

Dear Birdos4Eric,

That September newsletter stretched us all, I'm afraid. Namibia and Botswana are mouthfuls. But hopefully it prepared you for this one! Madagascar plays by its own rules. It's the world's endemism capital and you're going to read about a lot of weird birds (plus some reptiles and mammals) that are found nowhere else in the world. But before I get started, I'd like to thank Peter Hawrylyshyn for some close reading of the September newsletter. In past issues, Bob Lewis has caught a few of my bonehead mistakes and Peter, being Bob's friend, took over for him in September. He pointed out that I had mislabeled the Stark's Lark as the Gray's Lark (we did see both birds and I did find the names a bit confusing, but who could mistake that squinty look of the Stark's??) My apologies to the bird and to you, my readers. He also caught a second mistake—a Kittlitz's Plover mislabeled as a White-fronted Plover (once again, we saw both, and it's obviously that I had too many balls—or birds—in the air at this point). At any rate, I think that completes my corrections for the time being. The last bit of blame falls on YOU, my dear readers. I received 2,117 entries for the "Name that Hornbill" competition in September's newsletter, but I'm disappointed to report that there wasn't a winner. So last month's jackpot reward will roll over to this month. Now on with October.

Prologue—The Bay Area Changes Seasons

The first week of the month was relatively quiet—I was at home in Berkeley and still looking for a Willow Warbler. I had been following eBird closely and had noted that the Willow was popping up every few days at Miller Knox Regional Park in Richmond. So one morning I left early in an attempt to finally add this bird to the year's tally.

Miller-Knox is perhaps best known for its small pond that in the winter is often crammed with ducks and geese—it's where I went last February to get my Eurasian Wigeon for the big year. There's a section at its south end, however, that I figured would be perfect for a Willow Flycatcher—dense shrubbery with some small trees scattered throughout. I spent about 90 minutes combing through the undergrowth, but no Willow Flycatcher. Next I headed out to Ferry Point, the end of the reserve, where I noted a small stand of willow trees. My "ah-ha" moment was short-lived. No warblers there either. But while scanning a small flock of sparrows nearby, I noticed a bird that didn't belong—a warbler. It was greenish on the top and yellow on the bottom. I got close enough to get a good look before it flew, and I clocked its faint eye ring. Hmm. I tracked it midair until it was out of sight, noticing how bright the yellow underside appeared. After spending ten minutes with my field guide, I concluded it was a Mourning Warbler, the rarity I had searched for a few miles from my home several weeks earlier. A life bird for me.

I walked back along the shoreline, and I saw a bird at the water's edge that made me stop in my tracks—at first glance it looked like the Wandering Tattler that I had sought with my pal Dawn in early summer. But a closer look showed it to be a Spotted Sandpiper. Walking by the end of the pond, I noticed lots of avian activity in the surrounding trees. A small family of Western Bluebirds was hanging about a picnic table—though they can be found year-round, I tend to think of these as spring and summer birds in the Bay Area. Nearby, I caught sight of several

warblers, including a couple of Yellow-Rumps and a Townsend's—my first of the fall season for both of these species. Nature was in flux.



Western Bluebird



Townsend's Warbler



Common Sandpiper

Arrival—Antananarivo, Madagascar's Capital

Traveling is not for the faint of heart. After two whole days of travel comprised of a 5-hour overnight flight to Washington DC, a 13-hour flight to Addis Ababa, and another 5-hour flight to Antananarivo, I arrived in Madagascar. And promptly went to sleep at 3 PM and slept for 12 hours. Later that morning, I was picked up by my guide, Eric (that was convenient), and we went birding at Lake Alarobia near the city center. Tana, as the capital is called by its inhabitants, sit at 4,200 feet of elevation and is a bustling city of 1.3 million people. The lake is part of a private, walled estate, and once inside its huge towering walls, I found it easy to forget that the city surrounded me.

I was overwhelmed by my first view of the lake—hundreds and hundreds of ducks on the water and a small island in the center that was covered with egrets and herons. The ducks were mostly Red-billed with a lot of White-faced Whistling Ducks thrown in. But there were also rarities amongst them. As I was taking in these unexpected riches, my guide Eric was meeting our local guide Caraco (that's just the way it is in Madagascar—the guides use guides—it's good for the economy, I'm told.)

After Caraco joined us, the three of us set off, and Caraco tried to point out several species that were swallowed up by the masses of Red-bills and Whistling ducks. I managed to get my binoculars on several Knob-billed Ducks. I had more trouble with the pair of Meller's Ducks that he attempted to point out. These were bigger than the Red-bills, but their drab coloration helped them to blend into the duck mass. When I asked him to point them out again, he replied, "Gone." "Gone?" How does a pair of ducks disappear in a duck pond? He assured me we'd keep watching for them and had chance of picking them up again.

In the meantime, we began sorting through the heron and egrets. There were dozens and dozens of Cattle Egrets and Squacco Herons, as well as Great Egrets, Little Egrets, Black Herons, and Black-crowned Night Herons. But the bird we were looking for was the elusive Malagasy Pond Heron, which I was told was "very difficult to see" and we'd be "very lucky" if we saw one. In its breeding plumage it's a lovely small white heron with a distinctive blue bill. Caraco did manage to find one, but I had the same difficulty that I had with the Meller's Ducks—I looked in the wrong place and the bird was instantly gone (I should point out that it didn't help that neither of my guides was carrying binoculars—Eric had sheepishly said that in his hurry to leave his

house he had forgotten his, and I got the impression that Caraco didn't actually own a pair. But I should also mention that I'm not sure he needed binoculars—he seemed to be on intimate terms with every species at Lake Alarobia.)

We turned our attention to the other side of the path, looking away from the water. "You are very lucky," the local guide said, as we watched a Madagascan Hoopoe land on a branch overhead. The bird was joined a few moments later by its mate, who landed nearby, with a spider in its bill. He showed us the hole in a tree where the birds nested, and seconds later, one of them flew into it. Lucky indeed. Next Eric spotted what he told me was his favorite bird, the Malagasy Kingfisher. This is a close relative of the Malachite Kingfisher which I know well from Southern Africa. But unlike its relative, this bird sat perched on a branch and allowed us to get very close. I don't think I've ever seen a kingfisher this relaxed. Perhaps it was something to do with the pace of life in Madagascar.



Madagascar Hoopoe with a spider



Malagasy Kingfisher

Just before we left the end of the lake with the concentration of ducks and herons, Caraco did a final scan, picking up another pond heron. This time I was on it. We continued our circuit of the lake and heard a Malagasy Brush Warbler in the heavy undergrowth along the path. "Very difficult to see," said Caraco. This was becoming a refrain. But as the bird hopped out into the open, he spoke the second mantra of the day, "Very lucky." We had the same experience with this bird's close relative who lived back on the water-side of the path, the Madagascan Swamp Warbler—"Very difficult" quickly turned to "Very lucky."

At the far end of the lake we got a look at the second, smaller lake. Unlike the large lake, it had almost no ducks on it. Caraco was looking for a particular duck, however, the Hottentot Teal, which he said preferred the smaller lake. "Very difficult," he had said, but he promised to look. I handed him my binoculars and he did a quick scan. "You are very lucky." A solo Hottentot teal was chugging along the lake's far bank.

As we continued the walk, we were picking up what proved to be more life birds for me: Malagasy Bulbul, Malagasy White-eye, Madagascan Munia (do you detect a theme with these names?), Red Fody, and the ubiquitous Common Myna (not a life bird for me but a year bird.) We also saw raptors—a Malagasy Kestrel, a pair of Madagascan Harrier-Hawks and a Black Kite. I also saw my first reptile of the trip, a beautiful Lined Day Gecko.



Lined Day Gecko

As we approached the end of the circuit, we neared the huge concentration of ducks. I scanned the water for something new and also checked out the island to see if I could get another glimpse of a pond heron. “You did well,” the local guide pronounced. “You only missed the Meller’s Duck.” On my last sweep of the pond I picked out a couple of big brown ducks swimming slowly along the island’s edge. There were hundreds of other ducks around them. I pointed them out to Caraco. “Meller’s Duck,” I exclaimed. Sometimes you make your own luck.

The Northeast—Lowland Rainforest at Masoala National Park

That afternoon my Australian friends Tony and Nancy arrived, and I counted myself fortunate to have these excellent travel companions for another round of adventures (if you’ve been reading along, you will have met Tony and Nancy back in April when they joined me for birding in South Texas, Big Bend National Park, and SE Arizona.) Tony and Nancy and I had been planning Madagascar for well over a year (My wife Susan read the brochure that described the trip as “strenuous” and made her decision, “No, thanks!”) We flew up to Maroantsetra the next day, overnighted, then early the next morning we crossed the Helodrano Antongila Bay in a small skiff, arriving with our local (and only!) guide Joseph at Masoala National Park, one of the country’s premiere lowland rainforests. (This tour was billed by Birding Ecotours as a “pre-trip” to the main event, “Best of Madagascar Birds and Wildlife.”)

Our first walk there was extraordinary. It started off with Joseph leading us off the path into dense rainforest. He pointed up. Sitting on overhead branches very close to us were a pair of Short-legged Ground Rollers, a member of a family of birds that is unique to Madagascar. (Bear with me—there’s going to be a lot of birds with weird names this month—whole families of birds you’ve never heard of. If you want to take a break from reading this and open a Google window for “birds of Madagascar” you’ll not only find out I’m telling the truth, but you’ll see some great pictures—better than I can take under the low-light conditions of the Malagasy rainforests.)

This pair of ground rollers was a bit odd looking. But not nearly as odd-looking as the next one. In another nearby tree was a Cuckoo Roller—a bird that is so unique it’s the only one in its family—and some experts argue that it should be considered the only one in its order (which means it’s been

evolving independently for a very long time.) My photo below is poor, but in the interest of showing you that I'm not kidding—this bird has a bizarre head, appearing too big for its body—I include it below. Back on the “main” path (more of a narrow track through the forest), Joseph pointed into a tree nearby. We looked and then looked again, finally registering what we were seeing—Masoala’s most famous resident, the Helmet Vanga. And this particular bird was sitting on a nest.



Short-legged Ground Roller



Helmet Vanga



Cuckoo Roller

On that same walk we met several of the common birds of the rainforest, including the Crested Drongo, the Malagasy Coucal, and the Souimanga Sunbird. We also met some of the more uncommon ones: a Madagascan Green Pigeon, a small group of four Madagascan Wood-Rails, a White-throated Oxylabes, and a pair of Spectacled Tetrakas. Finally, we began our acquaintance with another endemic family, the couas; this one is related to the cuckoo family and is comprised of nine species. The couas-of-the-day were the Blue Coua and the Red-breasted Coua.

Our afternoon walk was not nearly as productive as the morning one, though we picked up some colorful new birds—the Olive Bee-eater and another Vanga, the Blue Vanga. We also picked up a bird you would expect to be colorful but wasn’t, the Greater Vasa Parrot, which was a dull olive green. But it turned out that Joseph really had only one target in mind that afternoon—the Scaly Ground Roller. About midway through the walk he began imitating the bird’s call, several times thinking that he might be hearing it return the call from deep within the rainforest ahead. At several points we did a bit of bushwhacking but to no avail, and at another point the trail descended so steeply that Joseph told us to wait while he went to scout the bird. While waiting, we got good (albeit fairly distant) looks at a beautiful large diurnal lemur, the Red-Ruffed.

Joseph returned to tell us that he had definitely heard the bird below us. When we descended the steep trail, we found we had to cross a mountain stream on stepping stones. Nancy balked but Tony pulled her across. We clambered up through the undergrowth on the other side, and Joseph said triumphantly, “There.” We could hear the low “boop, boop” that the bird was making, but we didn’t see it at first. (All Ground Rollers make “boop boop” calls, the phrase never various, only its pitch and the speed at which it’s repeated.) Definitely the bird of the day! It turned out to be sitting—and slightly bobbing—on a rock in front of us, much closer than we thought. This turned

out to be a very fortuitous sighting—despite looking for this bird on several occasions later in the trip, we never saw it again.



Red Ruffed Lemur



Scaly Ground-Roller
Photo by Tony Read

I refer to our second day in the national park as the “forced march.” Nancy takes issue with this description, saying that we weren’t forced, but agreeing that it was indeed a trek. (Using the distance markers in the forest, I estimated it to be only about 5 km; Nancy, who had done a 28 km run a couple of weeks before arriving, thought that the markers were wrong—she said it felt like 15 km.) We saw a several new birds—the Long-billed Bernieria, the Common Jery and the two morphs of another beautiful forest bird, the Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher. Both morphs have black heads and blue skin around their eyes; one has a rufous body and the other is pied, having a brilliant white body with black highlights in its wings and tail. We also saw the local specialty bird again, the Helmet Vanga. I reported seeing six of them on eBird and was queried about the “unusually high number.” How do you explain something like this? Yes, it almost defies the imagination to see a bird that looks like this—let alone a half dozen of them.

When we completed the forced march, Joseph informed us that we would be doing a nocturnal walk later that day. Because we were all dead tired, we lobbied for a later start time—4 PM. When we gathered, we watched Madaga Spinetails flying overhead, and then as we ducked into the forest’s gloom, they were gone. As our eyes adjusted to the forest’s gloom, Joseph spotted a Madagascan Sparrowhawk sitting quietly on a branch overhead. A beautiful raptor. As the trail got steeper, Joseph began playing his recording of a Brown Mesite, one of the more difficult local birds to see (and one of the few targets we had missed thus far.)

I should say a word about Joseph’s recordings. More often than not, he simply mimicked the bird’s call himself. He was a master of this, and on several occasions a bird’s response led us to see it. But for some sorts of sounds he couldn’t reproduce himself, he had used the video function on his cell phone to make a recording of these species’ calls, and he would play the video with the sound turned up when he was trying to locate the species. This day, he was playing that Brown Mesite recording regularly. Near the top of a long climb where the trail leveled off, Joseph stopped abruptly. Apparently

the Brown Mesite had run across the trail in front of him. We left the path and tiptoed into the forest behind me and slowly searched the area. No bird. When we re-emerged from the forest Joseph announced that the birds would now be going to sleep for the night but that it was still early for the nocturnal creatures to come out. So we sat in the forest and waited until it got dark.

And we weren't disappointed. The downhill trail was steep and narrow and rather precarious in the dark, but we went slow and we were rewarded with looks at geckos and chameleons (including a young Parsons Chameleon that was shedding its old skin) and two types of lemurs unique to this area—the Masoala Sportive Lemur and the Masoala Woolly Lemur (of which we saw several.) Equally exciting for me, however, was the one bird that we saw—a female Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher on her night roost. When we got back to camp, we were surprised to find another Masoala Woolly Lemur in the tree right outside the dining room. In Masoala the fauna sometimes finds you.



Masoala Sportive Lemur



Masoala Woolly Lemur
All photos by Tony Read



Parsons Chameleon

On our last day in Masoala, Joseph announced that instead of hiking the usual trails, we'd be visiting the literal forest. Tony raised an eyebrow. "What's the forest we've *been* visiting?" he wondered. "The figurative forest," I replied. Nancy, exasperated with us both, explained that Joseph had said we'd be going to the littoral forest. Tony was no clearer than before. "What's that?" he asked. I explained that it's what used to be called a mangrove swamp but that, given the leech and mosquito-infested hellhole most people conjured up when they heard this phrase, the expression "littoral forest" was now used since it didn't generate the same fear and loathing.

We took a short boat ride, and we entered the forest from the beach. In many ways, the littoral forest wasn't literally very different from the rainforest where we'd been walking for the past two days. The biggest difference was that overall, the terrain was much flatter (given the state of my knees by then this was a welcome relief.) And the littoral forest lacked the huge trees we'd been seeing the previous two days. But nonetheless, the canopy overhead was nearly complete. We were here to see some of the vangas that we'd missed the previous two days and we did pretty well, picking up three new ones, the Hook-billed Vanga, the Rufous Vanga, and the Tylas Vanga (which was eating a large insect). And, for good measure, we saw up a few Madagascan Pratincoles flying overhead. Not to mention a Brown Leaf Chameleon so well camouflaged that we were lucky not to step on it. (As well as being one of the smallest chameleons—it's 2–3 ½ inches long—it's got that camouflage thing going.)



Tylas Vanga



Brown Leaf Chameleon—those are its horns in the upper right

I think we disappointed Joseph that afternoon by opting for a shortened walk. We were all tired and Nancy had a horrendous cold that she had just passed on to me. We managed to pick up a couple of new Vangas, the Red-tailed and the White-headed, bringing us to eight of the sixteen vangas. Pretty good for our three days at Masoala. We were back to the camp before the nocturnal lemurs came out.

When we left the national park, we left early—a 5 AM boat ride back across the bay to get to the airport by 7:00 for a 9:20 flight. But when we got to the airport (one minute early!), it was completely deserted. The flight had been canceled. Our local fixer tried to fix things. He offered us another boat ride (this one on the river), and we accepted, rather than sit in a café for 5 hours (though the thought of a rest in a café with working internet after the trudging up the steep tracks in Masoala was tempting). The river trip proved better than expected—we saw lots of herons (Black, Purple, Squacco, and Striated) and egrets (Great, Cattle, and Dimorphic), and shorebirds—a few familiar ones like the Whimbrel, the Common Sandpiper, and the Ruddy Turnstone; an acquaintance from Southern Africa, the Kittlitz’s Plover; and a new endemic, the Madagascan Plover.

Return to the Capital—and to the Duck Pond

That evening we finally made it back to Antananarivo, where we met our two guides for the main trip, Jason Boyce from Birding Ecotours, and our local Malagasy guide, Harry Rakotosalama, along with our three new birding companions, RT, Brandon, and Joi. Because Jason and the three others had all flown in a day early, we set out the next morning on a local trip to—you guessed it!—Lake Anarobia. But this place was so great when I first visited that I looked forward to a second visit.

And it didn’t disappoint. I saw all of the birds that I saw the first time, with better looks at some of the more difficult ones, particularly the Malagasy Pond Heron. (It’s times like this that I wish I had one of those serious cameras like our new companion RT had. When he got on the bus that morning, he had a full-sized suitcase with him; I thought he had misunderstood and believed we were leaving town. Turns out it had his camera and lenses in it. And nothing else.) I also got another look at those Meller’s Ducks (and didn’t have to work at all to see them this time—they were old friends.) And I had some local knowledge that I shared with the group about where the hoopoe pair was nesting. We had just walked by the tree but stopped when one of the birds landed overhead. After it checked us

out, large flying insect in bill, it flew down to the hole in the tree where a hungry chick stuck its head out and grabbed the proffered bug.

The Island's Center: Mid-Level Rainforest, Part I—Andasibe-Mantadia National Park

The next day we hit the road. Like air travel, ground transport in Madagascar is predictably unpredictable. We left the hotel at 7 AM and it took us two hours to get to the outskirts of town. You think you've seen traffic? The only thing close to this I've ever seen was rush hour in New Delhi. Once we got out of town, however, things didn't get much better. The road was the major east/west connector between the capital city and the country's major port, but you wouldn't know it by driving it, other than by the number of trucks on it. It's riddled with potholes capable of swallowing up a small car, and our driver would approach and skirt these with great caution.

And not only are you sharing the road with the trucks but also with pedestrians and every imaginable vehicle—both motorized and not (ox carts, bicycles, cyclos)—and a few unimaginable ones. At one point when we were going down a steep hill, we came up to a wooden go-cart careening down ahead of us—he must have been going about 25 km per hour but we were going 50. Our driver simple eased around him.



View out the front window



Local Taxi



Taxi Closeup (Birds of another feather)



Street Worthy?

In the afternoon we came to our lunch spot, a restaurant on a terrace over a quiet stream with the rainforest towering overhead. As we waited for our food, we birded and picked up some beautiful species, including Ward's Flycatcher, another Vanga—Chaubert's—and the Broad-billed Roller (wish I had a picture of this one for you—look it up; you won't regret it.)

After lunch, we picked up Thierry, our local local guide (by now you've figured out how this works) and headed off into the forest at the V.O.I.M.M.A Community Reserve, a locally-run reserve (I'd tell you what the initials stood for if I knew.) Our first stop was about 20 feet off the main road in a dense thicket. Thierry pointed out a Rainforest Scops Owl sleeping at its day roost—a lovely bird—and given where it was, it was easy to see why we picked up a third guide. That roosting place was true insider knowledge and there turned out to be lots more where that came from.

On the park's trail Thierry kept turning up more surprises like the owl. First up was another nocturnal species also on its day roost—a Collared Nightjar. Even when we were within about ten feet of it, most of our group had trouble spotting it without Thierry's help—it was dark in the rainforest and the bird had superb camouflage. Next up was easier—a troupe of Indri in the trees overhead. Indri are the largest lemur species, and they were actually very easy to see—and very photogenic! Every few minutes one of them would spring from a tree thirty feet over our heads, projecting itself straight out

for ten feet, bounce off another tree or two, and finally end up nonchalantly holding onto a tree overhead, sometimes glancing down at us as if to ask, “Did you see what I just did?”

Nearby the indris Thierry found a pair of Madagascan Ibises. Tony, Nancy, and I had glimpses of them in Masoala. They are notoriously shy and if they sensed our presence they would fly off in a blur. But this pair was settled and Tony and I were able to get close and see their faces (Ibises generally have faces only their mothers could love, but I’m not sure that even their mothers showed this pair any love.)



Collared Nightjar
Photo by Jason Boyce



Indri mother and juvenile



Madagascan Crested Ibis

The small community reserve was rich in the variety of fauna it held. In addition to the indri, we saw the Common Brown Lemur. Other birds included more Blue Couas and one of my favorite vangas, the Nuthatch Vanga (this family of birds fills a remarkable number of niches!) My new birding pal, Joi, got a great digiscoped photo of this bird on its nest.

And this was our first look as one of the “classic” chameleons—Thierry challenged us to find it. Although it was on a tree within about six feet of us, most of us had trouble. But once we focused on it, it was unforgettable—a bright green mature male Parson’s. A couple minutes later, he showed us another example of this species—an immature that was orange (and lacked horns).



Nuthatch Vanga
Photo by Joi Inbody



Male Parson’s Chameleon



Immature Parson’s Chameleon

Remember my digression about travel in Madagascar? Turns out those roads on our first major trip out of Antananarivo were actually really good roads. On our trip into Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, we traveled fifteen kilometers from the park boundary to the point where we parked and hit the park's characteristic ecosystem, mid-level rainforest. It took over an hour and a half to cover the distance.

But if I thought the road itself was tough, the rainforest treated me even worse. Only a couple hundred meters into our walk, I stepped in a hole and went up to my knee; I was lucky—no real damage done. Several hundred meters later, crossing a stream on a log, I lost my balance and went into the water. Wet feet for the rest of the day. I was again lucky, however. A few minutes later when the group stopped to remove leeches, I didn't have any. Several people did—Tony pulled one off of Jason's chest. (Tony apparently didn't feel the one on his neck—nor did anyone else until later when Nancy noticed the large bloodstain on his shirt.)

But we were seeing birds. We had another excellent look at a Madagascan Pygmy Kingfisher, the favorite bird of our Malagasy guide Harry. We had a good look at a Blue Coua and several new species, the Stripe-throated Jery, Rand's Warbler, and the Madagascan Cisticola.

Our target birds for the day were ground rollers—the two I have seen with Tony and Nancy up in Masoala (the Scaly and the Short-legged) and one new one—the Pitta-like. We did a lot of off-trail hiking through very dense rainforest looking for these birds until Thierry finally heard the call of the Pitta-like Ground-Roller. I got it in my binoculars, looking through a very small window in the foliage. “What the heck,” I thought, “I might as well point my camera lens through that same hole.” When I got home that evening, I was very surprised to find an acceptable photo of this gorgeous bird. When you don’t have talent, settle for luck!



Pitta-like Ground Roller

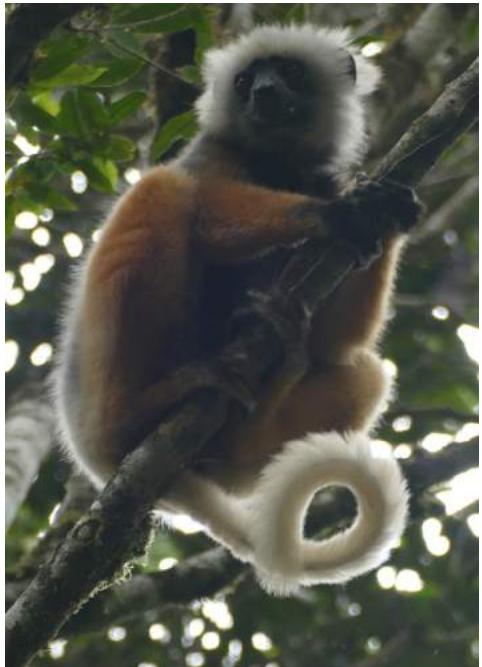


Madagascan Pygmy Kingfisher



Tony's Leech Bite

The other two ground rollers continued to elude us in the afternoon, but we traded the birds for a familiar lemur species, the Red-ruffed Lemur, and a new one, the Diademed Sifaka. A pair of this latter species ended up in the trees right over our heads at one point—feeding, occasionally swapping places, and checking us out surreptitiously.



Diademed Sifaka



Closeup of Diademed Sifaka

When we finally tore ourselves away from the lemurs, we made one last stop to visit a small pond in the reserve. On the way to the pond, I managed another glimpse of the Red-fronted Coua, a notoriously shy bird. The pond itself was just beautiful, surrounded by rainforest and covered with lily pads. A pair of Madagascan Wagtails had a nest in the base of a huge tree that grew out in the pond. We spotted a pair of Meller's Duck swimming in the deep shadows at the back of the pond (for ducks that are meant to be so rare, I had excellent luck with these—seeing them in the city at Alarobia Lake and now here in the depths of the rainforest.) And after a few minutes, the star of the show swam into view, the Madagascan Grebe—a tiny, colorful bird. My eBird list for the day showed 25 species—in 9 hours and 37 minutes—not a huge number of species for the time spent birding but some very special ones.



Pond with Madagascan Wagtail at the base of the tree



Madagascan Grebe

The next day we went to a section of the National Park much closer to where we were staying, so no 90-minute drive followed by 9 1/2 hours of birding. Instead a 15-minute ride followed by five hours of birding. It seemed very civilized.

It was the day of the nesting birds—five nests in all: Tylas Vanga, Crossly’s Vanga, White-throated Oxylabes, Nelicourvi Weaver, and, my favorite that day, the Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher. This last one had its nest close to the trail and calmly ignored the foot traffic that passed by so close. (What was most amazing to me is that many of the people who walked by this colorful bird failed to see it.)



Paradise Flycatcher on nest



Pair of Tylas Vangas at their nest



Crossley’s Vangas with chick

The bird that I really got lucky with that day, however, was the Madagascan Flufftail. I wanted to see a flufftail in southern Africa this summer (and tried to with my guide Dom while in Cape Town) but with no success. Our group had tried to see them the previous day in the National Park (also with no success). This morning we stopped at a stakeout spot; Jason told us where to look and Thierry played the call. After a couple of minutes, Jason said that the bird was coming in. I focused my binoculars where he indicated it would come—in a very dark patch under some dense bushes. Sure enough, the bird appeared and sang a song that seemed much too loud for its small size. But despite the racket it made, I was the only one who saw the bird.

After lunch that afternoon, we went looking for a roosting Madagascan Owl. Thierry had his contacts scout its location for him. But when we showed up at the designated spot, it wasn’t there. After a few minutes of tearing around the forest, however, he found it nearby. It was high up in a pine tree, partially obscured by branches, but it was clearly an owl and it was cleaning its legs with its beak.

Next we went looking for the Madagascan Rail. We were deposited on the road close to where the rail reportedly lived, and Joi, while looking up at a bulbul, spotted a raptor in a tree overhead. Much discussion not only among the three guides—Jason, Harry, and Thierry—but also among those of us who had come to see the rail—Tony, Joi, RT, and me. The consensus was that it was a Madagascan Cuckoo-Hawk, a fairly rare raptor (NOTE: Jason later ruled this to be a Madagascan Buzzard, not quite as rare as the cuckoo-hawk, but a nice raptor nonetheless.)

We then headed down a steep bank towards a marshy bottom. Jason positioned us next to some dense shrubbery, warning us not to lean back since the plants were loaded with thorns that wanted to hook into your clothing. He played the rail’s call and we waited. Nothing happened. But a few minutes later when it seemed like nothing would happen, a rail went shooting across the small path

below us. Only Joi and I saw it. As I remarked afterwards, it looked like a small black chicken that had been shot out of a cannon. I think the whole sighting lasted about .68 of a second.

There was much playing of rail recordings, trying to coax it back for those who missed it. But nothing doing. But we were lucky in one other respect—Tony spotted a Barn Owl flying in the distance that landed out in plain view so that we were all able to get good looks at it.

When we returned to the hotel there was one last bird to attempt—the Madagascan Nightjar. Jason said he'd seen them both previous evenings just when it turned dark. I set off with him and Tony and Joi up towards the swimming pool. Jason looked at his watch. He'd seen the bird the previous night at 7:28. "It's late," he said. It was 7:31. Just then the bird flew overhead and Jason got his flashlight on it. It hovered overhead for a moment. It's wonderful when birds do what they're supposed to do.

The Island's Center: Mid-Level Rainforest, Part II—Ranomafana National Park

It took two days to drive between Andasibe-Mantadia National Park and Ranomafana National Park. (If you've been reading closely, you'll have figured out why.) Along the way we passed countless rice fields and small towns, observing local daily life. The second day we didn't get in until after dark, due to a breakdown along the way. At one point the driver thought the brakes didn't feel right and he stopped to check them (a good thing since we had some long, mountainous descents). When he tried to remove the dust cap over the wheel bearing, the cap shot off with such force that it landed across the road. We were lucky that it didn't hit any of us who were standing around. But those who were closest—our driver and RT—were sprayed with the hot bearing grease.

Other than the breakdown, there were a couple of highlights along the way. At one rest stop, Jason noticed a snake, and as he approached it, he almost ran into a Carpet Chameleon that was on a bush next to him. And after our lunch stop on the second day, with the help of a couple of local guys, we went looking for Madagascan Snipe that were meant to be resident on the ponds nearby. One of the guys flushed the birds, and we got nice looks at them as they jetted by—too fast though for even the real photographers in the group to get a shot off.



Brick Making



Rice Field Workers



Carpet Chameleon

Ranomafana is considered by many to be Madagascar's premiere national park. In some ways, it's like Masoala, although it's in the center of the country and not on the coast. It's rainforest and the trails are steep (but, unlike in Masoala, they can be crowded—Ranomafana is definitely popular). Our breakfast on both days in the park was at 4:45 AM for a 5:30 departure—because of the park's

popularity, Jason and Harry wanted to start early to avoid the worst of the crowds. Ours was indeed the first bus in the parking lot at the park's main trailhead. Luckily the days in Masoala had prepared me for the trails in Ranomafana as we started down a steep descent with our local guide Stephan and his son James.

I was reminded once again that it was springtime here since this was another walk with lots of nesting birding. In this case, they were vangas—Tylas, Pollen’s, and Rufous were all on nests. The vanga are a large family of birds, having 16 species, which are remarkable for their diversity (remember that Helmet Vanga from Masoala? and the Nuthatch Vanga from Andasibe-Mantadia?) The three nesting species we saw, however, bore some resemblance to one another. All had black heads, either rufous or gray backs, and light-colored breasts, and the Rufous and the Tylas each had white collars. But the Pollen’s had a beak—while not quite in the same category as that of the Helmet Vanga—that put those of the other two to shame.



Rufous Vanga on nest



Pollen's Vanga on nest

Of course not all of the vangas we saw were sitting on nests; some were up high in the canopy—Chabert’s—while others were in the mid-canopy—White-headed and Red-tailed. And of course not all of the birds we saw were vangas (my eBird list for the morning had thirty species—which is a lot for a single spell of birding in Madagascar.) The other new birds for the day included the Rand’s Warbler, the Wedge-tailed Jery, and the Common Sunbird-Asity (this bird, too, belongs to a family that is unique to Madagascar, the asities. For you graduates of the Master Birding Program, the asities are the only family of suboscines in Madagascar.)

But the bird of the day had to be the Brown Mesite. This is a small quail-like bird, a member of the mesites family (yet another family unique to Madagascar, this one having only three members). We had spent the better part of the “forced march” in Masoala looking for this elusive rainforest species. Our local guide Joseph had played its call constantly that day, nearly driving Tony, Nancy, and me crazy. In Ranomafana local guide Stephan had a special trail where he knew them to be. Of course this trail was even steeper and narrower than the usual forest trails. But as we approached the crest of the ridge, Stephan’s call was answered by a bird in the dense rainforest below us. The slope plunged precipitously at this point, so this was an instance where the guides didn’t want us going off trail.

Instead, our guide Harry climbed down with Stephan and James into the dense undergrowth below and then spread out on a line. When Stephan located a pair of the birds, he had the other two close ranks, and the three of them acted as beaters would on a grouse hunt, driving the birds towards the guns (but in this case the hunters were all armed with cameras.) I turned out to be in a very opportune position—for a couple of minutes the two birds were directly below me, about six feet away. But it was harder to shoot them at this distance than you'd imagine—the ground cover was luxurious. Every now and then, however, one would poke its head between some leaves and I'd get an amazing look at this elusive bird.



Common Asity-Sunbird



A close look at a Brown Mesite



Blue-legged Chameleon
Photo by Jason Boyce

It wouldn't be Madagascar if we didn't see other things on the walk. Of course there were lemurs—the Common Brown Lemur, the Golden Bamboo Lemur (one of the rarest lemurs and arguably the reason why Ranomafana is internationally famous), the Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur (there's a whole family of Sportive Lemurs), and the Milne-Edwards Sifika (Alphonse Milne-Edwards really got around—look him up). Joi was particularly enamored of the lemurs and thought each one was even better than the last one. Reptiles put in an appearance, too. Near where we saw the Brown Mesites, James found a Brown Leaf Chameleon. This is the same species that we saw in Masoala, but that one's camouflage was dark brown and this one's made it blend into the lighter colored leaf litter. And we saw another of the classic chameleons, the Blue-legged. But the star reptile of the morning was the Satanic Leaf-tailed Gecko (yes, you read that correctly!) It has a tail that looks like a chewed leaf (though the tip is pointed like a spear) and it has little devil-like horns over the eyes. Pretty weird looking.



(Another) Brown Leaf Chameleon (head on left side)



Satanic Leaf Gecko (head on right side)
Photo by Jason Boyce

We had a break for lunch, then afterwards got a closeup look at the Madagascan Owl we had seen a few days earlier—this one was on a tree in the hotel grounds—and much closer to the ground than the one we had seen in Andasibe-Mantadia. Afterwards, we were back in the rainforest. This time the reptiles came first—a beautiful Peacock Day Gecko—and the lemurs weren't far behind—a

family group of Red-bellied Lemurs (the one in the picture below is the papa—you can tell by the white “tears” around his eyes.)



Madagascan Owl Peacock Day Gecko Peek-a-boo!—Red-bellied Lemur (note the white around the eyes)

Now that we've gotten those distracting reptiles and mammals out of the way, we can get back to the birds. Unfortunately, there were few of them on this walk. But what they lacked in quantity they made up for in quality. We had great looks at a Madagascan Blue Pigeon—we had seen them previously but both times the lighting was poor. Now the lighting was excellent—the blue was radiant and we could easily see the bare red skin that surrounds the bird's eye. These are interesting birds from an evolutionary standpoint; whereas the other native pigeon, the Madagascan Green Pigeon, is related to the African Green Pigeon, the closest relative of this bird is found in New Caledonia, 750 miles *east* of Australia in the Pacific Ocean. We also had a Cuckoo Roller flyover—Tony, Nancy and I had seen the bird up close in Masoala but this was the first (and only) time the rest of the group saw it.

The other bird was a real shock to our tour leader Jason. Again, Stephan got excited when he heard it calling and he was soon on the bird, using a laser pointer to show the rest of us its location, for it was deep in the underforest and the light was beginning to fade. But it was unmistakable—the Rufous-headed Ground Roller, a bird that was high on my wish list. You might recall that Tony, Nancy and I had seen two other Ground Rollers, the Short-legged and the Scaly, in Masoala, and our group got the Pitta-like in Andasibe-Mantadia. Jason said he'd only seen this species once previously, and he had warned me that this was the toughest of the five Ground Rollers to see. But there it was, moving about the underforest in front of us, usually obscured by leaves, but occasionally showing a part of itself as it stopped to make a series of its “boop, boop” calls.

This would have been a fitting way to end the day, but afterwards on the way back to our lodge we stopped where there were already almost a dozen other tour buses stopped—along the side of the narrow road (which was also the main highway) running through the rainforest. As it grew dark we did a stroll here, seeing a couple of nocturnal lemurs—the Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur and the Rufous Mouse Lemur. (Nancy pronounced this last animal to be the “Cutest in the world”—pretty high praise from someone who has seen a lot of creatures.) We also saw a male Souimanga Sunbird at his night roost—he wasn't pleased to have the guide shine a flashlight at him. And of course there were chameleons—from the world's smallest, the Deceptive Short-nosed, to one of the most classic, O'Shaghnessy's, a large green one very adapt at changing its color.



Rufous-headed Ground Roller



Cuckoo Roller
All Photos by Jason Boyce



Rufous Mouse Lemur

The next day we revisited the trail we walked the previous afternoon. In particular, we were looking for a couple of birds we had only glimpsed on the previous walk—the Madagascar Yellowbrow and the Velvet Asity—and a couple of new ones—the Brown Emutail and the Dark Newtonia, both real skulkers. The walk began auspiciously as we encountered a mixed flock of Spectacled and Grey-crowned Tetrakas, the latter bird being one I had missed the day before. Then Stephan got excited. A pair of Velvet Asities were eating berries in a tree alongside the path. This was one of the birds I had most wanted to see in Madagascar, and the day before my only look was of the bird’s tail feathers as it flew away. It was early and the light wasn’t yet strong and I must have been excited myself—my photos weren’t very good—but Jason’s were. That green eyeliner on the black bird is striking!

We ended up getting lots of birds again on this walk (24 species) including some colorful ones—the Forest Fody and the male Forest Rock-Thrush. The group also struck out again on the Madagascan Flufftail and the Madagascar Yellowbrow (which had flown across our path the evening before but which we hadn’t seen clearly). But we had great luck with those skulkers. I got a good look at the Dark Newtonia and the whole group (and a group that had followed us) got superb looks at the Brown Emutail, a notoriously difficult bird to see (I think it helped that the one we all saw seemed to be collecting nesting material and was obviously distracted from skulking by this task.) No lemurs this day, but as we neared the end of our walk, we saw something equally good—up ahead of us on the trail were a pair of Ring-tailed Vontsiras, small endemic carnivores that were once classified in the mongoose family. Some would say as charismatic as lemurs.



Velvet Asity
Photo by Jason Boyce



Ring-tailed Vontsira

When we left the rainforest the next day, I was ready to move on. An example. It seemed like every evening, there was something new outside the sliding glass door to my room at the lodge. For instance, the first night when we checked in there was a giant spider parked on my doorstep. People who know me well know that there are few things that bother me. Snakes? Bring ‘em on. Sharks? I love diving with them. Spiders? Forgedaboutit. I hate ‘em. I had to carefully negotiate my way around it to get into my room. On the final evening we were there, Nancy dropped by and the first thing she did was inform me I had a rabid bat on my doorstep. There was indeed a bat there. But whether or not it was rabid, I care not to hazard a guess. All I know is that when I went to dinner, like the spider, it was gone.

Heading South, Changing Ecosystems: Woodland, Grassland, and Dry Forest

As we began another long drive the next morning the landscape was changing—at the edge of the national park we passed areas where the local people were engaged in slash and burn agriculture. Then we entered a new region on the central plateau characterized by granite mountains and huge rock outcroppings. In one of valleys we came to Anja, a local community reserve. The reserve was another new ecosystem, tapia woodland. The visit to Anja put me in mind of the blues song, “One Bourbon, One Scotch, One Beer,” except that the song here was “One Mammal, One Herp, One Bird.” Let’s start with the bird—the Grey-headed Lovebird. This is a sweet-looking small parrot, and, unlike the Vasa Parrots we saw earlier, it’s a Malagasy endemic (and it’s got some color). The herp-of-the-day was a real looker. Or should I say they were; the Oustalet’s Chameleon comes in two colors—the male is brown and the female emerald green.



Grey-headed Lovebird



Oustalet's Chameleon (female)



Oustalet's Chameleon (male)

Photo by Jason Boyce

The reason Anja is a hotspot for overseas visitors is Madagascar’s most charismatic species, the Ring-tailed Lemur. If you are a fan of the movie *Madagascar*, you’ll know this creature as King Julian. Before the reserve was established, there were only forty of these lemurs in the area; now there are 400. The major culprit in the species’ previous decline was deforestation, which has been reversed here. (Human predation was not really a factor; unlike the Northwest of Madagascar where lemur can appear on the human menu, here the Ring-tail is considered sacred and no one eats it.) We saw two family groups—each had about sixteen members (and its own tree). About a quarter of the lemurs were young, only three weeks old. Since we visited at midday, most of the adults were resting in the trees, but the little ones were lively, playing with one another and trying to get their mothers’ attention. It’s easy to see why we are so drawn to this charismatic species.



Ring-tailed Lemurs

After visiting the forest, we drove higher on the plateau, into an ecosystem of grasslands. Our local Malagasy guide Harry said that the area was once good for owls and harriers, but he hadn't seen any in several years. The reason for this was the burning of the grasslands by the local people to encourage new grass growth for their zebu, the local cattle in Madagascar. As we drove across the landscape we saw burning everywhere. No owls, no harriers, only sheets of flame and Black Kites.

The next morning the first baobab trees appeared and shortly afterwards we visited another habitat—the dry forest at Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park. We had several target birds in the dry forest: a couple species of coua—Coquerel's and Giant—and the White-browed Owl. The local guides found all of these and threw in a Frances's Sparrowhawk for good measure.



Changing landscape—the first baobabs



Giant Coua



White-browed Owl

The Arid South—from Spiny Scrub to Spiny Forest

After lunch, the dry forest gave way to the spiny scrub, a stark landscape, and you wondered how anything could survive in it. But as we walked down a dry, dusty road looking for endemics, we encountered local people on the road who lived nearby, some on foot and others with their ubiquitous zebu carts. We had picked up a new local guide, Relatsy, and he soon led us off the path and into the spiny scrub. Now we found out for ourselves what a hostile environment it was. Tony, who was wearing shorts, had his legs scratched to pieces within five minutes. But we got the birds—the Verreaux's Coua, the Red-shouldered Vanga (reputed to be a very difficult bird to see), and, when I

dropped to the back with Harry and spotted a bird, he told me it was the Subdesert Brush-Warbler—which generated a bit of envy that evening when we went over the day's bird list.



Locals with chickens



Zebu cart wagon train



Verreaux's Coua

When we arrived in Ifaty I got email for the first time in several days. My wife Susan, who had been to dinner the day before with our friends Hanno and Bob Lewis with whom we had traveled two months earlier in Southern Africa, said simply, “Bob says you are now in the best part of Madagascar.” As some of you know, Bob is a big-time birder and photographer, so I appreciated hearing this. Ifaty certainly features Madagascar’s most unusual ecosystem—the spiny forest.



In the Spiny Forest

I'd rate the morning in the spiny forest as one of my five top birding sessions ever. When we arrived at the forest, we were met by Relatsy and two of his assistants. Because Brandon (as the only non-birder in the group) had chosen to forego the early start, it meant that the guide-to-visitor ratio was 1 to 1. The birding started off auspiciously—it was barely light and Relatsy had found (or knew where there was) the nest of a Subdesert Mesite on a branch above the trail. And the bird was at home. We found more couas: Crested, Running, and the best named—Red Capped (Green Capped)—denoting a subspecies. And more vangas: Chabert’s and Lafresnaye’s. Next Relatsy found a Madagascan Nightjar sleeping under a bush—we had seen this bird in flight while we were staying near Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, but this close up look at the bird was remarkable.

Then it was on to our next target species—the Long-tailed Ground Roller. Of the birds I had hoped to see on this trip, this ground roller was one of my last two targets. Not only did Relatsy and his crew locate the bird, but, as in the rainforest with the Brown Mesite, they actually herded the bird close to us (which was good for seeing the bird since it spends all its time on the ground and thrives in dense underbrush, and, despite the blue on its wings and tail, it's actually pretty well camouflaged, too.) Not

only was the bird close, but it was in plain view. In fact, Nancy kept wondering, “Why doesn’t it just fly away?” Apparently it’s not in the bird’s nature.

We had one major target to go, the Sickle-billed Vanga. This bird’s bill, like that of the Helmet Vanga, is remarkable. But whereas that bird’s bill is fat and blue, this one’s is long and sickle-shaped. Although we didn’t get very close to this bird, we got a pretty good look at it since it perched up high on a spiny plant and chattered away at us.



Subdesert Mesite



Long-tailed Ground Roller



Sickle-billed Vanga



Sleeping Madagascan Nightjar

We went back to the spiny forest in the late afternoon. On the way we picked up a bird I had missed on previous attempts, the Madagascan Buttonquail. Once in the forest, we were looking for the single local bird we missed earlier, the Thamnornis. Searching for it we saw a couple of friends from the morning, the Subdesert Mesite, the Crested and the Red-capped (Green-capped) Coua, and another distant glimpse of the Sickle-billed Vanga. Finally, as dusk was falling, Relatsy played the call one last time—and a pair of Thamnornises (Thamnorni?) landed in the bush right in front of us.

It was growing dark so we spent a bit of time looking for the Torotoroka Scops Owl, but it had taken the evening off. Soon one of Relatsy’s assistants gave a small shout—he had located a Brown Mouse Lemur and we quickly spotted several other of these tiny creatures as well as a White-footed Sportive Lemur (the first is the subcompact of the lemur world and the second is more like a small four-door sedan). As we were finishing our lemur viewing, Relatsy made a startled sound—right at his feet was a Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec. (You don’t know what a tenrec is? I’m not surprised—nor did I before this trip.) This nocturnal creature does strongly resemble a small hedgehog—not only do they look alike but they have similar habits and diets. I liked seeing the tenrec as much as I did the lemurs. Heresy!



Madagascan Buttonquail



Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec
All Photos by Jason Boyce



Gray Mouse Lemur

Epilogue: On the Edge—Indian Ocean Castaways

We had one last habitat that we hadn't yet visited. In the coastal city of Culear, we were dropped off at the harbor. The problem, though, was that our chartered boat was about fifty meters from the dock and the water was so shallow that the boat couldn't come in. Moreover, it was filled with raw sewage. You remember those zebu carts you saw pictures of earlier? Well, each of us had to step off the dock into one of those small carts that was parked in about two feet of water. When we were four to a cart, the driver prodded the yoke of zebu with a stick, and the zebu lumbered off towards the boat. At the boat we had to perform an even more precarious balancing act, stepping from the zebu cart onto the rocking boat. Luckily none of us fell in. Even more luckily, no one got a picture me in the cart or doing the balancing act. (But I did get one of some of the others. And I got a good one of Tony dealing with the transport on the way home—explanation of that further below.)



Transfer via zebu cart to boat



Transfer via canoe to boat

After an hour's boat ride we landed on a beach where we went for one of the day's two target species—the Littoral Rock-Thrush. The place we landed was a resort, however, not another littoral forest, which seemed odd to me, given the bird's name. But within three minutes of looking, we spotted it perched on a small tree nearby. And as a bonus, we also saw a number of Subdesert Brush Warblers, the bird I had seen in the spiny scrub that the others had missed. It's great when the birds just show up—littoral forest or no littoral forest.

After a bit we were back in the boat, this time to cross the channel to a nearby small sandy island called Nosy Ve, a sacred place for the local people. Our target here was the Red-tailed Tropicbird. (If you've read any of my pieces for the GGAS website, you might remember meeting this bird a couple of years ago; if not, and you are interested, here's the link to the earlier piece: <https://goldengateaudubon.org/blog-posts/tropicbird-bed-2/>). This is a gorgeous bird that was breeding on the island. There was no place for the boat to land, so we hopped out into a couple of feet of water and waded ashore.

While we were walking across the island looking for the tropicbird, I spotted a far distant (and much larger) seabird. I called to Jason, "There's a frigatebird on the horizon." He looked. And looked again. "Where?" he finally inquired (somewhat skeptically, I thought). I gave him directions where to look. This time he saw it. "How on earth did you see that?" he wanted to know. I didn't tell him my secret (and you're crazy if you think I'm going to tell you now.) Consulting the field

guide and the photos, we later determined it to be a Great Frigatebird. Soon we started seeing the tropicbirds. There were about a half dozen or so flying in the area, some of them returning to their nests in thickets where we could hear their chicks calling out to be fed.



Red-tailed Tropicbird



Subdesert Brush Warbler



Great Frigatebird

The trip back to the port was a reversal of the journey out—with a twist. On Nosy Ve the tide had gone very far out, so we had to walk out a distance. On the way, Harry bargained with the crew of an outrigger canoe who agreed to shuttle us to our boat. Another precarious transfer from dugout outrigger to our big, flat-bottomed speedboat. Then a 90-minute trip back against wind and swell, resulting in all of us getting completely soaked. And finally the transfer from the boat to the jetty by zebu cart. And incredible journey—one that's all in a day's work in Madagascar.

I thought we were done birding—we had gotten all of our major targets, we'd be flying back to Tana a day early because Madagascar Air had canceled our scheduled flight, and Jason was coming down with the bug that Nancy, Tony, and I had all had earlier. But Jason had one more day in him, so Harry had us on the bus at 5:15 AM and we headed to Belalanda, a local wetland that promised several species we hadn't seen yet. And, like all wetlands, it delivered. There were lots of shorebirds, including two new ones, the Common Ringed Plover and the Curlew Sandpiper. There were some familiar friends, including a dozen Lesser Flamingos and lots of Kittlitz's Plovers and Black-winged Stilts (one with chicks). Everyone agreed, though, that the bird of the day was the Baillon's Crake—we managed fleeting views of a pair of these secretive birds (but no photos, alas).



Lesser Flamingos



Black-necked Stilt chicks



Kittlitz's Plover

That afternoon we flew back to Tana. I enjoyed a whole day in Tana in which I worked on my bird notes and didn't pick up the binoculars. The next afternoon I began the two-day journey home.

Postscript/Postmortem

This was an extraordinary trip. The Madagascar checklist we had been given by Birding Ecotours listed 247 species for the country (including the Snail-eating Coua, which it labels as "EX" for "extinct" so there wasn't much chance of seeing that one.) I ended up seeing 155 species (my target for Madagascar had been 100), 108 of which are endemic to Madagascar. That's an astonishing rate of endemism. We saw representatives of all six families endemic to Madagascar: the Mesites (two of three species), the Couas (9 of 9—I'm not counting that extinct Snail-eating Coua); the Cuckoo Roller (one of one!); the Ground Rollers (all five—the highpoint of my trip); the Asities (two of four); and the Vangas (14 of 16). And, of course, I saw all of those other endemics, too—chameleons (11 species), lemurs (17 species), and those other odd mammals, the tenrec and the vontsira. (There were also geckos, snakes, lizards, and plants, too—many, many endemic species of plants (there are nine species of baobabs alone). I was already overwhelmed by the fauna; the flora proved to be too much for me.)

And for the year? I've got 945 birds to date—only 55 to go! Gee, I might really pull this thing off.... But don't expect more than a handful in November. I'm not leaving California and the new birds are getting thin on the ground (and in the air).

Bird of the Month. And now for something completely different. There IS no bird of the month! Instead there are five—the members of the Ground Roller family. Yes, that's right, and you should know their names by now: the Scaly, the Short-legged, the Pitta-like, the Rufous-headed, and the Long-tailed. You could say I was smitten by these birds. Go back and check out their pictures—between me and my buddy Tony and our guide Jason, I've got pictures of 'em all in this month's newsletter. (Not a small feat.) Here's what Frank Hawkins, Roger Safford and Adrian Skerrett have to say about them in *Birds of Madagascar and the Indian Ocean Islands*: "Plumage cryptic in some, bright in others, but striking in all. Often secretive and difficult to observe, although can become relatively conspicuous and tame when calling in breeding season. Nest in cavities. Birds of primary rainforest and spiny forest, rightly among the most prized target species for the visiting birder." 'Nuff said.

This month's quiz: How many Madagascar endemics can you name? Birds only! (Unlike previous quizzes, since I don't know the answer to this one, I'm not putting it below.) Email your answers to travelprogram@goldengateaudubon.org for a chance to sign up for one of our future Madagascar birding trips. (And don't forget that last month's jackpot had rolled over to this month.)

Finally, I'd like to thank my friends Josh Kemp and Don Johns for their donations to GGAS. You guys are the best. Let me remind anyone who hasn't done so yet that now would be a great time to make a donation in support of this organization's wonderful work—my website is <https://goldengateaudubon.z2systems.com/np/clients/goldengateaudubon/campaign.jsp?campaign=449&&test=true>.