeing some baobabs again and then a breathtakingly short drive through a bit of Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park. Beautiful blue fan palms started to break the monotony of the savannah, and sandstone bluffs capped with basalt made for scenic vistas below darkening clouds.

It was just after we got into the sandstone bluffs that we had a Marsh owl fly parallel to us before landing on the ground. We got even better looks after getting out of the bus.

Le Jardin Du Roy Lodge was beautiful, tucked into the rocky landscape near Isalo National Park. The buildings were all stonework with intricate designs and the multiple colors of the rocks of the area. Malagasy Hoopoes were common on the grounds, and enormous blooming Pachypodium ornamented the patios and terraces. There was an undisturbed gallery forest at the lower end of the property, and we walked beyond this into the rocky landscape beyond. Pandanus palms are becoming an important part of the landscape here; as they looked prehistoric. Malagasy Palm Swifts flew high overhead and a few (introduced) Helmeted Guinea Fowl clambered up a rocky slope. A Lesser Vassa Parrot was harassed out of the sky by a Malagasy Kestrel. The air had been freshened by an afternoon rain and we were accompanied by the occasional rumble of thunder.

This lodge serves enormous meals with first and second courses and the Zebu (a type of cattle...) was outstanding. Zebu are an important symbol of prosperity for the Bara people who live in this area. We noticed many similarities here to the culture of the Toraja people from the island of Sulawesi, including the high value they place on oxen as a symbol of health, wealth and prosperity, along with the burial of their dead in caves. After the tour, Greg unearthed a National Geographic article that suggested the cave burials may indicate that Zoroastrians fleeing Persia may have populated this area nearly 1000 years ago, we will wait and see.

Wed., Nov. 6

Zombitsie-Vohibasia National Park | Isalo National Park

We left at a shockingly early 3:30 am for the drive back the way we came to the 10,000 acre Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park. Outside the park boundaries nothing exists but introduced grassland. But the park itself is densely forested and no longer spiny, and the decomposed granite soil is more nutrient rich than the soil of the spiny forests. There are large baobabs and pandanus palms mixed in with other smaller stature trees.

Guides Rafy and Lucien joined us at sunrise and Rafy took off running. Within a short time, we began seeing birds entirely new to us, including Malagasy Green Pigeon, Giant Coua, Coquerel's Coua, Blue Vanga, Red-tailed Vanga, Chabert Vanga, France's Sparrow Hawk, Common Newtonian, and Broad Billed Roller. A Rufous-tailed Vanga sat tight on her nest, and a White-browed Owl peered at us from his perch in a tree snag. We got good looks at Appert's tetraka; and this is the only forest in the world where they are found. We also saw a pair of Long-billed tetrakas. A Standing's Day Gecko, standing quietly on his tree, is also found only in this forest. A troop of Verreaux's Sifakas, which are large, striking, mostly white lemurs with black facial bands, descended on us and spent some time leaping from limb to limb overhead with babies clinging on. But the icing on the cake, at least bird-wise, may have been the Cuckoo-roller. Our guide took off at a fast pace to a scouted location and there the Cuckoo-roller sat quietly for all to admire. This bird is so unique it falls in its own phylogenetic order. Its eyes are placed far back on its head, giving this large, half-meter-long bird a most unusual look. It was an extraordinary morning of birding.

We were home before noon and had a chunk of down time before heading out into the light rain on our afternoon outing. We walked past parts of the other resort compound and up into the rocks. The sandstone is pocked with holes small and large. The Bara people put the bodies of their deceased into the larger caves and leave them until they are ready to bring home for burial. We could see a box in a cave far up on a cliff face and wondered about its contents. The rain came now and then, and when we got to the top of the rocks, we could hear singing from down below. The local people here always celebrate the coming of the first rains with song!

Thurs., Nov. 7 Drive to Ranomafana National Park

Today was a big travel day, all the way to Ranomafana near the East coast. Fortunately, a few stops broke up the day. At the Isalo National Park visitor center we got good looks at both male and female Bensons Rock-Thrush. We stopped to move a couple of Malagasy Giant Chameleons (or Oustalet's chameleon) off the road. And at the Anja Nature Reserve we spent an hour watching ring-tailed lemurs and their frolicsome babies. This reserve is privately managed by the villagers and is a great example of ecotourism helping to protect the wildlife of this country. The people no longer hunt the lemurs because they make a decent income from park entrance fees and tips.

But the ride was long, through miles of disturbed habitat and occasional villages. The red sand slopes were eroded in places, and elsewhere were terraced for rice paddies. Burn areas were frequent. In many places, bricks were piled high over a ground level cavity, lightly plastered, and lit on fire to bake and harden. We climbed higher, where more prosperous villages had houses two or more stories tall and the streets were lined with more shops than stalls. After we passed over the summit of the mountains, the landscape grew greener and more productive; but lantana, eucalyptus and agave still were dominant. The town of Fianarantsoa is big and bustling and it took a while to get through it, since the idea of a bypass is foreign here. Our travels toward the coast took us through steeper terrain and areas that appeared to have native habitat in places. We drove through the National Park, which is beautiful with tree ferns and blooming shrubs and dense canopy and finally arrived at Ranomafana and our hotel, Ny Tanana.

Fri., Nov. 8 Ranomafana National Park | Night Walk

Our first morning in Ranomafana, we worked hard hiking up and down and up and down steep, irregular trails, scrambling down wooded slopes, and stooping to peer into deep underbrush. But it paid off with a day full of amazing wildlife. We found - or rather our guides found - a Pitta-like Ground-Roller deep in a bamboo thicket, and a Greater Bamboo Lemur also tucked back in the vegetation. Then, we were treated to Golden Bamboo lemurs high in the

canopy. These rare and beautiful lemurs were only discovered (at least by science) in 1986 and the park was created to protect them. There are probably only a couple of hundred individuals. After that extraordinarily lucky experience, we sat on the forest floor for the longest time while a Scaled Ground-Roller picked and scratched and wandered closer and closer to us until we could have reached out and touched him. That was followed by a much better look at the Pitta-like Ground-Roller. Also, Nelicourvi Weaver, Cuckooshrike, Ward's Flycatcher-vanga, a brief glimpse of a Madagascar Wood Rail, Pygmy Kingfisher, Magpie Robin and Velvet Asity (gorgeous!). A remarkable reptile of the day was probably the Satanic Leaf-Tailed Gecko, curled up and napping and looking, for all the world, like a dried and curled leaf. A scramble down a steep peaty slope got us a look at a Madagascar (Henst's) Goshawk's nest with mother Goshawk sitting tight.

We came home for lunch and a rest, then went out in the afternoon for roadside birding and a night walk. We saw Forest Fody, as well as Chabert Vanga and Ward's Flycatcher-vangas, Madagascar Starling, Madagascar Wagtail, Cuckooshrike and Forest Rock-thrush. We heard but didn't see the Blue Coua (a treat saved for later!).

Dusk fell quickly. In the dimming light, the guides rubbed banana on several tree trunks and within a few minutes a Rufous-brown Mouse Lemur emerged and began licking the wood clean. And within a few more minutes several other groups of tourists with guides came to the same spot to do the same thing. Clearly, these lemurs get an ample supply of banana.

Dalton commented on a "sleeping plant" which closes its leaves and droops at night. Maybe a *Mimosa pudica*? We wondered at the why of it? After dark, the chameleons turn paler and are easier to spot. And sure enough, we saw several, including a Blue-legged Chameleon with its head like a pointy beaked stegosaurus, a slender green flat-necked chameleon, and an O'Shaughnessy's Chameleon with his tail furled tight as a fern frond. We also saw a spectacular caterpillar - yellow and black bands with a wild fluff of a headdress.

Sat., Nov. 9 Ranomafana

Our morning hike today was quite a bit less rigorous than yesterday, which was a good thing. We got an extra hour to sleep in (5:30 breakfast call), which was also a good thing. The birding was much quieter today, though we still had some exceptional moments. An early highlight was a Brown Mesite sitting on her nest. This is an extraordinarily rare sighting, found by our guide Chantelle and her husband. We also saw a Crossley's Vanga and some saw a Brown Emutail. We played tag with a Rufous-Headed Ground-Roller for the longest time, and finally got a good look at one later on in the hike. But we found an uncommonly gorgeous Common Sunbird-Asity while looking for the ground-roller. And Fiona managed to pull off a photo of him, flashing his iridescent blue. We were looking at a Cryptic Warbler high in the tree tops when a Blue Coua came crashing through. This is our kind of bird! Loud, large, unmistakable and quite beautiful. When we finally got to see giraffe weevils, we didn't think the day could get any better, but then Kate spotted a lemur and it turned out to be the rarely seen Peyrieras's Woolly Lemur. Our guide Chantelle was quite excited by that, and so were we.

After lunch break most of us hopped on the bus to the village where we visited Chantelle at her vanilla orchid plantation. She is industrious and forward thinking and knows her knees won't hold out for a lifetime of guiding. The process is laborious. The vines grow on shade trees (a cassia from Mexico) that need to be managed. The orchids themselves grow from yard long cuttings and she has built up a sizable orchid orchard this way. They need deep compost at their feet, and she battles with button quail who come at night and dig through and scatter the duff. Each flower needs to be hand pollinated when it first opens, because the bees that are found in Mexico with the orchid don't thrive here. Eight or so months after pollination she harvests the pods, and then begins the laborious cooking and steaming and drying and turning process. But it seems to be well worth the effort. We all bought vanilla, wild pepper and cinnamon from her!

Sun., Nov. 10

Drive to Antsirabe

We stopped in the village on our way out of town to pick up lunches and to investigate the absolutely enormous, maybe even colossal, Red-legged Golden Orb-weaver spiders. Apparently, these are popular here when fried, and there certainly are enough of them to support a small village. And their webs truly do have a golden cast to them.

We stopped a few times in the park to look for Blue Pigeon and anything else of interest and then began our long trek towards Antsirabe; not far by miles but forever away because of the poor highway conditions. We quickly emerged out of the relatively pristine park habitat into a world where the landscape is one hundred percent disturbed. Hill slopes and valley floors are dammed and terraced for rice. Fires burn on slopes in the distance. The poverty here is truly overwhelming, with children waiting adjacent to the bumpy parts of the road where cars are forced to slow, to ask for money or food or to try to sell tourists small bundles of firewood or a few cassava chips. This island has only been populated with humans for a thousand or so years and it seems this unique and delicate landscape may not endure under the weight of feeding the burgeoning population. If it wasn't for the protection of national parks, there would be a lot less to experience when it comes to the wilds of Madagascar.

We stopped to eat foot-long chicken sandwiches under a shady ramada next to some perennial wetlands. After lunch Fan bundled up the remains to hand out to children we passed. We all seemed to remember once again of how we sometimes take our wonderful lives for granted.

At this stop we had looks at the prehistoric Hamerkop. And at a wonderful little wetland across the street, locals located a Madagascar Snipe for us. Brush Warbler and Swamp Warbler were found in their respective habitats, and there was a pause to appreciate the purple water lilies. Dalton says the first day these flowers open they are carnivorous, dissolving and ingesting the bugs that die on the sticky surface at the base of the flower. They need the nitrogen to help them set seed.

It was a relief to arrive at Residence Madalief on the outskirts of Antsirabe. The buildings and grounds are beautiful. Everything is made of wood and stone and thatch. The dining building is circular with windows all around. The founder also built an orphanage here, which has since moved into town, but it must have been a lovely place for children. We walked the grounds at dusk and flushed a few Button Quail. A pair of Black Kites looked down at us from the top of a pine tree; their nest must have been nearby.

Mon., Nov. 11

Drive to Andasibe

Our drive today took us through more miles of villages and terraced fields. The landscape was heavily terraced, with fields extending from the valley floor far up into the hills, all leveled and leveled and set up to drain water from one field to the next. The riverbanks were thick with the red mud from upper slopes. The terraces were mostly planted with rice, but corn, beans, and other vegetables were more prevalent here. There were roadside stands of potatoes, tomatoes and squash, and in places pots of boiling corn, as well as pineapple, mango, papaya, and banana. The begging in some places was intense. We stopped in Antsirabe to get cash and were beset by people selling trinkets and children asking for money. We were driving along the single road that crosses the island; its condition was abysmal. Travel was slow because of the potholes, the dodging of other vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians. There is no such thing as a bypass or a fast lane or a stop light here. Our driver Zozo was incredibly skillful, maneuvering the complexities of the road at the highest safe and manageable speed.

We lunched on pizza in Antananarivo saying goodbye to Zozo then headed east towards our next stay at Andasibe-Mantadia National Park in three 4x4 vans. We stopped once at a bridge to find Madagascar Pratincole, a stunning bird, at a distance. The road east ends near the coast at the port of Vatomaniry, so there were many transport trucks to

dodge on this road, making for slow progress up the many hills. But finally, we arrived at this large and important park visited by many.

Tues., Nov. 12 Andasibe-Mantadia National Park

We were staying at the Andasibe Lemurs Lodge in the village of Andasibe. The rooms were large and pleasant and the Indri chorus at dawn was unsurpassable. Our morning expedition was in Analamazaotra Forest near the lodge. It's a gentle forest, with seemingly few things that scratch, bite or make you itch. The Pandanus palms, tree ferns, bamboo, and twisted vines of the Strangler Fig made it look like the jungle that it is, and the ground in places was covered with the pink petals of the giraffe beetle tree (*Dichaetanthera arborea*). Five inch long Red Fire Millipedes strolled across the trail. The hike was lengthy, with many ups and downs of the trail, but we saw a lot! Two Indri with their baby were high overhead and the baby was determined to perfect his tree climbing gymnastics. We also saw grey bamboo lemurs hiding in the giant bamboo close to the trail. A Collared Nightjar sat tight in her bird's nest fern nest while we photographed her. She was utterly cryptic, with only a slit of an eye verifying her presence. It was also a morning of vangas. We saw a Hook-billed Vanga on a nest, a Nuthatch Vanga nest with no bird at home, a Tylas Vanga and her basket-like nest, a Red-tailed Vanga and a Blue Vanga. We tried hard to see the Short-legged Ground-roller and the Madagascar Ibis with no success. But we also saw Spectacled Tetraka and Long-billed Bernieria (formerly known as Long-billed Tetraka), Forest Fody, and Madagascar Turtle Dove.

Back at the hotel, we found a sleeping Madagascar Ground Boa down in a drainage ditch, who soon slithered down her hole. Then we dove back into the forest at Analamazaotra for our afternoon walk. We passed a Madagascar Scops Owl beaming at us from her perch in a giant grass; Dalton said she had been in the exact same place the year before. We also had a quick look at a wary Red-breasted Coua darting across the trail. We passed a sacred site for the animist religion that is practiced by some here, and saw a Common Brown Lemur with her tiny baby high up in a tree. We continued to search for the Madagascar Ibis and found a nest high up in a tree. Only at the very end of our hike did we locate this magnificent bird.

Then we walked the road as it grew dark. We were treated to a Goodman's Mouse Lemur and a Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko out clambering in the underbrush. We were unsuccessful at finding the Madagascar Long-eared Owl in spite of Patrice's persistent playing of their calls.

Today was a 25,000 step day...

Wed., Nov. 13 Andasibe-Mantadia National Park

Today, our last field day, we drove the arduous road into Mantadia National Park, about a two-hour bumpy and challenging ride. This large and hard-to-reach forest is about as pristine as can be found in Madagascar. We continued to add to our collection of lemurs. We watched Eastern Bamboo Lemurs up close, gnawing on bamboo canes and tending their babies. High in the canopy we saw the highly endangered Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur, which is found only in this forest. It was eerie listening to the growling of these lemurs together with the haunting calls of the Indri. And, towards the end of our hike we got a look at the beautiful Diademed Sifaka high in the canopy. That brought our lemur count for the trip to fifteen!

Our guide Patrice was very determined to find our target species, even though no one in our group was a totally serious lister. But after much looking and playing of tapes, he finally pulled the Short-legged Ground-roller into the canopy above us. This meant we had seen all five species of this endemic family! We also finally located the Madagascar Blue-Pigeon with his striking red eye. The White-throated Oxylabes was a hard-to-see bird while deep in the vegetation. We found a Nuthatch Vanga in a small bird party along with Paradise Flycatcher, Red-tailed Vanga, Malagasy White-eye, and Long-billed Tetraka. Dalton said that in wetter years these parties would be found much

more frequently with many more species. At the trailhead, a charming russet-colored Paradise Flycatcher mother was sitting tight in her beautifully built nest.

The seemingly elusive Flufftail finally showed itself briefly to some after a concerted effort by Patrice. After playing recordings for the Madagascar Rail at a small wetland, we cried uncle and told Patrice we were ready to head home. He definitely earned his tips.

That night, Dalton gave a great synopsis of our trip and we all recounted our peak experiences and species. There were many. But traveling with this great group of people was certainly the highlight of the trip.

Thurs., Nov. 14 Time to head back home...

This morning, we loaded up for the long drive back to Antananarivo. A short way into our drive one vehicle overheated and we had to leave it, so all piled into the two remaining vehicles and on we went. Otherwise, our trip back was uneventful, and we arrived back at the San Cristobal Hotel where our trip began almost three weeks ago. What a great adventure it was!

Cover photos by Carlos Sanchez