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THE FAUNA OF MADAGASCAR

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KEN LOGAN

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Madagascar was always one of the places in the world we said we would love to visit again. We were there 22 years ago. I was still working and could only do 15 of the scheduled 21 days trip with Rockjumper, so we missed out on SW Madagascar. It was a great trip- we flew down to the south east and up to the north west- the forest trails were not difficult and we saw some great birds, mammals and reptiles and even had a private trip round Tana zoo to see the Aye-Aye before we flew home. It was so long ago it was before my photography days. I only started bird photography when I retired in 2008.

This time round we had a private tour with a local guide – a 19 day trip plus a week to visit the Masoala peninsular (there is only one flight a week) to look for the Helmet Vanga. We were hoping for the Red Owl and Serpent Eagle as well but neither had been seen for months.

And how has Madagascar fared over the last 22 years- badly I'm afraid! The population has doubled, poverty, especially in the rural areas is abject. The worst I have seen anywhere in Africa. The infrastructure is crumbling, the roads are appalling, and the flights totally unreliable. Last time we flew to Majunga. This time we drove as flights were too unreliable- They can be cancelled at a moments' notice. You can only average 30 kmh on most roads- 3 hours to do a hundred kilometers. So, it is a 16 hour drive to Majunga, being thrown around in the back of a Pajero as you navigate around pothole after pothole. In all we spent six days driving 4500 kilometers- a lowlight on what was otherwise another really good birding and mammal experience. I was delighted with the photography. I photographed all the Groundrollers (5 species) all the Mesites (three species), all the Couas (ten species) and 13 of the 15 species of Vanga. I had two objectives on this trip. One- to reach my 5000th bird species photographed and two- to see the Helmet Vanga. We did both!! A great Christmas present!



All the birds in SW Madagascar were new for us. We spent our first afternoon in Tana at the Tsarasaotra wetland where Meller's Duck, Malagasy Bulbul and White-throated Rail got us off to a great start before we flew to Tulear in the SW to meet our guide and driver there, needing just 19 more photographs to reach 5000. I got there on Day 4 with Lafresnaye's Vanga being my 5000th bird photographed. This is a special achievement for me, better than getting 7000 species on my world list. Only a handful of guys in the world have photographed 5000 birds.

We started our birding adventures in the SW at the Arboretum d'Antsokay, a gentle start compared to what in places, was to come. Olive-capped Coua, Souimanga Sunbird, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Malagasy Coucal, Madagascar Buttonquail, Crested Drongo, Subdesert Brush Warbler, Common Jery, Sakalava Weaver and Madagascar Magpie Robin all showed nicely and all were photographed. We had lots of fun chasing a pair of confiding Buttonquail through the scrub.

Day 3 saw us up early and driving south to San Augustin in search of the area specialty- Red-shouldered Vanga, a bird only recently discovered and with a very limited distribution. He took a little while to find as they are small birds and flit through the scrub quite quickly but did eventually respond to the call. We had our first Chabert's Vanga there as well. By 9.00am we were back in Tulear to catch the speedboat which transferred us to Nosy Ve. The tide was out and our boat was at least a kilometer away. We all hopped into a cart and were pulled out there by tractor. We dropped our bags off





at the hotel and then went by boat in search of Crab Plovers and Red-tailed Tropicbirds. The plovers were not there but we had nice views of the Tropicbirds.

We had never seen any of the three Rock Thrushes on our previous trip, and our first -the Littoral Rock Thrush was dead easy. A pair live in the trees behind the hotel. We had to leave our Pajero behind on the mainland but now hopped into a decrepit old bakkie for our days outing to the Tsimanampesotse

Wetland and NR. Our first targets were Madagascar Plover and Madagascar Sandgrouse, quickly seen in the difficult early morning sunlight, and then we were off to the forest to track down Madagascar Harrier-Hawk, Madagascar Hoopoe, Greater Vasa Parrot, Grey-headed Lovebird, Sickle-billed Vanga, Common Newtonia, Madagascar Lark, Thamnornis, Verreaux's Coua and of course the prized Lafresnaye's Vanga. Drinks were on me that evening.

We transferred back to the mainland this time arriving to the shoreline by Zebu cart transfer where amazingly we met a couple of girls from our Mongolia trip just a few months ago. Just time for a few brief hellos before we were on our way to Ifaty and the Spiny forest.

This is a habitat like no other. The vegetation comprises a type of deciduous thicket or thorn scrub with many "bottle" trees which include several species of baobab and pachypodium or "elephant's foot". A fascinating landscape.

Here we found Crested Coua, very similar to this mornings' Verreaux's Coua and our two very special targets- Long-tailed Ground Roller and Subdesert Mesite. Mesites are strange birds, largely terrestrial but the Subdesert often perches on low branches which is where we found both the male and female. They just sit there and watch you and pretend they are not there. There were more Vangas to be found – this time Red-tailed, Hook-billed, and White-headed and another special bird Archbold's Newtonia, a lifer found only in the South West.



For our final day in the South West we returned to the Spiny forest Parc Mosa just outside Ifaty. The trails here were often filled with thick sand which made the walking quite tiring. So today we were treated to birding by zebu cart which with two zebu up front move a fair bit faster than you can. We planned to visit a Cuckoo-hawk nest where, when we arrived, the two adults were firmly in residence. Here we had our first lemurs of the trip- White-footed Sportive- cute little things. We also found a Totoroka Scops Owl and Stripe-throated Jery.

Back at our sea facing hotel we found a Madagascar Nightjar and a tiny Grey Mouse Lemur before retiring before our long journey north started in the morning



Day 7 saw us make an early start heading for the Zombitse forest which we reached around mid-morning. In all national Parks you are required to use a local guide in addition to your own guide and the local guide usually had what they euphemistically called an animal spotter, who disappeared into the forest ahead of us rarely to be seen again. These people were well paid by our local tour company but they also expected a tip from the client. Tourists are seen as an endless source of funds in Madagascar. You were faced with tipping



everywhere you went. I think well over half our spending money went on tips. Not that I really minded when these people have so little to start with.

We spent around three hours in Zombitse forest. For some unknown reason it is the only place in Madagascar where you can find Appert's Tetraka. Tetrakas used to be called Greenbuls but are really Malagasy warblers. Why the name Tetraka I don't know. Appert's is a terrestrial bird spending the day searching the leaf litter. When you find one they are not

shy and are easily seen- the trouble is finding one! It took a while but we did eventually find one. During the search we had nice views of Giant Coua, Rufous Vanga on the nest, and a good looking White-browed Owl. We did well on the raptors too. Madagascar Sparrowhawk, then a Frances's Sparrowhawk and a Banded Kestrel on the way out which flew a second before I could a photo. Our one lemur of the day was Verreaux's Sifaka.

We overnighted near Isalo NP and late that afternoon went looking for the sub-species of Forest rock Thrush- *bensoni*

or Benson's Rock Thrush as it used to be known. This bird likes rocks not forests but is genetically the same as the true Forest Rock Thrush. Our final target was Madagascar Partridge, a bird with declining numbers as its habitat is cleared for cattle farming. The Rock Thrush took 10 minutes but we spent over half an hour driving and searching for the partridge before we found a pair of males. A really attractive bird!

We back on the road with a 6.00am start the next morning heading for Ranomafana NP. Our birding break was at the Anja Community reserve and was really a stop to see the Ring-tailed Lemurs and let our guide and driver get their lunch. These guys eat rice three times a day. Lunch was always some greasy sort of meat and rice. Then another bone jarring afternoon on to Ranomafana.



This would be our first ever visit to Ranomafana – you can find 4 species of Ground Roller here and we found three of them.

The trails were difficult -too difficult for Stephanie and damned hard work for me too. You seemed to climb up and then down steep slopes and repeat the exercise over and over again.

The birds were worth the effort. Nice views of Pitta-like Ground Roller were had just 50 meters into the forest (Stephanie saw this one). Then we saw Lesser Vasa Parrot, Madagascar Cuckooshrike, Tylas Vanga, Ward's Flycatcher, Dark Newtonia, and Blue Vanga. The only birds I missed photographing were Madagascar Yellowbrow and Grey-crowned Tetraka.

We spent the day in the forest there was so much to find. Great views were had of Common Sunbird-acity and Velvet Asity, Collared Nightjar and Brown Mesite on the nest. Our final bird of the day, when it almost too dark to photograph was a Rufous-headed Ground Roller. They seem to be more confiding as the light fades inside the closed canopy of these primary rain forests.

We had two full days at Ranomafana. We did the high altitude trail the first day and mid altitude trail on the next. The mid altitude trail was even tougher than the first day. But the birds kept coming. Main target was Scaly Ground Roller. It was quite a climb but we got there. Next Henst's Goshawk on the nest. Pygmy Kingfisher and Crossley's Vanga were both found and we finished the day with Red-fronted Coua, Madagascar Buzzard, Madagascar White-eye, Forest Rock Thrush and Forest Fody.





Milne-Edwards Sifaka

We had a fair selection of Lemurs too- Milne-Edwards Sifaka, Red-fronted brown Lemur, Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur and Black and White Ruffed Lemur.

The following day we had a morning to visit a local marsh- Grey Emutail, Madagascar Sunbird and Stonechat, Blue Pigeon and Madagascar Brush warbler, broke the journey at Antsirabe, and headed on to Perinet (now called Andasibe) and Mantadie.

Perinet (now called Andasibe) and Mantadia are two of the most popular birding spots in Madagascar being just a few hours' drive from Tana. At Mantadia we went in search of our last remaining Ground Roller- the Short legged. I think only bird photographers can really appreciate how difficult rain forest photography actually is. In general, I have been pleased with my R7 and 100-500 lens. The weakest aspect of the R7 is its low light capability and having been used to pro bodies for most of my camera shooting days it is sometimes a real struggle to get a good shot in the low light conditions in rain forests.

It can take hours to find the birds you are looking for and then having found them, you need to get the shot. A Forest Rail will happily call back to you for half an hour without moving from dense cover. You then need to crawl in and ask your guide to move him to that small clearing where you might just get a shot. The Long-billed Bernieria that was impossible to shoot yesterday, today becomes a bird that is almost confiding?? How does that work? The Asities which are mid- canopy birds and never stop moving, took the longest to photograph. You need a good and patient guide. Hoby always asked me whether I was happy with my shot and if I was not, we would keep going until we got something reasonable- i.e. you need to wait for that Asity to come down 10 meters and still sit for just a second.



The Short-legged Ground Roller was also tricky. You had to track him down when he called, climb down a slope through thick undergrowth and there he was sitting on a low branch quite unperturbed by our presence. Mantadie was difficult. Even the Green Pigeons did not want to know. Poor shots of Rand's Warbler and Wedge-tailed Jery were obtained and we finished the day with Madagascar Owl in the gloom.

Andasibe was better. Had great views of the Indri with their deafening calls. Found the Forest Rail, Nelicourvi Weaver and a Rain Forest Scops that was impossible to photograph in his dark hole. In the afternoon we visited another marsh where I finally got the Madagascar Snipe in flight and had views of Madagascar Cisticola, Mannikin and Flufftail.

Our final morning in Andasibe before driving back to Tana gave us Green Jery, Spectacled Tetraka, Nuthatch Vanga and Madagascar Swamp Warbler along with Diademed Sifaka and Common Brown Lemur and Brown Woolly Lemur.



Now we were heading up to the North West. A 12 hour drive to what was once called Ampijoroa and is now known as the Ankarafantsika NP to look for the half dozen specials that can only be found in the North West.

We stopped along the way for Malagasy Harrier, Malagasy Martin and the Pratincole along one of the fast flowing rivers.

At Ankarafantsika we spent most of the morning trying to get a decent shot of Schlegel's Asity and Long-billed Bernieria before taking a trip on the lake for Madagascar Fish Eagle, Madagascar Kingfisher and Malagasy Pond Heron . We had no luck with the Jacana.

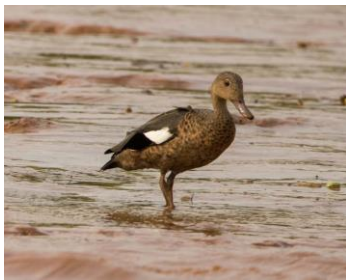
We now had one more morning to find the remaining specials and grabbed them all in three hours. Red-capped Coua, Van Dams's Vanga , White-breasted Mesite (worked hard for a good shot) and finally Coquerel's Coua gave us a full house with Malgasy Kestrel, a Hog-nosed Snake, and Coquerel's Sifaka thrown in for good luck.



Then we a four hour drive to Majunga, our final stop on our 19 day tour. Back on the Speedboat (thank goodness Stephanie likes boats) we shot down and around the many islands in the Betsiboka delta, and were fortunate to quickly find Bernier's Teal, Madagascar Sacred Ibis and lots of Crab Plovers.

We had a great seafood meal that night before the long trek back past Ankarafantsika where I found a Sooty Falcon sitting in a bare tree and past another wetland where after a 2 kilometre trek in 40 degrees we finally found the Jacana, we finally arrived in Tana thankful that the long hours in the car were at last over.

In the morning we would fly to the Masoala Peninsula.



The flight to Masoala flies on a Monday and returns to Tana the following Monday. You fly into a small town called Maroantsetra-overnight there and then catch a speedboat ride (one and half hours) across the bay to our lodge on the Masoala peninsula. We had to leave our guide Hobby behind and were allocated a local guide on arrival at Chez Arrol Ecolodge. Unfortunately although keen and pleasant he was not up to it as bird guide.

The birding here was really disappointing and the trails didn't deserve the name trail. You just picked your way up steep slopes through the tree roots and rocks. The forests were desperately quiet and I have no idea why. We went out at 4.00pm on our first day there and managed to flush a Red-breasted Coua and found a small group of Red-ruffed Lemurs- the only place in Madagascar where you find them, so day one did not get off to too bad a start

Day two the search for Helmet Vanga started in earnest. Stephanie had a helper but after an hour of making slow progress and with at least another hour and half to the Vanga territory, she called it a day and returned to base. We soldiered on, found a confiding Ring-tailed Mongoose (or Vontsira) and I managed to get some shots of a Blue Coua, a bird I had been chasing in every forest we entered. But no Helmet Vanga- we returned to base 5 hours later Vanga-less. What made it even more annoying was all the other groups – three in total all saw the bird.

Back at the lodge I asked whether they knew of a nest and they admitted that they did, have originally denied any knowledge of where the bird was nesting.

So, on day three we set off again-Stephanie with her helper as she was determined to see the bird. The weather had turned and we were faced with a morning of torrential rain. Masoala is the wettest place in the country. We walked along the beach for half



an hour and then turned to climb the mountain. The rain never let up. The only dry thing was my camera. And after an hour and a half on the mountain with Stephanie still with us we reached the nest. A bird was sitting on the nest but there was no sign of its partner. All I could see was an eye and a blue bill. We waited patiently and eventually she or he flew off and returned 5 minutes later. No posing near the nest- the eggs were getting wet. I decided it was time to leave -I did not want to disturb them further. I had a couple of semi reasonable shots – that would have to do.

So back down the mountain- the rain cleared around lunchtime and we did not go out again that day. We had some Madagascar Spinetails flying over the lodge so I managed to get a couple of shots of them.

Day 4, we decided to take a break. One couple had seen Bernier's Vanga some three hours to the south but I decided with our guide it was not worth the effort.

Day 5 we took a boat for a 20 minute trip down the coast to walk a supposedly flat trail down near the shore line. The trail was flat but there were zero birds. We gave up after half an hour and returned to the boat. I had seen some terns out on the rocks and we decided to explore there. Lots of Lesser Crested and just a pair of Roseate Terns were to be had. I asked after the Helmet Vanga nest. I was told it had raided by a Ring-tailed Mongoose. Not good news!

The plane was supposed to leave at 9.30am on Day seven so we decided to return to Maroantsetra on Day 6, In case of bad weather or a problem with boat, so day six was another travel day but we got to the airport on time on Monday morning.

The plane was supposed to land at 8.30am. Nothing by 9.00am, or 10.am or 11.00am. Then they got around to telling us it had mechanical issues and was not coming. We were flying back home at 3.00pm Tuesday afternoon. We could still make the flight if the plane came Tuesday morning.

Malagasy Air gave us a voucher for another night at our hotel. (I got a shot of some Malagasy Palm-swifts while waiting) and we spent the rest of the day just hanging around. Tuesday morning back at the airport at 7.00 am (it was actually called an aerodrome) with zebu grazing 20 meters from the runway. The plane landed at 8.30am to a great round of applause from all passengers. We were back on schedule – a quick transfer from domestic to International a kilometer away and we were well on time for our Airlink flight back to Joburg.

So, a trip with lots to talk about. Lots of hard work, lots of hanging around but some great birds and lemurs and most importantly my 5000th bird photographed. I finished up on 5089.

