

# ECOTOURS – WORLDWIDE TRAVEL TRIP REPORT MADAGASCAR

**Endemic birds, lemurs, chameleons and more**

**15September-7October 2024**



## **Trip report by Gabor O. & Andrea K. , Ecotours Worldwide Travel**

Madagascar should be on every nature enthusiasts bucket list. It is a unique country so much that sometimes you feel it is like a separate continent or even a separate World. Well, actually it became separated from the African continent many million years ago hence 90% of its species endemic, not can be found anywhere else. The World's 4<sup>th</sup> largest island has more than 32 million inhabitants, 90% of them extremely pure and very much concentrated in towns. Still, most of the countryside is strongly devastated and the unique flora & fauna tries to survive at some National Parks and other protected areas. But these refuges are usually far away from each other, there are no biological corridors and most of the time protection is just on paper.

But once you manage to reach a distant, isolated habitat it is crowded by incredible wildlife.

The following trip report is a photographic diary of a 3-week-long journey criss-crossing the country. Hope you will enjoy it as much as we did the sight of these creatures. However if you want to follow our steps you have to be prepared to cope with various obstacles from breaking down cars, horrendous roads, low level of accommodations at certain sites, sometimes lack of basic hygienic

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facilities, crowded towns, some strange local guides, sometimes sweating hot and/or incredibly humid conditions, some steep hikes. But you can read and see some of the rewards below!



### Day1 15<sup>th</sup> September

Started in the afternoon from Budapest with a direct bus transfer to Vienna airport which was a bit more than 3 hours ride however we had incredible storm with huge wind and horizontal rain which caused so much flooding that a few hours later of our arrival access road to airport was closed. Flight was delayed as well but luckily before midnight we left for Addis Abeba.

### Day2 16<sup>th</sup> September

Because of the delayed departure we arrived after 7am and within an hour we continued to Antananarivo where we arrived around 13.45pm. Luckily nothing was lost, so soon we were transferred to a small hotel at a green corner of the capitol city. Au Bois Vert Ecolodge had a nice green garden which after checking in we started to discover and noted our first endemic bird species such as **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Red Fody**, **Malagasy White-eye**, **Malagasy Bulbul**, **Malagasy Brush-Warbler**, and the ever-friendly **Madagascar Wagtail**. Plus of course we had some common species as well like **Rock Pigeon**, **Little Swift**, **Western Cattle Egret** and **Olive/Madagascar Bee-eater**. Really not a bad start! Before dinner close to the restaurant we saw **Radiated Tortoise** as well. During the night we were waken up several times by some mosquitoes which managed to get in somehow.



### Day3 17<sup>th</sup> September



We were supposed to leave very early morning but since our flight was delayed by 13 hours we had plenty of time to search more wildlife in the garden.

We had a huge buffet-style breakfast with selection of delicious French cheeses, cold cuts, omelets, bagels and many more. We had more than enough energy for the next 4 hours to look for birds. Beside the yesterday's species we had **Common Myna**, **Common Jery** and a lovely **Madagascar Magpie-Robin**. Another lovely endemic came in the form of a **Madagascar Hoopoe** which posed enough to get a photo of it. **Madagascar Martin** flew across above and we also found a well-hidden **Black-crowned Night-heron** up in a tree. After lunch **African Stonechat** was the only new thing before we were transferred back to the airport for a short flight to Toliara.

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Here we met with a local guide, Harilala and the excellent driver, Solo who drove with us about 1,5 hours to Hotel Volotelo near Ifaty. After a great dinner we went to bed early to be able to wake up before sunrise.



#### Day4 18<sup>th</sup> September



We started the day early with a short drive to the entrance of the *Baobab Forest* where we met 2 local bird-scouts and started to hear and see the first birds around 5.30am.



**Crested Drongo, Archbold's Newtonia** were the first ones, but then as a big surprise 2 **Harlequin Quails** crossed in front of us. The guys wanted to make it sure that all of us could see well the birds so they tried to shepherd them closer. We explained that we prefer to watch to birds naturally but they searched and found some more birds with this not bird friendly way anyway.

We had our first **Crested Coua** still sleeping in the dense canopy of a small tree, later we had much better views. The next amazing very localized endemic was a **Long-tailed Ground-Roller**. What a bird! It seemed very tame but surely could run as speedy Gonzales.







Despite the scrubby-thorny, dry sandy area it was unforgettable to wander among the surreal group of Baobab trees which never failed to amaze us. There are 8 Baobab species in the World, 6 endemics in Madagascar, 1 shared with Africa and strangely enough one lives in Australia. More and more endemics came thick and fast in the form of **Chabert Vanga**, **Running Coua**, **Lesser and Greater Vasa Parrots**. **Stripe-throated and Common Jery** were both present plus **Madagascar Magpie-Robin**. Three new raptor species we saw very well, **Malagasy Kestrel** and **France's Sparrowhawk** and later on even a **Madagascar Harrier-Hawk**.



**Subdesert Mesite** was an incredible find which sat on a small tree in a characteristic freezing pose. Another unforgettable bird was **Sickle-billed Vanga** which we had several times at other locations as well, but never could ignore it. Andi saw a **Malagasy Coucal** and we all watched 2 **Gray-headed Lovebirds**. **Namaqua Dove** and **Sakalava Weaver** were new and we also had a pair of **Souimanga Sunbird**.





We started to find other wildlife as well, the first lemur was **Peterson's Sportive Lemur**. Then we had a really unique 3-eyed Lizard, a huge endemic cricket, a scorpion and **Standing's Day Gecko**.

Later we saw the first female **Madagascar Magpie-Robin** which was followed by an a cryptic **Madagascar Nightjar**. We stared a lovely **Madagascar Cuckoo-Shrike** and after that we returned to the hotel for a late breakfast which was followed by a long siesta. You could enjoy the swimming pool or the sea-side.



After lunch around 3pm we went out again first to the Ifaty ponds where beside a dozen **Kittlitz's Plovers** and some **White-fronted Plovers** we found one **Three-banded Plover** as well. **Pied Crows** and **Common Mynas** were around as well.



4pm found us again at the **Baobab Forest** where the first 2 birds again were great endemics, a **Running Coua** and an **Olive-capped/Green-capped Coua**. Strangely enough the latter one was running more crazily than the Running Coua...

Several species which we saw during the morning visit like **Crested Coua** or the parrots we had it again but we also found **Malagasy Turtle-Dove**.

There was a huge group of **Sakalava Weavers** this time.





We left the National Park around 17.30 and looked at the local sellers' offers with some nice carvings and other handmade products. As we returned to the hotel we found a **Madagascar Giant Swallow-tail** and heard the **Madagascar Nightjar** in the garden. We had a special dinner with a traditional dance-show.



## Day5 19<sup>th</sup> September



After breakfast we left the hotel at 7.30am and first drove through the ever-busy Toliara than continued to East, going inland towards Zombitse. This was about a 5-hour-long drive.

During the way we saw some omnipresent birds such as **Namaqua Dove**, **Pied Crow**, **Malagasy Kestrel**, **Black Kite** but **Madagascar Buzzard** was new.

There were several road controls, police check-points but regardless there were many illegal rum distilleries all the way. The whole region is famous or infamous about the many legal and illegal mines of 7 different gems.

Well, it is hard to say anything good about the Zombitse Ecologne, except that it is very close to the entrance of the National Park. Hard to imagine a simpler place.

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Did not help either that we arrived just after midday so it was extremely hot and dry. The “rooms” boasted with a simple bed and nothing else, with no other guests we had a few to choose from but it was like deciding between bad or worse...Although it was pre-booked they were kind of surprised that we came, so they went to shop for the basic materials to be able to cook something. We persuaded them to bring some cold beer as well! In the “garden” we had some sunbirds, mynas, lizards and various dragonflies. **African Monarch Butterfly** was new.



At 15.30pm we went out to visit **Zombitse National Park**. As soon as we stepped in our recently met local guide run away to search the Lemurs. He was such in a hurry that not noticed the **Giant Coua** which Gabor found just a few meters away. We silently followed this amazing bird which was not disturbed by us at all.

We went deeper in the forest and after less than half mile there were a few **Verreaux's Sifakas** or with another name, **Dancing Lemurs**. Surely they danced, jumped and ate happily, not paying too much attention on us. It was quite magical to see them having dinner in their natural habitat.

Suddenly it started to pour cats and dogs which surprised not just us, but also the local guides. They said they have not seen rain more than half year! So they were extremely happy but not us, since we could not spend even half an hour inside but had to escape.



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Well, it was not fun to enter into our room completely soaked and it turned out there was no electricity, of course no fridge, no phone or internet coverage, etc.

The dinner was fine and since our host felt that we were not super happy she uplifted our spirits with showing us some **Gray Mouse-Lemurs** hiding under the roof. That was cool!



## Day6 20<sup>th</sup> September

After breakfast we left at 6.30am and drove to the Zombitse NP where we arrived within 15 minutes. We spent a bit more than 2 hours inside the forest till about 9am. This time Randria and Henry were our local guides. The first interesting thing was a



white colony of nymphs of **Flatid Leaf Insects**. **Greater Vasa Parrots** were around and we heard **Giant Coua**.

The next great thing we admired was a **Madagascar Scops Owl**. After that we found a milliped and a local endemic **Zombitse Sportive Lemur**.

Bird-wise the most unique very local endemic species was found by the local guide and we tried to follow this **Appert's Tetraka** for a while. **Crested Drongo**, **Red-tailed Vanga** and **Chabert Vanga**.

A pair of **Cuckoo-Rollers** flew high above the canopy but unfortunately they have not landed. We also added to the today's list **Common Newtonia**, **Madagascar Hoopoe**, **Madagascar Magpie-Robin**, **Coquerel's Coua** and **Madagascar Buzzard**.



Finally we went back to the lodge and in the garden we found a beautiful **Outstalet's Chameleon**, a **Giant Madagascar Swallowtail** and an endemic **Zonosaurus maximus** gecko.

Finally around 10.45am we drove towards Isalo. It was about one and a half hour generally on better roads than before.

On the way we crossed Ilakaka which is another gem-, actually sapphire-city. According to the stories one of the family members of Osama-bin-Laden was shot here after shopping a lot at one of these shanty-towns. We did not stop to buy anything just to be sure.



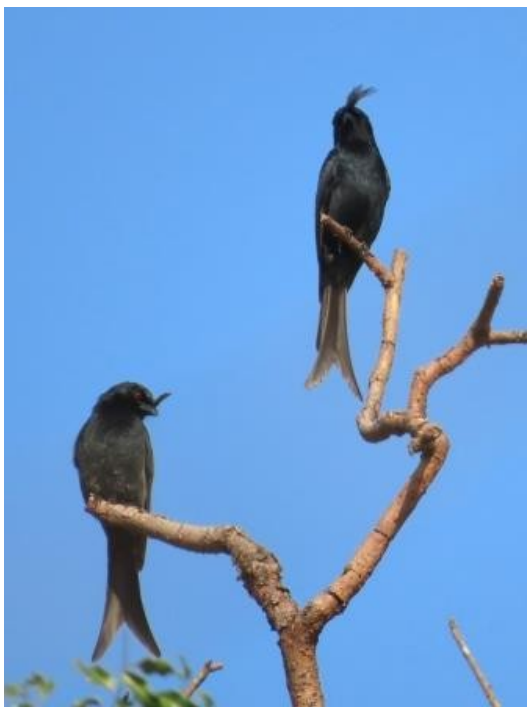


At Isalo we had a problem with the accommodation, it turned out they wanted to give a simple town hotel rooms instead of the ones which we booked at Isalo Rock Lodge. After some debate we were taken back on the road and checked in at the lodge. It was extremely hot so a shower helped and then we had some energy to look around in the garden. At this time of the day there were no bird activity but we had plenty of colourful butterflies including **Madagascar Satyr, Madagascar Giant Swallow-tail, Common Leopard, African Monarch and some skippers**. We needed to cool down again, this time with a quick plunge in the pool which

was followed by a short but rocky walk to the edge of a canyon. Beautiful view but still not much activity though we found **Malagasy Kestrel and Common Myna**.

When we went back to the rooms we realized there was no electricity, so the mini-fridge and the aircon were useless. Around 5pm we ventured out again, this time driving to a nearby rocky formation, La Fenestre D'Isalo or **Window of Isalo**. On the way we saw our first **Ring-tailed Lemurs** hopping on the slopes.

Although the sunset at this Jurassic rock formation was really nice we were equally excited by finding some new species at or nearby the rocks. The first lovely bird Gabor spotted from the car, **Benson's Rock Thrush** sitting on top of a bush with perfect light on. Later among the rocks he also found Madagascar Larks which were approachable enough to take photos. **Malagasy Swifts** flew above and we heard **Madagascar Partridge** as well. We also had a distant view of **Madagascar Coucal and Malagasy Kestrels**. Finally we had a great dinner and a well-deserved rest during the night.



### Day7 21<sup>st</sup> September

We had an early breakfast at 6.15am and left around 7am so we could start a 4 hour-long walking and birding in the **Namaza Canyon** with a funnily named but very good local guide, Mami. The first find was a **Malagasy Kingfisher**, closely related to **Malachite Kingfisher**.

We saw about 2 dozens of species, several of them we had before so we mention here just the new ones such as **African Paradise-Flycatcher, Malagasy Swift or Madagascar Turtle Dove**.

We found an interesting large planthopper, **Malagasy Lantern Bug, Zanna tenebrosa madagascariensis** and a local frog species plus a female **Oustalet's Chameleon** as well.

Our first mammals here were **Brown Lemurs and Ring-tailed Lemurs** happily feeding on a fruit tree.

First we heard and then successfully lured out a pair of **White-throated Rails** who gave us a concert up close on





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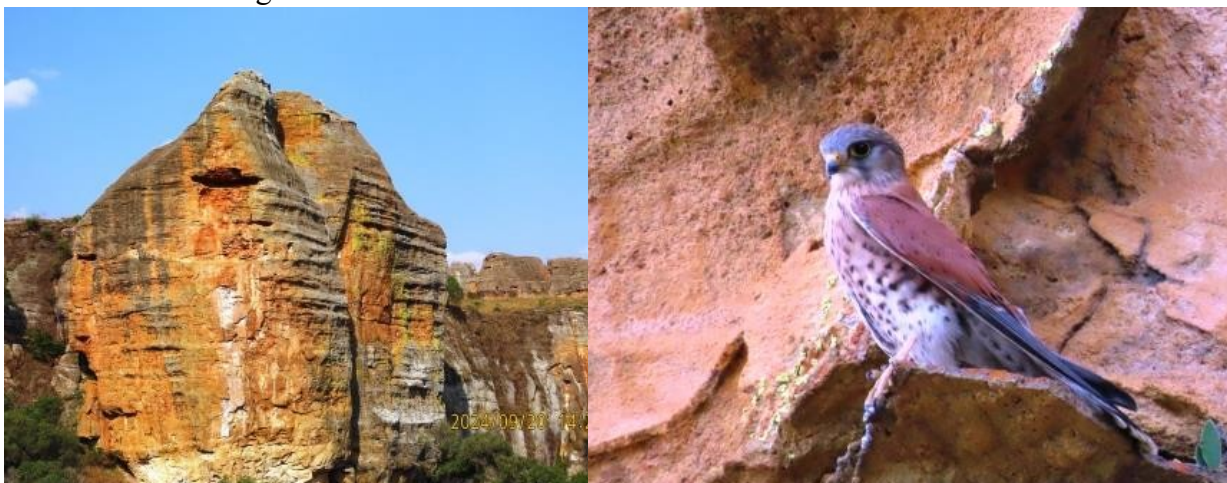


the other side of the stream. Another male **Benson's Rock Thrush** perched quite nicely for long. But a pair of lovely **White-browed Owls** managed to steal the show for sure.



The other big show was performed by some teenager **Verraux's Sifakas** playing and dancing in front of us. We also saw a mother with a baby. We also noticed a few strikingly coloured butterflies, but had no chance to take photos.

When temperature was really high we started to retreat our steps and after a successful visit we went back to the lodge before noon.

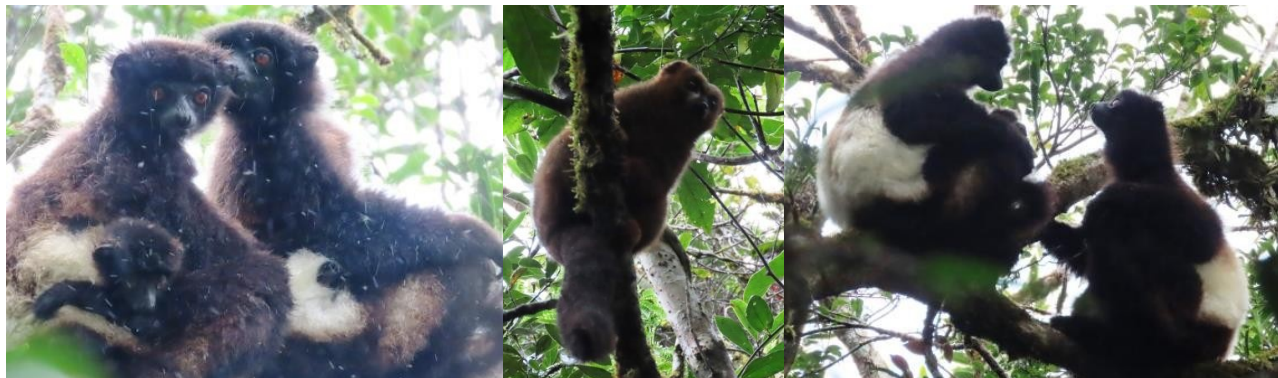


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After lunch we had a great siesta time but 3.30pm we walked out again to the canyon, this time all the way down to the natural pool area and a bit beyond. Apart from the few usual birds this time we found a **Madagascar Harrier Hawk** hunting at the cliffs.

After dinner we tried to save pictures and sleep as much as possible because we knew that next day we will have a long transfer day.



### Day8 22<sup>nd</sup> September



We had breakfast at 6.30 and an hour later we were already on the road. Most of the road was better than before but the 7,5 hour-long journey was still too much. During many hours we were crossing dry savanna habitats, later dry hilly regions and only at the last bit of the journey we reached greener forests and at the end really lush, tropical jungle. When we finally arrived to **Ramonafana** we had the usual situ, we were taken to a different, town accommodation than what we were supposed to get. For us the most important thing to be surrounded by good habitat so we have a chance for on-site birding and nature walks. We fought hard to get what we asked for and lost another hour to have rooms not in the town but nearby in a green area. Although rooms here were simpler, missing TV and other amenities but were clean, most importantly we could find new species even from our little terrace or walking a bit around. So after 5pm apart from some common species such as **Malagasy Bulbul**, **Malagasy White-eye**, **Madagascar Magpie-Robin** and **Souimanga Sunbird** we also found a pair of lovely Madagascar Starlings. A **Lined Day Gecko** was new as well.

### Day9 23<sup>rd</sup> September

At 5.15am, still dark birds were already singing. There was about 15-20 minutes very good movement around but after that strangely enough activity dropped sharply. Apart from the usual birds we had **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Chabert Vanga** and **Malagasy Swift**.

Unfortunately we could have breakfast just at 7am and later we met with our local NP guide, Burton. He was a strange character, imagine to leave your bins home to guide and being extremely loud and if all that is not enough to flush away all the birds he sported a huge yellow nylon rain-cover flying behind him like a giant Chinese festival kite.... But he had excellent ears and eyes and knew his birds. Perhaps birds knew this strange, loud, colourful creature well as well, because to



our surprise not all of them escaped in the denser part of the forest. But no wonder that although we spent 5 hours with him we could find only 17 species. But to give a point to him because of regular rainy periods it was not an easy birding at all. But at least most of the birds we found were new and quite exciting. The first one was a **White-throated or Yellow-browed Oxylabes**, an Eastern endemic. **Spectacled or Yellow-throated Tetraka** was great as well. We had 2 **Nelicourvi Weavers** as well at nest. **Green Jery and Crested Drongo** was found. We bumped into some reptiles as well like **Leaf-tailed Gecko** and a chameleon.

A female **Velvet Asity** was a fantastic find which was followed by several Vanga species such as **Tylas, Red-tailed, Hook-billed and Rufous Vanga**. **Malagasy Brush-warbler** was in the dense vegetation as usual.

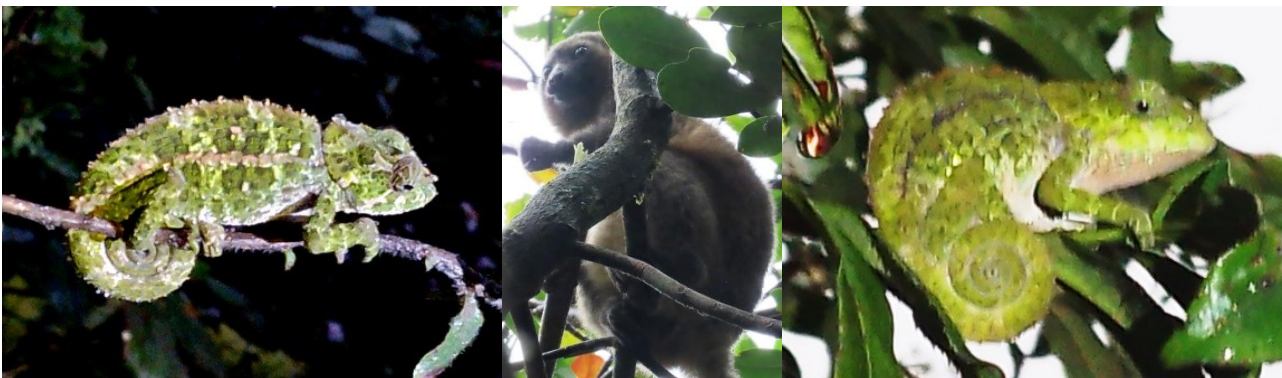
Most of the tourists came to see **Milne-Edward's Sifaka** so at a group of 6 adults and 2 babies the trails were really busy. We spent some time to try to take some photos and videos as well.

Later on a **Pitta-like Ground-Roller** sat out in the rain singing so we all had a great view. **Spectacled Tetraka and Dark Newtonia** was the next and the last bird was a large **Tylas Vanga** sitting on its nest, well camouflaged.



Finally quite wet we gave up, went back to the lodge to have lunch and get some dry cloths. After 3pm we went back to the NP trails. We had again **Pitta-like Ground-Roller** and **Spectacled Tetraka** but only new species were **Long-billed Bernieria** and **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher**. We also spent some time with the rare **Golden Bamboo Lemurs** eating busily their favourite food, bamboo.

Later before dusk we went further up alongside the main road to a locally well known site where tiny **Rufous Mouse-Lemurs** came down from the canopy to feed on bananas. We had another lovely chameleon and at a roadside large hole a **Madagascar Tree Boa** lurked.



## Day10 24<sup>th</sup> September

It was still not a lucky day, was continuously rainy, very hard to look for birds. With a 2-hour-long pre-breakfast birding between 5.30 and 7.30 we managed to find just 9 species, namely **Malagasy**



**Coucal, Madagascar Cuckoo, Dark Newtonia, Red-tailed Vanga, Common Jery, Malagasy Bulbul, Malagasy White-eye.** Only new birds were **Forest Rock-Thrush** and **Forest Tody**.



We went back to the hotel for breakfast and tried again from 8.30 till 11am this time on the other, right-hand side trail 4kms further up from the NP main entrance. It was still raining and very small activity around. A male and female **Giraffe-necked Bugs** were nice. Bird-wise the first exciting species was a female **Common Sunbird Asity**, A **Red-fronted Coua** and a stunning **Blue Coua**. We heard **Cuckoo-Rollers** but not seen.

Around 11am we gave up, went back to the lodge, had a quick lunch and around 12.15 we hit the road again. It was supposed to be a 4 hour-long transfer to Ambositra, but the really curvy road was in extremely bad shape so it took us 5 hours to reach our next accommodation, Hotel Artesan. The name referred to the highly decorated interior full with wood carvings. Was a busy touristy place, restaurant was almost empty when we got in but soon it became completely full and extremely noisy. Since this accommodation was in a town there was no chance to bird before dusk or next morning. Instead we had a mosquito hunting competition but sadly although we decimated them there were enough survivals to make our sleep restless. We tried to harden our immune system with drinking smuggled Unicum and pálinka.



### Day11 25<sup>th</sup> September

Today was another incredibly long transfer back to the capital city, Antananarivo. Before we hit the road early morning Solo took the vehicle to double check the brakes so we felt safer. Many hours



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later we stopped at Antsirabe, a large town with quarter million inhabitants where we bought some chips to survive the next hours. About 5(!) hours drive and couple of thousand potholes later suddenly the clutch gave up and could not engage more. We stopped in the middle of nowhere and used the possibility to visit the buses at least. We managed to roll further again but it failed again, so we stopped. In terms of distance we were not really far anymore, just about 90 kilometres but the situ was quite hopeless. Solo did not give up and miraculously after a couple of trials and errors it worked again and we had no further problems to reach our previously used and prised hotel, named after San Cristobal. Instead of 6 hours drive it again proved to be much longer, 8 hours.

We felt hugely privileged in this hotel with all the modern amenities, everything worked, had hot water, wifi, TV, swimming pool, although the latter 2 normally we and our guests not too much interested. More importantly both the dinner and next morning the breakfast was absolutely excellent.



## Day12 26<sup>th</sup> September

We met with another guide, Eric from *Andasibe* and started with him around 8am to his “homeplace”. It took us a bit more than 4 hours to reach our next accommodation, the Lemur Lodge despite the fact that the road was generally not too bad, but it was a long time just to leave the capital city. At Andasibe it was a bit difficult each time to reach or leave the lodge’s property since you had to struggle through a tiny but extremely crowded village, especially that they always had some fiesta and a busy market on the only street.



We had to fight here as well to get not the tiny standard rooms in one building, but much better ones each in a separate building.



After so much travel during the previous days we were ready to go out into the NP instead of siesta time. Eric took us to the main NP entrance where we spent time from 1pm till 4pm. After the first few 100 metres we found a **Red-fronted Coua** in the dense bushes. We managed to see it but it was impossible to take a photo of it. **Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher** was much easier, also **Common Newtonia** and **Madagascar Cuckoo**.

A male **Horned Chameleon** was a great find, luckily it was quite active as well so we could witness its typical strange movement.

We also found high up in the canopy an **Eastern Woolly Lemur** sleeping like a Sloth. Also had

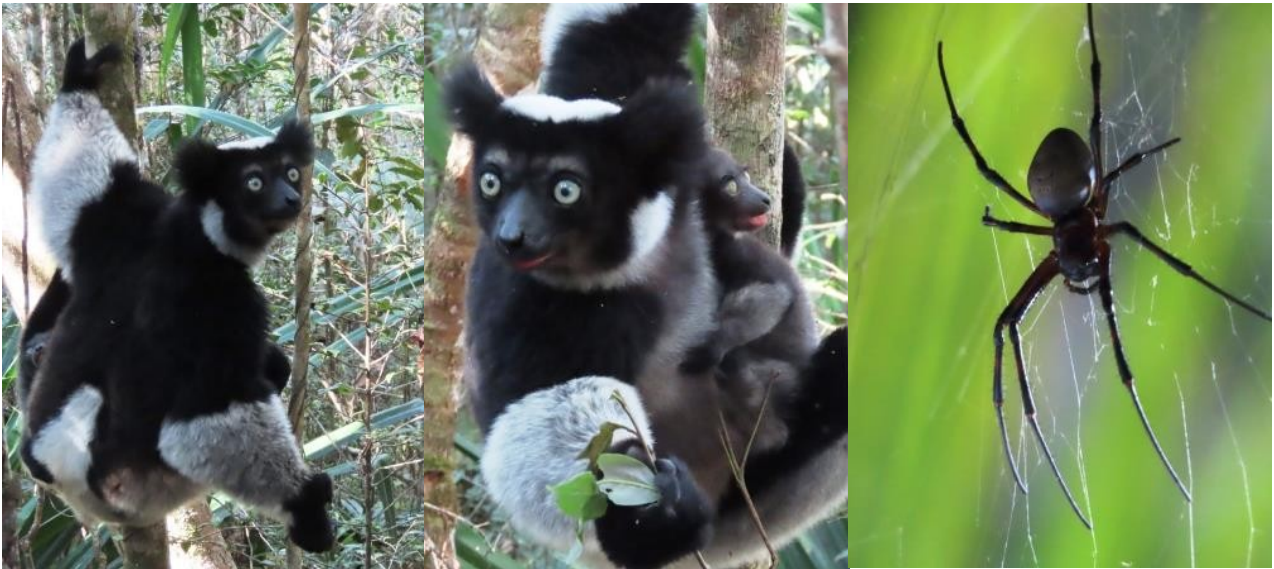
### **Common Brown Lemur.**

But we spent most of the time with the “king of the lemurs“, Indris. First we saw a really huge male and we cautiously followed it for a while. Later we also saw a female with a baby which was lured closer by a local guy with its favourite food, basically eating from the hand. Although we do not agree to half-tame wild animals this practice is still much better than many others they do at protected areas.



Finally we went back to the lodge where in the garden and behind in the forest we kept hearing and seeing some of the common bird species but even Blue Coua and Indris.





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### Day13 27<sup>th</sup> September

We had an early breakfast at 5.30am so at 6am we could start. We visited *Analamazoatra Reserve* with Aristid and also a guy from a local community. We had **African Stonechat**, **Malagasy Brush-warbler** and **Forest Fody** first.

Then suddenly on the road in front of us we spotted 2 **Madagascar Buttonquail**. Later we heard **Madagascar Flufftail** but could not see it.



Previously seen **Greater Vasa Parrot**, **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Madagascar Cuckoo** we found again. At one point we had a large flock of birds with **White-eyes**, **Newtonias**, **Drongos**, **Flycatchers** and **Fodys**. But also found **Blue Vanga** and **Red-tailed Vanga**. In the meantime we heard again the special calls of **Indris**.

We managed to photograph **White-throated Oxylobes**. The next new bird was **Madagascar Munia** or **Mannikin**. We also had **Madagascar Coucals** and **Rand's Warblers**.







But the most stunning was an incredible close singing **Rufous-headed Ground-Roller** less than 2 foot away! Raptors were represented by **Madagascar Harrier-Hawk** and **M. Buzzard**. Among the non-feathered creatures we should mention a large brown snake, a strange wasp, some dragonflies, a huge lizard and **Giraffe-necked bug** again.



We heard and tried several times **Madagascar Flufftail** and once we managed to have at least a glimpse. Finally we reached the vehicle around quarter to 3 and it was another 80 minutes to come down on bad, shaky roads, so it was about 4pm by the time we got back to the lodge. So timing was quite different than what we discussed and planned previous day since we got info that it will be 2 hours drive in the morning, 2-3 hours hiking and 2 hours back. In reality after the first 2 hours driving we walked and were in the fields about 7 hours and than drove back. But by this time we were not completely surprised. We learned that in Madagascar no plan is punctual and nothing goes according to the plan anyway. We washed the dust off with some drinks, checked pictures and emails and finally had dinner.





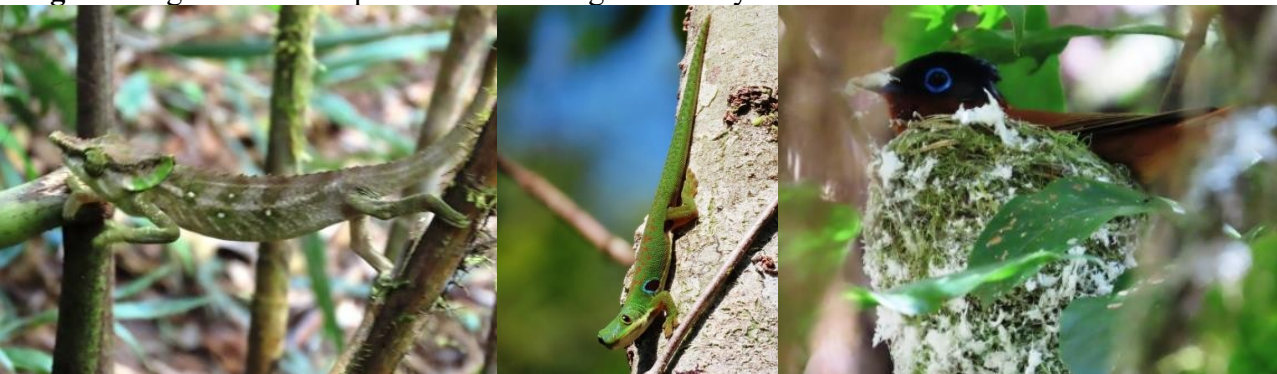


## Day14 28<sup>th</sup> September

Today we had breakfast at 7am and started 7.30am with a drive to the foot of the *Maromizaha Forest*. The name of the forest means Plenty to See Forest and although we had not many species during our 5 kilometer-long hike which we did slowly but had some fantastic new species and also photo possibilities of other, previously just quickly seen species.



The first 3,5 hours we spent slowly going up on a wide forest trail mainly encountering several previously seen species. **Mascarena Martins** were new and we photographed **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher** again. Several species were nesting such as flycatchers and weavers.



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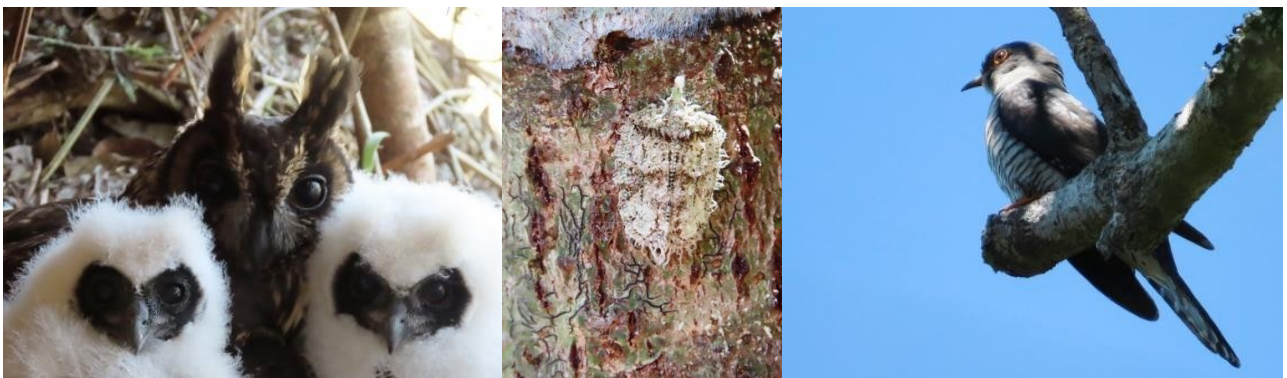




We heard **Red-fronted Coua** again and saw **Tylas Vanga**. It was very interesting to find and compare peachy coloured female and black-and-white male **Pollen's Vangas**.



Around 11am we reached a much smaller side-track which was also steep, sometimes rocky. By this time we were not on the top of our strength but it was worth the struggle. Andi photographed but we all saw well 2 rare **Red-bellied Lemurs**. The next was one of the most incredible birds, a male **Velvety Asity** which was half-way to get its breeding colours. Actually it looked even better with this special stage. This experience gave us enough energy to make another, even more difficult but at least short detour. We went down into a steep side-valley and then climbed up at a rocky scree to a narrow platform. To our great surprise there were 2 large **Madagascar Long-eared Owl** babies with their mum. What an incredible experience! We would definitely not find this without our great local guide. We worked our way back to the main trail, rested a little bit and ate our picnic which we carried from the lodge. From this point the trail went down continuously and quite steeply. At the beginning we saw and photographed very nicely a **Chabert's Vanga**. It took us about an hour to go down to the foot of the hill. In a distant we saw another hill with a huge rock and a cave. There were some rumours that behind that area nests a **Madagascar Serpent-Eagle**.



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We arrived back to the hotel about 14.30pm. We rested a little bit, worked with the photos but before dark we walked a bit out of the garden and at the edge of the forest. We saw some of the common birds and we returned to the lodge.



At 18.15 we drove out for a night-walk but it was very difficult to cross the little village where a huge crowd enjoyed a special fiesta with loud music, football, market and so on. Eric and Jura lead the night-walk in a private park. First we found different water and



tree frogs. We also saw **Goodman's Mouse Lemur** and **Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur**. The last great finds were several various Chameleons including **Short-nosed Chameleon**, **Two-horned Chameleon** and **Parson's or One-horned Chameleon**.





We felt that it was a nice and successful night-walk and we were ready to go back to the lodge, crossing again the still very active crowd and had an excellent dinner as usual here.

**Day15 29<sup>th</sup> September**



This morning we went back to the *Analamazoatra Reserve* from 8am. The first species were common ones, like **Paradise Flycatcher**, **Common Newtonia** and **Drongo**. But than our local guide pointed out in the dense bushes a well-hidden **Madagascar Scops-Owl**.

Vangas were represented by **Blue**, **Hook-billed**, **Tylas** and **Red-tailed Vangas**. We heard **Indris** “singing” while at a river we found **Eurasian Moorhen**. We saw several species what we had before, like **Nelicourvi Weaver**, **Brush-Warbler**, **Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Drongo**, **Forest Fody**, **Paradise Flycatcher**.



We found and followed an Indri family for a while, enjoyed to see them jumping from one tree to another. A **Red-fronted Coua** flew away from the trail but later we found another two. We found a sleeping **Bamboo Lemur** and later on a **Malagasy Kingfisher** killing and eating a huge insect at the Tilapia fish-ponds. There were 2 boas as well, hiding quite well.







At the flowery bushes we could photograph several beautiful butterflies, including **Green Lady**, **Narrow-Banded Blue Swallowtail**, **Madagascar Beauty**, **Madagascar Metalmark** and an **Acraea** species.



At noon we went back to the lodge, refreshed ourselves and had lunch. Rested a little bit and at 15pm we went out again, this time to the **Community Reserve**. The first thing was a huge green dragonfly, female **Madagascar Emperor**. Then we heard **Madagascar Flufftail** and this time we were stubborn enough to try hard and finally we had a few glimpses as well and took some not too sharp photos as well. But finally the **Red-fronted Coua** came out in the open and we took some photos.



Later on accidentally we bumped into 2 **Madagascar Forest Rails**, Andi managed to take a photo as well. We hiked further and had marvellous views of a beautiful pair of **Madagascar Ibises** sitting out on an open branch above a small river. It was great to see **Blue Coua** again. On the mammal front we had 2 **Goodman's Mouse Lemurs** and a **Brown Lemur**. The next one was a young male **Parson's Chameleon**. After a **Maggie-Robin** we spotted another **Madagascar Flufftail**. This time we managed to see it very well but taking a good photo was another matter. We were surely the last ones to leave this interesting reserve around 17.30pm. Later on we heard a **Madagascar Nightjar** in the garden.

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## Day16 30<sup>th</sup> September

This morning was very strange, we had huge fog, it was almost impossible to see anything. So we had a late breakfast and after that we could take some good photos of some garden species at flowery bushes such as **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Malagasy White-eye**, **Common Jery**, **Crested Drongo** and **Malagasy Bulbul**. Then suddenly we were surprised by a **Henst's Goshawk** which flew across and at the same time 2 **Madagascar Sparrowhawks** circled higher above, one of them had breakfast with it which seemed a small chicken.



Around 9am we started the journey back to Antananarivo which we knew it was supposed to be 4, max 5 hours. Well, of course it got much worse...As we were climbing up some hills the oil and coolant started to boil. We stopped alongside the road, waited for a while, added coolant and then continued. But the situ repeated several times more and more frequently so it was clear that it won't be possible to make the journey with this car. For many hours we were promised to get another vehicle and although we were just 60 kilometres, so about an hour drive from the capital city the rescue arrived just several hours later. We were pretty much exhausted but relieved that finally we can pack our stuff in the other vehicle, get in and hoped that within an hour we can crash in by that time absolute favourite San Cristobal hotel. But what has happened next exceeded our worst nightmares. The drivers (turned out to be father and son) decided to tow with the rescue vehicle the broken one.





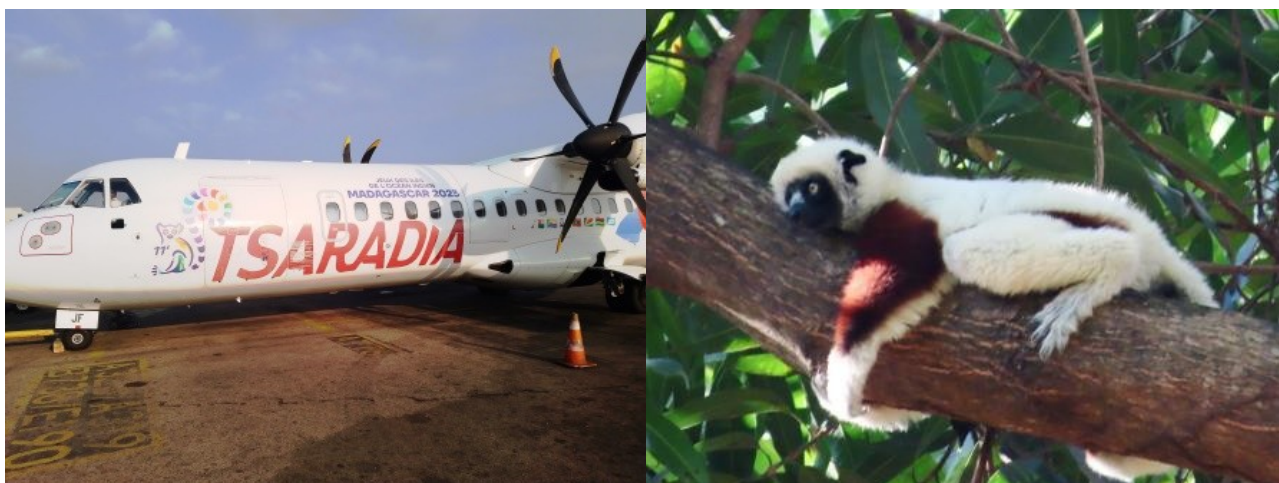
We expressed that it is a very bad idea, not just because after spending an extra 4 hours in the heat alongside a busy road beside a broken down vehicle we would like to be at the hotel as fast as possible, but also because of safety reasons. They did not listen and of course the rescue vehicle was not strong enough to deal with having passengers, plus all the stuff and tow the wreckage uphill as well. So it started to brake down as well! There was a point where finally they decided to disconnect the towing metal rod which was successful but no-one was in the detached car, so it started to roll down on the hill towards a very deep ravine! The son had to jump not to be hit while the father run like crazy and jumped into the speeding vehicle head first and in the last moment stopped the car. We just could not wait to safely arrive to the hotel which miraculously happened after an 8-hour-long struggle.

We did not feel compensated by the fact that we saw few birds in the meantime which were all common ones, except 5 **Squacco Herons** close to Antananarivo.

## Day17 1<sup>st</sup> October

The final leg of our tour started with an early flight to North, to Majunga from where we could be transferred and spend some days at **Ankarafantsika NP** and planned to drive back gradually to catch the international flight. The return flight from Majunga is so infamously unreliable that if you are not flexible to stay another week you will not risk it to rely on it.

So at 5am we went to the airport, at 7.20am we were in the air and an hour later we landed in Majunga.



Gildas, our new local guided waited for us and we stopped at a supermarket to buy some stuff, including SIM cards so in emergency we can have an extra method to communicate plus also use some GB for internet.

Majunga seemed a terribly crowded and ugly town, it took at least 1 hour just to get out. After 10am we reached the outskirts which was a dry, savanna-like habitat. There were some areas where we could see some attempts of reforestation but unfortunately all with non-native trees such as eucalyptus which cause more problems.

During the next 3 hours we could ID alongside the road **Namaqua Dove, Malagasy Swift, Malagasy Palm Swift, Black Kite, Madagascar Buzzard, Olive Bee-eater, Pied Crow, Red Fody and House Sparrow**. At and around **Lake Amboromalandy** we had a dozen **Black Herons, Little Egrets, Squacco Herons and Great Egrets**, plus a small endemic, **Madagascar Cisticola**.

We arrived to Ankarafantsika and the small Tia Asity Lodge around 1pm. This was the worse time, it was extremely hot, 38Celsius in shade but the simple rooms were perhaps even more. No electricity, dust everywhere, the “garden” is basically a desert. Also it turned out that as so many times they thought that the program is over for today. So we had to force that if we are here we would like to do and see something. So finally at 3.30pm we went out with tuktuks to the vicinity of the NP entrance.



We managed to find **Madagascar Hoopoes**, **Crested Drongos**, **Greater Vasa Parrots**. We also saw some **Coquerel's Sifakas**. **Purple Heron** was new at a like where we also had **Striated Heron** and **Malagasy Kingfisher**. **Malagasy Turtle Dove** came down to drink as well while a **Madagascar Buzzard** made some noise and scared a few **Olive Bee-eaters**. We were happy to find again **Chabert Vanga** and **Sickle-billed Vanga** around the parking lot.

We travelled back to the "hotel" where we had a good dinner, chicken with vegetables although we were not sure how they manage to keep everything safe during these hot days if they do not have electricity. Anyway, just to be sure we pour down enough bacteria-killers in the form of pálinka and Unicum.

## Day18 2<sup>nd</sup> October

Today we decided to have a late breakfast and do a birding circuit before. It was a good decision to start at 6, so at 6.25am we started to see the first common birds like **Bulbul**, **Jery**, **Magpie-Robin**, **Paradise Flycatcher** but soon some exciting new ones as well.



The first new one was **Long-billed Bernieria**. Then frustratingly we just heard **Cuckoo-Rollers**, **Madagascar Green Pigeon** and **Rufous Vanga** which later we all managed to see. We encountered 3 **Greater Vasa Parrots** and then a female **Cuckoo-Roller**. Well, this bird we managed to follow and approach, finally we were about 2-3 metres distance and witnessed up-close its hunting method. It was an incredible experience!







Later we met with an Indian bird photography group, they were chasing a **female Schegel's Asity**. We had **Long-billed Bernieria/Tetraka** and **Madagascar Cuckoo-Shrike**. This was followed by a **Malagasy Sunbird** with a long bill and shining green colour. But the bird of the day was surely an incredibly stunning **male Schlegel's Asity** which we all managed to photograph as well.



The last bird during this 3-hours-long pre-breakfast walk was a **Hook-billed Vanga**. During the late breakfast we encouraged our hosts to run the generator (we gave some money and sent a guy to get diesel from the village) so we could survive in the huts. We went out again just 3.30pm, wanted to start a boat tour at 4pm but the photographer group not returned in time and we had to wait half an hour. So we decided to bird around the main entrance again and apart from the usual **Hoopoes** and **Sickle-billed Vangas** we found a **Broad-billed Roller** sitting in excellent light. There were also a dozen **Helmeted Guineafowls**.

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During the boat trip we saw around 32 **White-faced Whistling-Ducks**, about 30 **Squacco Herons** and 20 **Cattle Egrets** and a **Purple Heron**. One of the best was at the beginning to find a **Madagascar Jacana** and a **Malagasy Coucal**. In a distance over the reeds up on a tree we counted 6 **Madagascar Green Pigeons**. A **Little Grebe** was new, but the best new species was **Madagascar Fish-Eagle**, one juvenile on the nest and one adult at a bay.



**Day19 3<sup>rd</sup> October**

We got out of bed 4.45, started 5.15 so at 5.30 we were already on the deeply sandy trails of the A.NP. This time we did the **Coquereli Circuit** which was about 4kms and we birded it for 3 hours and 15 minutes.

The first magic moment was when 2 **White-breasted Mesites** jumped on the road in front of us and then escaped. Gildas played the call very strongly, perhaps that not helped at all. The next was a large group of **Brown Lemurs**, we counted 8 individuals.





The usual **Bulbul**, **Jery**, **Paradise Flycatcher** and **Greater Vasa Parrots** turned up. Then we saw a **Sportive Lemur** in a tree-hole.

We heard a **Cuckoo-Roller** and as we went closer we realized that it was a male and was not simply just calling but rolling in the air as well. So it was a fantastic show what we all enjoyed very much. This was followed by 2 **Madagascar Hoopoes** and **Lesser Vasa Parrots**.







The next new thing was a **White-headed Vanga** which unfortunately flew away. But we were compensated by first a female and later a male **Van Dam's Vanga**. Also we could witness a male **Rufous Vanga** which practised a special bill-clapping.

Soon at a bit more open area we saw a perched male **France's Sparrowhawk**. And later in the denser forest a **Madagascar Sparrowhawk**.



We found another **White-breasted Mesite** which we tried hard to photograph. As we went further we surprised a **Coquerel Sifaka** with a baby. The last birds this morning were 2 **Crested Couas**, a **Long-billed Bernieria** and a **Madagascar Buzzard**. But the last creature on this trail was a **Rhinoceros Chameleon**. We left the trail before 9am, it was already hot.

Went back to the "lodge", had a good breakfast and a very long siesta time. During that we worked on the lists, selected and downloaded photos, published some on FB and Twitter, plus rested a bit as well.

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Our last outing was with a 4x4 in a narrow sandhill ravine up till a huge savanna vegetated platform with plenty of termite nests. From here we could look down on a colourful canyon with red and yellow dominating and anything between. It was a bit like a Madagascarian Bryce Canyon. As we checked everything we managed to find **Malagasy Kestrels** and lovely **Eleonora's Falcons**. It was worth to wait a bit to enjoy a spectacular sunset on these anyway colourful sandstone rocks with falcons swooping across. Was a picturesque farewell from Ankarafantsika NP.



## Day20 4<sup>th</sup> October

After breakfast we checked out when it turned out our breakfast were not paid however by our contacts however we paid everything in advance full. Well, another surprise.

Originally the plan was that we start later and drive 4-5 hours to the next major town and day after we continue back to Antananarivo.

But since we started at 9am and Solo (who came down from the city previous night to pick us up) covered the distance to Maevatanana within 3 hours we decided not to stay there.

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It was noon and he said he can take us back to the capital city within max another 8 hours. We said all right and he actually did it within less than 6 hours so we arrived back to our good old San Cristobal Hotel just before dark.



### Day21 5<sup>th</sup> October

In this way Solo was free next day and we had a full day to rest in our favourite, comfy hotel and could even build up a pool birding list which included **Olive Bee-eaters, Madagascar Martins, African Stonechats** and several friendly **Madagascar Wagtails**, plus one **Red Fody**.

We completed the bird-lists, tried to identify the photographed butterflies, chameleons and other creatures which seemed a never ending story.

### Day22 6<sup>th</sup> October

After the last really full breakfast we had to finalize our packings and then had a transfer to the nearby airport for the afternoon flight back to Addis Abeba and from there to Vienna. So we arrived home just day23, 7<sup>th</sup> October which gave us less than 2 weeks before our next big adventure, Pantanal & Atlantic Forest, BRAZIL!



We have encountered 116 species without a very intensive birding. We could add dozens of more waterbirds, waders, gulls and other easily seen species with some extra travel and other species with out spending as much time with siesta as we did. Also we could add more domestic flights and less travel on bad roads. But it was a compromise, weighting the risk of cancelled or delayed flight or breaking down on the road. We had actually both but get out of each luckily. But you have to consider all this when you decide to sign up for a certain itinerary.

Overall it is surely an unusual adventure but with sights which are one of a kind as well. We had so many extremely interesting bird observations, lemur and chameleon encounters, butterflies, moths, frogs, incredible trees and wild-flowers that made this tour an unforgettable wildlife experience.

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