

# MADAGASCAR 2013

*27th September to 21st October*



# Main Tour

*Friday 27th September 2013*

After a delayed arrival into Antananarivo and slow processing of baggage and customs, the group arrived late in the night before a swift transfer to our hotel where comfy beds were a welcome sight.

*Overnight: Hotel Combava, Antananarivo*

*Saturday 28th September 2013*

Before breakfast, we walked the small grounds of the hotel where we got onto our first birds of the trip; **Red Fody**, **Common Myna**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Malagasy Kingfisher** and **Malagasy Brush Warbler**. Across the road, we scanned the paddy fields finding **Western Cattle Egret**, **Dimorphic Egret**, **Great Egret**, **Squacco Heron**, and two distant **Greater Painted-snipe** creeping around the levees.

After breakfast, we were collected by three 4x4s and made our way to the protected wetlands of Tsarasoatra Park where the ponds were brimming with birds; 1000s of wildfowl consisting mostly of **Red-billed Teal** and **White-faced Whistling Duck**, and also a few **Knob-billed Duck**. Herons were well represented and we added **Black Heron**, **Black-crowned Night Heron**, and a stunning **Malagasy Pond Heron** in full display. A few **Malagasy White-eye** sang from the nearby bushes and our first **Malagasy Kestrels** were seen on the other side of the lake. As we went to the second pool, we heard **Madagascar Coucal** and a pair were quickly located in the marsh and some **Hottentot Teal** rested among the many **Red-billed Teal**. Around the next bend, we had our first views of **Malagasy Turtle Dove** feeding in a glade and from the reverse view of the main pond we found a **Madagascar Grebe** in non-breeding plumage, identified by the lack of a gape patch and overall greyness of plumage.

We then took the long road to Mananara Lodge, stopping along the way for our first vanga, a **Chabert Vanga**, before arriving in time for lunch. The gardens held **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Madagascar Bulbul** and **Madagascar Stonechat** and during our lunchtime snack a pair of **Meller's Duck** whizzed by giving superb flight views.

After lunch, we met with our local guide, Jean-Luc, then made our way to Lake Mananara in search of the rare Slender-billed Flufftail. Upon arrival, we were greeted by two noisy **Madagascar Rails**, one of which showed very well.



The Madagascar Wagtail was a familiar bird seen throughout much of the tour.



Tsarasoatra Park was a real gem in the capital and held many good species including a displaying Madagascar Pond Heron.



We tried in vain for Slender-billed Flufftail at Mananara but settled for some great consolation birds instead, including this Madagascar Rail and Madagascar Flufftail.

As advised before the trip, an attempt to find the flufftail required us to wade across the boggy marsh and along the way we enjoyed flight views of **Grey Emutail**, several **Madagascar Snipe**, **Madagascar Spinetail** and a few singing **Madagascar Swamp Warbler**. As we reached the spot for the flufftail, we played the call but had no response so we made our way back to *terra firma* – a journey not without casualties! Those who made it back first managed good views of the island's more common *Sarothrura*, the **Madagascar Flufftail**, which was surprisingly open and confiding in its behaviour. We were all thoroughly gripped by Julie who had good views of a male Madagascar Partridge while the rest of us were getting wet feet!

On return to the lodge, several **Madagascar Nightjar** were seen and we quickly became familiar with Madagascar's only nightjar call. As night fell, we made our way to Nigel & Daryl's chalet where we waited for **Brown Mouse Lemur** to emerge from the roof, which they duly did. After a quick freshen-up, we took a night walk with the guide through some impressive forest where he found us three interesting reptiles; **Globe-horned**, **Short-horned** and **Short-nosed Chameleons**. Less willing to stay still was an **Eastern Avahi**, or Woolly Lemur, and only a few of us managed views before it disappeared.

After dinner, we tried in vain to track down the **Rainforest Scops Owl** that was calling close to some of the guest chalets but had to call time and focus on sleep instead. However, a lucky few did manage views later in the night when the owl began calling right outside their window.

Overnight: *Mananara Lodge, Anjozorobe*

*Sunday 29th September 2013*

The majority of the group tried again at the lake for Slender-billed Flufftail and were rewarded with even better views of the **Madagascar Flufftail**, but sadly no sign of the former. In the distance we could hear the mournful cry of **Indri** and on the trek back up the hill, those at the front had views of a **Madagascar Starling** while a **Common Jery** announced its presence in fine voice back at the car park. A walk around the lodge gardens failed to locate the hoped for Madagascar Partridge but we had great views of **Madagascar Cuckoo**. After breakfast, we were puzzled as to the identity of a broad-winged raptor soaring in the distance, which turned out to be our first **Madagascar Buzzard**, and six **Cuckoo Rollers** whistled in their dramatic tumbling display flight.



Our night walk at Mananara gave us our first taste of the country's diverse reptile fauna, with three chameleons seen including these Short-nosed (above) and Globe-horned (below).



Common Jery was the default warbler.



This Madagascar Cuckoo sounded very happy to be back in Madagascar after his winter holidays in central Africa.

The drive back to Tana was fairly uneventful and after a good look at the local **Mascarene Martins** at the airport, we took the afternoon flight to Majunga on the west coast. Upon arrival, we were greeted by Rolland, Faly and the faithful Coaster bus that would transport us around much of our journey. We made our way directly to our charming hotel and enjoyed a sumptuous dinner.

Overnight: *Hotel Cocolodge, Majunga*

*Monday 30th September 2013*

Early starts were a feature of this tour and today was no exception. After breakfast, we made our way to the coast and prepared ourselves for a speedboat trip. In the car park, we enjoyed good views of **Olive Bee-eater**, **Namaqua Dove** and the attractive **Madagascar Mannikin** before being diverted around the corner to another launch site. For our third consecutive day, we went paddling (!) and before long we were whizzing across the blue sea towards the Betsiboka River delta in search of several rare endemics. Stopping first to scan the exposed mudflats, we soon found a few **Malagasy Sacred Ibis** and several **Bernier's Teal**, our target species, plus **Crab Plover**, **White-fronted Plover**, **Lesser Flamingo**, and numerous Palearctic wader species including **Terek**, **Marsh and Curlew Sandpipers** and **Greater Sand Plover**. A mighty **Humblot's Heron** and a distant **Madagascar Harrier-Hawk** we also seen flying into the area. Further upstream, we found many more **Bernier's Teal** and estimated that our count for the area was at least 21 birds – a very healthy total. We later had better fly-by views of the Harrier-Hawk upon our return journey before jetting back to our base when our Irish friend Swampy was literally 'swamped' by spray at the back corner of the boat!

After a quick freshen up, we travelled through the town of Majunga towards a seasonal wetland known colloquially as 'the airport pool', finding **Pied Crow** and **Madagascar Lark** along the way. Unfortunately, the pool was mostly dry and the hoped for White-backed Ducks were nowhere to be seen. Instead, we scanned through the heron selection, finding several squat **Striated Herons** plus **Yellow-billed Kite** and a **Sakalava Weaver** posed nearby. Afterwards, we made the journey to Ankarafantsika, stopping for our first **Madagascar Jacana** along the way.

Upon arrival at Ampijoroa Lodge in the Ankarafantsika National Park, we had great views of **Coquerel's Sifaka**, **Crested Drongo**, **Grey-headed Lovebird** and a group of amazing **Sickle-billed Vangas** that fed in the nearby trees.



Our boat trip to the Betsiboka River delta was a great success with at least 21 Bernier's Teal seen plus good views of Malagasy Sacred Ibis, Humblot's Heron and a variety of shorebirds seen.



This fine Coquerel's Sifaka was part of the warm Ankarafantsika welcoming committee.

After settling in and lunch, we met with our local guides, Jacque and Gerard, and began our walk into the dry forest. Good birds at the gate included a perched **Madagascar Buzzard** (later seen with prey) and a very mobile **Crested Coua**.

The guides soon found us a party of three **Red-capped Coua** and a **Madagascar Cuckooshrike** posed nicely too but we had to try hard for the local speciality, **Van Dam's Vanga**, which eventually responded to playback and flew in to perch right above us. As the afternoon got darker we began to hear **Madagascar Nightjars** and a few were seen in silhouette gliding over the low brush. After a short break, most of the group then travelled the short distance by bus to Marosakoa for a night walk. This was surprisingly fruitful and we picked up views of the following lemurs - **Brown** and **Golden-brown Mouse Lemurs**, **Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur**, and **Mongoose Lemur** – and **Oustalet's Chameleon**. Dinner and a good night sleep followed.

Overnight: *Ampijoroa Lodge, Ankarafantsika NP*

*Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013*

The morning started with a walk around a new trail and within minutes we were watching our first **Blue Vanga** followed quickly by a pair of **White-breasted Mesites** that dashed noisily through the undergrowth. Not much further on, we came across the first of three **Coquerel's Coua** which posed nicely for photos and our first **Common Newtonia** was also seen nearby. Further along the trail, we were directed down a leaf glade where the guides found us a pair of **Schlegel's Asity**, the male appearing especially stunning. Nearby, we had perched views of a **Madagascar Hoopoe** 'purring' (quite unlike the 'poop-poop' calls of both Eurasian and African Hoopoes). A small mixed flock contained several **Long-billed Bernieria** (Tetraka), **Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher** and another **Common Newtonia**, and several **Madagascar Magpie-Robins** were nearby. On our way back to the bus, several **Olive Bee-eaters** hawked nearby and a couple of **Madagascar Cuckooshrikes** fed in the trees next to the path.

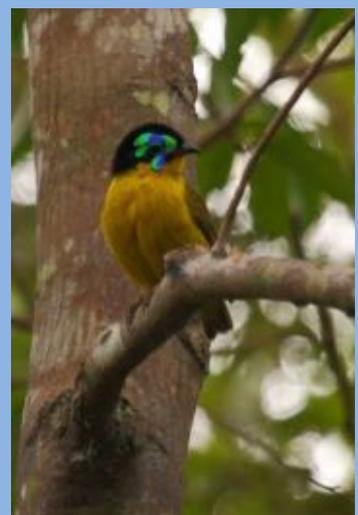
After breakfast, we headed back into the main forest patch in search of more specialities. The air was full of the calls from many **Cuckoo Rollers** but we had difficulty getting good perched views. The mewling call of **Madagascar Buzzard** was heard overhead and one was seen coming into its nest. Despite a few rain showers during the previous week, the forest remained fairly quiet and we failed to locate several hoped for species, such as Madagascar Buttonquail and Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, at this site.



This Mongoose Lemur was seen very well on our night walk at Ankarafantsika.



Three Coquerel's Coua were seen well in the forest during a successful morning at Ankarafantsika.



This male Schlegel's Asity was a big hit with the group.

However, Jacques proved his quality by finding us a female **Rufous Vanga** which was later joined by a male and good views were eventually had of the pair just overhead. Good local knowledge proved its worth minutes later when we were led to a roosting **Torotoroka Scops Owl** sleeping in the hollowed base of a tree but our group responded by finding its own **Frances's Sparrowhawk** which seemed quite unconcerned as we stood below it, taking many images. A large lizard, identified as a Collared Iguanid, was seen basking on a log; note that this species is more widely known as **Cuvier's Madagascar Swift**! Several more **Crested Coua** and a **Western Girdled Lizard** were also seen at the end of the walk.

The peace of lunchtime was broken when a **Madagascar Harrier-Hawk** was viewed from the restaurant as it raided a tree-hole, its facial skin blushing to bright pink in its excitement. Some **Common Brown Lemurs** joined the **Coquerel's Sifakas** to provide more photo opportunities.

After lunch, we drove to Lac Ravelobe in search of Madagascar Fish Eagle. Along the forested trail, we enjoyed close-up views of **Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher** and **Madagascar Magpie-Robin** before reaching the open water of the lake. With the exception of some shining **Malagasy Kingfishers**, both **Greater** and **Lesser Vasa Parrots**, and our first **Madagascar Green Pigeons** in the distance, the area was fairly quiet, possibly due to the local villagers fishing in the 'good' area for the eagles. Some **Glossy Ibis**, **White-faced Whistling Ducks**, **Purple Herons** and an **African Darter** were seen from the banks but little else inspired. As we made our way back to the road, we looked back across the water hyacinth area and picked up some distant **Allen's Gallinules** in the scope. Then the shout went up "EAGLES!", and sure enough, a pair of **Madagascar Fish Eagles** were seen soaring over the forest where we had stood not 30 minutes beforehand. The views were distant but the pale heads could easily be made out. Later, a few **White-throated Rails** announced their presence but would not show for us. With the target species in the bag, we headed back to the lodge for the checklist and dinner.

Overnight: *Ampijoroa Lodge, Ankarafantsika NP*

*Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2013*

With a long drive back to Tana ahead of us, we headed back to the lake to try our luck for **Madagascar Fish Eagle** again and were rewarded with scope views of a distant perched bird. A few **Sickle-billed Vangas** showed briefly and good flight views were had of both **Greater** and **Lesser Vasa Parrots** again.



This female Rufous Vanga was one of a pair that eventually showed well to all.



This Collared Iguanid, or Cuvier's Madagascar Swift, was very approachable on the forest trails.



Seen from the lunch table, this Madagascar Harrier-Hawk was seen with its double-jointed legs deep into a tree hole, no doubt looking for a spot of lunch of its own.

We made several stops along the journey back, the first being at a healthy-looking wetland at Ambondromamy where our first spot was a brilliant **Bernier's Striped Snake** that seemed quite unbothered by our close approach. Then a **Humblot's Heron** was seen cruising overhead with a **Grey Heron** and several **Madagascar Jacanas** were seen on the water hyacinths nearby. A thorough scope scan of the ponds produced no fewer than 6 **African Pygmy Geese** although they were all fairly distant and mostly backlit. A colony of **Sakalava Weavers** provided another fine spectacle.

Later, two **Black-winged Stilts** were seen from the bus as we crossed a small river and we later stopped to scan the rapids of the mighty Betsiboka River for **Madagascar Pratincole**. Within moments, we had scope views of a pair that engaged in some display manoeuvres before we walked across the vast bridge that spanned the falls. After a pause for fuel, we stopped for lunch overlooking the central Malagasy plateau.

Once replete, we continued the drive and by mid-afternoon we arrived at an area where the rare Madagascar Harrier has been seen on occasion. Unfortunately, the afternoon was very windy and the harriers could not be blamed for keeping their heads down - if they truly remain in the area which is heavily disturbed by the local populous. **Malagasy Kestrels**, **Yellow-billed Kites** and **Madagascar Buzzards** (not forgetting scores of **Madagascar Larks**) were all seen, often sending pulses up, but sadly no harriers so we continued onwards to Tana and arrived in time for a sumptuous dinner at our hotel.

Overnight: *Hotel Combava, Antananarivo*

*Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2015*

After a smashing breakfast (!), we made our way back to Tana airport for our flight to Fort Dauphin, where we arrived in time for lunch, next door at Le Dauphin.

Afterwards, we decided to try our luck with a sea watch from the nearby headland and immediately struck onto a **Kelp Gull**, later followed by two more. Although the strong winds gave us hope, we failed to see any other birds apart from **Greater Crested Tern** but we were treated to the most amazing spectacle of 50+ **Humpback Whales** blowing offshore with many individuals fin-slapping the water and a few breaching too – what a bonus! That evening, a **Madagascar Nightjar** was seen perched on cables opposite our hotel as we made our way to dinner.

Overnight: *Hotel Croix du Sud, Fort Dauphin*



This Bernier's Striped Snake was very approachable.



Humblot's Heron in flight, by Jeff Cooper.



Sakalava Weaver – where we saw one, we generally saw many.

*Friday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2015*

After breakfast, we set off for a 5-hour transfer from Fort Dauphin to Berenty, stopping along the way for good views of two **Greater Painted-snipe** and an obliging **White-throated Rail**, plus several **Hamerkop** from the bus. After passing through Andohahela National Park, we made a few stops to try for Lafresnaye's Vanga - without success - but some of us managed brief views of **Running Coua** (which lived up to its name) and we all got a good look at our first **Subdesert Brush Warblers** too. We then arrived at the vast expanse of sisal plantation and, after crossing the Mandrare River, encountered a mixed flock of swifts over the crop which included **Malagasy Black** and **Alpine Swifts**.

We arrived in time for lunch, after which we enjoyed our first encounters with the resident **Ring-tailed Lemurs** and **Verreaux's Sifakas** in the lodge grounds while common birds in the gardens included some bright **Common Jery**, many **Malagasy Kestrel** and a colony of **Sakalava Weaver** in the car park.

We were later greeted by our local guide, Jean, whose first delivery was a fine **Hook-billed Vanga** that whistled overhead. During our afternoon stroll through the dry forest, we picked up some smart birds including a roosting **White-browed Hawk-Owl** and another **Torotoroka Scops Owl** for our tally. **Red-fronted Brown** and **White-footed Sportive Lemurs** were also seen very well before Jean whisked us into the forest for close perched views of a stunning **Giant Coua**. Nearby, on the trail out of the forest, two more were seen well in a more open setting.

We were then led to an open area to search for Madagascar Sandgrouse. We soon connected with our first **Madagascar Buttonquail** although the views weren't great and we then encountered a flock of feral **Helmeted Guineafowl**. As we began to tire from our long walk, 7 **Madagascar Sandgrouse** sprung into the air and we enjoyed fabulous flight views of this difficult species.

Jean invited the group for a night walk and we had close up views of a **Madagascar Nightjar** in the torchlight plus **Grey Mouse Lemur**, **Warty Chameleon**, and the bizarre white nymphs of the **Flatid Leaf Bug**.

Overnight: *Berenty Lodge, Berenty Private Reserve*



White-throated Rail on our journey to Berenty.



This Hook-billed Vanga, showed well at Berenty.



Giant Coua, one of three seen well on our first afternoon at Berenty.



Madagascar Sandgrouse – just reward after a long evening walk.

*Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

Before breakfast, we headed to the thorn scrub in search of Lafresnaye's Vanga but we could not locate the bird and opted to try again later in the day. Not far from this site, Jean led us to another roosting **Torotoroka Scops Owl** and then a superb **Madagascar Nightjar** that was roosting nearby. We went back into the main forest and found ourselves a fine **Black Kite** which is a scarce migrant to the south of the island, but failed to locate the hoped for Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk that is known to frequent the same forest. Great views of some **White-browed Hawk-Owls** provided some compensation.

We headed back to base for breakfast after which we went back into the thorn scrub in search of **Green-capped Coua**. Although the local guides located the species a few times, it was very difficult for the group to get onto the bird. After giving us the run-around, and becoming temporarily distracted by a **Running Coua**, we eventually had great views of **Green-capped Coua** perched in a bare tree before it dropped to the ground and disappeared. We returned to base and most took a well-earned break although a few of the hardened members continued to bird in the forest with Jean, locating a roosting pair of **Barn Owls**, **White-headed Vanga** and several **Giant Couas**.

After a short siesta, we connected with the **Verreaux's Sifakas**, or 'dancing lemurs', as they crossed from a feeding area towards their roosting site. We then headed back into the thorn scrub to try again for **Lafresnaye's Vanga** and were successful very quickly. Nearby, a **Spider Tortoise** was found and well photographed. With time on our hands, we went to find the roosting **Barn Owls** and Jean led us straight to them. Later, we had great views of a pair of **Frances's Sparrowhawk** and three **Common Greenshank** were seen in the Mandrare River before our walk back to the lodge and dinner.

Overnight: *Berenty Lodge, Berenty Private Reserve*

*Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

Another forest walk for the hoped-for Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk drew a blank for that species but we had brilliant views of a pair of **Madagascar Buttonquail**, **Frances's Sparrowhawk**, **Hook-billed Vanga** and several **Crested Coua**, and a daytime roost for the **Madagascar Flying Fox**. At a small enclosure we discovered some captive Radiated Tortoise and Nile Crocodile and enjoyed good views of several common species such as **Common Jery**, **Common Newtonia**, **Madagascar Magpie-Robin** and **Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher**.



Verreaux's Sifaka, one of the many lemurs we encountered at Berenty.



White-browed Hawk-Owl – one of three owl species seen well at Berenty.



This male Madagascar Buttonquail was one of a pair that showed very well.

On the journey back to Fort Dauphin, a **Running Coua** sprinted across the road and posed nicely on the verge before legging it into the thorn scrub, and closer to our destination a fine female **Cuckoo Roller** flew close to the bus, giving us good views. After lunch and before our next flight, we tried another seawatch off the headland where, despite the very strong onshore winds, there was nothing of note to see apart from a few more **Humpback Whales**. So we made our way to the airport and took the short flight to Toliara (or Tulear) and met with our three 4x4 drivers who transferred us at great speed to our hotel.

Overnight: *Hotel Ifaty Beach, Ifaty*

*Monday 7<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

After a hot drink to wake us up, we made our way to the Ifaty Spiny Forest local reserve where we were greeted by our local guides, Freddie, Christophe and Dadi, who, despite their unconventional techniques, delivered our target species. First up was a stunning male **Long-tailed Ground Roller** that posed nicely for photos on the deck, followed by **Archbold's Newtonia** and a pair of **Red-tailed Vanga** (only later and with photographic evidence did we establish that two birds were definitely involved). We were then ushered down a narrow trail for amazing views of a male **Subdesert Mesite** that sat motionless in a nearby tree. Despite the rising temperatures, the forest was a delight to walk around and the flora was spectacular, especially the vast Baobabs, and we also encountered many Three-eyed Lizards here. Another target bird was soon found, the **Thamnornis** (Warbler) also known as **Subdesert Tetraka**. Later, several **Chabert Vanga** showed well and we had good views of two sparrowhawks that were nesting above the trail. The female appeared much larger than the Frances's Sparrowhawks we'd seen recently in Berenty and the smaller male showed some obvious barring on his chest. Although the local guide called these as Frances's, we all had our doubts and they have subsequently been identified from our images as **Madagascar Sparrowhawks**, by Madagascar expert Brian Finch.

We made our back to the hotel for breakfast and later tried our luck at the salt-pans for another local endemic – **Madagascar Plover**. Two birds were accidentally flushed by the group and promptly disappeared but three more were located nearby and we all enjoyed cracking views of this stunning wader. Having missed Banded Kestrel earlier at the spiny forest we went back to the general area and tried again but despite a long search we left empty-handed and returned to the Beach Hotel for a lazy lunch.



What a beauty! A male Long-tailed Ground Roller in the spiny forest at Ifaty.



A male Subdesert Mesite, and the second of a full set of mesites seen on the tour.



Albeit rather plain, the Thamnornis, or Subdesert Tetraka, is a scarce bird only found in the southern part of the island.



We enjoyed great views of three Madagascar Plovers at Ifaty.

In the afternoon, we re-joined Freddie and team for another walk around the local reserve and tried again for the kestrel, without success, but had to settle for more views of **Chabert Vanga**, **Sakalava Weaver** and some very confiding **Thamnornis** which, despite the accidental loud bangs from Julie's bottle of soda (so that's why it's called 'pop'!), posed nicely for images.

Reluctantly, we pulled ourselves away from the beach and took the vehicles back to Toliara, stopping along the way for a few birds here and there. Just before our destination, we walked along the edge of a productive wetland, finding several new species for the trip including **Little Grebe** and **Red-knobbed Coot** but a flighty **Lesser Sand Plover** was only seen by a fortunate few before darkness fell and we were urged to continue to our hotel.

Overnight: *Hotel Victory, Toliara*

*Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

After breakfast, our bus took us to the waterfront of Toliara where we were ushered to a jetty for an unusual tender service to our boat. The words 'Zebu' and 'tender' were rarely used together throughout our stay in Madagascar ('Zebu+tough' and 'Zebu+chewy' were far more familiar combinations) but it was a very novel way to reach our speedboat that would take us out to Nosy Ve.

As we approached the island, which is protected as a local sanctuary by villagers from nearby Anakao, we had good views of a flock of **Crab Plover**, a few **Dimorphic Egrets** and two **Saunders's Terns**. At the next sandbar, a group of larger terns consisted of **Greater Crested**, **Lesser Crested** and at least one **Common Tern** that was barely visible in the field due to the mass exodus of the others and only identified later from images taken of the flock. As we rounded the island, our target species, **Red-tailed Tropicbird**, came into view and we had great views of these stunning birds in the air and on the nest. Walking to the other end of the island, we encountered more shorebirds including migrant **Sanderling**, **Ruddy Turnstone**, **Grey Plover**, and **Eurasian Whimbrel** plus local **White-fronted Plovers** that showed very well. Before we left the island, the **Crab Plover** flock was relocated.

On the peninsula of Anakao, we made ourselves comfortable in the beach-style bungalows of the *Safari Vezo*, which wasn't too strenuous, and another target species, **Littoral Rock Thrush**, was easily located in the arid gardens of the hotel over lunch. Relaxation, sleep and massages were all that remained for the rest of the day.



Crab Plovers at Nosy Ve.



Dimorphic Egret.



Red-tailed Tropicbird – one of about 25 seen.



Littoral Rock Thrush.

Overnight: *Hotel Safari Vezo, Anakao*

*Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

Reluctantly, we boarded our speedboat for the transfer back to Toliara after breakfast when the only bird of note on the journey was a single **Saunders's Tern**. We got another Zebu cart ride thrown in too. Back on the mainland, we transferred quickly to our hotel for a quick freshen-up, finding a 100% untickable Fulvous Whistling Duck waddling in the hotel grounds as we arrived.

Refreshed and invigorated (well, some of us), we made our way to the nearby hills and an area known as 'La Tabla' in search of two more regional endemics. After a long walk through some especially prickly scrub, we eventually heard our first target, the **Red-shouldered Vanga**, and after picking up two more **Lafresnaye's Vangas** nearby, we eventually tracked down a pair of this vulnerable species which is threatened by the rapid destruction of its already limited habitat. Also seen at this site were **Madagascar Buzzard** and many **Madagascar Cisticola**. After another long walk back to the bus and a short transfer, we began walking another trail for the second target bird, **Verreaux's Coua**, but thanks to the keen-eyed ladies of our group we didn't have to walk far at all as one appeared very well close to the trail. Another easy day and back to the Hotel Victory for a welcome lunch and more forced relaxation.

Overnight: *Hotel Victory, Toliara*

*Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

After breakfast, we started our journey to Zombitse National Park and were greeted upon arrival by our local guides and many noisy **Cuckoo Rollers** calling overhead. We had not been in the forest for long when the guides struck gold with our main target species, **Appert's Tetraka**, and we enjoyed prolonged close views of this bright, terrestrial and highly range-restricted endemic. Soon after, we enjoyed good views of **Verreaux's Sifaka**, **Hubbard's Sportive Lemur** and some impressive **Standing's Day Geckos**. With the local **Cuckoo Rollers** still calling loudly overhead, we tracked the 'wolf-whistle' call of **Red-tailed Vanga** and had good views of a pair at close range but it was the bird accompanying them that really caught our attention. After suggestions of Common Redstart and Red-tailed Newtonia, due to the dark eye, plain back and red tail combination, we left none-the-wiser but Brian Finch, an expert on the island's birdlife, has subsequently identified the bird as a **Red-tailed Vanga**, probably an aberrant female, from Jeff's superb image.



A chance Lafresnaye's Vanga at La Tabla. Photo by Jeff Cooper



Verreaux's Coua in flight at La Tabla.



We had great close views of our target bird at Zombitse – Appert's Tetraka.



Standing's Day Gecko at Zombitse NP.

We travelled to our motel and arrived in good time for lunch, after which we took the short drive to the stunning Isalo National Park. Our first stop was at the Tourist Information Centre where a pair of **Benson's Rock Thrush** had built a nest inside the main building. After a short wait, we eventually had good views of the pair and a **Peregrine Falcon** soared overhead while being harassed by the local **Malagasy Kestrels**. Our next stop was Le Jardin de Roy, a beautifully landscaped resort where we walked in search of Madagascar Partridge. Unfortunately, the grass covering most of the area had recently been burnt and our chances of finding the partridge were slim. Nevertheless, we enjoyed a good stroll around the estate and saw many **Olive Bee-eaters**, another **Benson's Rock Thrush** and a new reptile for the trip, **Duméril's Madagascar Swift**. As the sun began setting behind the sandstone scarps, hopes of finding our quarry were fading fast until a chance encounter with a strolling French couple, who told us that a partridge had crossed their path just moments before. We followed their vague directions but were unsuccessful in finding the bird. A **Madagascar Pond Heron** in a nearby pool could not raise our spirits and we made our way to base for dinner ruing the fact that we'd come so close to seeing the bird. It was certainly the one that got away!

Overnight: *Motel de l'Isalo, Isalo NP*

*Friday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

Before breakfast, we went back into the national park to try again for the partridge only this time, we were SERIOUS! Tiana directed the driver to a grassy area under the sandstone cliffs and we spread out like beaters on a driven grouse shoot. After 500m, nothing, so we crossed the road and tried again. We had all but given up when two **Madagascar Partridge** suddenly erupted and promptly landed ahead of us. We reconfigured ourselves and moved quietly forward until they erupted again when we all had better flight views. Great!

After breakfast, we made our way slowly north, stopping along the way to check the drainage ditches for Marsh Owl, where they had been seen on Zoothera's previous tour but we had used up our quota of luck for the day and had to settle for a **Common Quail** that was flushed before whizzing off at incredible speed. Lunch was taken at a small village known as Malailay where we got to meet the locals and exchanged songs with the kids. Afterwards, we made a quick stop for a **Madagascar Pond Heron** and a leg-stretch, and later stopped again in the town of Fianarantsoa for fuel and snacks before continuing to Ranomafana and arriving at the hotel in time for dinner.



Female Benson's Rock Thrush at Isalo NP. This bird has now been delisted as a full-species by most authorities and lumped with Forest Rock Thrush, based on recent DNA evidence.



Several Dumeril's Madagascar Swift were seen in Isalo NP.



Madagascar Buzzards were seen on 14 days during the tour.

Overnight: *Hotel Cristo, Ranomafana NP*

*Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

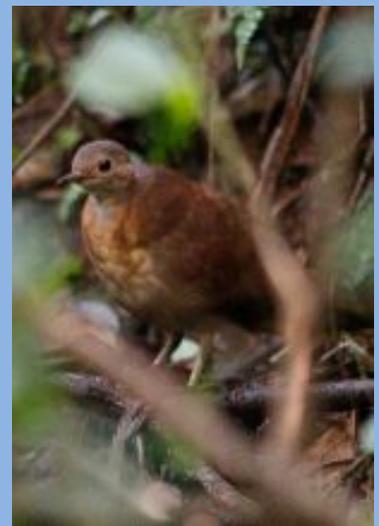
After an early breakfast, we set off to collect our local guides, Fidi, Sabine and Gao, and they immediately put us onto a fine **Two-banded Chameleon** hidden in the bush outside their home. We drove to the main gate for Ranomafana National Park and as we started on the trail, a lucky few caught sight of two **Madagascar Blue Pigeons** flying over. Down the track, a small party of calling **White-throated Oxylobes** were seen by most and a **Nelicourvi Weaver** by a few. After crossing the main bridge, we began climbing the forested trail but we found many of the birds very difficult to get onto compared to the open country birding we'd enjoyed recently. Nevertheless, we all had views of the **Spectacled Tetraks** before continuing up the incline and then taking Fidi's advice to walk back down a narrow trail to observe a party of **Golden Bamboo Lemurs** which showed well in the end. Not long after, the leader received Fidi's instruction to "play the tape!" for **Brown Mesite** which was heard some way off. After a few moments, Fidi returned excited and said that the bird was coming closer and it showed for a few of us before a large party of non-birders came through and put the brakes on proceedings. After they'd left, we tried again and eventually everyone had close views of our final Mesite.

Further along the trail, we enjoyed views of **Milne-Edwards's Sifaka** and we experienced a real purple patch with the terrestrial **Crossley's Babbler** (Vanga), **Tylas Vanga**, the first of three **Velvet Asity** (a male), and three **Madagascar Wood Rails** all being seen within 15 minutes. Another welcome lemur diversion bagged us the attractive **Red-bellied Lemur** and we then headed up to a viewpoint over the forest, where we took a welcome break. A Madagascar Cuckoo belted out his tune nearby and then the shout for "Henst's Goshawk" went up. The bird was heard calling and only Nigel managed a quick view of it before it disappeared from view. We made a slow journey back to the bus, finding a **Spectacled Tetraka** on the nest and brief views of a **Lowland Streaked Tenrec** which shot across the path; they may look like Hedgehogs but they can definitely move a lot faster!

After lunch, we headed to the top of the main hill and it was here that Fidi and team found us our much-wanted **Giraffe-necked Weevil** just before the thunder and precipitation came in. As we jumped back into the bus, the heavens opened and the rain turned quickly to hail. The sound effects on the bus roof intensified as the hailstones got larger and larger until they were bigger than Maltesers. It was spectacular!



A fine Golden Bamboo Lemur at Ranomafana.



This Brown Mesite eventually showed well to all. Photo by Jeff Cooper.



A bizarre Giraffe-necked Weevil at Ranomafana.

Once the storm had moved on, we began walking down the hill and some of the group had brief views of a **Blue Coua** before a **Red-fronted Coua** was spotted above us and it eventually gave good but brief views to all of us. As the afternoon darkened, a number of interesting reptiles were seen including **Cryptic Chameleon** and a **Liopholidophus** snake with a mouth full of frog, or **Boophis madagascariensis** to be precise. At a banana-baited site, we had good views of **Greater Dwarf Lemur** (which was surprisingly large – for a dwarf) and **Brown Mouse Lemur** which topped off the day nicely.

Overnight: *Hotel Cristo, Ranomafana NP*

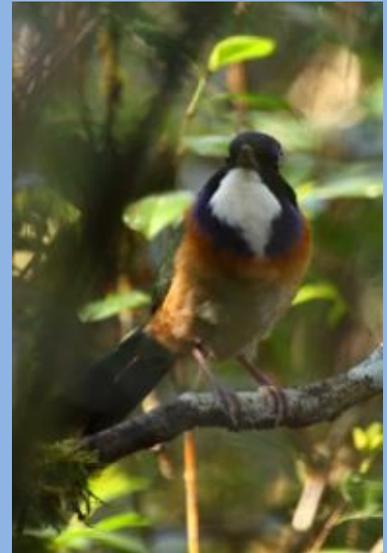
*Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

After breakfast, we drove to the top of the main hill again and began our morning walk, which kicked off with a dowdy-looking **Cryptic Warbler** in full song that we managed to get scope views of. Then a couple of Forest Fody appeared on the scene before we entered the main forest trail. Before long, Fidi had located a **Pitta-like Ground Roller** for us but it took a long time before the whole group had great views, which we eventually did as it called from an opening in the thicket.

Moving slowly up the hill, we encountered a few **Nelicourvi Weavers** although they didn't stick around for long before we were once again in full 'roller mode' as a **Rufous-headed Ground Roller** was heard. Most of the group had brief views as the bird scurried across the trail several times but we would have to wait another day for the best views. A fine **Milne-Edwards's Sifaka** gave great views along the trail and a few LBJs, in the guise of **Dark Newtonia** and **Stripe-throated Jery**, made brief appearances before we tried our luck for what is probably the ultimate LBJ of Madagascar – the **Brown Emutail**. Fortunately, one bird responded to tape and came in very close, within a metre of most of us, but it was incredibly difficult to see as it hopped through the leafy undergrowth, almost at our feet, before doing a Houdini.

Further down the trail, we tried a site for **Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity** and fortune was with us as a stunning male bird came into open view, very close, for the group and earned a place in the tour hall of fame for 'Bird of the Trip' for many of us. Not to be outdone, moments later a **Common Sunbird-Asity** appeared in the same tree and gave crippling views. What an amazing 10 minutes that was! A **Grey-crowned Tetraka** was seen by a few here also.

On the walk back to the bus, Gao made what was possibly the 'find of the trip' – a **Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko**.



This Pitta-like Ground Roller took some finding but showed very well once we all got onto it.



Crippling views were had of this stunning male Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity.



Gao's major find – a Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko.

Further along the trail we had another encounter with a male **Red-bellied Lemur**, which is surely one of the most handsome of all lemurs.

After a delicious lunch and brief repose, we collected the guides and headed up the hill again for another stroll. We began to get a little twitchy about the absence of Pollen's Vanga from our list, a species which is usually straight-forward to find. We tried several areas where the local guides frequently see them but without success. So, we continued down the hill to try for some different species. Distant views were had of **Blue Vanga** before we took a small trail that produced some quality birds including our best views yet of **Blue Coua**, a party of **Ward's Flycatcher** and our first confirmed sighting of **Green Jery**, which at first had us scratching our heads over its identification before it began to sing.

Overnight: *Hotel Cristo, Ranomafana NP*

*Monday 14<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

Having dipped on a hoped-for **Forest Rock Thrush** the previous evening, we tried again first thing and were successful in finding at least three individuals. It was back to the top of the hill to try once more for Pollen's Vanga. Two **Forest Fody** and a couple of smart **Madagascar Starlings** gave good views before we began the forest hike again.

After a short while, a **Pollen's Vanga** was heard amongst a noisy group of **Tylas Vangas** and a lucky few got views before it disappeared. We continued to a site where Fidi said that **Madagascar Yellowbrow** (or Yellow-browed Oxylabes) frequented. He was spot-on and after a short while we located some calling birds in the thick wet undergrowth. Again, a fortunate few had good views before the birds went quiet and could not be relocated. Fortunately, a couple of **Rufous-headed Ground-Rollers** announced their presence and began displaying nearby, offering far better views than the previous day. A few **Grey-headed Tetraka**, **Nelicourvi Weaver** and **Dark Newtonia** also came into view while we waited for the Yellowbrows to reappear, which they eventually did albeit rather shyly again. On the walk back to the bus, a fine male **Velvet Asity** was seen.

After lunch, we went to the home village of Fidi and his family to photograph some impressive chameleons in their garden, including male and female of the huge **Parson's Chameleon** and an impressive female **Two-banded Chameleon**.



Male Red-bellied Lemur.



This Rufous-headed Ground Roller was a reluctant poser but we all had good views.



Male Velvet Asity,



Female Parson's Chameleon – she's huge!

Later on, the group split into two parties; one group went back to the top of the hill to try yet again for Pollen's Vanga (still no sign) but did come close to seeing **Henst's Goshawk** that was heard calling nearby. A highlight for this group was a stunning **Baron's Mantella** frog. The other party opted to scan the forest for **Madagascar Blue Pigeon** (2 were seen) and potentially some raptors at the main gate. This also afforded some good views of **White-throated Oxylabes** for those who had missed it earlier, and a fine **White-headed Vanga** showed very well too.

Overnight: *Hotel Cristo, Ranomafana NP*

*Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

After saying our goodbyes to the fabulous staff at *Hotel Cristo*, our final morning at Ranomafana offered us our last chance to connect with the elusive Pollen's Vanga. Our walk started well with a small group of **Madagascar Blue Pigeon** showing fairly well and as we arrived at the lookout, a **Madagascar Cuckoo** was in fine voice and in view. More Blue Pigeons were scoped although a distant singing **Rand's Warbler** kept on the move and proved difficult to connect with. A few **Cuckoo Rollers** called in aerial display and then a pair of raptors came cruising low over the lookout. Fortunately, they did another lap from a better angle and by now we were all happy with the ID of these **Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawks**. With less than an hour to go before our departure, a **Pollen's Vanga** was heard nearby and finally came into view, giving the group prolonged views - it was definitely worth the wait! With our spirits high, we descended the hill when suddenly Sabine got a sighting of something that had dashed off but left her very animated. Unfortunately, in all the excitement, she couldn't recall the English name and after a curious moment of 'charades' we guessed "Kingfisher"? "YES! YES!" she replied and pointed just as the **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher** came in and landed just a few metres away for all to see. It was a brilliant moment and the icing on the cake to our enjoyable time at Ranomafana.

Tiana had arranged a superb lunch spot for the group at the town of Ambohimahaso, where we were treated to a local dance and invited to join in, which Swampy, Julie, Brian and Pat duly did. It was a really nice way to break up the long journey to Antsirabe where we arrived just after dark.

Overnight: *Hotel Cristal, Antsirabe*

*Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

After breakfast, we set off on another long drive and arrived at Andasibe in time for a welcome lunch.



White-headed Vanga at Ranomafana.



Baron's Mantella frog seen on an afternoon stroll at Ranomafana.



Our 'last minute' Pollen's Vanga which eventually showed very well, much to the relief of the group.



This stunning Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher was a real crowd-pleaser. Photo by Nigel Watson.

Much to our disbelief, the fruiting trees in the gardens held several approachable **Madagascar Blue Pigeons** and **Madagascar Green Pigeons** – we had tried so hard for the blues at Ranomafana – and a **Broad-billed Roller** was heard and seen by most of the group near our bungalows.

The bus took us the short journey to the main gate of Perinet National Park, along with our local guides Patrice, Thierry and Lala, and here we found several target species including at least three **Nuthatch Vanga** in a mixed flock. Unfortunately the views were not brilliant but we did enjoy a better look over the coming days. Next up was a **Madagascar (Crested) Ibis** that was sitting on a nest and although we could only see the head and bill through the scope it was a top bird to tick off our wish-list. We were then led over a stream to watch a pair of roosting **Rainforest Scops Owls** – a species that many of us had missed at Mananara Lodge. With some good birds in the bag, we were obliged to exit the park at 4pm so we tried for a roosting Madagascar (Long-eared) Owl but unfortunately the hoped for bird was not present. Later we took a night walk during which we found a stunning **Glistening Demoiselle** damselfly, **Short-horned** and **Short-nosed Chameleons**, and a delightful **Brown Mouse Lemur**.

Overnight: *Hotel Feon'ny Ala, Andasibe NP*

*Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

We left the hotel very early for the time-consuming trip to Mantadia National Park which wasn't so far to travel but the condition of the road was so bad that it took us a long time. We stopped along the way for scope views of a singing **Rand's Warbler** and quickly happened upon another **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher**, then another and then a third. Upon entering the reserve, it was not long before Patrice had found us one of our target species, a **Scaly Ground Roller**. Unfortunately, just as the group were getting onto the bird it took flight and despite the best efforts of the guides it could not be relocated.

Patrice disappeared momentarily to check a roost for another target species and came back happy. We were led up a steep hill and walked off-track a little to where Patrice used the laser pen to direct us to our quarry, a pair of **Collared Nightjar**. We all took turns at taking images (without flash!) before walking back to the main track. A **Pitta-like Ground Roller** raised pulses before we were then directed along the trails to get good views of **Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs**; **Common Brown** and **Red-bellied Lemurs** were also seen that morning.



Madagascar Blue Pigeon feeding in the grounds of our lodge.



This Glistening Demoiselle was a star of our night walk at Perinet.



Brown Mouse Lemur at Perinet.



Such amazing camouflage – Collared Nightjars at Mantadia.

We were then buoyed by our first decent sighting of two **Cuckoo Rollers** perched nearby and a mixed flock containing **Nuthatch Vanga** came moving through the forest all too quickly.

Patrice heard a call familiar to him then summoned the group quickly up a steep hill to see the **Short-legged Ground Roller** as it might not stay still calling for long. Fortunately, the group arrived in time to see the bird sat not more than a few metres away, calling at eye-level, and proved a real favourite. Not far from here, Patrice and Thierry heard Scaly Ground Roller and tried hard to locate the birds before they disappeared for the second time.

Moving along the main trail once more, a huge **Pill Bug** (a crustacean belonging to the order *Isopoda*) waddled across our path and we had good views of **Lowland Streaked Tenrec** here too. A couple of **White-throated Rails** were seen along a wooded bog before we made our way out of the forest for a well-earned picnic lunch.

Afterwards, we looked in at a nearby pond where we found a pair of **Madagascar Grebe**, a **Meller's Duck**, **Common Moorhen** and **Madagascar Swamp Warbler**.

We then took the long drive back to Andasibe, stopping along the way to check if the Madagascar Owl was present but we were not in luck. We then took a walk to try our luck for Red-breasted Coua but it was a little late and we didn't find one. We'd had a very long day and decided to make the most of an early dinner in readiness for the following day.

Overnight: *Hotel Feon'ny Ala, Andasibe NP*

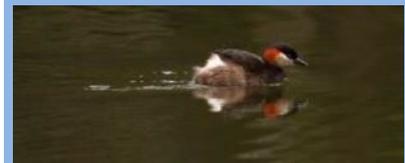
*Friday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

At first light, we had distant views of a **Diademed Sifaka** across from the lodge before we tried again at the roost site for the **Madagascar Owl** and this time we were in luck. The single bird was sat openly in a pine tree and showed very well.

We returned to Mantadia to try again for Scaly Ground Roller and this time Patrice was more determined than ever, to the extent that he single-handedly gave piggy-backs to all of us across a stream, which was a hoot! Although he located two birds on his own, we were unable to find them as a group so continued to another site. Here, we had to contend with good views of some young **Lowland Streaked Tenrecs**, a perched **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher** and a further two more **Pitta-like Ground Rollers**, but no sign of our elusive Scaly friend.



Incredible views were had of this Short-legged Ground Roller. Photo by Pat Wetton.



One of a pair of Madagascar Grebes at Mantadia.



After several unsuccessful attempts, we finally enjoyed good views of this tricky Madagascar Owl.



'Lemur of the Day' award: a lovely Diademed Sifaka at Perinet.

We stopped for lunch after which we re-entered the forest where Patrice had heard Wedge-tailed Jery in a mixed flock but the birds had moved through with a few **Nuthatch Vangas**, among others.

We returned to Perinet where we enjoyed fabulous views of a party of **Diademed Sifakas** but there was no sign of the hoped for Madagascar Sparrowhawks. After 4pm we left the park and made our way to look for **Red-breasted Coua** and some of the group were lucky to catch a glimpse before the bird dashed off, never to be seen again. We then walked along the road to the hotel, finding a couple of **Hook-billed Vanga** for our trouble.

Overnight: *Hotel Feon'ny Ala, Andasibe NP*

*Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

With some people happy with their views of Scaly Ground Roller from the first day at Mantadia, and the others happy to try one last time, the group agreed to split for the last full day.

The Scaly party arrived at Mantadia (with good views of **Eastern Grey bamboo Lemur** along the way) and we tried very hard to locate our target species. Patrice once again gave piggy-backs across the stream, much to Daryl's delight (YAY!), but our first stop was unsuccessful. We moved along to another site and had walked for more than an hour, finding no less than six **Pitta-like Ground Rollers** along the way, before Patrice heard the soft call of the bird we were after. Slowly we made our way over to them and, over the course of the next 20 minutes, enjoyed the most amazing views of two **Scaly Ground Rollers**. Our determination had paid off and, to top it all, most of the group then had views of a **Henst's Goshawk** flying over.

We returned to Perinet and connected quickly with the rest of the group who, until that point, had had a fairly quiet morning. The groups had come together at just the right moment because the family party of **Indri** that we met under began to call right then! A truly unforgettable sound that is much louder than most of us had anticipated, despite having heard it on several days previously.

Still there was no sign of the Madagascar Sparrowhawks so we made our way in search of Wedge-tailed Jery again. Although we located some calling birds, they disappeared before we could see them and we had to contend ourselves with brilliant views of **Blue Coua** instead.



Madagascar Green Pigeons joined the Madagascar Blue Pigeons in feasting on the fruit crop in the gardens of our lodge.



Scaly Ground Roller – one of a pair that showed exceptionally well on our final full day at Mantadia. Photo by Jeff Cooper.



A family of Indri waited until the group was back together before starting their eerie chorus above us in the forest at Perinet.

We returned to the lodge for lunch where a **Madagascar Harrier-Hawk** soared overhead and later went back to Perinet to look for Sparrowhawks and others but without success; a lone **Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur** being our best sighting. Walking back to the lodge in the afternoon sun, we saw plenty of **Chabert Vangas** and close to our lodge, at least two **Ward's Flycatchers** stayed very close to us.

Overnight: *Hotel Feon'ny Ala, Andasibe NP*

*Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

Our final morning at Perinet and the final morning of the tour involved a game of catch up for three target species; a Coua, a Jery and the Sparrowhawks. We tried the same trail where we'd previously caught sight of the **Red-breasted Coua** and again found it there, plus a **Madagascar Wood Rail**. Next up was the **Wedge-tailed Jery** and after a tense search we came across two birds at the very end of a trail quickly followed by a very obliging female **Velvet Asity** that sat next to the trail. This only left **Madagascar Sparrowhawk** to find so we returned to the top of the hill where they were believed to be nesting and just as we arrived, a male bird flew in to perform a food pass to the huge female and she feasted on it from an open perch. What a morning and a fabulous way to finish the tour. We returned early to the lodge, enjoyed an early lunch before departing on our journey to Tana. With an hour to spare, we decided to visit the airport and try our luck for an early Sooty Falcon or maybe one of the Marsh Owls that is known to frequent the site but it seemed that we had used up all our luck already and a calling **Madagascar Nightjar** was the only bird of note here.

We returned to the Hotel Combava for our last supper before most of the group transferred to the international airport and the flight home. Nigel, Daryl and Trish remained in Tana for the night and began their Masoala extension the next day.

Big thanks to Tiana for putting together such an awesome itinerary and for taking such good care of us, and THANK YOU for being such great sports on tour.

With best wishes and fondest regards,

Vicki & Adam Scott Kennedy



Ward's Flycatcher (Vanga) at Perinet. Photo by Jeff Cooper.



Big lenses were not required for this approachable female Velvet Asity at Perinet.



Madagascar Sparrowhawk – our final request was duly delivered by Patrice. Photo by Jeff Cooper.

# Masoala Extension

By Nigel and Daryl Watson, and Trish Thompson.

*Monday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2013*

We arrived in Maroantsetra airport on time and were met by our new local guide Joseph, who knowledgeable, quiet, walked at our pace and could call in some birds without tapes. We transferred to the quay for our speedboat ride and two decrepit old taxis that didn't look as though they were going to make it, but they did! The boat trip first took us through mud flats where we picked up our first new bird for the trip, two Bar-tailed Godwits. The boat ride took an hour and a half to reach the lodge. When we landed, we were taken to our bungalows which were quite basic with no electric plug sockets. (Note to future visitors: anything needing charging had to be taken to reception in the evening when the generator is on). It was very hot and humid so we were surprised that our first foray into the forest was at 10.30am. We saw very few birds but we did see Red-ruffed Lemurs and very handsome they were too.

We were next due out at 2.30pm but our guide came to us at 2.10pm saying there were Helmet Vangas around. We threw caution to the wind and ran to the forest in shorts and flip flops, not being ready for the next walk. After 100 meters in the forest sure enough we came across three Helmet Vangas. Target number one in the bag. Later, on the afternoon walk, we added White-fronted Lemur to our growing mammal list.

*Overnight: Arol Lodge, Masoala*

*Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2013*

Today's target was Bernier's Vanga. We set off at 6.15 in the boat further along the coast. We stopped at some rocks in the sea where there were many terns, amongst them were Roseate Terns, another new bird for the trip. We arrived at our destination and set off into the forest. Fortunately, this area was less hilly than at the lodge which was welcome as it was very hot and humid.

About half an hour into the walk, Daryl found two lovely Eastern Ring-tailed Mongooses (or Mongoosii? Who knows?). Joseph was able to imitate them and bring them in close for photos but sadly it was quite dark and the pictures are a little grainy.



Helmet Vanga is the largest of all Vangas and probably the 'most-wanted' too. This was one of three birds seen together at Masoala. Photo by Nigel Watson.



Female Bernier's Vanga at Masoala. A family of 4 birds were seen together. Photo by Nigel Watson.

After a couple of hours of walking, we came on a clearing in the forest. Joseph heard the Bernier's Vangas and we saw a pair with two chicks that we were able to get good photos of. Job done, it was back to the lodge for a dip in the sea and lunch and back out again at 4.00pm. The afternoon walk was extended into a night walk. The plan was to climb the hill in daylight and walk down with torches. Nothing much was seen in daylight but just as it was getting dark Joseph called in a Short-legged Ground Roller and a White-browed Owl for good views. In the dark we saw another new lemur species for the trip, Weasel Sportive Lemur.

*Overnight: Arol Lodge, Masoala*

*Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2013*

On the morning walk we saw nothing new but Trish did catch up with Red-breasted Coua and we all had good views of Brown Mesite and Madagascar Wood Rail. Afterwards, we took another dip in the sea to cool off while Trish, of course, was off chasing dragonflies.

On the afternoon walk, another new species was seen - Dusky Tetraka. Joseph and Tiana heard it first and after a while good views were had; dark green underneath and a yellow throat.

*Overnight: Arol Lodge, Masoala*

*Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

In the boat for 8.00am and our departure back to Tana. Back at the mud flats the boat driver went slowly and we added another bird to the trip list, two Reed (or Long-tailed) Cormorants. After lunch, it was back in the crummy taxis to the airport and upon arrival at Tana airport we had another go for Marsh Owl and Sooty Falcon but to no avail.

*Overnight: Hotel Combava, Antananarivo*

*Friday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2013*

We had breakfast at 4.00am for our early return to Mananara to try one more for the Slender-billed Flufftail but, no surprise, we didn't hear or see it. Jean Louis, the local guide, said that he had seen Red-tailed Newtonia half an hour from the lodge about two weeks ago. Had we known this it would have made more sense to go for the Newtonia first thing and tried for the 'mythical' Flufftail later. We walked for a couple of hours in the midday heat but didn't see the Newtonia. So, we made our way back to Tana for our last supper and our flight home.



The male Bernier's Vanga is possibly the most difficult of all Vangas to see well.  
Photo by Nigel Watson



Madagascar Wood Rails showed well at several locations on the tour.