



Madagascar Oct 03-20, 2023

Prologue:

I don't remember the last time I considered my next mammal watching destination and came up with a wish list of like, 15-20 top-wanted mammal species, then came back saying I've seen all of them. But in Madagascar it happened.

Why hadn't I visited Madagascar earlier on? Years ago, when I managed to sneak in a non-human primates' course amidst my Mechanical Engineering degree, I learned about and dreamed of visiting Madagascar. But somehow, when I became a mammal watcher and spent years chasing after jaguars, pangolins, and orangutans, I seem to have forgotten how much I wanted to travel there. It wasn't until my dinner and drinks with Jon Hall and Alex Meyer in New York in 2022, prior to Jon's amazing trip there, that it resurfaced. As soon as I started doing my research, I realized that not only were there super-cool looking primates there, there were endemic, "gettable" carnivores, and some freak-looking other endemics such as the lowland streaked tenrec and the giant rat. So, after the wave of 2022 reports combined with the horror stories of Madagascar's forests' dire state, I realized this had to happen soon!

Alex Meyer was in charge of this one, and I must admit that with a baby and a new job at the same time, I almost completely neglected looking at the itinerary or having any input, and just blindly trusted Alex. I could only join the first 2.5 weeks, and I gave Alex a list of my top-wanted species. I only had to make a single, solo day trip to see the ring-tailed lemurs, but otherwise my portion of the trip included all my top targets. Jonas Livet and Rūta Vaicekauskaitė completed our 4-person group, and they did have some more input than me into the itinerary and accommodations. The itinerary was quite intense but miraculously it worked out perfectly! It is also thanks to the lack of any unplanned issues such as car or boat problems, last-minute dramatic flight changes (which are ever-so-common in Madagascar), health issues or injuries, and not a single activity cancelled or postponed due to rain, which is especially lucky, even for October. So, while this worked perfectly for us, I could totally see it going differently if it were to be repeated.

At the end of the trip, I calculated having spent 116 hours in transfer vs. 105 hours in the field. It was slightly different for Alex, and for Ruta and Jonas.

Itinerary:

Day "0": TLV --> Antananarivo, stay @ BG Tours hotel, ~1 hour outside Tana toward Antsirabe

Day 1 (3rd Oct, 2023): Tana to Ranomafana, stay @ Setam Lodge

Day 2: Ranomafana, stay @ Setam Lodge

Day 3: Rano to Kianjavato, stay @ Kianjavato Ahmanson Field Station (KAFS)

Day 4: Kianjavato to Ranomafana. (Tomer only) to Anja Community and back, stay @ Setam Lodge

Day 5: Ranomafana to Tana, Stay @ Gassy Country House near Tana Airport

Day 6: Flight to Morondava, stay @ Akiba Lodge (formerly Camp Amoureux) in Kirindy Forest area

Day 7: (Tomer and Alex only)* Kirindy to Tsingy de Bemaraha, stay @ Soleil de Tsingy

Day 8: (Tomer and Alex only)* Tsingy de Bemaraha, stay @ Olympe de Bemaraha

Day 9: (Tomer and Alex only)* Tsingy to Kirindy Forest, stay @ Kirindy Ecolodge

Day 10: Kirindy to Morondava, fly to Tana, drive to Andasibe, stay @ Chez Marie**

Day 11: Andasibe-Mantadia area (Analamazoatra, VOIMMA, Mitsinjo), stay @ Hotel Feon' ny Ala

Day 12: Andasibe-Mantadia area (Maromizaha), stay @ Hotel Feon' ny Ala

Day 13: Andasibe to Tana, stay @ Gassy Country House near Tana Airport

Day 14: Fly to Maroantsetra, transfer to Farankaraina, camp @ Farankaraina near old bungalows

Day 15: Farankaraina to Masoala, stay @ Chez Arol

Day 16: Masoala, stay @ Chez Arol

Day 17: Masoala to around Soanierana Ivongo***, stay @ random run-down bungalows near beach

Day 18: Soanierana Ivongo area to Toamasina***, fly to Tana. I stayed at Fly-Inn near airport. Trip End.

Day “19”: Tana to Tel Aviv

* Jonas and Ruta stayed 2 additional nights at Kirindy Ecolodge.

** We had Chez Marie booked for 3 nights because of lack of availability elsewhere. This was changed on the spot after 1 night at this unacceptable lodge.

*** We were initially supposed to stay in Masoala (Chez Arol) a 3rd night then fly back to Tana through Maroantsetra. But around 5 months before our trip, Tsaradia Airlines decided to permanently reduce the Tana <--> Maroantsetra flights to once a week, resulting in us having to forego a night in Masoala and spend 2 days getting to Toamasina for a flight to Tana.

Useful Notes:

Guiding Services and Tour Operator: We booked with Patrick Randrianantenaina (@patrick_madagascar_tourguide on Instagram), who both helped Alex plan his 36-day itinerary, and helped organize our ground excursions, guides, drivers, etc., except in Masoala where he was mostly our spotting guide. I can highly recommend Patrick – he's smart, funny, well-connected, has an eagle-eye and has a magic energy for attracting carnivores (no joke!). Of course, Africa is Africa and things happen – he's still gaining his confidence and I think he has the potential to become the Madagascan Harriet. Meanwhile, asking lots of questions and making sure you clearly understand the plan at any point never hurts. But I will definitely book him next time I go to Madagascar.

The species identification is based on:

- Handbook of Mammals of Madagascar, 2022 Edition by Nick Garbutt
- Lemurs of Madagascar, 5th Edition
- Dr. Steve M. Goodman, who kindly helped us with identifications of questioned species
- McLain et al., 2017 (2018). A New Cheirogaleus (Cheirogaleidae: Cheirogaleus crossleyi Group) Species from Southeastern Madagascar. Primate Conservation. 31.
- IUCN Red List Distribution maps

Species Viewing Statistics: Just before the trip, I finally found time to look into what we should expect to see. I compiled the “data” from reports on Mammal Watching since 2016, which included relevant sites to our itinerary. This has 4 tabs that list the species from each report for each location, species stats per site, the total number of expected species, and a prediction for which ones we would see. Eventually, I also added the actual species list (also attached at the end of this report). The file is attached here:

<https://www.mammalwatching.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Madagascar-Summary.xlsx>

Looking at it in retrospect, knowing what I know now, there are some wrongly-ID'ed and outdated species that have been split since they were reported, but I'm leaving it as is, and I want to share it anyway.

Regarding SIM card – Telma has reception in remote places including Masoala peninsula and Chez Arol. Orange didn't. Telma is also cheaper if I'm not mistaken.

Day-by-day Account:

Day 0: Landing in Madagascar

I landed in the afternoon and waited for Alex, who landed an hour later. After exchanging some money and buying a SIM card, we were off to BG Tours hotel. Before checking in, Alex asked if they had any bats, to which the answer was "no". But as this was happening, Alex and I spotted some bats flying, and Alex pointed them out to the owners. These were never to be identified...

The place is highly recommended in my opinion. Since we had to wake up at 5am, we requested an early dinner. But they had a 19:30 dinner with all the hotel guests, which starts with an apéritif in the living room, followed by a "communal" dinner. But to me, this was a perfect welcome to Madagascar, with the other guests being mostly French. The food was great, too!

Alex, having booked the hotel due to it being an hour out of the airport toward Antsirabe (and Ranomafana), was perplexed to find out that all the hotel guests weren't going to Ranomafana, and most of them had never heard of it... which I found hilarious!

Jonas and Ruta who came from 4 days around Nosy Be had their flight delayed by a few hours, and only landed around 22:40. We would only meet them the following morning.



Day 1: The Long Drive to Ranomafana

We met Ruta and Jonas around 5:30am and left just before 6 for Rano. With a lunch stop at a nice but touristy spot about half-way to Ranomafana, we drove for over 13 hours, arriving after 19:30 in the evening, to a mildly rainy Setam Lodge, cozily nestled roadside across the river from the national park. As we drove on the main road bordering the river and national park, we saw several groups of tourists with flashlights on the road, who were looking at chameleons and nocturnal lemurs. Great sign!



By the way, I, Tomer Ben-Yehuda, hereby grant a Michelin Star to Setam Lodge... but more on that later.

Obviously, we had no time for dinner, as we wanted to maximize our time on the very first evening. We

met Patrick, who had waited at Ranomafana following our suggestion, to spare him the long drives to Tana and back.

It was still drizzling, but we were out! Within minutes of walking on the main road starting at 20:00, I spotted a dwarf lemur in the thermal scope, which ended up being a **Groves' dwarf lemur**. My first wild lemur!

Next up the road was our first **Brown (aka Rufous) Mouse lemur**, which posed quite nicely on a branch that apparently had little bit of banana smeared on. Soon after, still in the light drizzle, I found a thermal image at the roadside, on the ground. We put our flashlights on it and were surprised to see a **Microgale shrew tenrec** running through the roadside

underbrush! We had some great looks at it, from 0m distance, and tried to catch it for a picture, but it ran up into the thick vegetation and disappeared. It was small, under 10ish cm, pale-ish gray coat, wet, and with a tail that was distinctively short, around head and body length or shorter. **Pale shrew tenrec** is what we all thought after looking through a few different sources, but it remains a “most probable”, yet a confirmed **Microgale**.



underbrush! Patrick also found us *Cryptic, Glaw's and Oshaighnessy's chameleons* along the road. But the next mammal was to be a special one. Patrick knows of an exact spot along the road where a Fanaloka frequents around 9pm. We spent some time just waiting in complete darkness and scanning around with our 3 thermal scopes as the rain stopped. Suddenly, Jonas announced “Fanaloka, it’s on the road”. We all looked at the obvious shape of the animal in the thermal scope, until it got a little closer and we were able to spend several good minutes with this **Fanaloka** before it scurried away up the side-road.



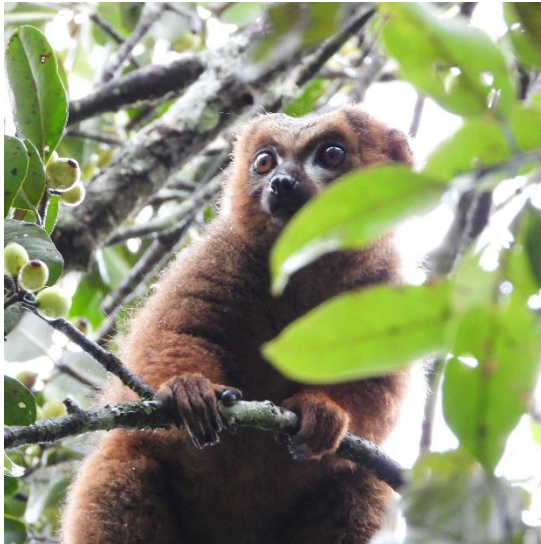
Can we take a minute to discuss why the Malagasy named two of their animals Fanaloka and Falanouc, which is obviously confusing as fuck? And then let's add the fact that the former's scientific name is Fossa Fossana, not to be confused with an actual Fossa, which is *Cryptoprocta ferax*. This is of course done to confuse mammal watchers. Can we just go back to calling Fanaloka "Malagasy civet"? Kthanksbye.

There were also some bats flying around, but we didn't identify them. After a delicious and late dinner at Setam Lodge, Jonas and Ruta went to sleep, but my adrenaline was still too high, and I convinced Alex to walk the road with me for another hour. We did see two rodents, one of which was most likely a tufted-tailed rat, and the other which looked like a tiny mouse, but they would remain unidentified. With that, we ended the first evening around 23:15ish.

Day 2: Ranomafana

After a great breakfast at Setam lodge, we entered the park just after 7:00. Hopes were high: this is one of the most biodiverse national parks in all of Madagascar! The adrenaline was high, especially considering this was my first mammal watching trip since my son was born, 8 months earlier.

Only a few minutes into our hike in the park, Alex and Patrick quickly spotted an **Eastern red forest rat** running across the trail, which I didn't see. Luckily, minutes later, we saw another one walking through the underbrush, and the guys (Alex and Jonas) got pictures, while I got a video. Then the news came that our spotter Oliver has found **red-bellied lemurs**. Coordinating over the phone, we met Oliver, and rushed to the sighting. This was the theme of the day at Ranomafana: spotters find lemurs and we rush to the sighting. We walked through the dense, seemingly virgin forest, only to



find groups of people already with the lemurs at each sighting. Not that I was complaining!

Lighting and clouds was shit for photography, but we spent a good 10ish minutes with lemurs before being told that Oliver found the **Golden bamboo lemurs**. The discovery of the latter was the reason Ranomafana became a national park. Being critically endangered, this is one of the cooler-looking diurnal lemur species. Once again, we sped through the forest, feeling isolated,



only to find several people already there, at least one which I recognized from the previous lemur sighting. Fog and light conditions were still not optimal, but we observed the lemurs and enjoyed our time with them.

Our next target for the day was the Sifaka. But while waiting for Oliver to spot them, we took a 'side' trail, where we first found the iconic *Pitta-like ground roller*, and later Patrick pointed out a sleeping family of **Peyrieras's woolly lemurs**, which were particularly cute. But our photography session was interrupted with news of the **Milne-Edwards Sifaka** having been spotted. Knowing these are sometimes difficult to find, we rushed faster to the sighting. When we got there, we found



the sifakas stationary and relaxed, and surrounded by close to 30-40 other people taking pictures. Their position against the backlit sky was still not optimal, but as we observed them, they got closer and I even have some iPhone photos of them.



The next target would have been Red-fronted brown lemur, but Alex wanted to resume his photo session with the woolly lemurs, which turned out to be a lucky decision, because as we headed in that direction, Alex found another mammal and tried to point it out for me on the ground. I saw a pair of Pitta-like ground rollers down the hill near a small stream but was surprised that Alex would point so adamantly at a pair of birds, let alone a species we saw closer and better already. As the word "mongoose" finally registered in my head, I realized what Alex



was pointing at, as a **Ring-tailed vontsira** revealed itself through the vegetation in the area he was pointing at. Yes! My second most wanted carnivore in Madagascar, and surely one of the cooler-looking ones that exist, with its vivid reddish coat and those cool black rings around its tail. It was too quick for a picture, and I had realized that Alex sacrificed his own chance for a photo to ensure I got to see it, since he knew how much I wanted to see it. Now that's true friendship!

Trying to re-locate the animal, in 2 consecutive events, random guides enthusiastically pointed us to look down the hill. But on both occasions, it turned out they were pointing at the Ground rollers.. Damn-it! We had lost the animal.

Jonas and Ruta were further up the trail with Patrick. Luckily for Ruta and Patrick, the vontsira ended up on the trail closer to them, and they got brief but clear views. Less fortunately for Jonas, he was on a pee-break and missed it.

Patrick took us to a side-trail where he had found an active nest of the endemic **White-tailed forest rat**. Luring the rat out with light scratching on the trunk, the rat curiously poked its face out of the hole, and



we got to see it. A very cool species indeed! We then walked over to the picnic and lookout point, which often has ring-tailed vongsiras hanging around for food scraps, and at night, Fanaloka. The place was nice and so was the view, but no carnivores showed up during our 20-minute break. We did see a huge, crazy spider, and our first of many beautiful *Striped day geckos*.

Oliver lost the red-fronted brown lemurs but found another group of Golden bamboo lemurs. A single animal put on a nice show, now in the sun so we could enjoy its golden color in full daylight, and up-close. We also heard Black and white ruffed lemurs but didn't make a special effort to find them, as we had head out for lunch, and we

still had plenty of time to see this species at Ranomafana, Kianjavato, and Andasibe-Mantadia areas.

Setam had good food in general, but this lunch started with a ramen soup that's probably the best I've ever had. It was just fucking delicious, I couldn't get over it! They also had a nice albeit messy shrimp dish, rice, veggies and a nice dessert, but that ramen bowl..! I swear Setam lodge had some of the better food I've had anywhere in the world outside of Europe, let alone a Lodge restaurant. This is why I use my non-existing Michelin Star authority to grant Setam Lodge a Tomichelin Star. You're welcome.



During lunch we received word that the local researchers who Patrick was in touch with caught **Webb's** and **Lesser tufted-tailed rats** in their traps, and we were invited for the release. We made a quick stop there, then continued up to Sector 2 of the Ranomafana national park, known as Vohipara, which is located up the road, at a slightly higher altitude than the main sector (sector 3). This location is where



Patrick usually finds the Small-toothed sportive lemur at one of 3 known day-roosts. Apparently, last night's rain was a damper on our chances.

The rest of the crew would have another chance 2 days later, while I was on my daytrip to see ring-tailed lemurs. But I was assertively confident – we will see it today! 😊



Not long after entering the reserve we saw another group of Milne-Edwards sifaka. These were collared, with individuals each having a distinguishing marks such as a pink star, a blue circle etc. Patrick also tried looking for Mantella frogs but to no avail. We reached the first Sportive lemur day-roost, but nobody was home. Same with the second day-roost. Everybody was thinking today was not the day for this species, but I remained assertively optimistic that the 3rd location, which was much further, would be it. I was right! The cutest lemur of the day, the **Small-toothed sportive lemur** was just hanging out in the open by its day-roost tree-hole. At one point it jumped into the hole, and then



weaseled back out in a very sleek fashion. We got to witness this behavior 2 or 3 times, and then we left it alone. It should also be mentioned that this sector of the park had very few people, and we were completely alone most of the time.



After the sportive lemur we actually spent about an hour and a half birdwatching for some of Jonas and Ruta's targets: *Blue coua* which

flew overhead, *Malagasy coucal*, *Madagascar Cuckoo* which we also saw earlier that day, and some

other nice birds that came around. We also tried but didn't succeed at finding Madagacar flufftail, which was very close, but stayed in the dense bush. Also Rufous-headed ground roller, which we heard but never saw.



As it started getting dark, we made our way back to the main road, missing sunset by 20 minutes or so. We were told that dusk is a prime time for finding dwarf and mouse lemurs. However, throughout our trip we found that they come around throughout the night. We specifically wanted to start our night walk around Vohipara, due to the higher altitude, which is home to what is most likely **Sibree's dwarf lemur**. We saw one that we think is it. As we walked down all the way from the Vohipara parking all the way to the main park entrance, we saw 3 dwarf lemurs, one of which we are confident is another Groves' dwarf lemur, and the Brown mouse lemur again, among some frogs and sleeping birds. Scientific disagreements still exist on dwarf lemurs speciation. But based on the most recent paper, I now believe that indeed we saw Sibree's dwarf lemur near Vohipara, and the rest were all Groves' dwarf lemur, including on the previous night.

Day 3: Kianjavato

My adrenaline was still too high, and I decided to wake up before everyone and visit the small gazebo which overlooks the river and waterfall from 6:00 to 7:00. Of course, I was hoping for some broad-striped vontsira or falanouc action, but all I saw during the hour of sitting was more *Chabert's vangas*, *magpie robins*, *Crested drongo*, *Malagasy sunbirds*, *Blue pigeons* and other birds. At 7 we met for another delicious breakfast, and watched as a couple of Red-bellied lemurs crossed the road. Then, we made a quick stop with the researchers, who were going to release a **Tanala tufted-tailed rat** that they caught overnight.

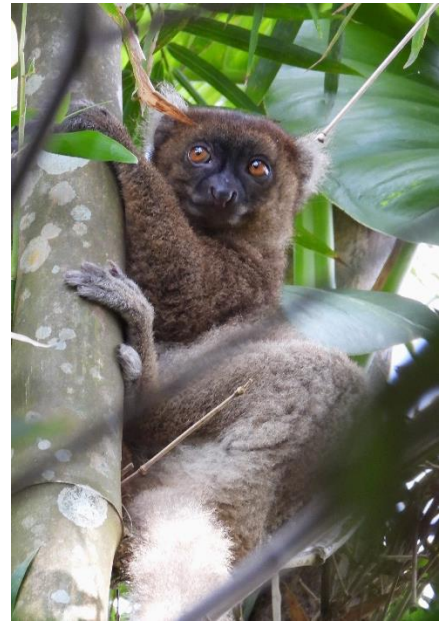
By 8 we embarked on a 2ish-hour ride to Kianjavato. We were skeptical about the actual drive time, since the supposed 10-hour drive to Ranomafana turned into 13 hours. But to our surprise, and despite "market day" in some villages we drove through, we made it in just under 2 hours. After a briefing about the excellent Kianjavato research projects, we were taken to our "rooms". I must admit – I was afraid of not having hot water or beds. But the setup was elegant: each "room" has two tents – each equipped with a cot and a decently-comfortable mattress. There were out-house bathrooms and ambient temperature water showers. But the views from Alex and I's "room", and the little hike down the wooden bridges from our room on top of the hill to the research center, all make this place truly a gem.



We had several targets at Kianjavato: During the day we would look for the Greater bamboo lemurs, Eastern sucker-footed bats, Black & white ruffed lemurs and anything else that would come along. Then at night we would look for Jolly's mouse lemur and the local, recently described but yet-to-be named species of Dwarf lemur (CCS5), as well as the Greater Hedgehog tenrec. In addition, they also have a few radio-collared Aye-ayes, which Jonas wanted

to see, in case we dip on it at Farankaraina. First, I refused to acknowledge the possibility of missing Aye-aye at Farankaraina, as I was under the impression that it's practically guaranteed. I wanted my "virgin eyes" to see my first Aye-aye completely wild and non-collared. But Jonas's fear was contagious, and we agreed to try, just in case. However, the nearest Aye-aye's nest was far in the steep, hilly forest. This would have meant forgoing most of the other targets. So, we gave it up and left Aye-aye for Farankaraina.

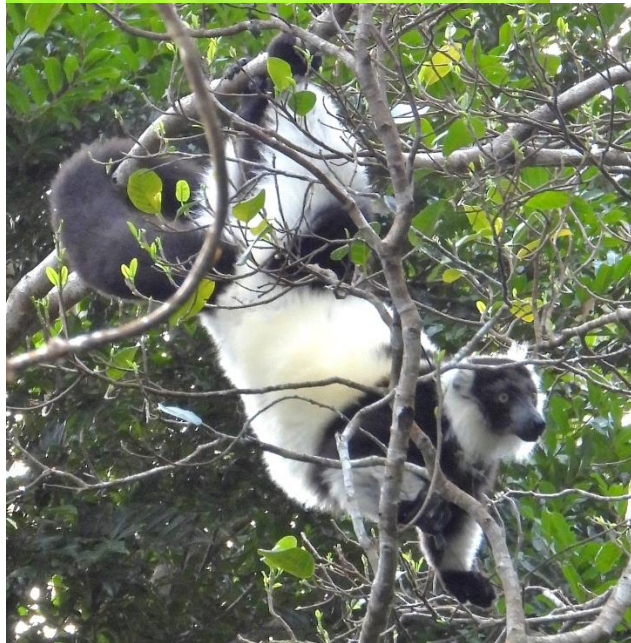
After lunch we each planted a tree at the Kianjavato re-forestation project, which was great. Around 15:00 we set out for the forest through the village. We found the **Greater bamboo lemurs** easily and spent some time with them. They are mostly radio-collared, so the researchers know where they are. I asked to see one that's not collared for the picture, but otherwise I highly support the great conservation initiatives. I hope many people go there and support the project. They told us that before COVID they had 3 collared families, and they lost one during the pandemic. They found collars and other signs, meaning the lost family was probably poached. Mind you – this is one of the most endangered primate species on earth, and I sincerely hope it can be conserved and stabilized at Kianjavato. It's too late for them at Ranomafana, as there is one last known individual in the park who hangs out with golden bamboo lemurs.



Next, as we were on the way to find the ruffed lemurs, we were intercepted by another researcher who found the **Easter sucker-footed bats**. Even I enjoyed seeing these cool critters with their suction cup limbs. After a long photo session, we continued up the



very steep hill, stopping at an abandoned research lab that has been reclaimed by nature, and which looks like it's taken straight out of either Jurassic Park or a horror story. I'm pretty sure I saw IT (the clown) when I peeked into one of the abandoned dark rooms. Additionally, and equally creepy, there were also tons of **Peter's sheath-tailed bats** flying inside, which mostly Alex and Jonas took pictures of, in flight.



We then continued hiking for about an hour up the steep trail, finally connecting with the **Black & white ruffed lemurs**, which were also in my top 10-ish most wanted species list. There were only two, which was surprising, since their noises made me think there would be more. While observing them, I noticed something in another tree, and found our first **Red-fronted brown lemurs**. And in the middle of all of this, one of the local guides also found a *Greater Vasa parrot*, which was on my secret list of birds...

Before dark, we made our way down the hill to a little clearing, from where we would start our night walk towards the entrance. As darkness descended, we switched into night mode, and spotted our first **CCS5 Dwarf Lemur** rather quickly.



I will just refer to it as that for now, but in the future, I will revise this report and re-name it when an official name is assigned.

We saw several dwarf lemurs, and finally, after all our accompanying researchers and guides (an entourage of 6 + Patrick) put together concentrated effort, they finally found a **Jolly's mouse lemur** and spent some time with it, as it was mostly hidden except for a few seconds here and there.

This is a good time to mention a warning that I should include in every trip report since 2019: thermal 'scoping' while walking, especially in muddy rain forests, especially in unfamiliar terrain, especially on steep trails, especially on bridges with broken planks... is **dangerous!** I'm lucky I didn't die in Borneo, when my foot slipped through the space between the planks of a 30-meter-high bridge over the river in Danum Valley. Luckily, I didn't fall through, but hit my knee hard, managed to get up, walk a few steps, lay down and lose consciousness for a few seconds. When I woke up, somehow and miraculously I was still gripping and holding my \$2000 thermal scope, which wasn't strapped. My subconscious clearly knows what's important in life.



Having said that and having seen both local, nocturnal arboreal targets, I turned my thermal scope downwards for the rest of the evening, walking carefully and scanning for terrestrial goodies. When I saw a thermal signature, on the ground in a grassy clearing downhill from the trail, I called out loud for everyone to come. Jonas and Ruta were close by, but Alex was ahead with one of the guides. When it moved, I realized this was for sure a greater hedgehog tenrec and called it out as such. I turned on the spotlight, and sure enough, a **Greater hedgehog tenrec** was moving through the grass on the edge of the forest. We quickly and carefully walked downhill toward where the hedgehog tenrec was last seen but



didn't manage to re-locate it in the light or thermal. Luckily, before we had time to mourn the lack of pictures from the encounter, we got word from the guys ahead that they found another individual! We were able to observe and photograph this one well, as it went from tucking its head in, to feeling a little more relaxed and scurrying away to the thick vegetation. What a creature, and to think it is actually unrelated to hedgehogs, and that it only looks like this via means of perfect parallel evolution! Definitely another one of my top 20 on the pre-trip wish list. Boom.

Before we made it back to the village I thermal-scoped another lemur, which turned out to be a sleeping Greater bamboo lemur. Finally, across the river and right before the village, I thermal-scoped a rodent which turned out to be an invasive **Brown rat**.

Very happy with our 8-lifer afternoon and evening, we said goodbye to the team and drove back to our lodge for dinner and a short night's sleep. After a rice n' chicken dinner and a refreshing shower in a shed with frogs, roaches and gigantic spiders, we went to sleep for a few hours before having to wake up at 4:45am.



Day 4: Back to Rano and Anja for Tomer!

Today was an exciting day for me, as I would see the most iconic animal in Madagascar – the ring-tailed lemur. I should mention that when traveling with “Zoo Chatters”, species have different meanings than they do with purely wild mammal watchers. While seeing ring-tailed lemurs had been a dream of mine, they are by far the most common lemur in zoos, making them a low-ranking target for Alex and Jonas. Ruta was keener on seeing them in the wild but hearing about the 4-hour drive each way, factoring in with all the other long drives, this remained a solo trip for me, as originally planned.

We had an early breakfast and were on the road by 5:30, reaching Ranomafana by 7:30. Patrick and I were on the road before 8, with his brother, Mario, who was to be our driver for the day. I had 2 targets: see ring-tailed lemurs, and to miss nothing back at Rano. Have my cake and eat it, too, as some may say.

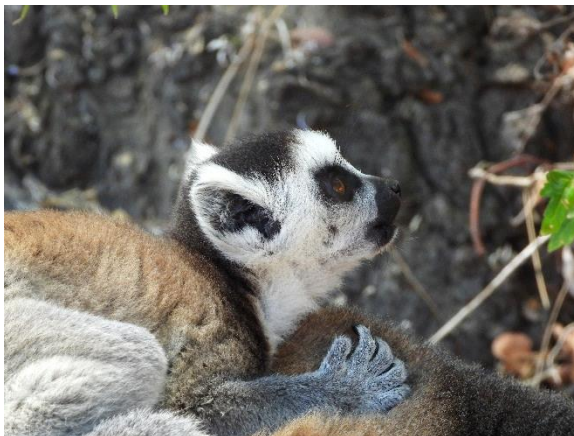
I actually enjoyed the drive, with scenic views of red hills and mountains rising from green valleys and dotted with random villages of varying architecture styles – some fairly modern, while most were more traditional and some had primitive huts. Around 10:30 Patrick announced that we were making good progress, then he called a restaurant where we would stop for an early lunch. He arranged it so that the food was ready at the table when we arrive, and we were in-and-out in 20 minutes. It worked perfectly



and I thanked him. As we neared Anja, the small dry forest reserve nestled at the bottom of the dramatic round granite boulders seemed like a scene out of fairy tale. Seriously, I loved the place, aesthetically.

I had 1 hour inside the reserve, so that I could make it back in time for evening activities. It reminded me a little of the 1-hour timeline with both species of gorillas, except this one self-imposed. I had an amazing time observing the **Ring-tailed lemurs** and their babies interacting in the trees, on the rocks, and very close to me. We also saw

Oustalet's Giant Chameleon in action, impressively catching a fly, as well as the *Madagascar Girdled Lizard* and the strange-looking *Flatida rosea*, or the *flower-spike bug*. After an hour of being in lemur heaven, we left this amazing place for the drive back. We made it back before 17:00 and I asked Patrick to stop at the roadside cave where the **Major's long-fingered bats** hang out. It was a 5-minute in-and-out deal, and I knew that the rest of the team visited this cave earlier. Upon returning to the lodge, I went out on my own while waiting for the rest of the team, who were still inside the park, looking for Eastern lesser (grey) Bamboo Lemurs. I found a quiet spot along the road which overlooks the river and



saw Red-fronted brown lemurs and Red-bellied lemurs while waiting. When the crew was finally out of the forest, they shared that they saw the single Greater bamboo lemur left at Ranomafana, as well as the *Velvet asity* which was my top bird target. But they didn't end



up finding the Eastern lesser bamboo lemurs, nor any other new mammal for the day except the long-fingered bat.

At night we tried for the Webbed-footed tenrec where the researchers caught one before. We saw very fresh dung and wet prints on the rock. But the rock was protruding into the river among thick, tall grass, so in order to stake it out we would have to sit uncomfortably on unstable rocks in the middle of the river and look with our thermal scopes at the rock about 15 meters away. There was no room for all 7 of us (including Patrick and the researchers) on the rocks. So, we split and let only Patrick sit on the rock in the river, while we stayed ashore. I soon realized that even if Patrick sees the tenrec, by the time he calls us over the noise of the stream, and we carefully make our way with our gear, we would probably miss the animal. So Alex and I decided to proceed to sitting on a rock near Patrick while Ruta and Jonas opted to stay ashore. Long-story short, we got a thermal signature a few times, but every time we turned our light on it disappeared immediately, then we finally caught a glimpse, only to realize it was a rat – probably an introduced brown or black rat. We saw more rodents through the scope earlier from the shore, but I assume they were all introduced rats. On our long hike back to the village, Alex found a *hammer-headed flat worm* which was cool. We were shown another rock, way closer to the village, with fresh dung and wet footprints, which apparently belong to webbed-footed tenrec. In retrospect, this area was much more accessible and out in the open. Had we known about this place, we would have staked it out instead.

Day 5: The Extra-long and Tiring Road back to Tana

We had to leave by 6am. But we were informed that the researchers caught a shrew tenrec overnight. So we met up with them after breakfast and released a young **Dobb's shrew tenrec** at the edge of the forest, not before taking measurements for identification. We noted that it was much larger than the shrew



tenrec we saw on the first evening, and the tail to head-and-body proportions were noticeably different. Steve Goodman later identified the species, but Jonas also researched and confirm it, so thanks, Jonas!

We left Setam Lodge at 7 instead of 6, and paid for it by arriving at Tana after 23:00.

We did break the long drive at a forest where Bestilio Sportive lemur used to occur but hasn't been seen for several years now. We didn't break that streak, but we made up for it by finding the very rare *Madagascar Snipe* in the marshland across the road from the forest, where Patrick knows to find it. With both lunch and dinner on the road, we reached Gassy Guesthouse near Tana's airport and were treated to a comfortable mini suite. Looking back at the tight schedule for the "Ranomafana" leg, it was only a preview for what was to come: Kirindy and Tsingy de Bemaraha.

Day 6: Kirindy - Where Shit got Real

Today the pressure was on: I basically had 2.5 hours today, and an hour tomorrow morning to successfully find a Fossa if I were to continue to Tsingy de Bemaraha tomorrow. Ruta and Jonas decided to stay at Kirindy to avoid the 10-hour drive each way for only 1 day at Tsingy, combined with a short time at Kirindy, which didn't include a full day. I was the one who originally thought of staying back, but when Patrick reassured me prior to the trip that Fossas have been seen daily at Kirindy Ecolodge this year, I cancelled my reserved room in Kirindy and aimed to join Alex in Tsingy. For Alex it was a no-brainer: 1 species, Fossa, which he had already seen commonly in zoos vs. 8 potential species at Tsingy that are not common or don't exist in zoos. For me, Fossa was above all.

On top of this, we would have to stay at Akiba lodge (formerly Camp Amoureux) first, then at Kirindy Ecolodge when we return from Tsingy. We would have preferred to do this in reverse, due to wildlife targets at each. But this wasn't possible as of when we booked, since Kirindy was full.

As far as the wildlife targets at each location:

- **Akiba Lodge** area still has Madame Berther's mouse lemur regularly, which hasn't been seen around Kirindy Ecolodge for a few years now. It also seems that Akiba Lodge is more reliable for Fat-tailed dwarf lemur, which is now rare at Kirindy Ecolodge.
- But **Kirindy Ecolodge** is the place for Fossa, Narrow-striped Boky (aka Bokiboky) and Giant jumping rats. As of Sept-Oct 2023 Fossa aren't reliable at Akiba with sightings once a week or less, as opposed to twice-ish a day at the Ecolodge. Narrow striped boky and Giant jumping rats are basically not feasible at Akiba. Final quick note about Fossa: we changed our itinerary around to visit Kirindy earlier in October than originally planned. This is due to the fact that they are more reliable before the start mating. In 2022, their mating tree was deep in the forest, and they practically disappeared before November. Apparently, in 2023, the mating tree was near camp.
- Coquerel's giant mouse lemur remains a riddle, as it hasn't been reported from Kirindy since before COVID, but Steve Goodman told us he heard one a few days prior, around 4am from his room at the **Ecolodge**. Additionally, the local guide at **Akiba** told us he saw a Mirza (giant mouse lemur) about 2 weeks ago, but I'm not 100% sure he identified it correctly.

The plan was to get to Akiba lodge as early as possible, check in, then continue straight to the Ecolodge (another half an hour or so) for the Fossa and hopefully Bokiboky until dark. Then get back to Akiba for night activities. Luckily for us, and atypically for Madagascar, we were notified a few days earlier that our flight to Morondova was moved an hour and a half earlier.

By 12:10ish we were in the car and out of the airport, making our way toward Kirindy through the picturesque Avenue of Baobabs, where we would stop on the way back. By 14:10 we were at Akiba, where Ruta and Jonas decided to stay birding, since they were to have 2 additional nights at the Ecolodge. Alex and I hit the road, and got to Kirindy Ecolodge by 15:00, which was excellent timing.

But during our short stop at Akiba, we had a fun encounter: we checked in and I asked this guy who was wearing a guide shirt about Madame Berthe's mouse lemur, but his response was "I don't know, we just got here". There was something familiar about this guy. I looked at his shirt again, which read "Odzala". Wait a minute... I know this guy!

"Wait, what's your name?" I asked, at which he seemed confused, but answered "Alon". Yes!

“I knew it, you are Rod and Tamar Cassidy’s son! We’ve actually met before, at your grandmother’s apartment in Tel Aviv!” My son’s name is also Alon, which is another anecdote I shared with him.

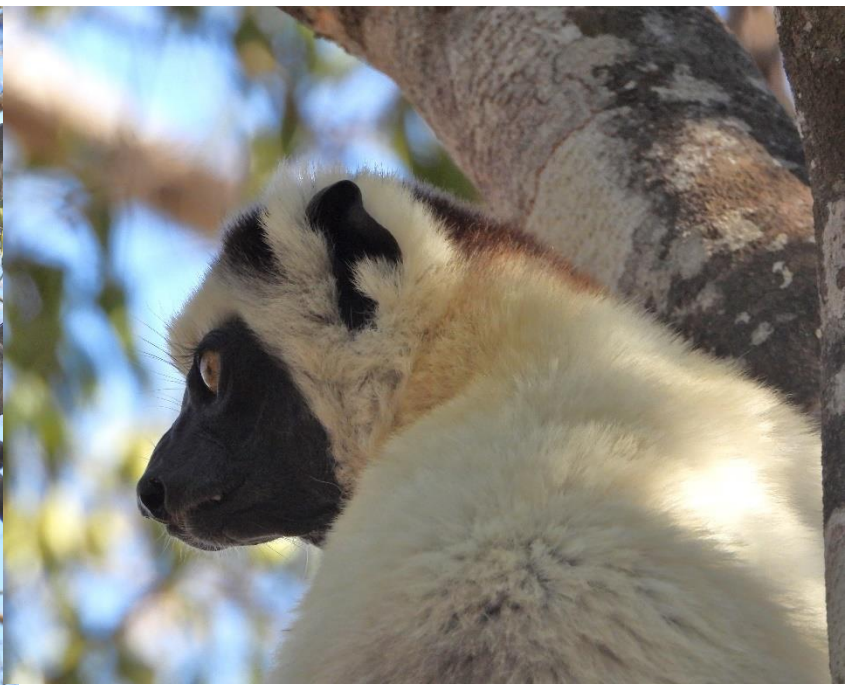
We took a selfie and of course I sent it immediately to Rod Cassidy. His partner, Alessandra, also introduced herself, and throughout the next few days we would run into them and hang out with them several times, both here and at Tsingy. What are the chances – in the middle of Akiba lodge, in nowhere, Madagascar, to run into someone I actually recognize and know by name. This has been happening to me now almost on every trip, and each time I love it when it happens!



Back to mammal watching... After fruitlessly looking for our desired carnivores on the drive in, we asked around the ecolodge when we got there. We were told that Fossas still come around, and guestimates were aiming for 17:00. This was ok since we had to leave by 17:30 towards Akiba. Meanwhile, Patrick set us up with Alfred, our local guide for Kirindy Ecolodge for the duration of our (and Jonas’s and Ruta’s) stay. Patrick also expressed to Alfred and his co-guide (Nyungshuwe?) how much I wanted to see Fossa and Bokiboky. It felt like everybody was 100% in!

We also ran into Mr. Steve Goodman while registering at the counter. Alex had been in touch with him and knew he would be there. Steve assured us that we would “trip over Fossas in our sleep” and that Bokiboky should be easy. However, our guide Alfred said that Bokiboky isn’t easy, and we would need luck. Patrick agreed with him, which was unnerving, as almost every report on mammal watching had this species (some with multiple sightings) and I assumed it should be gettable.

We set out on our search through the forest. Almost immediately we saw cool birds, including the beautiful *Blue Vanga*, *Sickle-billed vanga*, *Malagasy paradise flycatcher*, and *Lesser Vasa parrot*. Alfred also pointed out a *Malagasy scopes-owl* in a nest, and then our first mammal of the day appeared as Alfred spotted **Verraux’s Sifakas** near the trail. This was also a top-20 wish-lister for me, with its iconic dances and insane jumps. We witnessed them making long jumps between trees and chilling in the sun.



We continued up the trail, looking for the bokiboky, when suddenly a “Whooo!” call came from somewhere in the forest. Then another one: “Whoooo!” Alfred called back: “Whoooo!”. Then, some faint yell by the far whooper in Malagasy. I knew this could only mean one thing: they’re calling us for Fossa. A short unclear yelling conversation started through the forest. I was anxiously waiting for the realization to drop, that we need to go toward the voice. It didn’t take long, and Alfred said: “they found the Fossa”. Of course. About a minute later we saw Nyungshwe on the trail, signaling for us to come with him, fast! I ran, and I mean, ran! Alex was just behind, but I sped up even faster as Nyungshwe took my binoculars so that I could only have my camera to run with. We sprinted for a few minutes, arriving somewhat breathless at camp, where other guides pointed behind the staff lodging. And there it was! A fucking real-life **Fossa**! An animal I had dreamed of seeing in the wild, ever since I knew it existed. Of course the scene was not very “wild” at first, as it was munching on leftover chicken behind the staff lodging. And it was clearly unafraid of humans, getting way closer to me than I expected, despite me initially keeping a respectful distance. So much that I could take a selfie! Within seconds Alex caught up, and about a minute later, a girl named Roxy pulled out of a vehicle and joined us. She announced that she just arrived, and that this is her first wild animal in Madagascar. Now that’s something...



After less than 10 minutes, the animal just casually walked back into the forest, never to be seen again. We followed it for about a minute, until it just disappeared into the bush. Completely elated and almost in disbelief, we still had about an hour and a half or so to try for the Bokiboky, before heading back to Akiba.



Back on the trail system, we saw *Crested* and *Giant couas*. At one point Alfred heard some rustling on the ground and thought it was the Bokiboky, but it turned out to be *White-breasted mesites*, a bird that was on Alex's very short bird wish list for the trip. With birds he collects orders, whereas with mammals he does families. But I'll let him explain it better in his report 😊.

At 17:30, content with our day's success but still worried about the Bokiboky, we left for Akiba. I will mention that Akiba lodge is nice, but it's overrated from how Patrick and others described it. The restaurant and "plaza" area are nice, but the rooms are small and not very practical. The bathrooms and showers are outdoors, which can be elegant, but something didn't work with the lights and the very weak water pressure. I also never got hot water, which they were supposed to have. But the setting is pristine, and the wildlife is good.

We reunited with Jonas and Ruta, who came back from their afternoon tour, telling us they were taken to see a Madame Berthe's Mouse lemur day roost among other things, but this later turned out to be a Gray mouse lemur. There was general confusion among guides about distinction between the species, and understandably so. We joined forces with Alon and Alessandra and embarked on our night hike around 18:30. First, we waited by the restaurant for the emergence of another supposed Madame Berthe – quickly confirmed as **Gray Mouse Lemur**. We inquired intently about the Giant mouse lemur, or Mirza and were to be taken to an area where the lead guide saw one 2 weeks ago. With the language barrier, I



noticed the Malagasy often confused "weeks", "months" and "years". I confirmed: "before 14 days? Or before 700 days?". "No, no. Before 15 days". Ok.

Throughout the night walk we must have seen 15ish Gray mouse lemurs, each one inspected

for a Madame Berthe's diagnosis. Additionally, we saw **Fat-tailed dwarf** lemurs and the very exciting **Pale fork-marked lemur**, located by their distinct sound, twice throughout the evening. We heard more throughout the evening, but we tried to focus on finding the Mirza. We also saw



Madagascar Ground Gecko and *Oustalet's giant chameleon*, and Alessandra insanely pointed out the head of a *Common Madagascar cat snake* that was sticking out of a burrow. This was our first snake for the trip, but more bewildering was how she spotted it, perfectly camouflaged in the leaf litter. We also found *Madagascar buttonquail* sleeping on the ground on the way to the Mirza site. Unfortunately, we didn't see the Coquerel's giant mouse lemur, but finally we found **Red-tailed Sportive lemur** in the area where our guide had recently seen the Mirza.



On the way back to camp we saw a couple more scopes owls, and finally around the trees near camp, we photographed what Steve Goodman later confirmed to be **Madame Berthe's mouse lemur**. To be honest, all 4 of us trip participants did our research about the differentiation of



Madame Berthe's mouse lemur from the Gray mouse lemur. I think we saw an additional Madame Berthe's, captured in not-so-great pictures, but the coloration, ear size and face all look like it. I welcome any opinions about the pictures here. The



picture of the supposed additional one is on the next page.

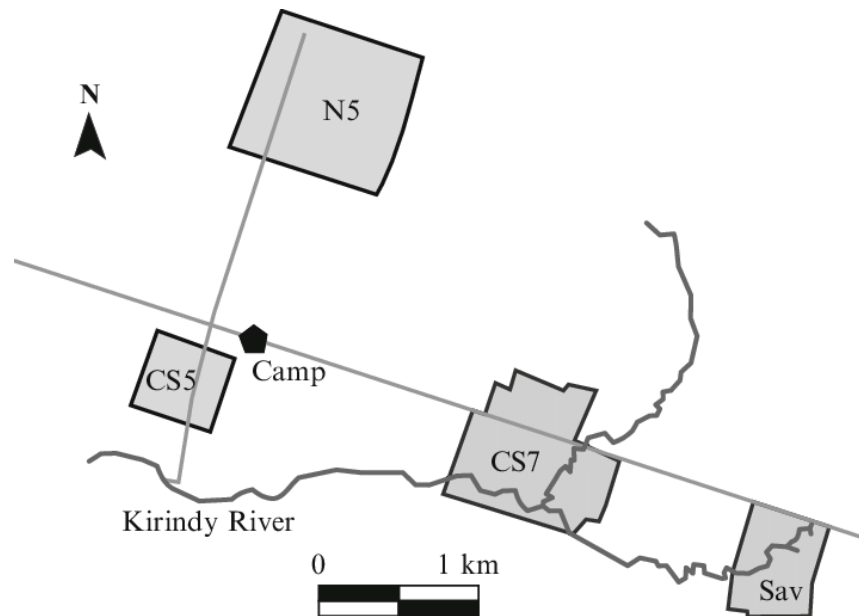
After a very late dinner, we retreated to our rooms. While already in bed, Alex and I heard some squeaking, which we thought were bats inside our cabin. But upon inspecting the main support log of our roof, I realized a Gray mouse lemur shared our room with us. I was excited to share my room with such a cute and wild creature.

Day 7: The Long Drive to Tsingy de Bemaraha

We had an early morning breakfast at Akiba, during which Alon told us about Verraux's sifakas above their room. I made a quick stop to photograph them, before we made our way to Kirindy Ecolodge again. Unfortunately for me, I chugged some of the "fresh" fruit juice at Akiba, before realizing it tasted bad – as if it had gone rotten. And boy, did I pay for it later...!



We reached Kirindy Ecolodge by 6:00. On the drive in, Jonas pointed out a Fossa on the main road, just a few hundred meters before the lodge. We thought this individual would show up around camp, but it never did, which made this sighting feel wilder than yesterday's. Jonas would photograph probably the same individual at the same spot around the same time the following morning, while Alex and I were at Tsingy. After a brief chat with Steve Goodman who told Alfred to find Bokiboky around "N5" section of the forest, we were out for an early morning walk. N5 is less frequently visited by tourists, who generally concentrate on SC5, SC7 and the area between them, shown on the map below. But alas, we failed to find the Bokiboky. Alfred said "Don't worry, Tomer. We will find it when you get back from Tsingy. I promise!"



And with that, Alex and I wished Jonas and Ruta luck, and left for Tsingy de Bemaraha. To get there from Kirindy or Morondava, all the vehicles traveling that day make a convoy since the region is considered unsafe in terms of armed robberies and such. Everyone meets at a checkpoint before the first ferry crossing, and then drive in line. At lunch, we met a couple of ladies that sat next to me on the plane the previous day. You keep seeing the same people at Kirindy and Tsingy, because the flights are on certain days of the week, so everyone mostly follows the same route. This, of course, included Alon and

Alessandra, who we saw at the second river crossing, right before reaching the hotel area at Tsingy. We made it to our hotel by 17:30, and unfortunately by this time I was starting to regret having drunk the bad fruit juice at breakfast. I was developing a fever, plus I was on the toilet much of the evening and night.

This was especially unfortunate, as our hotel for the night, Soleil des Tsingy turned out to be a luxurious African-style lodge with an infinity pool, delicious food, comfortable rooms with large rain-showers, etc. But before completely feeling like shit (pun intended), I managed to dip my feet in the infinity pool and enjoy the scenery before sunset.



Before dinner, we met our local guide for the night, and walked down from the lodge to the nearby forest

around the village. We found a **Peter's mouse lemur** and took pictures in the dense bush. At this point, my fever and stomach problems really kicked in, and so with the understanding that no other nocturnal species can be found without risking our safety, I walked back to the hotel and took advantage of the entire evening and night to take a hot shower and rest. I briefly joined Alex for dinners, only having appetizers before going back to the room and making it a much-needed 9-hour sleep night, until 5:45am. In retrospect, I realized Peter's mouse lemur was my 100th wild primate species! How anticlimactic, to reach such goal while feeling this terrible.



Day 8: Tsingy de Bemaraha

I woke up at 5:45 feeling SO much better. Wow. My stomach was still not back to normal, but at least my fever was gone, and I would survive today's long and physically demanding hike.

After a quick breakfast and packing lots of water, we were off to Tsingy de Bemaraha National Park. We only visited the Big Tsingy. It took about an hour to drive in,

and then we met our guide for the day – Fafa. We wore our harnesses and were out on the trail by 8:15ish.

Because of our interest in mammals, which are generally found earlier in the morning, Fafa took us in the opposite "route" from the usual tour – starting with the forest, then caves, then lunch, and then climbing up the Tsingy and the hanging bridges, finishing back through the forest. Our first stop was a **Bemaraha Sportive lemur** day roost. We spent a few minutes with it before it disappeared into the hole. Up the trail

Fafa found some **Decken's sifakas**, and later also **Rufous brown lemurs**. The brown lemurs were especially collaborative and even inquisitive. We saw sifakas and brown lemurs again before entering the caves.



As the trail starts going in-between the granite rocks, there are infinite small caves between the crevices and underneath Tsingy formations. The first one that seemed large enough attracted

Alex's attention, of course. Fafa checked out one side and claimed: "no bats". But Alex insisted on checking the other side as well, which hid a large cave chamber, where a some bats were hanging out. There were three **Glenn's long-fingered bats** huddled together. There were also some individual bats, which Alex photographed.



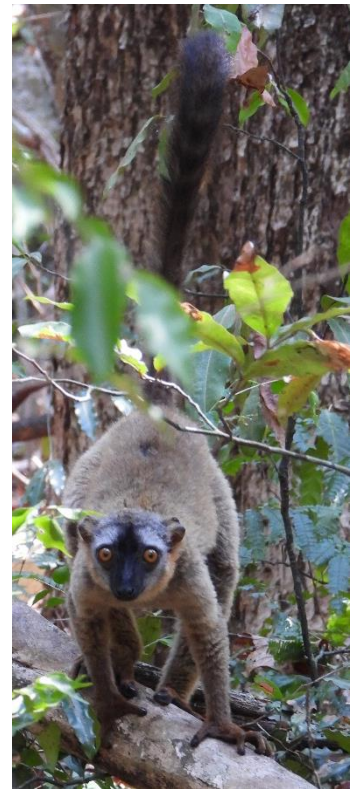
Steve Goodman later suggested that one of those looked like the **Malagasy Western House bat (aka Western Yellow bat)**, which he himself described in 2005. But I'm not including this species in the report for now, because to me the picture looks too similar to the long-fingered bats. If it gets confirmed then I'll gladly revise. Walking out of the cave, I heard people talking. But who in the world, except for

Alex Meyer, would visit this random cave off the trail? I must have guessed – it was of course Alessandra and Alon, who saw Patrick and came to check it out.

As the trail continued to weave in-and-out of rocks and forest, we got into the caves. First, it just seemed like we were wondering randomly through caves, but then it turned out there was infrastructure, like rails and metal cables to hook your carabiners to.



Meanwhile, some caves were completely dark and in some places you had to watch out for deep holes and crevices that were over 10m deep. It was quite adventurous! We spent 2ish hours traversing in-and-out of caves, sometimes with extremely tight squeezes where we would have to pass our cameras or backpacks through to Fafa before carefully crawling through an





opening. In one of the chambers, Alex found a very cool-looking **Madagascar giant Mastiff bat** with its truly alien-looking face and ears. Later on, in the adjacent cave chamber, Alex also found a very cute **Malagasy mouse-eared bat** hanging on a vine that was dangling from the roof of the cave.

As we exited one of the caves through a narrow crack, we saw a group of Japanese tourists sitting on the ground having lunch. “This is lunch spot”, Fafa announced. “This is where the ring-tailed vontsira are supposed to be?”, I wondered, surprised. “Yes”.

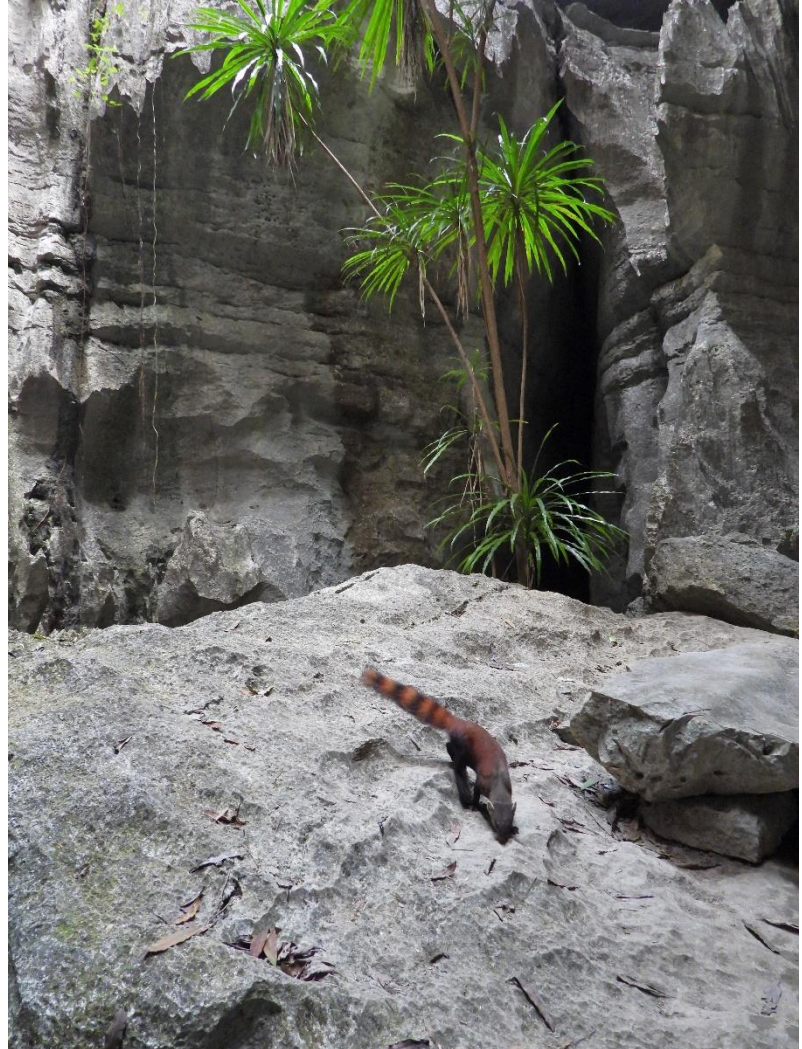


We walked to a quiet spot between the huge rock formations, where we would have lunch. We immediately saw a ring-tailed vontsira on the rocks, unbothered by our presence. It put on a show for a few minutes. I absolutely loved it – one of the coolest looking carnivores with its contrasting red coloration against the gray rocks with the oddly-positioned palm trees that make the entire scene look like it was designed for some adventure movie. I couldn’t be happier with this sighting of the vontsira. We sat down



to eat the packed lunch from Soleil hotel, while admiring a *Bemaraha (forest) rock thrush* that really took a liking to Patrick and vice-versa. While eating and discussing how happy I was to be feeling so much better today after yesterday’s state of misery, a **Western nesomys** appeared out of the rocks and posed nicely out in the open. We then heard and saw Alon and Alessandra up on a trail that comes through the open chamber where we were sitting. We called them over to see the rat, and urged them to have lunch there, hoping the vontsira would come again, which later they told it did, indeed.







After lunch we made our way up the trail to the lookout point and hanging bridges. It was fucking awesome – seriously – this entire day was just so adventurous, diverse and scenic – pictures just don't do justice.

Finally, on the way back down, which was also adventurous in itself, we checked out the Bemaraha Sportive lemur day roost again and got to see it better than we did that morning.

Another locally-endemic species – the Bemaraha Woolly lemur, exists in the area. There have previously been known sleeping sites along the main trail, so guides would take tourists to see it. But currently, we were told, it hasn't been seen for a while. One would have to research and inquire about this one.

Night activities are currently strongly **unadvisable**, as camping in the park is not allowed because of security issues. In fact, tourists are encouraged to leave by 15:00 or 15:30 at the latest.

We said goodbye to Fafa and continued to our new hotel for the night, L'Olympe du Bemaraha. This was a result of late booking, with neither hotel having 2 consecutive nights' availability when we added this

destination. It wasn't as fancy as Soleil, but was still nice, with a central restaurant and bar area overlooking the forest, with a pool that was much less inviting than Soleil's. But it's not a fair comparison. After a hot shower, we met Alessandra and Alon who came over to join us for dinner and drinks. I wasn't drinking alcohol because of my stomach, so I celebrated the amazing success we've had so far with not one, but two Cokes. And not even Coke Zero – but just regular coke! 🍷



Tonight was the first night of the trip where we just hung out over dinner and drinks and did not go out for a night walk, as we had already seen the only feasible target within the walkable “safe zone”. For me, still needing to rest, the timing was optimal.

Day 9: Back to Kirindy – No Time to Rest!

We were on our way by 6:30am and emphasized to Patrick and the local driver that we wanted to try and make it to Kirindy as early as possible. Our local driver for this leg was much less collaborative than the legendary Mickael and Femeno of the Tana-Ranomafana/Andasibe sections, but he got in line. By barely stopping, except pee breaks and a short, 40-minute lunch, we made it back to Kirindy by 15:00. Only 8.5 hours instead of the 10 it took on the way in! We reunited with Ruta and Jonas and exchanged our stories from the past 2 days before embarking on an afternoon walk.

Our prime target was, again, Bokiboky, and time was getting short! The pressure was back on. Unfortunately, except for red-fronted brown lemurs again, we didn’t see any mammals.

At night, we had different targets: Alex and I wanted to see the Malagasy Giant (jumping) rat and the Bastard big-footed mouse. Jonas and Ruta already saw these two and wanted to try for the Dormouse, or Western tufted-tailed rat. So we split again: Patrick took us with Alfred to a known den of the giant rat, whereas Nyungshwe took Jonas and Ruta to another area in the forest.

After a great dinner, we were off to “N5” again, where the giant rats den. Almost as soon as we got onto the trail, we spotted our first **Bastard big-footed mouse**. Then, before reaching the known den, Alfred



spotted the **Malagasy Giant Rat**. I was afraid it would disappear in a flash but was surprised to see this elegant, gentle beast just gracefully walking away, allowing us to



follow it closely. It reminded me a lot of the Plains viscacha in its posture and movement, and the den is similar, too. Despite its being called a Jumping rat, we only saw it jumping once, over a fallen log. The rest of the time it was just strolling elegantly. Definitely a unique species.

Having seen both targets, we decided to go find Jonas and Ruta, and the tufted-tailed rat. Long story short: we ended up finding neither. We drove back to camp and walked

back to “CS7” in the map (above, in Day 7). But throughout the remainder of the evening we found the Red-tailed sportive lemur and the Pale fork-marked lemur, another buttonquail, and a sleeping nightjar,

among many more Bastard big-footed mice. Apparently, in the past year and a half, there has been a population explosion of them, and it is unclear why.

Back at camp, I thermal-scoped a rat, which at first I thought was our sought-after tufted-tailed rat, but which turned out to be a **Black rat**. I saw many rats while thermal scoping around the staff dining area, most of which turned out to be black rats. But there were some smaller ones that looked different. I believe that if enough time is dedicated, additional rodent species may be found there. But we were tired and didn't have too long left for sleep before tomorrow's long day.

No Coquerel's giant mouse lemur. I wonder if people who dedicate more time to it either here or around Akiba will come up with interesting new information. Apparently, Zombitse is the place for these.

Day 10 – Kirindy to Andasibe

I decided to be “The Extra Hard Boy” this morning, get up by 4:30 and dedicate another hour pre-dawn for an attempt at Coquerel's giant mouse lemur, and then for Bokiboky around dawn. I walked up the “main road” into the forest for about an hour and a half or so but found nothing new.

We had to leave by 8:15, which included a built-in 10-minute breakfast “break”. So at 6:00 Alex and I were back at it with Alfred, desperately trying to find Narrow-striped boky, knowing that Kirindy is the only place on our itinerary that has them. Ruta and Jonas stayed back for a leisurely breakfast and some birding, since they had seen this species the previous day.

Patrick and Alfred tag-teamed the effort. First, they made us sit and wait at a place where they are sometimes seen. I didn't fully understand if this was a den or an area that attracted them, but I figured by this time of the morning the animals would be out of the den already. When this didn't work, Alfred took us deeper into the forest. At 7:30ish I was going back-and-forth in my head between mourning the species and thinking how I would explain in my report that more time is needed to see it, to telling myself to stay positive, as it shouldn't be that difficult according to most reports. We passed a group of tourists and asked the guide if they saw one, to which the reply was: “no”.

But 4 minutes later, we heard a shout through the forest, followed by some loud explanation in Malagasy. This could have only meant one thing: the guide we had just spoken with announced to Alfred that they had found the Bokiboky. This is exactly what happened, and Alfred straight up ran with us to where the sighting was. Again, we ran as fast as we could! Thank you, weekly CrossFit 😊

Within 2 minutes of sprinting, we got there – looking at a pair of **Narrow-striped Bokies** and a group of confused birders who were wondering what was wrong with us, and why we were running. This was 7:52 according to the time stamp on my photo. I can't explain in words how fortunate and exhilarated I felt, to see this species at the very last minute, after beginning to accept defeat. We stayed with the animals for about 8 minutes before absolutely needing to leave. During the 8 minutes we saw them hunting a scorpion, foraging for insects around the leaf litter and inside dead logs, and rushing around the forest. The entire





experience was pure joy. I know they come easy for some mammal watchers, who sometimes have multiple sightings over a few days' stay. But we spent over 7 hours cumulatively looking for this species and didn't see it until the very last minute.

Delighted with joy, we walked back to the lodge and gorged our breakfast standing up before driving out. When we reached the main road and got phone reception, we found out that our flight was delayed by almost 2 hours. This gave us extra time to re-visit Akiba lodge and visit the supposed Madame Berthe's mouse

lemur nest, but which we now knew was a gray mouse lemur nest. It was very cute! We then hiked to a Red-tailed sportive lemur day roost, which wasn't home, but en-route we saw a *gray-headed lovebird*, which is the 3rd native species of parrot in Madagascar. We saw this species prior, but this was by far the best sighting. We also saw the *Madagascar nightjar*, *Chabert* and *Hook-billed Vangas*.



With spare time left, we took a leisurely walk down the famous, picturesque Avenue of Baobabs, before continuing to city of Morondava for a delicious lunch at a cool beachside restaurant – something we originally wouldn't have had time for, if it weren't for the flight delay.

After the 1-hour flight to Tana, we met our dedicated driver, Mickael, and drove straight to Andasibe, making it to Chez Marie after 22:00. After dinner we were so tired that we didn't attempt to go on a night walk. But there was also no patch of forest that would be immediately accessible from

Chez Marie without wandering down the street. I'm not sure how safe that is, in Andasibe.

I must mention – the owner of Chez Marie is very nice, but this is not an acceptable accommodation, especially given the variety of much, much better accommodation around. Apparently, by the





time we booked, everything was completely full, and this was the only place that had 3 consecutive nights available for our dates. But it's worn-down with dented mattresses, torn mosquito nets, mold in some rooms, general lack of cleanliness, etc. Alex, Patrick, Mickael and I were assigned to a "family" room. There were bats inside the roof, but they weren't sufficiently visible to identify.

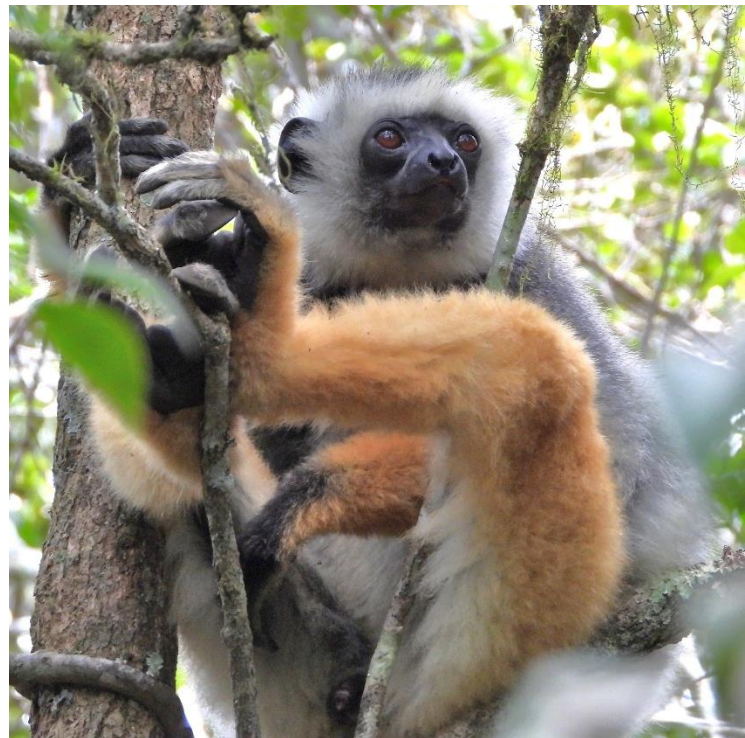
Day 11 – Andasibe!

Again, being in a new place – I woke up early and spent 30 minutes looking into some forest across the street, which is on the property of Hotel Feon' ny. I saw a few birds such as the *Souimanga Sunbird* and *Malagasy bee-eater*, but nothing new.

After breakfast we were off to Analamazoatra national park for the Indri and supporting crew. This is the former Perinet reserve and is the "main" national park in the area. Mantadia National Park is larger, a bit further North, and we didn't visit it. Today we would visit the above, plus VOIMA and Mitsinjo.

It was a bit cloudy and drizzly this morning. We met our guide for the day, Tooju, and started our hike. We stopped by the bridge not far from the entrance with some bamboo forest for Eastern Lesser (gray) bamboo lemur, which was not present, then continued up the path that goes uphill. The forest was quiet this morning, perhaps because of the weather. We heard but did not find a *flufftail* again, but we did see several *frogs*, *lizards* and a young *Madagascar tree boa* which was cool.

At one point, while looking for Indri, we saw another group that was looking at Diademmed Sifaka. We enjoyed this magnificent primate for several minutes. A true stunner, with such unique coloration for a primate, and another one of my top-20 most-wanted species. While enjoying the sifakas that were still just waking up, we heard Indri calling far in the forest. But within an hour we



also found the **Indri**. Well, we found 3 indris and about 40 tourists and photographers. Then a school trip of 15, plus a teacher and a guide joined. It was still magical though, as **Indri** was my most-wanted mammal in Madagascar, again, tied for the #1 spot with Fossa and Aye-aye. We spent a while with them and got to see and hear them calling, which is a whole show. Definitely an amazing experience!



We hiked back down to the bridge and this time **Eastern Lesser Bamboo lemurs** were present. After missing them in Ranomafana, and Tsingy, this was a welcomed sighting. We watched them up-close in the sun that finally came out, leisurely eating bamboo as their name suggests. Before leaving the reserve for lunch, we were taken to see another group of Diademed sifaka and another group of Indri. We also followed a mixed flock of birds, which included *Nuthatch*, *Red-tailed* and *Blue vangas*, *Nelicouvri weavers*, and others.



During lunch, Jonas took initiative: while we were eating, oblivious to his whereabouts, he walked over to Feon' ny Ala hotel across the street and asked if they had last-minute vacancy. They did! And the additional cost was almost negligible. He came back and announced that he booked 2 rooms for 2 nights. What a hero! We swiftly grabbed our stuff, updated Maire of the change, and moved across the street. And what a difference! This is the type of nature lodge we love – with indoor and outdoor restaurants that overlook the stream and the forest across, with a spacious garden, a game room, much cleaner and more elegant rooms with private verandas. Phew. And most important, the beds were comfortable!

A leisurely afternoon coffee at the restaurant overlooking the forest, and we were off to VOIMMA reserve, a few minutes down the road. The targets for this afternoon were the Common brown lemur and the Lowland streaked tenrec, the latter which Alex and Jonas read about being feasible there.

We got in around 15:00 and were taken to see a huge and colorful *Parson's chameleon*, and a cool-looking *Mossy leaf-tailed gecko*. We heard and tried to "chase" brown lemurs outside the reserve but didn't find them, so we came back in. As it got a bit darker and cooler, Ruta suggested we should start using thermal scopes and watch the ground for streaked tenrecs. Generally, I don't like looking through the thermal scope when there is still light out, because the moment I start, it gets addictive and then all I see is life through a one-eyed screen. Granted, I use it for hours-on-end at night, but during the day I try to just spot with my eyes while also enjoying the scenery. However, Ruta was right! Within 2 minutes of using the scope, Jonas found a **Lowland streaked tenrec**. This was in the area that looked like a dried lake, with naked tree roots dotting otherwise mostly open terrain. We followed the tenrec for a few minutes, and



even caught it, gently, for a minute. But as soon as we let it go, it quickly disappeared into a fallen log among some leaf litter, never to be seen again. Having found one this quickly, we thought we would see tons more. However, we never found another, and not for the lack of searching!

I think there is some confusion regarding lowland and highland streaked tenrecs in general, as there are reports of highland streaked tenrecs from the Andasibe-Mantadia area (pins on iNaturalist, photos on Flickr etc.). But to my understanding, and according to my research, there are no Highland streaked tenrecs in this area. The individuals here indeed have more white-ish streaks than some individuals by the coast, which

have more pronounced yellow. The above tenrec's streaks also looked whiter than the one we later found in Masoala (spoiler!). But again, to my understanding, only Lowland streaked tenrecs are found in the entire region. Highland streaked tenrecs are distinctively furry, and much less spiny, with only creamy-white and no yellow.

After seeing the tenrec, Tooju heard and then found some **Common brown lemurs**, and we had a couple of minutes with them up-close in the quickly fading light.



Before leaving VOIMMA we also managed to find our first **Goodman's mouse lemur** of the evening, which wasn't very cooperative with the lights.

We met Patrick who took the afternoon off to answer some e-mails, and drove a few minutes to Mitsinjo, where we would have our night walk. Upon entering the park, I thermal-spotted a large shape off the trail which turned out to be an **Eastern Woolly Lemur**.





First, we managed to see it out in the open, then it quickly jumped to another tree which obstructed. But it stayed for a while, allowing prolonged views.

Then on the main trail, Tooju found a friendly Goodman's mouse lemur that was happily eating sap off a tree, unphased by the admiration of the mammal watching crew. Later, we saw a couple of Tufted-tailed rats, the first of which was most likely a Webb's, and the second one which we identified as **Petter's tufted-tailed rat**.

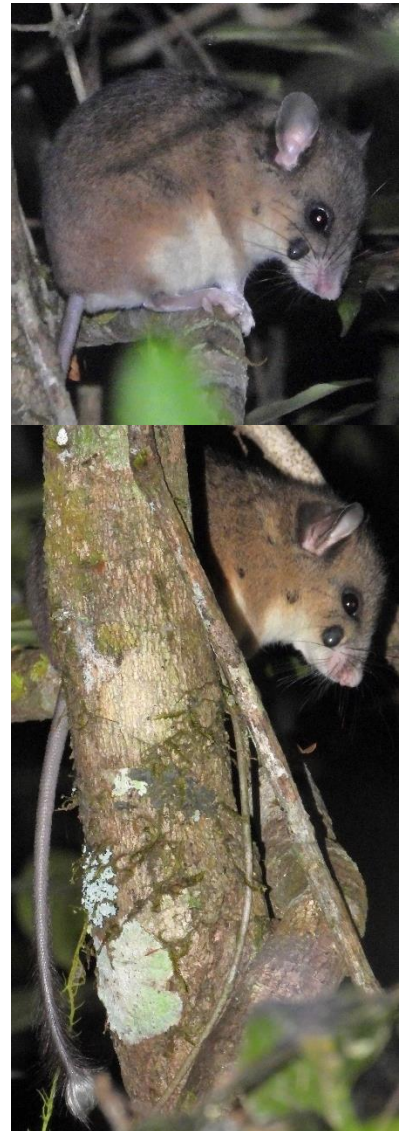
Jonas swore he saw a Tailless tenrec in the thermal scope near a small stream, but we never found it in the light. We found a Brown rat there, instead.

We spent a few minutes around the Orchid Gardens to look for the Hairy-eared dwarf lemur before leaving the reserve. The orchid gardens was said to be a good place for this species, but we didn't luck out. We then walked the road towards the car, finding another *leaf-tailed gecko*. We were taken to see a *Barn owl* in its nest. While 3 of us were looking at the owl, Alex found a **Crossley's dwarf lemur** in a tree nearby, albeit very high up. The dwarf lemur species in the Andasibe-Mantadia region used to be considered Greater dwarf lemur (*Cheirogaleus major*), but recent re-assessment classified them as Crossley's, hence the ID. Don't confuse Crossley's other name – the Furry-eared dwarf lemur, for the much rarer Hairy-eared dwarf lemur, which are sympatric in this region. A very annoying choice of naming.

Tired and satisfied, we returned to our comfortable hotel for a delicious dinner with a flaming banana dessert. While eating, we met another nature photographer named Alvin Francis Lok. I figured if another group comes back to dinner so late, they must be a hardcore naturalist of some sort... "Excuse me! Why are you just now arriving at the lodge? What species were you after?"... They turned out to be a couple of nature-loving friends from Singapore, one of which (Alvin) is a photographer and mostly a "herper". We exchanged some stories and Facebook profiles. After dinner we mammal watched the grounds of our new hotel, finding another Eastern Woolly lemur in a tree on the property.

Day 12: Andasibe – Maromizaha

Today we were taken to this rather large reserve, 20 minutes away by car. The first target of the day was Madagascan rousettes. We picked up our guide for the day, Etienne, drove to the reserve, and climbed up to a cave where a large colony roost. Unfortunately, they didn't tell us in advance that this was a one-





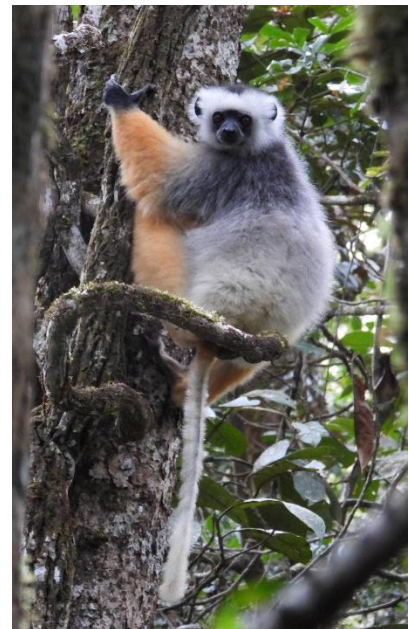
way climb, and we would trace our steps before starting the forest trail. We would have left a substantial amount of equipment behind if we knew. Regardless, we climbed up using ropes and descended into the cave, finding the **Madagascan rousettes** flying high inside the crevices. At this point, my camera batter died (despite the fact that I charged it a few nights prior... not sure what happened) and I left my spare at the hotel 😞.

So, while everyone continued into the reserve, I asked Mickael to take me to the hotel and back as fast as we could. This was a 45-minute debacle, and Mickael enthusiastically tried to make it fast! We surprised everyone by how quickly this took, but it still cost me a *Rufous-headed ground roller*, which I would have loved to see. I missed it by about a minute, but at least I had my battery loaded for the rest of the day.

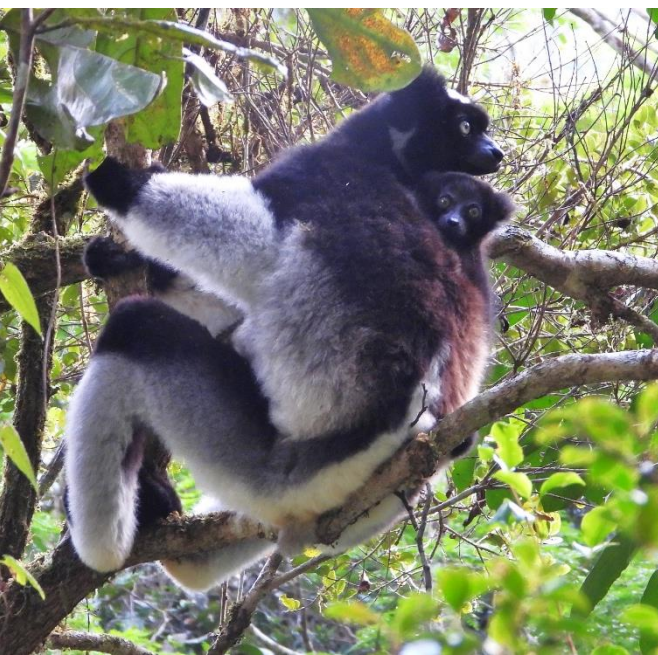
Throughout the day, we saw no new mammal species until the night walk.

Etienne tried to find Black & White ruffed lemurs for us while we were having lunch. I wanted another encounter with this iconic species, but they were too deep in the forest. There was another Eastern Woolly lemur sleep site beside the trail, but apparently a group of French tourists bothered it to see it moving. We did see some cool lizards and amphibians again, such as the *Madagascar climbing rain frog*.

At one of the lookout points over the forest, I spotted a Diademed sifaka far, far out in the valley and was able to catch it on Video. A few minutes later, Ruta spotted an Indri that was sitting out in the open – a great find, despite the large distance. We decided that, for the lack



of other feasible diurnal targets, we would hike down to the valley and get some better views of them. We spent some time with Indri singing (more like siren-making) very close to us, and with the sifaka only a few meters away, also making their much quieter noises.



In the afternoon, we visited a campsite and a research station in the forest, both where ring-tailed vontisras visit frequently. We were still on a trip-long mission to find one for Jonas. Vontsirras

were a no-show, so we started making our way back uphill to the point from where we would start our night hike. On the way, Patrick and Etienne heard a *Velvet asity*, and finally I got to see one, after I missed the sighting the rest of the group had while I was with the ring-tailed lemurs. I spent a few minutes trying to get a picture of one in the fading light. Luckily, Jonas captured a photo of “my” velvet asity, and kindly let me use it. Funny enough, after only getting brief views, we continued to hike and Jonas announced an animal in his thermal scope, but then dismissed “sorry, it’s just a bird”. I put my flashlight on it, and then about 2 meters from me was a beautiful male *Velvet asity* unobstructed and in all its glory. Now I was really satisfied.



We sat down at a lunch spot looking place to wait for darkness, then started hiking – first uphill, but then on a relatively flat trail higher up (the same trail we used coming in). We saw another Tanala’s tufted-tailed rat in a tree trunk. And only a few minutes later, Etienne and Patrick found our prime target for the evening: the **Weasel sportive lemur**, which we enjoyed despite some thick fog that was coming in-and-out.

We later found another tufted-tailed rat, which we think is **Lesser tufted-tailed** (but arguably **Major’s**), two more Crossley’s



dwarf lemur that provided much better views than the one from the previous night, and several more Goodman’s mouse lemurs.



The biggest dip for the evening, and perhaps the biggest one for the trip, was the Hairy-eared dwarf lemur. Granted, it’s not an easy species to find, but we were told that “around the first bridge” would be a good place. Having been out in this reserve since around 7:30, we were all quite tired and perhaps we didn’t spend enough time around this prime spot. But Alvin, the herper we met the previous night, took a picture of a lemur, right here, near this very bridge, which later turned out to be the Hair-eared dwarf lemur, through his pictures on Facebook. It must have been the following night, if not on the same night as us, but later (around 23:00 is what he said). So I

definitely recommend for future mammal watchers to spend some time around this spot, as it could be productive for this otherwise-rare species.

We did find a super-cool looking bright-eyed frog (*Boophys sibilans*, I think), some cool *geckos*, a *Madagascar pygmy kingfisher*, and the island's other species of *Nightjar* (I think Collared).

We were all super tired, and while Ruta and Jonas went straight to the hotel, Alex and I ate with Patrick at a terrible restaurant in the village, where we also met Elias Sadalla Filho. Elias, Alex's friend and trip participant for the second leg of his trip (after I leave) had just arrived at Andasibe and met us at the restaurant. I could barely keep my eyes open, but it was nice to meet another fellow mammal watcher, even though he, too, like Alex, Jonas and Ruta, is a zoo person... 😊

Day 13: Andasibe to Tana with some Zoos...?

This morning Jonas and Ruta were going to visit Vakona Lodge with its Lemur Island free-ranging zoo.

This would be a good time to present Jonas Livet (Hi 🙋):

Jonas currently holds the official Guinness Book world record for having been to the most zoos in the world. The official number is 1,215 zoos, but that's only the ones he could prove with pictures and tickets. The real number is closer to 1,600 if I remember correctly...? Well 1,601 now with Vakona lodge.

They were going to be back by 10:30, while Alex and I gladly took this morning to sleep in and have a leisurely breakfast.



They ended up coming back at 12:30. Alex and I took the extra time to play a few rounds of ping pong at the lodge, and I dried my clothes that were washed at Chez Marie out in the sun.



Reunited, we had a great lunch at Feon' Ny lodge. Then, believe it or not, Alex and Jonas had the nerve to ask Chez Marie if we could try to photograph the bats in the roof of our old room. I gave this a 1% chance. But low and behold – she agreed! We photographed these bats the best we could, then later ID'ed them as **Peter's goblin bats**. We also walked over to Chez Luc, another place that has bats in their roof, based on someone who Alex was in touch with. These ones turned out to be **Eastern free-tailed bats**.



We had no further mammal encounters on our way to Tana. We briefly stopped at a roadside spot for *Madagascar pratincole*. We also stopped at a small zoo called Reserve Peyrieras Madagascar Exotic. This small, run-down reptilian zoo may have been a nice place prior to COVID. Apparently, they used to have mammals too, but now they only have chameleons, geckos, and frogs. Admittedly, it was nice to see some cool-looking herps including strange chameleons and Mantella frogs. From there, we made our way back to Gassy Guesthouse in Tana.



Day 14: Farankaraina Special Reserve!

After a short flight we arrived at the town of Maroantsetra, where the most inefficient 1-by-1 luggage handout by name and tag number put us back 45 minutes. Typical Malagasy inefficiencies were ever more present on this North-Eastern part of the country. By 14:15ish we were on the motorized canoe towards Farankaraina. We left our heavy luggage at Maroantsetra and packed for 1 night of camping. The boat ride was nice, with some birds including *Red fody*, but no cetaceans.

We arrived at camp after a 2-hour canoe ride and half an hour of hiking. Adrenaline-driven again, we wanted to utilize every second we had at this nice beach-side reserve. The only concrete plan was, of course, to see the Aye-aye.

I want to explain the strategy for seeing Aye-ayes, as it was unclear to me before arriving:

I thought we would wait under a known nest, similarly to Daraina or Kianjavato. But here at Farankaraina, the guides constantly locate the fruiting trees where aye-ayes come to eat. I read they have 7-8 aye-ayes in this small reserve, and so seeing one on any single night is nearly guaranteed. However, being in one of the rainiest corners of the country, 2 nights is likely recommended. The procedure is: you wait around at the “headquarters” around 18:00 and are summoned when the guides find the aye-aye(s). This can be at 18:15 or at 20:00... which can make for a nerve-wrecking wait, contemplating whether you placed your bets correctly, or if you’ll have to explain why you were the only mammal watcher to have missed aye-aye at this “guaranteed” reserve. When you see the aye-ayes, they are frequently eating fruit all the way up in the canopy, 20-30 meters straight up. Due to the density of the forest, you practically have to stand directly underneath to see them, so viewing and photography can be challenging, especially for your neck. However, the reward is, of course, a truly wild fucking Aye-aye, so it's quite worth it, to say the least 🤪. Apparently, the best time to see them is mid-September through mid-November, but supposedly they can be seen year-round. Perhaps the rainy months require 2-3 nights, but I’m not 100% sure. Keep in mind that any night can rain-out, even in the dry season.

Infrastructure-wise: I should also mention that the bungalows aren’t in use, at least as of 2023, so it’s just camping. There is a single, cold-water shower adjacent to a single communal toilet. I was warned There is no Wi-Fi or phone reception, but on the beach itself I got reception with my Orange SIM card. The food was surprisingly delicious! Finally, I will mention that the entire Farankaraina and Masoala “leg” was arranged through Oliver – owner of Chez Arol lodge.

In the late afternoon we hit the trail with Caludio, our guide for this leg of the trip. We walked for about an hour and a half in search of White-fronted brown lemurs and Northern bamboo lemurs but found

neither. We did see *Red-breasted coua*, another *Malagasy cat-eyed snake* and our only wild *Mantella* of the trip – the *Brown Mantella frog*. We were told that the Bamboo lemurs come out around dawn and dusk, and that flashlights are often needed to see them. We were also told that Sportive lemurs and Fork-marked lemurs are both particularly difficult to see here. We specifically wanted the Sportive lemur, since according to recent assessments, the species that occurs in Farankaraina is Seal's Sportive lemur, as opposed to the Masoala Sportive lemur, which occurs around Chez Arol on the peninsula. According to Claudio, the rainy season is a better time to look for the Masoala Fork-marked lemur, but more on that later.

Around 18:30 I had “ants in my pants” as they say, so I had to go out with my thermal scope. I stayed close by, in case we're summoned for the aye-aye. Only later, did I realize that looking in the area where the bamboo lemurs hang out is potentially detrimental to finding aye-eyes, as the canarium trees are right there. I wished someone had told me this earlier...

We then walked slowly with Claudio back up the trail along the beach. We found a sleeping *White-throated rail* and a *Black rat*. We also wanted to search for the local Mouse lemur, which is generally regarded as MacArthur's mouse lemur at this location. It may later be recognized as a separate species from the yet-to-be-described Masoalan mouse lemur species.

But before we got much further out, we were called-in for the Aye-eyes! Not knowing how long they would stick around, we (once again) ran with the guides towards the site. As Ruta put it, “For this one, I will run too!”. A few minutes later we were under the tree where an **Aye-aye** was nonchalantly eating Canarium fruit up in the canopy. This was a few minutes' walk from Headquarters. At first it was hidden in the leafy canopy, but eventually it made its way down and across naked branches, putting on a nice but neck-cracking show. It was quite a challenge to photograph, as I said before. Most of the time you would need binoculars or a good camera to get a very good look at it. But sure enough, it was a freaking **Aye-aye**! My top target! I know that in some places it can be seen with better comfort, and perhaps closer to





eye level. But to me, seeing this magical creature in its element, leisurely eating and going on about its business, and not always being fully visible or convenient to watch – only added to the magic around this enigmatic creature. We spent about 45 minutes with it. I spent some of the time laying down on the ground and used Jonas’s foot as a “head rest” to stabilize myself and my camera enough to take semi-reasonable footage and photos of the aye-aye.

There were 2 other groups with us this night: 2 Germans and 4 Americans, the latter who would continue with us to Chez Arol. While we were watching the aye-aye, one of the Americans wondered back to the main trail and called us over, as he found a **Greater dwarf lemur**. Then, just before heading back to dinner, I looked through the thermal scope to see if there were additional aye-eyes there, since we heard more



fruits falling elsewhere. But another thermal signature just above the main trail materialized as a pair of **Seal’s sportive lemur** – a species that all the guides were very surprised to find!

After a delicious 3-course dinner with sauteed shrimp, the night wasn’t over! Patrick and Claudio joined us for an additional night walk back toward the



reserve entrance, and then circling around up the hill, back through the reserve. We saw a few more Greater dwarf lemurs, several sleeping birds, another cat-eyed snake, and finally, a single **MacArthur’s mouse lemur**.

Back at camp, Ruta and Jonas retired for the night, as we had to wake up around dawn again to catch the boat to Masoala. But Alex and I weren’t finished! (My goodness. I’m starting to sound like a vampire). We

continued with Patrick and Claudio, through Aye-aye spot (and potential but absent Bamboo lemur spot),



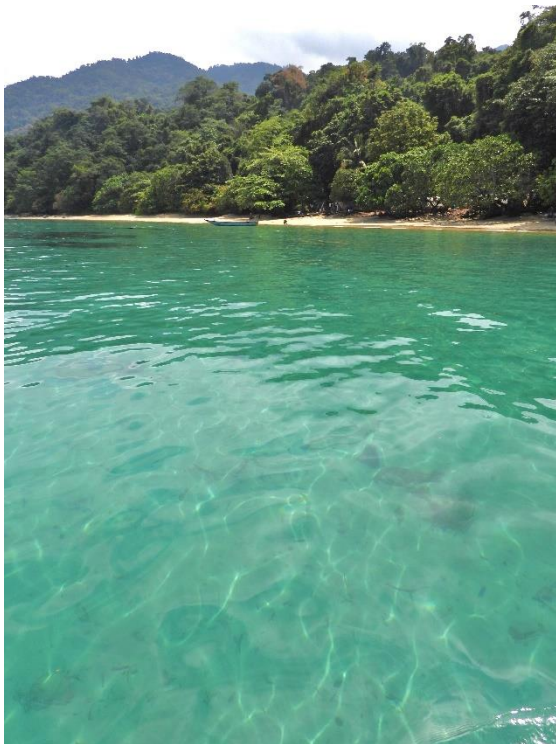
where the Sportive lemurs were still present but even higher up and more obscured. We hiked the main trail into the heart of the reserve and managed to add yet another mammal species for the evening – a **Masoala (or Moore’s) woolly lemur**. We saw two different individuals, a few trees apart.

At 23:00 we called it a night, and hiked back. With a quick, cold shower I caught a 4.5-ish hour nap.



Day 15: Farankaraina to Masoala

After a quick tooth-brushing at the picturesque beach of this beautiful, remote location, a short breakfast and a 45-minute walk, we were at the boat by 6:30. During the walk, Claudio pointed out another *Madagascar Pranticole* on a rock. We took the canoe for an hour and a half through mangroves and natural canals, and met our speed boat on a beach, where we transferred vehicles. Our luggage, which we deposited at Oliver’s office the previous day, was already on board, and we made another 2-hour transfer across the bay to Chez Arol.



I hoped to see some cetaceans, but we didn’t. Dugongs also apparently live in these waters, but I wouldn’t know where to start looking for one.

We passed by Nosy Mangabe and the small islands next to it, one of which supposedly has a large colony of Madagascar flying fox. We also saw several congregations of fish splashing and being attacked by sea birds, which is often an indication of another large predator or a group of predators attacking them from below as well, but we never saw the culprits.

Masoala National Park is reminiscent of, and is the Madagascar equivalent of Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica. They are both the “largest tracts of lowland rainforest left” in their respective countries, are quite remote, situated on a peninsula, reached by a boat, and with picturesque hilly rainforest that spills into turquoise, clearwater sea. Masoala National Park, similarly to Corcovado, is also one of the most biodiverse spots in the country, hosting all but 2 of the country’s carnivores, and

a plethora of mammals from all the orders in the country – both terrestrial and marine. The boat journey is very Jurassic Park-like and scenic, all of which makes this a perfect finale for such an adventurous trip.

Chez Arol, I will mention, is very pleasant, has hot water-showers in private bungalows, a nice central restaurant area with decent food (not as delicious as Farankaraina), and a beautiful beach. It's a nice place, but from the way it was talked up, I was expecting a semi-luxurious lodge. There is also no wifi or reception, unless you have Telma SIM card, which I didn't. So, without warning to my family, I was completely disconnected for 3 days.

Originally, we were supposed to have 3 nights there. But Tsaradia Airlines decided to permanently cancel their Friday flights to Tana, reducing the frequency to once a week. This caused us to lose a night here, and instead, make a 2-day drive to Toamasina, from where we would catch a flight back. As soon as we got in, we hiked for 2 hours before lunch. We first took a trail that goes through a rocky terrain and over small streams, where we saw a Nesyoms species, which was most likely a Lowland nesomys. I didn't get a good enough look at it. Alex saw it fairly well but didn't get a picture. However, this is basically the only species that occurs in Masoala lowlands by the beach.

Further up the trail, we ran into two birdwatcher ladies who we befriended earlier in Andasibe. They just saw the ruffed lemurs and pointed us in that direction. After 15 minutes of climbing up a fairly steep hill, we found the **Red ruffed lemurs** and spent quality time with them. While watching these lemurs, Claudio also spotted a group of **White-fronted brown lemurs**, which disappeared shortly thereafter.



We then hiked on the main ridge trail – the trail that goes from the Chez Arol area to the Masoala national park. This is the same trail where apparently brown-tailed mongoose can be and has been seen, as recently as 2 weeks before our trip. This trail would eventually prove to be productive for other carnivores too.

After lunch, despite how tired I was, I took the only opportunity I had to actually put on my swimsuit and go to the beautiful, tropical beach! The water was pleasantly warm, clear, and it was a great little break.

At 15:30 we hiked back up toward the ridge, but on side-trails that overlook a stream. We saw the *White-faced brown lemurs* again. At one point Alex heard, then he and Claudio found a Ring-tailed vontsira off the side of the trail. These guys can be quite sneaky and shy, but the top priority was for Jonas to see it. I immediately and assertively shouted for Jonas who was trailing a few meters behind. Within a few

minutes he finally saw the vontsira in the bush, then crossing the trail right in front of him. Phew! Now all of us have seen this species: mission complete!

Aside from additional *Blue Couas* and more of the regular stuff, we didn't see anything new or remarkable in the afternoon, which included waiting quietly for 45 minutes at the spot where Claudio recently saw a pair of Brown-tailed mongooses.

When we got back before dinner, it was getting dark, so per Claudio's suggestion I 'thermal scoped' the patch of bamboo right near the restaurant. Bingo. We spent several minutes observing the **Northern Bamboo lemurs** eating and preparing for sleep. As Claudio suggested, we watched them using flashlights.

After dinner we went on a long night hike. Almost immediately we spotted **Masoala Sportive lemur** on the



grounds of the lodge. We took a trail that goes along the beach, and then into the main Ridge trail. The amount of tufted-tailed rats spotted through all 3 of our thermal scopes was unbelievable, both near the beach and up the trail. We positively identified Tanala's and Webb's tufted-tailed rats. But at one point, after over an hour of rats, we stopped checking each one and tried to find other mammals. We saw more Greater dwarf lemurs, and finally we also found Masoala woolly lemurs, which Ruta and Jonas were still missing. Eventually, we also found a mouse lemur, which is notoriously not yet described, and is sometimes referred to as **Masoala mouse lemur**. Compared with pictures of the mouse lemur from Farankarina, it looks like they are similar enough. So, for now, I will consider them the same. There is some "spillage" of species from Farnkaraina to the Masoala Peninsula. But there is also a natural boundary between them, and some species are indeed different, such as the sportive lemur. I will keep them both as MacArthur's but I may revise my report in the future.

We also saw a hanging long fingered bat but couldn't identify it down to species level. Later, I also thermal-scoped a **Commerson's roundleaf bat**, which hung around nicely despite the lights and flashes.



More sportive and woolly lemurs aside, we did also find and photographed a White-tailed tree rat, a species that is not officially known from the Masoala peninsula, with no distribution maps indicating its presence here. We also saw this same species at Ranomafana, but there we just saw its head peeking out of the nest, whereas here it was resting out in the open. Definitely a cool critter, and one that's worth reporting, to extend its recognized distribution map.



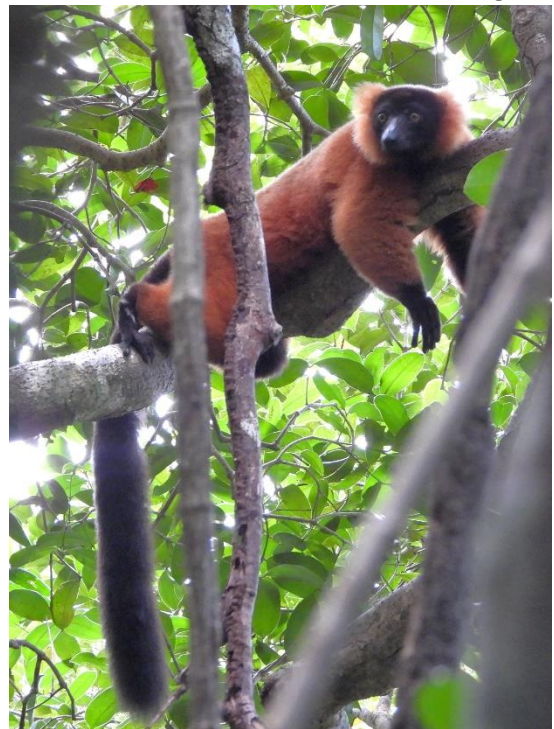
Day 16: Last full day of Mammal Watching!

With at least 6 new mammal species yesterday, our list was now getting into the 70's, which is beyond the best scenario I could have imagined. At this point, anything would be a bonus. But we were still thirsty, and there were still targets left!

This morning Jonas and Ruta joined the Americans on a half-day excursion into the park to see the Helmet vanga in its nest, while Alex and I were focused on efforts to get Brown-tailed vantsira on the ridge trail.



In the early hike with Claudio we passed the two lady birders who pointed out a pair of Northern bamboo lemurs. This morning we hiked further up the ridge trail than we had, previously. We saw the cute and tiny Brown leaf chameleon, Red-ruffed lemurs again, and several birds including a few vangas, but not Helmet vangas. Apparently, October isn't the best time of the year to see helmet vangas, despite them being a "flagship" species for Masoala. I was actually hoping to see one, as this was my second most wanted bird in Madagascar after Velvet asity.



Before heading back for a late breakfast, we took the trail where we saw the Nesomys on our first hike. Sure enough, Alex found a pair of Lowland Nesomys. This time they stayed around and even acted decently undisturbed despite our proximity. We also had a close encounter with the white-fronted brown lemurs, this time out in the open and undisturbed.



After breakfast we wanted to have a short, 1-hour attempt on the main trail for the brown-tailed vantsira, then get back before lunch. Alex picked a spot on the trail that had good visibility to both directions, up and down the trail. Patrick insisted on hiking up to the spot where they'd been seen previously. He would Whooo at us if he saw something. My gut feeling was that "our" section was too close

to the village, with the presence of smells and sounds from the village being felt. But I laid aside this thought and committed myself to the task. After about half an hour of waiting, Claudio, who initially went with Patrick, came back, and joined us. But only a few minutes later, we heard a “Whooo!”

My eyes must have opened wide; immediately Alex and I looked at each other, as if saying: “was this a Whooo?”. 2 seconds later: “Whooo!”. That’s it – no time to think. I grabbed my camera and started running up the trail. A 3rd “Whooo!” I realized this must be something RARE. This is not another ring-tailed vontsira, or even a fossa. This was the kind of Whooo that meant GET YOUR FUCKING ASS OVER HERE IMMEDIATELY. I ran faster than I ran for the fossa, but this was steep up-hill, navigating and skipping in-between tree roots. After less than a minute of running I saw Patrick, and he signaled to me to come, fast. This was physically demanding – I was breathing loudly by this point, but I kept going as fast as I could. This must have been only a 300-meter aerial distance, but the challenging terrain made it a 2-ish minute run. As soon as we got to the place, Patrick pointed to where the animal was walking. We asked him if it was the brown-tailed mongoose, to which his initial response was: “yes”. But when he showed us 2 pictures he managed, Alex immediately announced: a **Falanouc**! No way! This was like 12:45 in the middle of the day, and there he had clear pictures of a Falanouc, missed by us by what must have been under 2 minutes! As of that moment, Patrick now holds 2 of the only hand-held daytime pictures of wild Falanouc in existence! It is THAT rare.



© Patrick Randrianantenaina (both pictures)

Well, we had initially planned on getting back to the lodge for lunch... but we would spend the rest of the day and night in this spot. Patrick thought it would come back, but it never did. We just sat silently, watching the section of the trail where the Falanouc crossed – looking up and down the trail. At one point we asked Claudio to go back down and get Ruta and Jonas if they were back from their excursion. Also, if possible, maybe bring a sandwich or scraps from lunch. He came back with the cook, and a luxurious picnic lunch. But without Jonas and Ruta. I tried to understand why, and there was a miscommunication where he clearly overlooked them and missed them at camp. But luckily, they took a local staff member to lead them to this spot, where they correctly guessed we would be, as this is the “brown-tailed vontsira spot”.

At the time I also thought that despite being an extremely generous gesture by the lodge, a picnic lunch made too much of a ruckus: additional staff, noises of setting up, and of dishes and plates, etc. Of course, in any other circumstance this would be the most highly appreciated effort. But specifically in the middle

of a dense rain forest, while trying to relocate an animal so rare Patrick has never seen it in 30 years of guiding tours and living in its habitat, until today, and with visibility that's only a few meters into the forest and maybe 15 meters in either direction up or down the trail – this probably didn't help our cause.

Alas, it never did show up. Before Jonas and Ruta came, we saw yet another Ring-tailed vongsira crossing the trail, and Alex got a blurry picture of it. At night, Jonas, Ruta and Claudio walked down for dinner while Alex and I stayed put. We asked if they could bring our night gear while they were down there, which they gladly did. At one point, Patrick got up and made a quick round of "patrol" to see if anything was moving around. Suddenly he Whooped at us again! I thought: "What is he, a freaking magician?!" Alex and I immediately got up and rushed over to where he was, seeing a faint but definite carnivore in Patrick's headlamp's red light. What is this?? A falanouc? No, maybe a small Fossa? Luckily Alex had his headlamp on and turned on the bright light. Oh, another **Fanaloka**! I managed a record shot, and it was cool, but it was not our Falanouc. But it's noteworthy to mention that 3 different carnivores were sighted on this short section of the trail, all within 12 hours! Jonas and Ruta also saw what was likely the same individual on their hike back up from the lodge.



Despite our huge dip on what would have been, as Alex put it, "the absolute exclamation point on our already super-successful trip", we were happy that at least Patrick took pictures, and we now have a great story to tell. I urge mammal watchers to visit Masoala and find out if this can become a reliable spot for either Falanouc or Brown-tailed mongoose. I'm also excited that, despite missing the actual sighting – this rare species was seen on our tour, by our guide, who was looking for it, for us! As opposed to passing another group who had just seen it and told us about it – no; this was our guide on our tour. It makes it that much more bitter-sweet.

Hiking back at night we saw a few more tufted-tailed rats, another woolly lemur, mouse lemur, and dwarf lemur. On the lodge's ground we saw another Sportive lemur, and Claudio also called us over to a Lowland streaked tenrec he spotted. There was also another Commerson's roundleaf bat hanging from one of the trees in the lodge's grounds.

Even though most species today were repeats, this ended up being the single day with the most different mammal species seen, with 14 different species.

Days 17-18: Driving to Toamasina and Last night in Tana

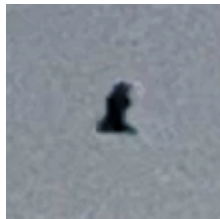
We left Chez Arol on a boat by 6:15, after an early breakfast.

The boat took 2ish hours, then we met our driver and his pickup truck at Mananara. The first day's drive was horrible – being squeezed 3 people in the back of a pickup (with rotating turns for the passenger seat), driving over a boulder-y terrain, being tossed from side to side and hitting our heads violently against the sides of the vehicle, with no headrest - only metal,



was not fun. The first 30 km took over 5 hours. There are also water ferries. Food and lodging were also by far the worst we had. The second day was much better, with actual roads. But we all agreed to this prior to the trip, based on the tight schedule and the cancelled flights. I will discuss further in the “Things I missed and what I would have done differently” section, how I would suggest to re-arrange the entire Masoala leg for future mammal watchers.

Some sections that were less rocky were actually nice, driving along (or on) tropical beaches. Just before sunset, flocks of **Madagascar flying fox** were flying overhead. We stopped briefly to observe them and photograph them with our cellphones as all our gear was in the back of the truck, tucked under covers... and under Patrick.



Before reaching Toamasina, we stopped at Ivoloia Park and Zoo, which had a nice collection of both free-ranging and caged lemurs, including an aye-aye. We also saw a wild colony of **White-bellied free-tailed bats**.

After a delayed flight, we had a goodbye drink at Gassy Guesthouse Hotel in Tana, where we parted ways, and I went to Fly-Inn Hotel, which provided western luxury and comfort that was highly welcomed.



Things I Missed, Things I would have Done Differently, and a Few Final Thoughts

First, I'll say this trip exceeded all my expectations and was amazing in every way. I didn't miss much. But a few species we didn't see along our route:

Hairy-eared dwarf lemur – On our second day at Andasibe, perhaps we should have gone elsewhere in the morning, then came into Miramozaha well-rested after lunch, prepared for a long evening. Alvin photographed this species in the exact spot we were told it would be, but around 23:00, whereas we were out of the reserve by 21:00 after a long and physically demanding day. Concentrate on the area around the first bridge on the main trail.

Alternatively, at Mitsinjo and the Orchid Gardens, spend more time looking specifically for this species. We had a general walk, where we found several rats, and tried to find a tailless tenrec. In retrospect, perhaps we didn't put enough focus on this species.

Coquerel's giant mouse lemur – In Kirindy Forest and Akiba Lodge, we were getting some contradictory stories and opinions about our chances of seeing this species. It used to be feasible prior to COVID. Now, apparently, it's difficult. If we had another night, I would try to concentrate only on this species. But that would be impossible given the flights. See my thoughts and Kirindy and Tsingy below.

Masoala fork-marked lemur – Apparently, this species is very rare, and it's noted that one should report it if seen. But we were getting contradictory stories about this species too. Claudio told us that they surveyed the entire forest around Chez Arol during COVID when they had no tourists, and came up with all the lemurs that occur there, including aye-aye, but not Fork-marked, nor hairy-eared dwarf lemurs. He says neither has been seen since 2018. However, apparently, they have been seen around the nearby Masoala Forest Lodge 6-8 months prior to our visit. We were planning to visit this forest on the 2nd night,

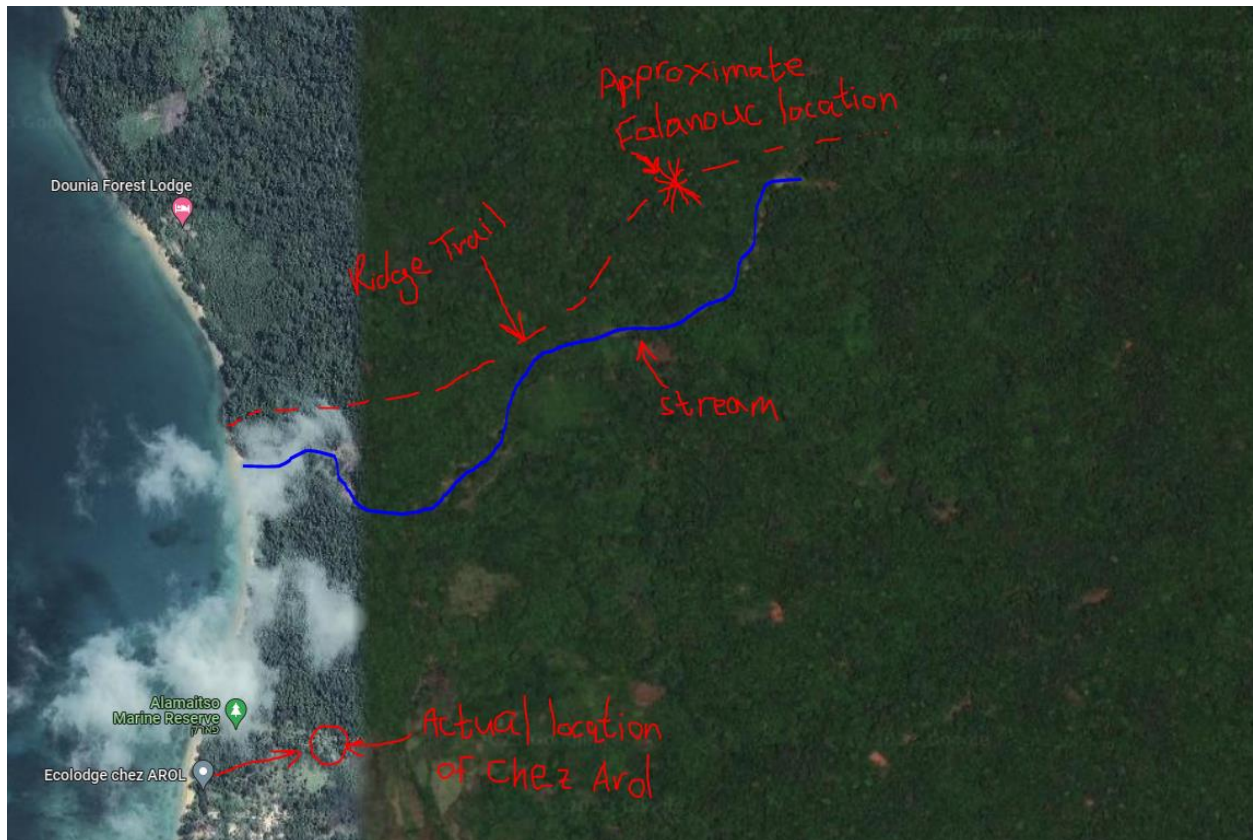
before the Falanouc grounded us to a single spot for 12 hours. We were also told it's easier to see in the rainy season, and a different person mentioned during full moon – the latter which I don't really believe.

Betsilio sportive lemur – I wouldn't even know where to start with this one. The forest patch between Ranomafana and Antsirabe, where they used to be seen a few years ago, has been damaged and I'm not sure if Patrick knows of a reliable place to look for them, but it might be worth asking.

Jonah's and Simmon's mouse lemurs – See "how I would do Masoala differently" below.

Falanouc – Always stay with your guide... 😊

But in all seriousness, the ridge trail from the beach (also easily accessed from Chez Arol, but through a slightly-confusing trail system, first) is a spot I would definitely try again. Patrick and the local guides probably know the exact spot, but I think it's around here: -15.703659112789826, 49.97008213737318. Keep in mind that we had 3 carnivores at pretty much the same spot (within 100m of each other) in a span of less than 12 hours. So it's definitely a spot worth checking out.



How I would do Masoala differently – So the 2-day drive was horrendous to all senses. If you can charter a flight back from Maroantsetra, do it! It's expensive though, like \$5000 for 4 people and a guide. If you do that, I would then do perhaps like 1-2 nights at Masoala Forest Lodge, which is supposedly nicer than Chez Arol. Plus, it potentially has Fork-marked and Hairy-eared dwarf lemurs as mentioned above, in addition to the other local species. Then I would do the final 2 nights at Arol, concentrating on those rare carnivores.

Alternatively, if you aren't going to take a chartered flight and must drive – but if you can spend 1 extra night in the region, then I would suggest to repeat our itinerary with the following change: I would inquire if it would be feasible to spend the first night at Mananara Nord National Park and camp there. And if possible, I would ask what time one would have to leave Chez Arol that morning to make it in time – including the boat ride and horrible driving. The targets would be Mananara-Nord sportive lemur and Johan's mouse lemur. But be warned – getting any sort of accurate information from anyone on the East Coast of Madagascar is harder than finding the rarest mammal! If you manage the above, then the following day, drive all the way to Tampo Forest (-17.287218799712797, 49.41561118447) which is not easy to find on Google Maps, but has Simmon's mouse lemur. Then spend that night in Fenoarivo, which has decent accommodations, unlike the place where we stayed. Then, fly to Tana the following morning.

Thoughts about Kirindy Forest & Tsingy – This worked out perfect for us, but we could have easily missed Fossa and/or Bokiboky. And we did miss Coquerel's giant mouse lemur, which may just be very hard. If you have the luxury of spending 7 nights instead of just 4 nights, then it works out, as the flights to and from Morondava are operated twice a week. In that case, I would do 2 nights at Kirindy Ecolodge, followed by 3 nights at Tsingy de Bemaraha. Maybe take the extra full day at Tsingy to track down the Bemaraha woolly lemur (I'd get in contact with a local researcher or something), and lots of bats at the Little Tsingy, which we didn't visit. Then the 2 final nights at Akiba. Or alternatively 3 at Ecolodge, 3 at Tsingy, and 1 at Akiba. This depends on where the Coquerel's giant mouse lemur turns out next. I have a feeling it will turn out soon, after not having been reported since 2019.

If I could add just a few more days – I would definitely add a night at Tsimanampetsotsa National Park, camping for the Grandidier's mongoose, which according to Nick Garbutt's book and Patrick, should be "easy". This would require a flight there and back.

If I had just 2 additional nights on top of that, I would do Nosy Be and Ambanja, as that seems to be a nice pay-off for the little time required, with nearly-guaranteed Northern Giant mouse lemur which would be high on my list in lieu of the Coquerel's one, Black lemur, and chance for Omura's whale as well as whale sharks!

Many Many Thanks!

I want to say thank you to our entire crew (Alex, Jonas and Ruta) for being such a fun, diverse, determined, and tireless group, all which made the trip so enjoyable! Also, Alex, of course, for putting the entire trip



together – an intense but very successful itinerary which worked out so well. And also for being a great roommate for the trip, and friend, as always!

Thank you to Patrick for such great logistical organization of lodges, drivers, for being eagle-eyed, and... what can I say... having a superpower for attracting carnivores!

Stay tuned for Alex Meyer's much more extensive trip in Madagascar, including many more locations and species!

Notable Birds and Other Wildlife

Notable Birds:

Malagasy turtle-dove
Madagascar green-pigeon
Madagascar blue-pigeon
White-breasted mesite
Crested coua
Blue coua
Giant coua
Red-breasted coua
Malagasy coucal
Madagascar cuckoo
Collared nightjar
Madagascar nightjar
Madagascar snipe
Madagascar buttonquail
Madagascar pratincole
Barn owl
Madagascar scops-owl
Madagascar hoopoe
Malagasy kingfisher
Madagascar pygmy kingfisher
Madagascar bee-eater
Pitta-like ground-roller
Greater vasa parrot
Lesser vasa parrot
Gray-headed lovebird
Velvet asity
Red-tailed vanga
Nuthatch-vanga
Chabert vanga
Crossley's vanga
Madagascar blue vanga
Hook-billed vanga
Sickle-billed vanga
Pollen's vanga
Crested drongo
Malagasy paradise-flycatcher
Madagascar magpie-robin
Forest (Bemaraha) rock thrush
Souimanga sunbird
Malagasy sunbird
Nelicourvi weaver
Red fody
Madagascar wagtail



Herps:

Cryptic chameleon

Glaw's chameleon

O'Shaughnessy's chameleon

Striped day gecko

Oustalet Giant chameleon

Madagascan cat-eyed snake

Parson's chameleon

Madagascar tree boa

Mossy-leaf-tailed gecko

White-banded chameleon

Stump-tailed chameleon

Boophys sibilans frog

Madagascar bright-eyed frog

Brown Mantella

Brown leaf chameleon

Pandanus frog

Sculpted Madagascar frog

White Folohy Madagascar frog

Madagascar Ground Gecko

* This is just what I have written down, but from pictures I post on Flickr and Facebook I will most likely identify more species.