

Madagascar Madness

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Pre-Trip:

For me, Madagascar has run the gamut. From childhood dream, to potential honeymoon destination (I'm lucky we chose Costa Rica), to movie I quote with my 2-year-old. As long as I can remember, it's had a gravitational pull and for good reason. Every single native land mammal here is unique to Madagascar. Even including bats, the endemism rate remains a staggering 97%. The place is a veritable gold mine for mammal-watchers!

I nearly joined onto Jon Hall's 2022 trip, but it had already filled up. A serendipitous event, as I could now mold my very own itinerary from scratch. I was able to secure his touted guide Patrick Randrianantenaina (patrickv7v@gmail.com), and we worked tirelessly together for months to shape the schedule into its final form. Patrick was incredibly patient and knowledgeable during this process- an invaluable combination and I cannot recommend him enough! Nick Garbutt's masterpiece Mammals of Madagascar was also integral to my planning.

Now, I had to build a team. First up was Tomer Ben-Yehuda. While in Uganda, he and I made a pact to visit this magical land of endemics, and before too much of it disappeared. Then was Jonas Livet and Rūta Vaicekauskaitė. The French and Lithuanian couple had nearly joined me to Kenya in 2021. But this time, a fellow obsessive collector like Jonas couldn't resist visiting such a biodiverse treasure-trove. These three would accompany me for the first 18 days, but with my itinerary ballooning to 36 days, I needed more recruits.

I turned to Brazilian native Dr. Elias Sadalla Filho, who I knew from a message board called Zoonat. Much like me, he's only interested in Mammals, both wild and captive. Next up was Phil Davison, an Englishman who joined me on the now famous Javan Rhino tour led by Vladimir Dinets. He enjoys all biodiversity and even keeps a list of his flights- he hit #100 on this trip! I connected with our final member, Chad Johnson, through an ad I put on mammalwatching.com. We first met at Bronx Zoo's Madagascar! building, in honor of our eventual second meeting in Madagascar itself. They're three of the nicest guys I've ever met and I was ecstatic to have them round out the roster!

After a year of planning, I've never felt so prepared for a trip. Then a week before my departure, I got sick. Ah, the best laid plans... Tests for Covid, Flu and Strep all came back negative. I did everything in my power to recuperate that week, but by D-day I was still far from 100%. I had waited my whole life for this- there was no turning back now. I came to learn that having the middle seat on a trans-Atlantic flight while fully congested is a very specific form of torture.

I landed in Antananarivo (Tana) minutes behind Tomer. After we both secured a sim card and local currency, we tracked down our transfer for "BG Tours" hotel. I chose this lodging based on its unique position 1 hour south of the Airport, and therefore 1 hour closer to Ranomafana. We arrived in time for a delicious dinner shared with an international guest list. Our meeting Jonas and Rūta would have to wait until morning, as they arrived after midnight.



Itinerary: (Oct 3 – Nov 7, 2023)

Regions Visited Numbered Chronologically 1-8

Day 0: Land in Antananarivo (Tana) – drive to BG Tours Hotel

Day 1: BG Tours Hotel – drive to **Ranomafana NP**

Day 2: **Ranomafana NP**

Day 3: **Ranomafana NP** – drive to **Kianjavato**

Day 4: **Kianjavato** – drive to **Ranomafana NP**

Day 5: **Ranomafana NP** – drive to Tana

Day 6: Tana – fly to Morondava – drive to **Kirindy Forest**

Day 7: **Kirindy Forest** – drive to **Tsingy de Bemaraha NP**

Day 8: **Tsingy de Bemaraha NP**

Day 9: **Tsingy de Bemaraha NP** – drive to **Kirindy Forest**

Day 10: **Kirindy Forest** – drive to Morondava – fly to Tana – drive to **Andasibe**

Day 11: **Andasibe**

Day 12: **Andasibe**

Day 13: **Andasibe** – drive to Tana

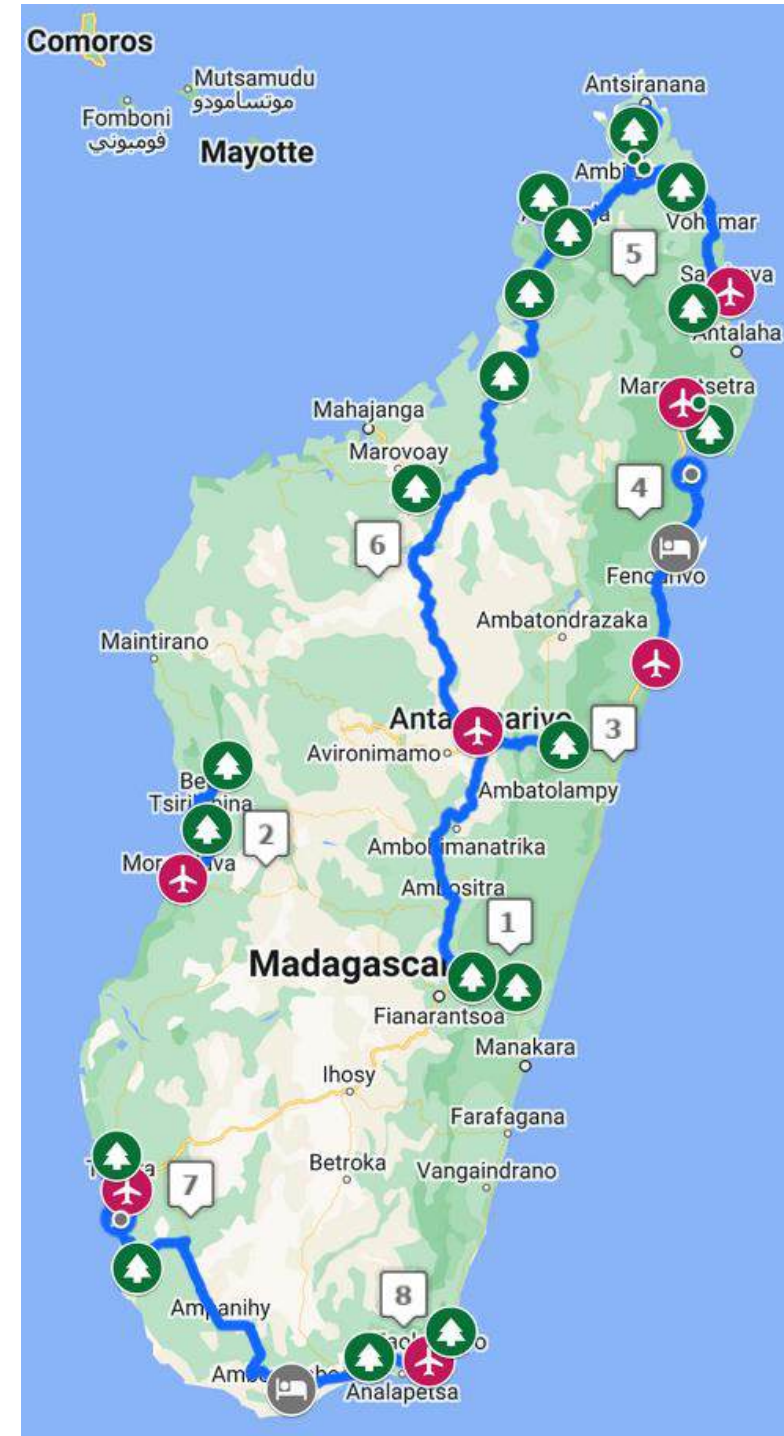
Day 14: Tana – fly to Maroantsetra – boat to **Farankaraina**

Day 15: **Farankaraina** – boat to **Masoala NP**

Day 16: **Masoala NP**

Day 17: **Masoala NP** – boat to Mananara Avaratra – drive to Manakalana

Day 18: Manakalana – drive to Toamasina – fly to Tana



Day 19: Tana – fly to Sambava – drive to **Marojejy NP**

Day 20: **Marojejy NP**

Day 21: **Marojejy NP** – drive to **Daraina**

Day 22: **Daraina** – drive to **Andrafiamena**

Day 23: **Andrafiamena** – drive to **Montagne D'Ambre NP**

Day 24: **Montagne D'Ambre NP**

Day 25: **Montagne D'Ambre NP** – drive to **Ankarana**

Day 26: **Ankarana** – drive to **Ambanja**

Day 27: **Ambanja** – drive to Ankify – boat to **Nosy Be**

Day 28: **Nosy Be** – boat to Ankify – drive to **Antanambao** – drive to **Anjiamangirana** – drive to Antsohihy

Day 29: Antsohihy – drive to **Ankarafantsika NP**

Day 30: **Ankarafantsika NP** – drive to Tana

Day 31: Tana – fly to Toliara – drive to **Ifaty**

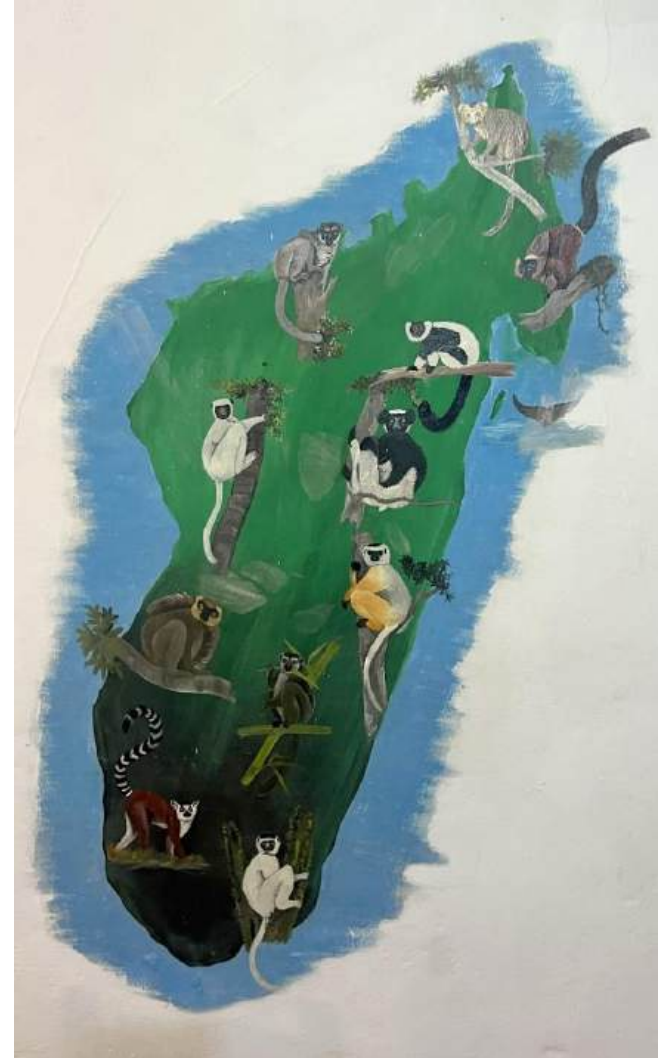
Day 32: **Ifaty** – drive to Toliara – boat to Anakao – drive to **Tsimanampetsotse NP**

Day 33: **Tsimanampetsotse NP** – drive to Tsiombe

Day 34: Tsiombe – drive to **Berenty** – drive to **Andohahela NP (Mangatsiaka & Managotry)**

Day 35: **Andohahela NP (Managotry)** – drive to **Sainte Luce**

Day 36: **Sainte Luce** – drive to Taolagnaro – fly to Tana – fly home



Ranomafana National Park

We departed BG Tours hotel by 6am and arrived to Ranomafana's Setam Lodge at 7:30pm after 13 painstaking hours of rough roads handled well by drivers Mika and Fameno. Wasting no time, we dove into our first night walk. Accompanied by a gentle rain, Tomer thermaled the trip's first mammal within minutes: a **Groves' Dwarf Lemur**. Moments later we were face to face with a very damp **Rufous Mouse Lemur** enamored with the banana it was eating. Then Tomer thermaled a small shrew-like creature weaving between the roots and moss. It was a *Microgale* sp. and based on size, coloration, and tail length we determined it likely to be a **Pale Shrew Tenrec**. Photos were impossible, and in hindsight a video would've been the way to go.

Patrick led us to a section along the road known for **Fanaloka** sightings and it was soon known for one more! In awe, we all enjoyed a magical 20 minutes



Rufous Mouse Lemur



watching this gorgeous small carnivore forage for food. A perfect finish to our first taste of Ranomafana. Back near the lodge, Tomer and I pushed onwards catching fleeting views of unidentifiable rodents, and bats in flight. We had now managed to see each of the five mammal orders native to Madagascar within just as many hours!

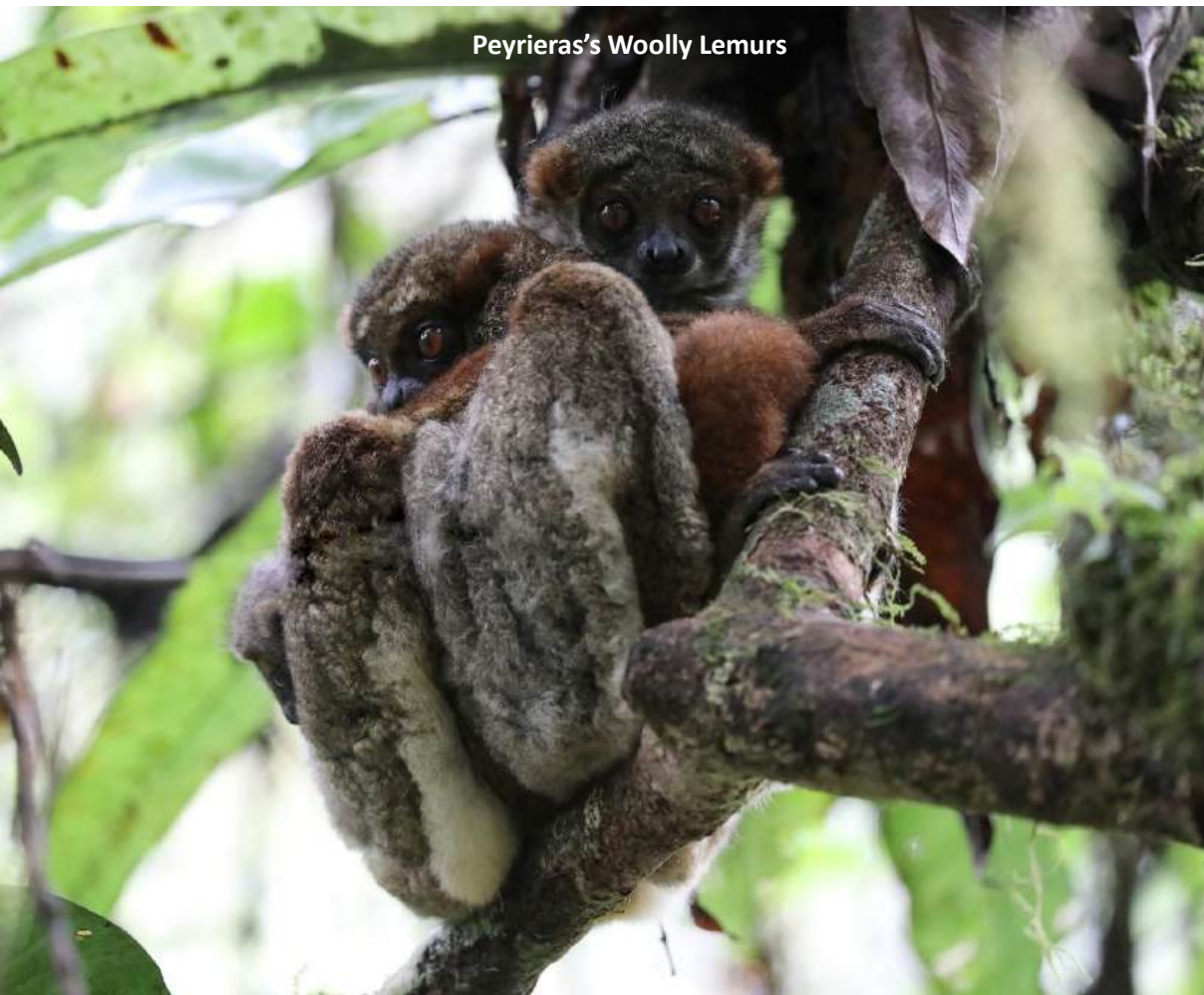
We started out at 7am the next day in the Talatakely area, with a **Lowland Red Forest Rat**. Then came word from our spotter, Joseph, to meet at a group of **Red-bellied Lemurs**. The spotting system between Patrick and Joseph was efficiency at its finest. While we took in these white eye-ringed cuties, Joseph was onto the next target, in constant communication with Patrick and other spotters. A dream



Red-bellied Lemur



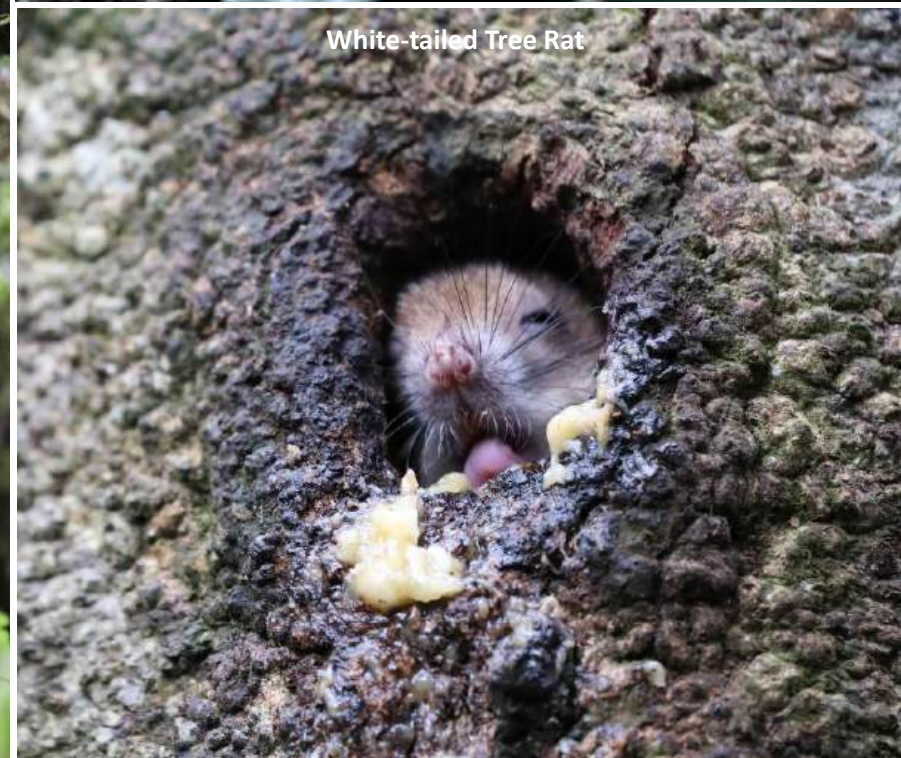
scenario for someone hoping to maximize their mammal output in limited time. Next up was the critically endangered **Golden Bamboo Lemur**, only discovered in 1986 and the impetus for opening Ranomafana back in 1991. A follow up encounter bathed in gilded sunlight really emphasized their colorful name. Nearby, we ran into a striking *Pitta-like Ground Roller* before Patrick pointed out a day roost for **Peyrieras's Woolly Lemurs**. We quickly abandoned our post when news of **Milne-Edwards Sifakas** rolled in. A brisk and arduous hike brought us beneath a tree housing a small group of this magnificent lemur, painted like an inverse panda. A retread of the Woolly Lemur roost paid off when I spied a **Ring-tailed Mongoose** bounding along the nearby hillside. However, poor Jonas missed it while on a pee-break. Patrick then brought us to a tree hole for a **White-tailed Tree Rat**, which just barely stuck out its masterfully whiskered face.



Peyrieras's Woolly Lemurs



Pitta-like Ground Roller



White-tailed Tree Rat



An especially delectable lunch (see Tomer's report) was followed by a meeting with local researchers Patrick had arranged. We were lucky to observe the release of **Webb's** and **Lesser Tufted-tailed Rats**. Subsequent day's releases included a **Tanala Tufted-tailed Rat** and a young **Dobson's Shrew Tenrec**. Very exciting!



Lesser Tufted-tailed Rat



Lesser Tufted-tailed Rat



Dobson's Shrew Tenrec



Dobson's Shrew Tenrec



Tanala Tufted-tailed Rat

We visited Vohiparara in the afternoon, in search of our first Sportive Lemur. This section of the park is at higher elevation and boasts numerous day roosts for **Small-toothed Sportive Lemur**. One by one we came upon abandoned roosts. At the final one, we were in luck! A pair of beady eyes gazed back at us, attached to a hunched-over furball. I was ecstatic! A family lifer, and the only primate family I hadn't ever seen. The animal retreated to its hole, only to artfully wriggle back out moments later. Probably the most athletic behavior I witnessed from any of these so-called "Sportive" Lemurs.

Our night walk began from Vohiparara's entrance, immediately yielding what was likely a **Sibree's Dwarf Lemur**, featuring the requisite dorsal stripe. As altitude lowered, we came upon more **Grove's Dwarf** and **Rufous Mouse Lemurs**, unencumbered by the previous evening's rain.



Small-toothed Sportive Lemur



Sibree's Dwarf Lemur



Grove's Dwarf Lemur



Grove's Dwarf Lemur

Kianjavato Ahmanson Field Station

The next day we drove to Kianjavato in under 2 hours. En route, Patrick confirmed the top target had already been located- very welcomed news! Upon arrival, I noticed photos of events that had been held at the field station featuring costumes of Madagascar wildlife. Because I'd be in Madagascar during Halloween, my 15-year costume streak was in jeopardy. I had joked about dressing up as a lemur, but figured that would be difficult to pull off. Maybe this was my chance... I asked if the staff had kept any of those outfits and they went to go check. A few moments later they brought out custom-made Ruffed Lemur and Sucker-footed Bat pullovers! I couldn't believe it! I wasted no time becoming each of these distinctive creatures, culminating with Tomer recording my best lemur impression. Can report, my 2-year-old approved.



Childishness behind me, it was time for some real lemurs. Local guides, Theoluc and Dadah, delivered radio-collared **Greater Bamboo Lemurs** as we entered the forest. Kianjavato is the last strong-hold for this species, with only one individual remaining in Ranomafana. The main event was up next, and it was another family lifer! The **Eastern Sucker-footed Bat**, as its name suggests, has small suction cups on its wrists and ankles. However, they stick to leaves using “wet adhesion” from body secretions instead of suction power. A fascinating species, leaving me only two bat families worldwide to complete the set. Nearby, a group of **Peter’s Sheath-tailed Bats** fluttered about in the frighteningly dark rooms of an abandoned research station.



Greater Bamboo Lemur

Eastern Sucker-footed Bat



Peter's Sheath-tailed Bat

We scrambled up a steep incline to reach radio-collared **Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs**. Then on the tree next door, Tomer pointed out our first **Red-fronted Brown Lemurs**. Our night walk was inundated with **Kianjavato Dwarf Lemurs**, a species not yet described but only one very shy **Jolly's Mouse Lemur**. We were thrilled to find multiple **Greater Hedgehog Tenrecs**, including one close enough to touch. The parallel evolution here is noteworthy: first between Sucker-footed Bats and their Disc-winged counterparts from the Americas, and then between Hedgehog Tenrecs and ordinary Hedgehogs. We returned to Ranomafana early the next morning, after a fruitful 24 hours at Kianjavato.





Kianjavato Dwarf Lemur



Jolly's Mouse Lemur



Ranomafana National Park (Redux)

With pre-trip sickness lingering, and the majority of our Rano targets wrapped up, I decided to rest up at Setam Lodge. Jonas/Rūta enjoyed the morning birding in Vohiparara, while Tomer was off to Anja on his side quest for one ring (-tailed lemur) to rule them all. I rejoined the birding pair before lunch to visit a well-known roadside cave dotted with **Major's Long-fingered Bats**. After lunch we returned to Talatahely, now noticeably less busy than our initial morning. Our goals were to track down the final **Greater Bamboo Lemur**, our first **Eastern Bamboo Lemurs**, more **Golden Bamboo Lemurs** (because you can never have quite enough bamboo lemurs) and of course another **Ring-tailed Mongoose** for Jonas. We managed two out of three bamboos, with no sign of the Eastern. We found plenty of **Lowland Red Forest Rats**, with the majority being around dusk plus one more **Milne-Edwards Sifaka**. Alas, Jonas's pursuit for wild mongoose raged on. And I'd be remiss to not mention perhaps the most elegant bird from the trip, a stunning black and green male *Velvet Asity*.



Velvet Asity



Major's Long-fingered Bat



By nightfall we hurried out of the park to meet Tomer, who was slowly turning into Gollum the longer he waited. With few achievable targets remaining, we opted to attempt a **Web-footed Tenrec** stake-out. A new guide named Thierry brought us to two locations where scat had been found. Tomer and I joined Patrick on a rock in the middle of a stream. We thermaled some excitement-inducing activity at streams edge, which wound up only being an introduced **Black Rat**. Sadly, no tenrecs this night. Our return walk did feature a strange-looking *Hammer-headed Flat Worm* that shimmered as it writhed across the path.



Dumeril's Madagascar Frog



The next morning, we braved the lengthy drive back to Tana, stopping at Ankazomivady Forest as a break from the monotony. A guide named Eric walked us through this forest patch with hope of finding a **Betsileo Sportive Lemur**. With no sightings in years, it's very possible the species is no longer found here. We settled instead for a *Carpet Chameleon* and an elusive *Madagascar Snipe*. By the time we hit Gassy Country House in Tana there was nothing left to do but sleep!

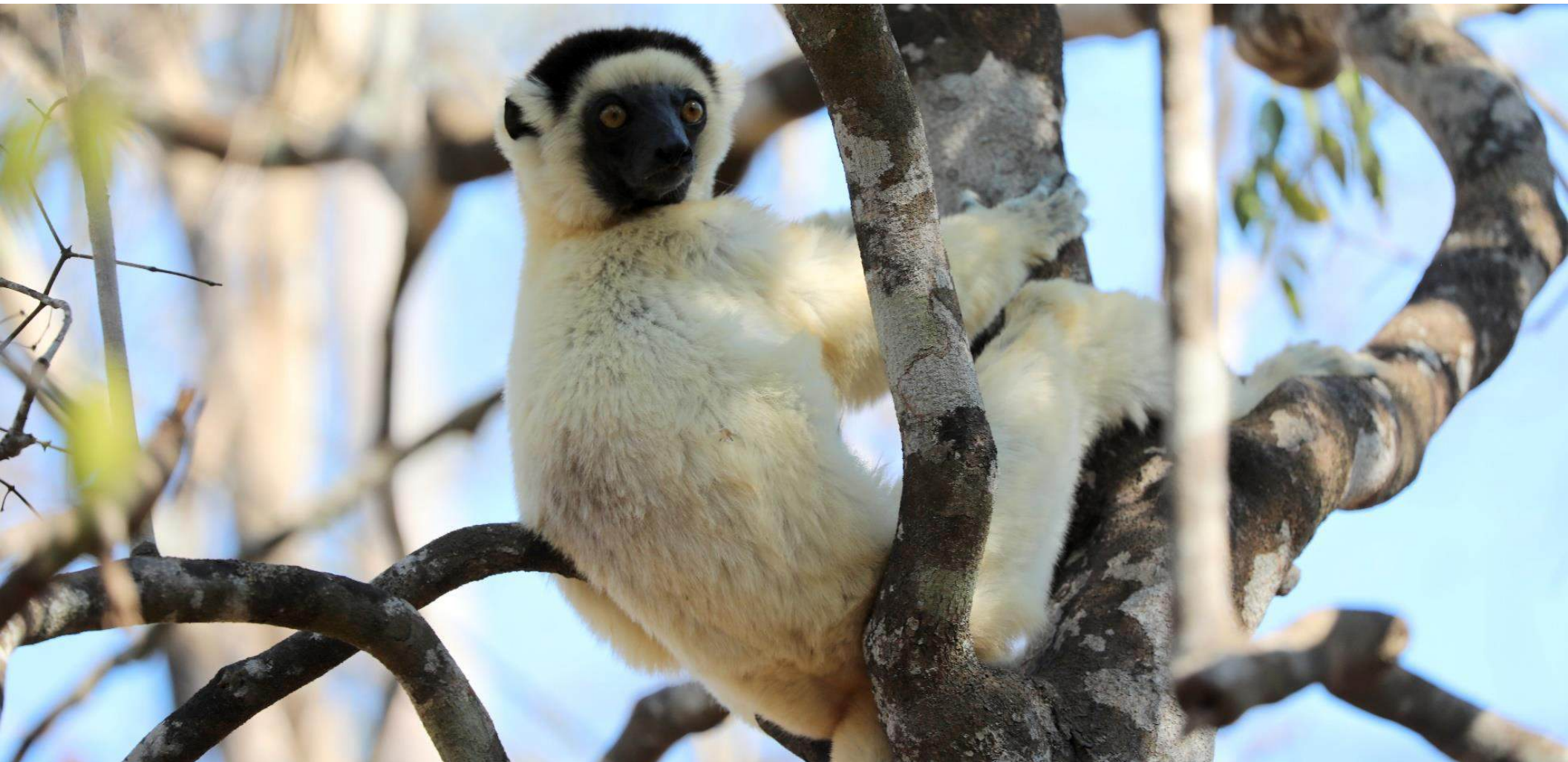


Kirindy Forest

This patch of itinerary was rough: only 2 partial days at Kirindy sandwiched around 1.5 days at Tsingy de Bemaraha. Far from ideal, but my hand was forced by a limited flight schedule and the immense driving time between the two parks. It was these daunting drives combined with a fear of shortchanging Kirindy that led Jonas and Rūta to skip Tsingy. Tomer had been on the fence. He was intrigued by Tsingy, but yearned first to see a Fossa, with maybe 4 hours to do so. Word from Kirindy Ecolodge was optimistic- they had been visiting daily. Tomer took a chance and canceled his room at Kirindy. Although he'd still need that Fossa before leaving Kirindy of his own volition...

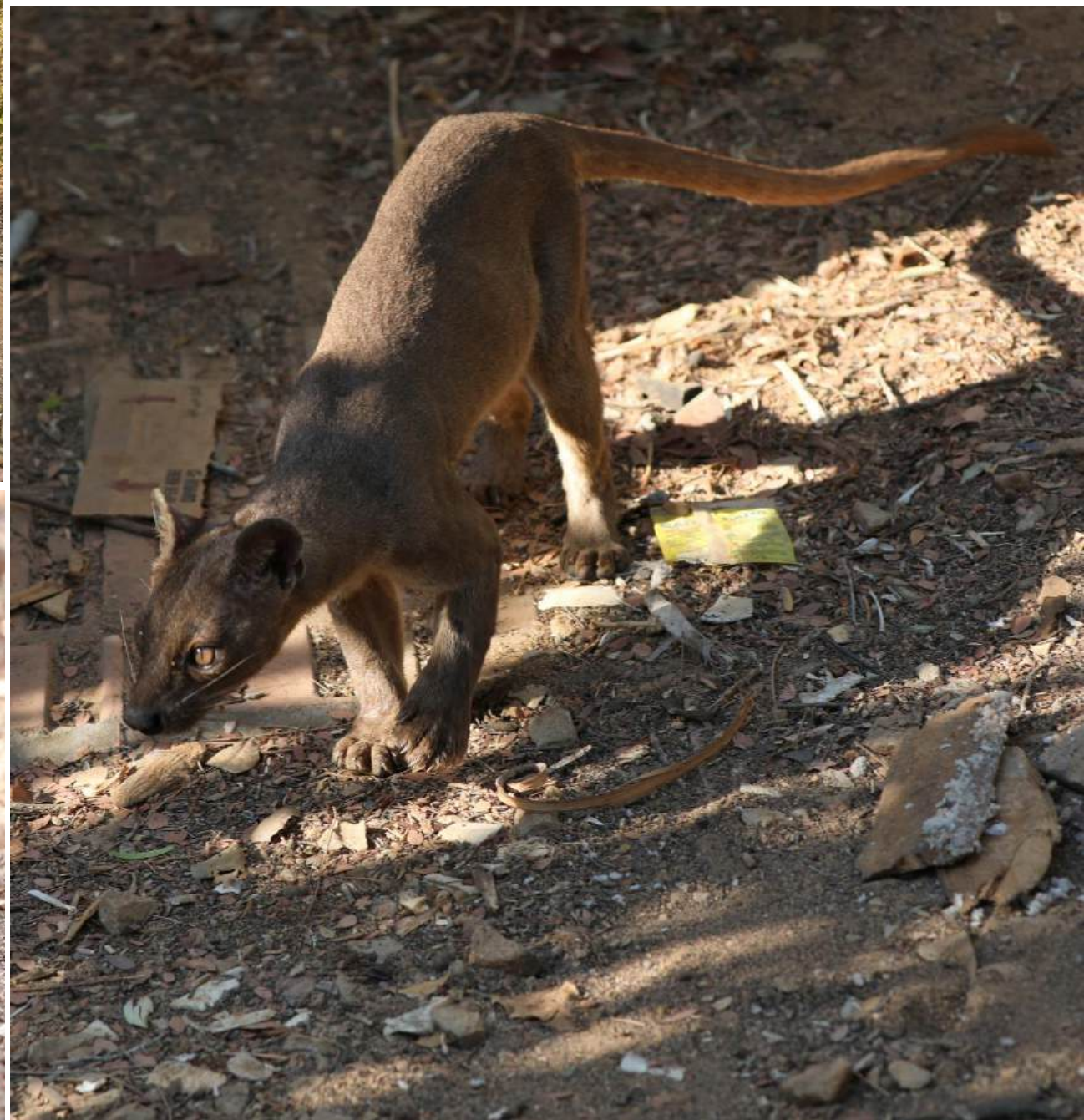
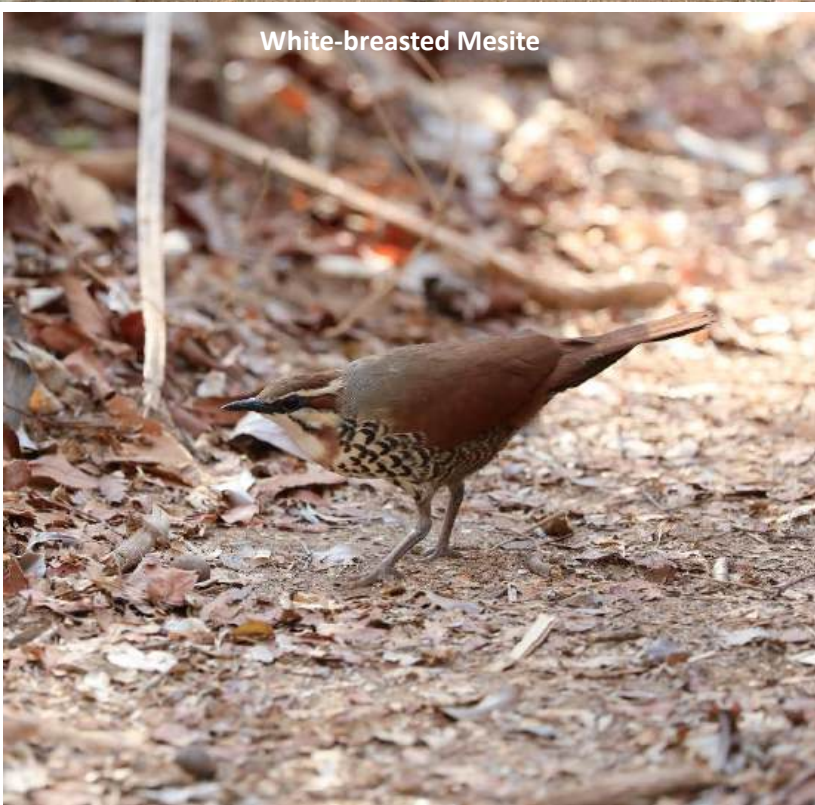
A stroke of luck shifted our flight 90 minutes earlier, alleviating some pressure on the already ambitious schedule. We were able to deboard, meet our driver Mosa, drop Jonas/Rūta at Akiba Lodge, and reach Kirindy Ecolodge by 3pm. It was here we met Dr. Steve Goodman, Madagascar researcher extraordinaire, who was conducting surveys in the area. What an honor and a pleasure it was to talk with Dr. Goodman! He assured us, "we'd be tripping over Fossas in our sleep."

Before long, we headed into the forest, with guide Alfred at our side. He quickly found us **Verreaux's Sifakas** leaping across the trail between the treetops. We continued along, when a loud "Whooo!" rang through the forest. Moments later, another. Alfred replied with his own "Whooo!" and began a long-distance



conversation in Malagasy. There was palpable excitement in their voices. Tomer and I looked at each other wide-eyed- they had a Fossa! Tomer took off with cartoonish speed, and I paced myself close behind. We ran until our muscles burned and our veins pumped battery acid. Then we ran some more. Alfred's colleague, Liantsoa, had waited at the lodge to communicate if a Fossa appeared, and one just did! Perfect execution by our guides in an area without any phone service. With heaving breaths, we arrived to see a small bit of commotion behind one of the lodge buildings. There, in all its glory, was a full-grown female **Fossa**, chomping on discarded chicken. Madagascar's largest carnivore and a legitimate lemur-hunter completely unbothered by our presence. Simply magnificent. Plus, what a relief, now I wouldn't have to hear about Tomer's Fossa FOMO. We did however, still need a **Narrow-striped Mongoose/Bokiboky**...





In the fading afternoon light, we returned to a bird-infested forest. But in shocking twist, I actually went into this trip with bird targets! Earlier in the year I tallied up how many avian Orders I had seen and somehow, without ever purposefully looking, I was missing only two. Both of which occur in, you guessed it, Madagascar! So, for me, the *White-breasted Mesites* we saw ducking beneath the dried foliage were much more than just “some birds.” They represented a very special Order Lifer! Now, only *Cuckoo-roller* remained! But no signs of Bokis.

Night was approaching and we were expected at Akiba Lodge. For tonight’s walk we rejoined forces with Jonas and Rūta, who were flanked by newcomers Alon Cassidey (son of Sangha Lodge’s Rod Cassidey) and his partner Alessandra. With the help of guide, Tinova, we enjoyed a productive evening, hitting all our expected targets. We were tripping over mouse lemurs. Most were **Gray Mouse Lemurs**, but a couple were identified later by Dr. Goodman as the world’s smallest primate: **Madame Berthe’s Mouse Lemur**. Two **Pale Fork-marked Lemurs** were located by listening to their high-



Madame Berthe's Mouse Lemur



pitched whistling calls. A stunning species- I'm a sucker for unique facial markings. We also came across a **Western Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur** and a **Red-tailed Sportive Lemur**. We inquired about **Coquerel's Giant Mouse Lemurs** and were told that they're very rarely seen, and they made no exceptions tonight. Though there was an unexpected guest back in Tomer and I's room: a **Gray Mouse Lemur** had joined us for a sleepover! Adorable!

Early the following morning, we returned to Kirindy Ecolodge, to find the blur of another **Fossa** streaking across the entrance road. Yet there was a different carnivore we desired. Our driver was antsy to begin the lengthy Tsingy trek, so we had to rush through an hour-long **Bokiboky** hunt, but again came up empty-handed. Concern was setting in, as frighteningly few hours lay ahead for Tomer and I at Kirindy. For now, we said our goodbyes were off to Tsingy!



Gray Mouse Lemur



Western Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur



Pale Fork-marked Lemur



Red-tailed Sportive Lemur



Madagascar Scops Owl



Madagascar Nightjar

Tsingy de Bemaraha National Park

We had a convoy to catch! Due to the threat of armed robberies, drivers have begun banding together in large groups while traversing this territory. The convoy begins at the first river crossing, and continues through the second river crossing at which point the lodges begin. As expected, we ran into Alon and Alessandra, who were making the same journey. It took about 10 hours with stops (including a scrumptious shrimp lunch at Karibo Hotel), before we arrived at the luxurious Soleil des Tsingy.

This place was epic. Complete with an infinity pool and gourmet meals served with a forest view. Unfortunately, as the day wore on, Tomer was fading from an ayahuasca-level baobab juice he downed at breakfast. He gutted out a short night walk along the main road from the lodge with Maritsenga as guide. We tracked down two **Peter's Mouse Lemurs** before turning in for an early dinner, where Tomer didn't make it past the first course. We both welcomed the chance to rest up ahead of a big day planned.



Thankfully, it turned out all Tomer needed was a good night's sleep at a posh hotel to feel way better. An hour's drive brought us to the entrance of Big Tsingy, where our guide Fafah awaited us. Suiting up with harnesses and carabiners prepared us for a next level sort of hike. We chose to tackle the Andamozavaky trail loop in reverse, prioritizing a **Bemarahasportive Lemur** roost. Only the top of the animal's head was visible, but a much-needed revisit at the end of the day netted us headshots worthy of Hollywood.

Before long, Fafah located a pair of **Decken's Sifaka**, my third Sifaka so far. Systematically checking off our targets, a small group of **Rufous Brown Lemurs** was up next, probingly peering at us as if they'd never seen humans before. Soon we hit a large rocky area, with many small caves. The first cave we entered was a dud but I insisted on exploring the next one over, which yielded **Madagascar Long-fingered Bats**, and a lone **Malagasy Mouse-eared Bat**.



Bemarahasportive Lemur



Peter's Mouse Lemur

Rufous Brown Lemur (male)



Rufous Brown Lemur (female)

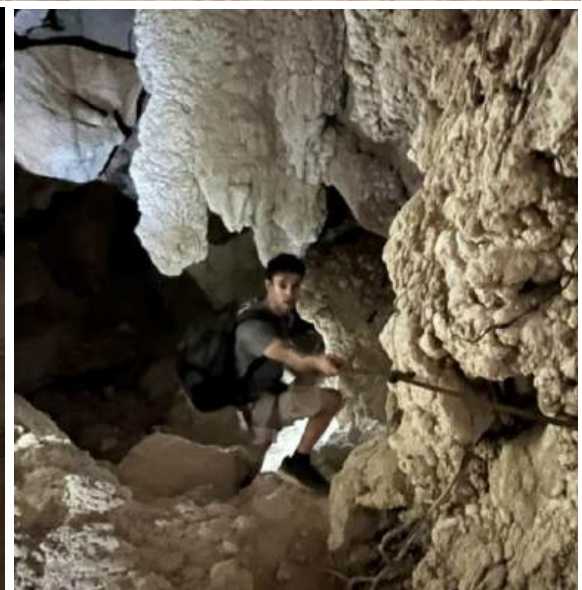


Decken's Sifaka





Things kicked up a notch as we spanned the extensive Broadway Cave. We spent the next 2 hours in darkness, snaking our way through tight crevices while avoiding deadly drops. Our carabiners hooked onto cables that were secured into the rock, providing a last line of defense. I carefully checked several bell holes along the ceiling before hitting the bat-pot: **Madagascar Giant Mastiff Bat**. It was unmistakable, with massive



ears evoking Princess Leia's iconic hair buns. Further ahead we found a second Giant Mastiff, and another **Malagasy Mouse-eared Bat** clutching to a ceiling vine.

We exited the desolation of the cave directly into a large group of tourists eating lunch. I asked about **Ring-tailed Mongooses**, and they had just seen one! We ducked behind some large rocks, and walked into our own private cavern. Within seconds of taking out some food, an inquisitive Mongoose appeared. It posed for several glorious minutes, completely exposed on the bare rocks. This opening act, was followed up with an equally cooperative *Bemaraha Rock-Trush*. The Malagasy Nature Hour concluded with my most wanted target of the park: a **Western Nesomys**. Ever since my friend Sandra Heldstab showed me her photos of this unusual rodent, I'd been craving some of my own. Mission accomplished! What a productive lunch!



Madagascar Giant Mastiff Bat

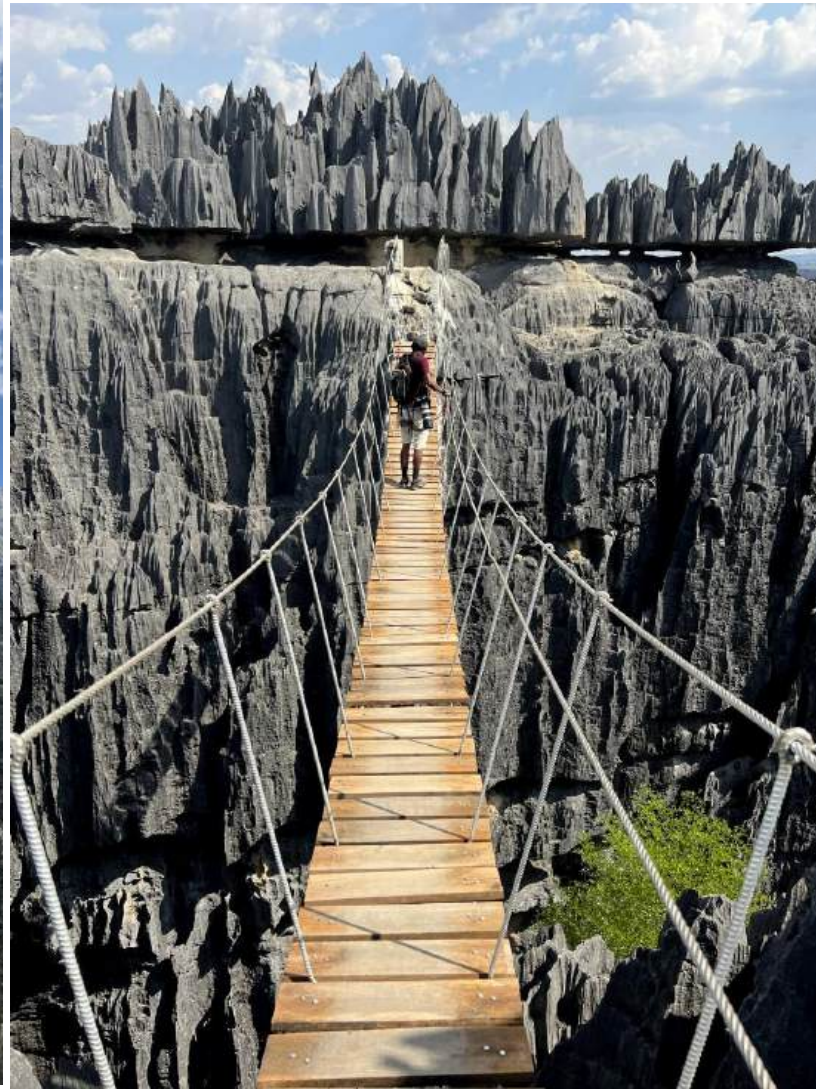




Our hike crescendoed with a climb to some lookout points. The view was breathtaking. A vast landscape of jagged limestone formations pointed skyward like a thousand ancient church steeples. They're called tsingy in Malagasy, which has a literal translation of "the place where one cannot walk barefoot." Although the lemurs here sometimes actually do!

Absolutely buzzing from our superb day, we made our way back to the vehicle. We needed to leave by 3:30pm as night walks were strictly prohibited. With the only viable nocturnal target out of the way, we took the night off to enjoy a delightful dinner alongside Alon and Alessandra. Which we followed up with another greatly appreciated good night's sleep.

We queued up for an extensive ferry line at 6:30am, and made our way back to Kirindy by 3pm in record time, thanks to more stringent stoppage schedule.





Kirindy Forest (Redux)

Now reunited with Jonas and Rūta at Kirindy Ecolodge, we swapped stories before setting out to tackle the **Bokiboky** problem. In our absence, with the help of Dr. Goodman, they were able to add **Grandidier's Free-tailed Bat**, **Western Tufted-tailed Rat** and an undescribed **Kirindy Tufted-tailed Rat**.

Back in the forest, Alfred and Patrick gave their best effort, but could only find a troop of **Red-fronted Brown Lemurs**. Where were these Bokis?



Red-fronted Brown Lemur (male)



Red-fronted Brown Lemur (female)

The night was dedicated to Rodents! Jonas and Rūta sought out **Western Tufted-tailed Rats** on fresh trails, while Tomer and I visited an area that had proven fruitful for **Bastard Big-footed Mouse** and **Malagasy Giant Jumping Rat** the night before. The place was crawling with Bastards and within 15 minutes we ran into a Giant. True to its name, it hopped around the forest like a baby kangaroo. An additional **Pale Fork-marked** and **Red-tailed Sportive Lemur** bolstered the night's setlist before meeting back with Jonas. Unfortunately, the only thing resembling Tufted-tailed Rats that night, was a **Black Rat** in a tree near the lodge.

Bastard Big-footed Mouse



Malagasy Giant Jumping Rat



The next morning, we again met with Dr. Goodman who was releasing bats that had been caught overnight, including **Racey's Pipistrelle**, **Kirindy Serotine**, and **Malagasy White-bellied Free-tailed Bat**. We were now down to a final 90-minute window to find a Boki, before booking it to the airport. The odds felt staggering. Tomer and I had already come up empty-handed from our 6 hours of day walks. Furthermore, Jonas and Rūta had seen them exactly once in 14 hours.

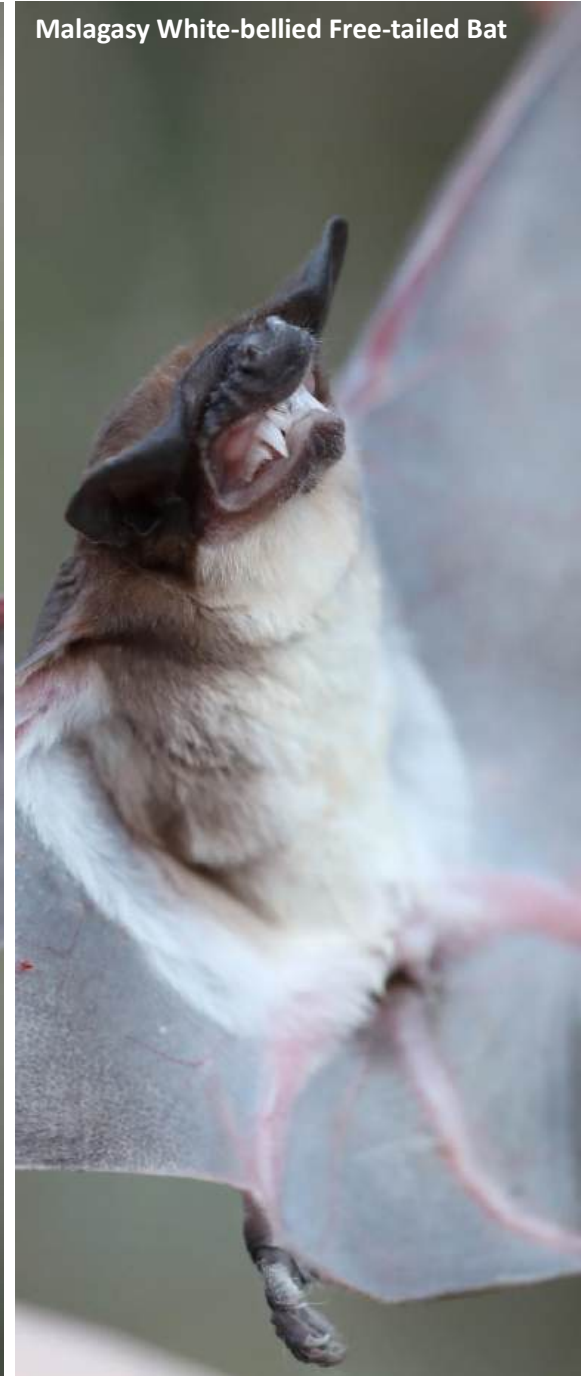
Racey's Pipistrelle



Kirindy Serotine



Malagasy White-bellied Free-tailed Bat



Tomer and I began by staking out a possible den site. In the meantime, Alfred and Patrick spread out to cast a wide net. After this proved unsuccessful, we trekked deeper into the forest, taking us even further from our vehicle. We passed another group on the trail and asked if they had seen any. They hadn't. Time was dwindling and so were our spirits. Trying to stay positive, I thought of my daughter, Ava, and immediately surged with happiness. Suddenly, with only 10 minutes remaining, a loud shout cut through the trees. It was the other group we just passed and the excitement on Alfred's face was all the translation we needed.

We made a b-line in the direction of the shout, deftly weaving between bushes and tree trunks, praying the animals wouldn't go far. Mercifully, the pair of **Bokiboky** was still in sight, hunting scorpions amongst a fallen tree and leaf-litter. One even stopped to pose on a log while chomping away at its crunchy treat. We spent 8 minutes with these oddly elusive creatures before giddily rushing back to the car. You can't cut it any closer. An all-time zero-hour encounter. Dammit Kirindy, you'd done it again!



With that, we began our return to Morondava Airport. Once back in cellular range we learned our flight had been delayed 2 hours. Thank goodness we had already seen those Bokis. With this found time, we revisited Akiba Lodge to see a **Gray Mouse Lemur** day-roost, along with some nice birds like *Gray-headed Lovebird*, *Greater Vasa Parrot*, *Madagascar Nightjar*, *Chabert* and *Hook-billed Vangas*. We even had time to enjoy the renowned Avenue of the Baobabs followed by delectable calamari at the Bleu Soleil seaside restaurant. An uneventful hour-long flight brought us back to Tana, where we reconnected with Mika our Rano driver.





Andasibe Area

No rest for the weary. The moment we touched down in Tana, we were off to Andasibe. 4 hours later, we gathered at Chez Marie for a late dinner, and agreed it was too late to venture out. Dinner was great, but the rooms were not in working-order. Patrick had warned against booking this hotel, but options were limited on the dates we needed. I tossed and turned all night with the smell of insect repellent permeating the air. Thankfully, Jonas rectified this situation the next day when he marched across the street to Feon'ny Ala and secured us hugely upgraded bungalows for the next two nights.

A bit fatigued, we set out for Analamazaotra Special Reserve, finally closing in on the world's largest lemur. Tojo was our experienced guide for the day. The morning was overcast and began with a *White-lined Madagascar Frog* and *Madagascar Tree Boa*. Not to be outdone by its larger cousin, a **Diademed Sifaka** was the first mammal up. This was a welcomed sight after narrowly missing the species at Duke Lemur Center decades earlier. With a beautiful contrast of yellows and grays, it was a shoo-in to land the cover for Nick Garbutt's latest guidebook. We were here with the Sifaka when we heard our first **Indri** in the distance. Naturally, that's where we headed next.



Their call is haunting and ear-shattering. Like a high-pitched whale singing into a loudspeaker from the treetops. They're the second loudest primate behind only Howler Monkeys, and can be heard up to 1.2 miles away. This also makes them fairly easy to locate. Just like that, we stood below my #2 most wanted Mammal in the world. Two more came into view as we watched next to a large crowd of tourists. We spent the better part of the hour mesmerized by their songs. Next, Tojo brought us to a bridge known for **Eastern Lesser Bamboo Lemurs**, and it didn't disappoint. In addition to Bamboo Lemurs munching on greens, we were treated to a *Malagasy Kingfisher* fishing the river below.

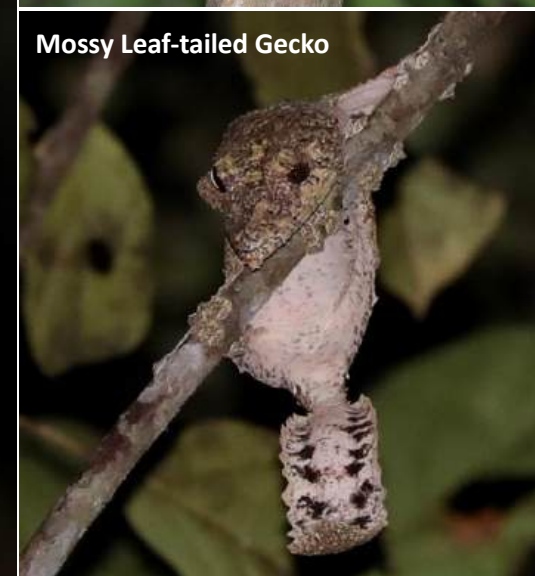
After lunch we visited fresh ground at V.O.I.M.M.A. Community Reserve. We started off with a *Parson's Chameleon* and *Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko*, before Jonas thermaled the jewel of the afternoon: a **Lowland Streaked Tenrec** in dry leaf litter! This cartoonish, black and yellow creature looks to have been electrocuted, featuring a dense row of thin spines standing upright on its head. As the sun set, we closed out V.O.I.M.M.A. with **Common Brown Lemurs**, and our first distant **Goodman's Mouse Lemurs** before shifting to nearby Mitsinjo Forest Reserve.





Common Brown Lemur

At the entrance to the Mitsinjo trailhead, Tomer thermaled a large **Eastern Woolly Lemur**. Not even a minute later Tojo pointed out a cooperative **Goodman's Mouse Lemur** exposed on the side of a tree trunk. Later, walking along a stream, Jonas caught something in his thermal resembling a **Tailless Tenrec**, but we were never able to confirm. Further ahead, we enjoyed an extended session with a **Webb's Tufted-tailed Rat** frozen on a branch. Mitsinjo is known as a potential location for **Hairy-eared Dwarf Lemur**, so we dedicated time in its orchid gardens, without success. The walk back to the car yielded a **Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko**, *Barn Owl* and our first **Crossley's Dwarf Lemur**. Before bed, we even found another **Eastern Woolly Lemur** on the grounds of Feon'ny Ala.



For our second day in the region, we focused on Maromizaha Forest. Accompanied by an excellent guide named Etienne, we planned to spend the better part of the day here, spanning from late morning until well past dark. The entry was a steep climb, first by car and then by foot. Soon, we'd be pulling ourselves up with thick ropes towards the entrance of an especially tall cave. High at the ceiling fluttered fidgety **Madagascan Rousettes**, allowing for only quick glimpses. This was the moment Tomer's camera battery died. Naturally, he disappeared back to the hotel with Mika to fetch a spare. Those who remained forged ahead on the trail, chancing upon a beautiful *Rufous-headed Ground Roller*. Tomer returned, but he had just missed it. Good thing he's not actually a birder. There was mention of a day roost for **Eastern Woolly Lemur**, but sadly other tourists had disturbed the site. From atop a magnificent panoramic overlook, Tomer and Rūta traded long-distance sightings of **Diademed Sifaka** and **Indri**. We descended into the valley for a closer look, and ended up at the foot of their chosen trees. We cherished the intimacy that comes with being the only tourist group in the forest.

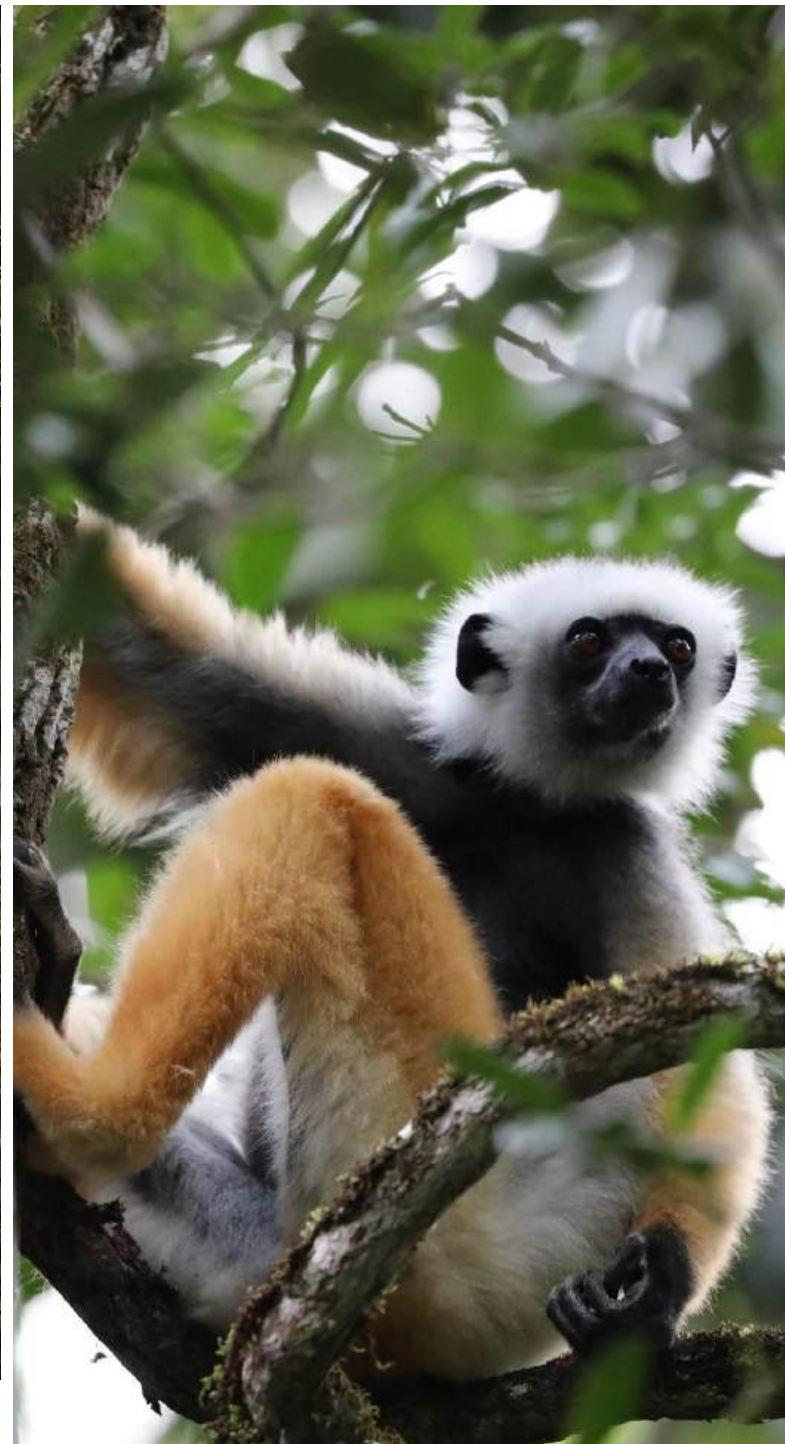


Rufous-headed Ground Roller





Madagascar Bright-eyed Frog





After a restful finish to the afternoon, we geared up for an extensive evening walk. I contemplated disowning Tomer as he devolved into full birder mode chasing his first *Velvet Asity*. Tufted-tailed Rats continued to be on the menu, or as Patrick called them “TTRs.” The first was a rather large individual seeking refuge in a moss-covered log. The hairs on its tail were mostly black mixed with some white, making this potentially a **Major’s Tufted-tailed Rat**. The second was a young **Lesser Tufted-tailed Rat** that gingerly clung to thin branches above the trail. Watching the trees, Etienne found the eyeshine of the night’s most anticipated species: a **Weasel Sportive Lemur**. Diminutive lemurs showed up in the form of **Crossley’s Dwarf** and **Goodman’s Mouse**, but **Hairy-eared Dwarf Lemurs** were not in the cards. Turns out one was right under our noises. Just days earlier, Alvin Francis Lok, who we met at the lodge, had photographed one at that same location around 1am. You win some, you lose some.



Major's Tufted-tailed Rat



Crossley's Dwarf Lemur



Weasel Sportive Lemur



Alvin Francis Lok

Nature Photography

Hairy-eared Dwarf Lemur

The next morning, Tomer and I recharged around a ping-pong table, while Jonas and Rūta visited Vakona Forest Lodge for its captive lemurs. At breakfast we crossed paths with Elias, before making few last-minute bat-stops. The owner at Chez Marie was quite gracious to welcome us back to photograph the **Peters's Goblin Bats** I had noticed in our room 3 nights earlier. A short walk down the road brought us to Chez Luc, where we crawled into the attic to find a gathering of **Madagascar Free-tailed Bats** tucked away. Our return to Tana featured a stop at Peyrieras Reptile Zoo. It was an honor to be here with Jonas, who holds the Guinness World Record for zoos visited with 1831 and counting. One final stop at Mangoro Bridge produced a *Madagascar Pratincole*. Once again Gassy Country House hosted us overnight in Tana and kindly agreed to hold onto my large luggage for the next leg of our trip.

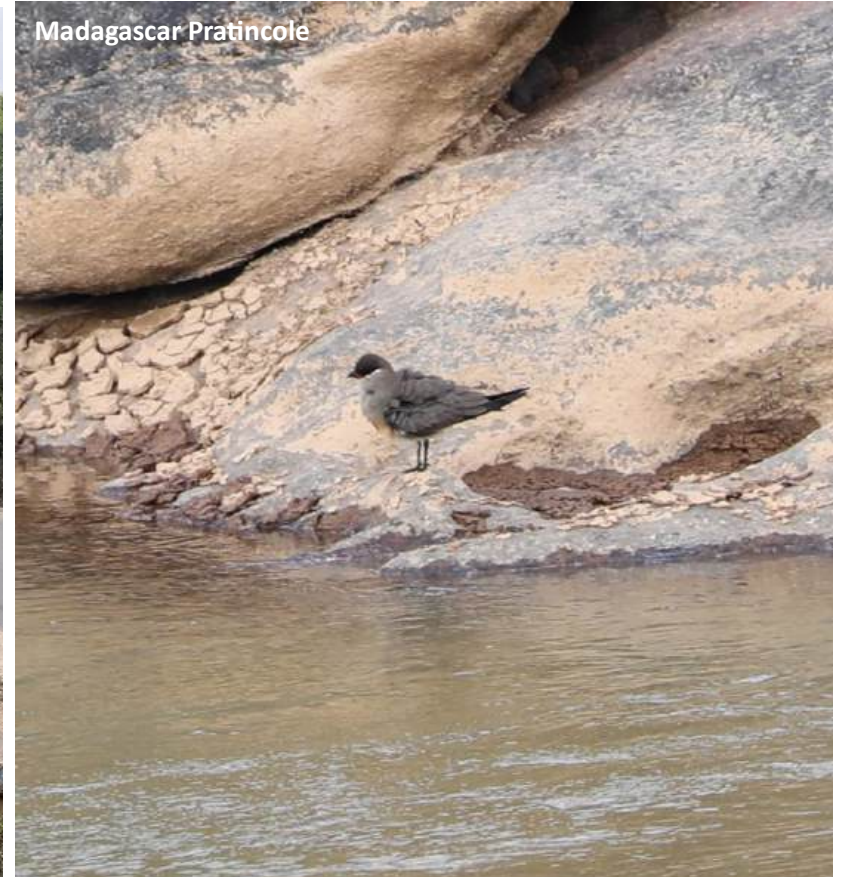


Peter's Goblin Bat



Madagascar Free-tailed Bat (photo by Jonas Livet)





Madagascar Pratincole

Farankaraina Tropical Park

We landed in Maroantsetra with a forceful bounce, rattling awake tired minds. We hopped from plane to car to motorized canoe and still needed an hour's hike to reach camp at Farankaraina, home of the Aye-aye. Claudio, who would be our guide for the next few days, led us into the forest under fading afternoon light. Mammals remained scarce until after dark, but we did run into a *Red-breasted Coua*, *Malagasy Cat-eyed Snake* and *Brown Mantella Frogs*. After a short break, we stepped into the night.

Farankaraina employed a system of multiple spotters to locate **Aye-ayes** feeding atop tall trees, who then relay the location to the anxious visitors nearby. Thus, we were cautious not to stray far from camp. A lovely *White-throated Rail* whet our appetite before the alarm call sounded. Here we go again, dashing towards something epic. And there it was, in all its stick-fingered, bushy-tailed glory, eating *Canarium* fruit from the lush canopy. A stay at Farankaraina should include a trip to the chiropractor after all the neck straining that can be expected here. Eventually, laying on the ground was the best solution. Before we headed back to camp, a **Greater Dwarf Lemur** peered down at us from its branchy perch.



Dinner included local seafood and was impressively good given the obvious limitations. With content bellies, we re-thermaled around the Aye-aye tree and were pleasantly surprised to find two **Seal's Sportive Lemurs**. Further along the trail we encountered several more **Greater Dwarf Lemurs** and what's likely to be **MacArthur's Mouse Lemurs**. Pushing ourselves even later into the night, Tomer and I were rewarded with a couple of **Masoala Woolly Lemurs**.

Early the next morning we made a cursory check for bats in several abandoned beach bungalows around camp, before hiking over to our canoe meeting point.

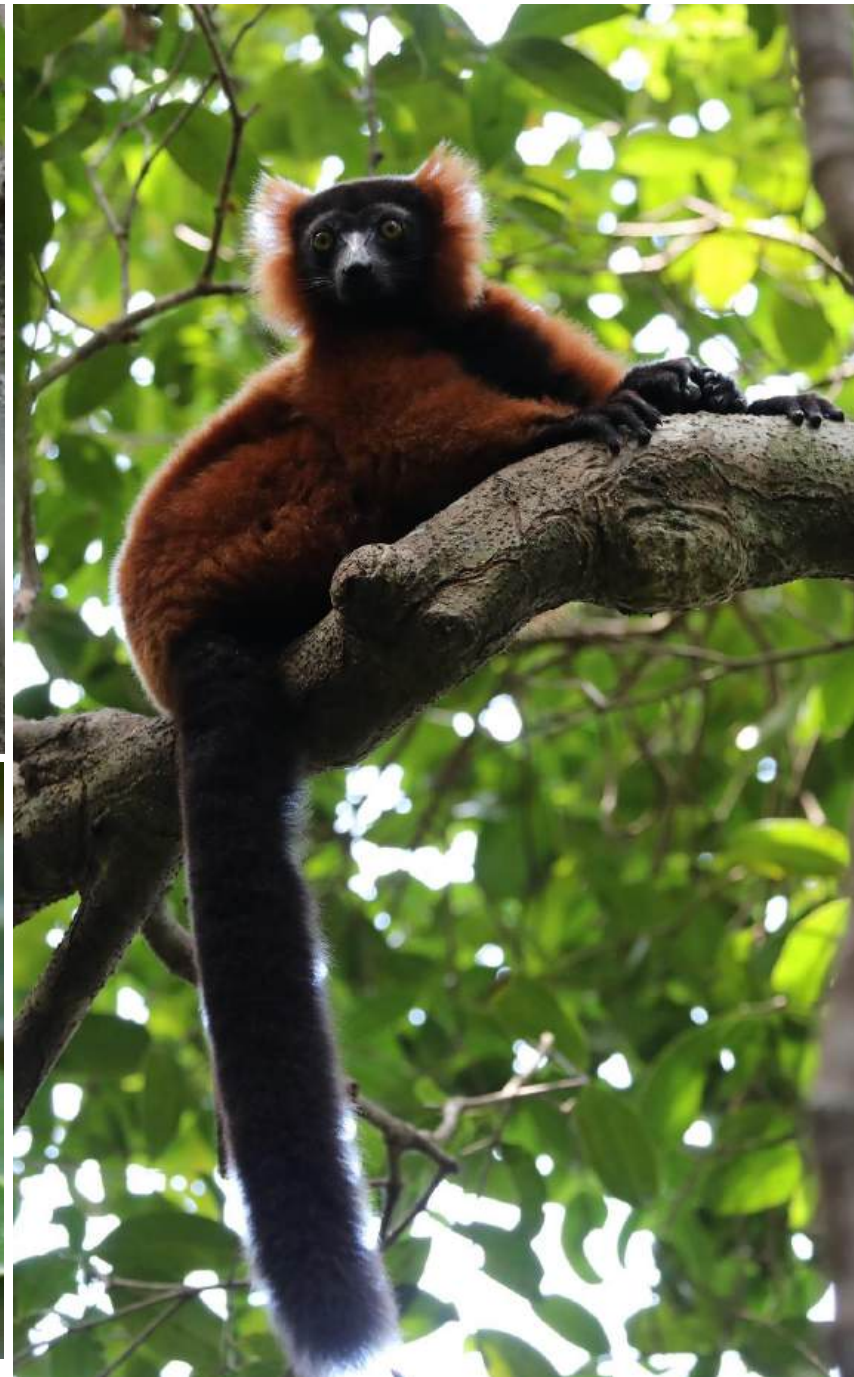


Masoala National Park

Hours split between canoe and speedboat eventually delivered us to Chez Arol in Masoala National Park. Arrival to this tropically remote part of the country was picturesque, even cinematic at times. Excitement oozed from the group, as this was our final park together.



We hit the trails as soon as we checked in, and while it was still morning. I snagged a brief but ample view of a **Lowland Red Forest Rat**, the only *Nesomys* found at these low altitudes. Before we knew it, we were scrambling up a steep hill with the promise of **Red Ruffed Lemurs** ahead. We gazed at a handful of these rufous beauties lounging around, when Claudio noticed a group of **White-fronted Brown Lemurs** across the trail. These two species living side by side made for quite the colorful lemur palette.



Based on a lead from Garbutt's book, we headed for the ridge trail that connects Chez Arol to the National Park. This is one of the few places in the world with a chance for **Brown-tailed Mongoose**, further evidenced by Claudio's sighting here weeks prior. We planned to spend as much time on this trail as possible, especially during the crepuscular hours of the day. After a short lunch break, we aimed directly back for the ridge, finally netting Jonas a **Ring-tailed Mongoose** along the way. Ah, sweet relief. We spent our remaining daytime hours on a stake-out at the ridge, but to no avail.

Back at the lodge, the evening began with a burst of thermal activity in a patch of bamboo. To no one's surprise, these were **Northern Bamboo Lemurs** chomping away before bed. At dinner we fueled up for a long night ahead. We'd barely left the lodge before detecting the first **Masoala Sportive Lemur**. We walked along the beach and then back to the ridge trail, our three thermals buzzing with TTRs throughout. A photo-sharing session with Dr. Goodman settled on **Grandidier's**, **Ellerman's** and more **Webb's Tufted-tail Rats**. We enjoyed fantastic views of an obliging **Greater Dwarf Lemur**, but managed only one shot of an unidentifiable **Long-fingered Bat**. A **Masoala Woolly Lemur** was a welcomed sight for Jonas and Rūta, who'd missed the species the night before. The final lemur of the night was the yet to be described **Masoala Mouse Lemur**. This 5-hour nocturnal stroll was relentless, and even delivered a **White-tailed Tree Rat**, not previously known to exist on the Masoala Peninsula. What a discovery! The final notch for our record 15 species day was an impressive maroon-tinged **Commerson's Leaf-nosed Bat** hanging from a branch.



Greater Dwarf Lemur



Ellerman's Tufted-tailed Rat



Grandidier's Tufted-tailed Rat



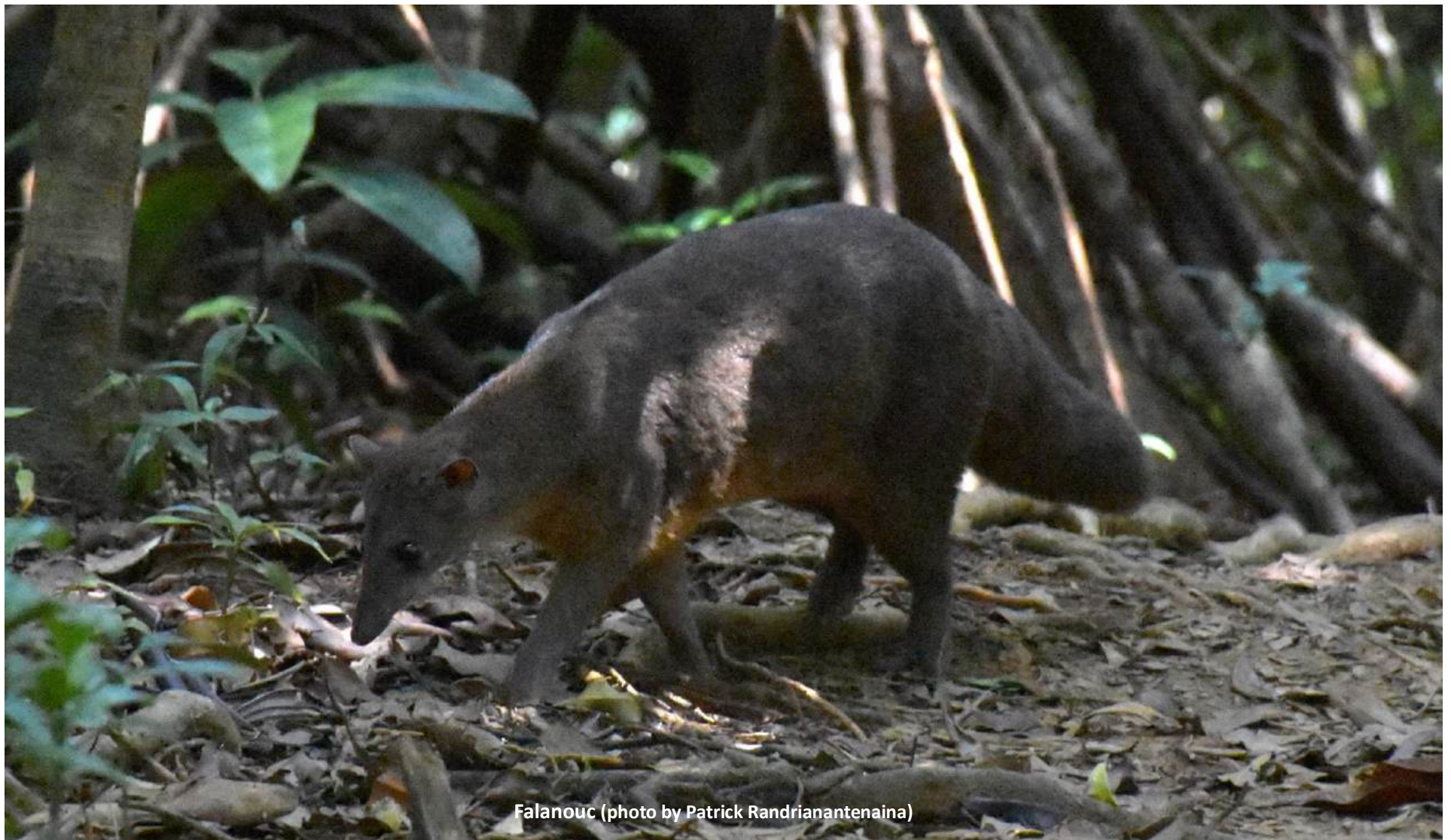


For our final full day at Masola, we chose to divide and conquer. Jonas and Rūta set out by boat to a *Helmet Vanga* nest, while Tomer and I focused on mammals near Arol. We dedicated the morning to photographing **Lowland Red Forest Rat**, while also running into more **Northern Bamboo**, **Red Ruffed** and **White-fronted Brown Lemurs**. The last of which posed perfectly by the lodge like it was a school picture day.



We downed an especially late breakfast and noticed Jonas and Rūta still hadn't returned from Vangaland. With nothing else to do, we agreed to try the ridge trail, but just for 1 hour. How little we knew... Reaching yesterday's site would take 20 minutes each way, so I opted for a closer section of trail that provided great visibility in both directions. This turned out to be the unluckiest decision I've ever made as a mammal watcher. Meanwhile, Patrick continued further uphill...

Patrick sat quietly at the edge of the trail and waited. Then, without warning, something walked across the trail and into dense vegetation. He tried to keep an eye on it while hooting downhill to us. Tomer and I looked at each other. Oh shit, what did we just miss!? Yet again we raced through a Madagascan jungle, this time at such an extreme incline our chests heaved, desperate for oxygen. Out of breath and almost delirious we met an excited Patrick, who led the rest of the way. After 2 minutes at this frenetic pace, we had arrived and Patrick pointed to the spot where the animal crossed in front of him and then to where it disappeared. He suggested it was a **Brown-tailed Mongoose**, and showed us his camera screen. I knew instantly, and my heart sank. The creature that passed by a measly 10 feet from Patrick, at 1:09 in the afternoon was in fact my most wanted rarity of the trip: the strangely wonderful **Falanouc**. Perhaps the first diurnal photos of a species barely photographed to begin with. And we missed it by 2 minutes! I could be sick, just thinking about it again.



Falanouc (photo by Patrick Randrianantenaina)

Our best chance was to hunker down and pray it used this route again. So Tomer and I sat and waited. We waited for the next 11 hours. The time went by surprisingly fast. As soon as we were thinking clearly, we asked Claudio to check the lodge for Jonas and Rūta to bring them here, hopefully along with some lunch. Somewhere our request was lost in translation. We were treated to a comically extravagant white tablecloth picnic lunch, complete with fine china and metal cutlery. Not exactly the incognito vibe we were going for, but thoughtful nonetheless. However, our lunch delivery did not include Jonas and Rūta. Fortunately, they tracked down our whereabouts from kitchen staff, and were able to join us soon after.

From our makeshift camp we had a few close calls. First a **Ring-tailed Mongoose** crossed the trail, followed many hours later by a **Fanaloka**. As Tomer put it, three Malagasy carnivores crossing the same trail within 12 hours was absolutely redonkulous. Jonas and Rūta took a break for dinner, while Tomer and I remained steadfast. Eventually, with midnight closing in and a sunrise wake-up looming, we decided to call it. Finally descending back towards Arol, we encountered an **Ellerman's Tufted-tailed Rat**, **Masoala Woolly Lemur**, **Lowland Streaked Tenrec** and **Commerson's Leaf-nosed Bat**; with the final two at the lodge itself.



Fanaloka

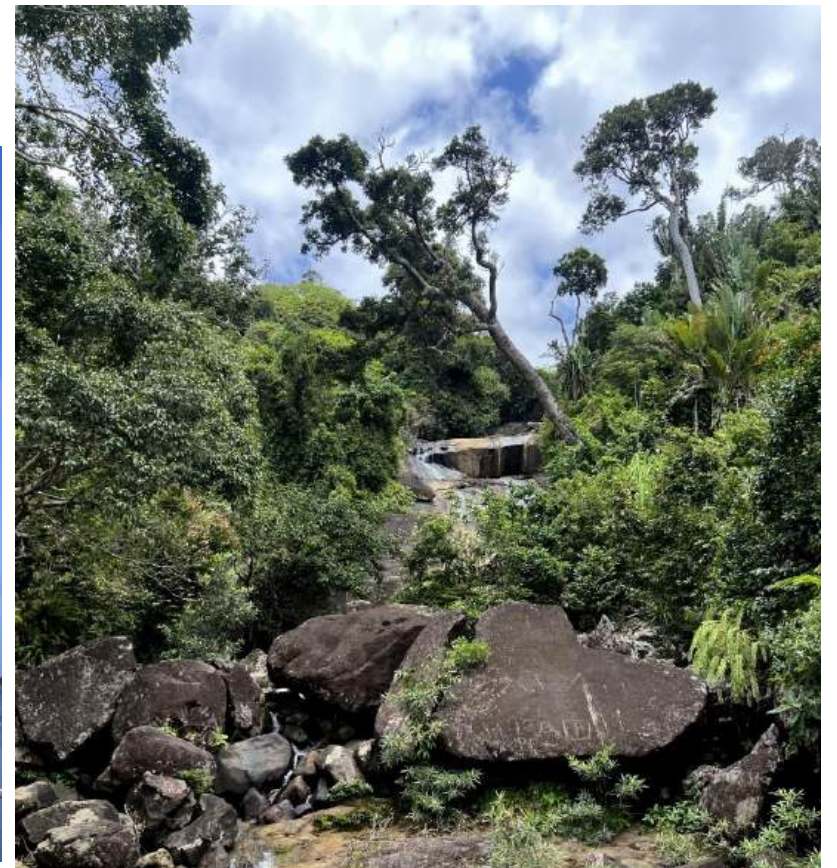


Masoala Woolly Lemur

The Return to Tana

We boarded the boat at dawn and thus began our odyssey back to Tana. Some context here... Months earlier, Tsardia Airlines had trimmed their biweekly Maroantsetra flights down to once a week. By then, our itinerary had long been set, so we needed a contingency plan. Options were severely limited. Chartered flights were prohibitively expensive, and the smaller, cheaper plane was out of service for repairs. News that didn't instill confidence. I searched the commercial flights of every nearby airport, and found that Toamasina serviced Tana on Friday nights. Unfortunately, this meant we needed to leave Masoala a day earlier than expected, since getting from Masoala to Toamasina was no small feat. For starters, Masoala is only accessible by boat, after which we could expect two full days of rugged driving. Patrick suggested we skip across the bottom of Antongila Bay and sail directly to Mananara Avaratra, thereby avoiding 70 miles of devastating roads.

Even with this "short cut" we still had a day and a half's drive ahead. We crammed into a real headbanger of a pickup truck with driver Lerwick at the helm. Meanwhile, Patrick and a driver's assistant named Realy shared the cargo bed. What's a driver's assistant you ask? Well, we were driving on what can barely be described as a road, which was peppered with rocks and boulders. So, the assistant gets out to move rocks, or at times hangs off one side of the car to shift the weight enough to avoid toppling over on the sections of crazy uneven ground. The roads did get progressively better, but this meant we started with the shocking worst of it. The first 30 km took over 5 hours. Shortcuts along scenic beaches were a much-welcomed respite from this insanity.



We got to stretch, had some fun, and got our hands dirty at one of the seven (that's right, seven!) water crossings we attempted. Joining side by side with a line of locals, we hauled thick rope which manpowered the car ferry along. As soon as the last person in line ran out of rope, they'd scramble back to the front and resume pulling. We knew our route went near habitats for **Jonah's Mouse Lemur**, **Mananara-Nord Sportive Lemur**, and **Simmons' Mouse Lemur** but we prioritized getting as close to Toamasina as possible. Somehow, we still snagged views of a new mammal from the car- a flock of **Madagascar Flying Fox** in flight at dusk. We had made it as far as Soanierana Ivongo, before settling on the nigh-abandoned bungalows at F & F Hotels Tsaratanana in Manakalana. After a superficial scan of the surrounding trees for **Simmons' Mouse Lemur**, heads hit pillows, hard.

The second day we were blessed with perfectly paved roads, recently completed by Chinese construction companies who aim to pave the entire way to Maroantsetra. Even with a later than usual departure time, we made it to Toamasina by 1pm with plenty of time to visit Parc Zoologique Ivoloïna. The staff here graciously took us on a tour of the grounds. While watching some free-ranging lemurs, I asked about bat roosts, as I tend to do. Happy I did, as our guide soon whisked us away to a bat box. The only ways into the box were tiny bat-sized slits and an access door at the bottom of the structure. While balancing on a chair, Patrick used a long pole to unlatch this door. The second he did, it swung open with tremendous might from the compounded weight of years of guano. It rained down like the fallout from a nuclear batshit-bomb. It covered everything: Jonas's hair, all of Patrick, the chair, the floor. It was both hilarious and unsettling at the same time. Our reward- a group of **Malagasy White-bellied Free-tailed Bats** huddled up inside. Had we not a flight to catch, the staff mentioned **Simmons' Mouse Lemurs** roam Ivoloïna's grounds at night. This would be the first of only 4 days in my entire stay without a unique mammal added to the trip list.



36 hours after leaving Masoala, we had finally reached Toamasina Airport and were Tana bound. And the most ridiculous part: my next destination was a meager 60-miles away from Maroantsetra as the crow flies. Yet, Google Maps only offers an insanely indirect 1200-mile driving route. Other options involve a multi-day hike culminating with an extensive motorbike portion. Such a shame the direct flight option between Maroantsetra and Sambava has been discontinued for some time now.



Malagasy White-bellied Free-tailed Bat (photo by Jonas Livet)



Madagascar- Part Deux:

After a final drink together at Gassy Country House, I bid a fond farewell to my three amigos and began the second half of this epic journey. Reunited with my suitcase, I made my way to the nearby Oceanis Home & Voyages hotel. Here, Elias and Phil gave me a warm welcome alongside two of the most delicious cold pizzas I've ever tasted. Chad, who needed to delay the start of his trip due to Covid, would meet us later in Nosy Be.

Marojejy National Park

We slept precious few hours before a 5am airport arrival. Upon landing in Sambava we met Lee, our excellent driver in the North, who was the perfect mix of serenity and speed. We reached the Marojejy National Park welcome center by 10am and were greeted by our optimistic and charismatic guide, Richelin. After leaving behind any large luggage, we headed towards the park. Lee drove us to Mandena village and then our hike began. The first hour through the village and nearby plantations had no tree cover and was scorching at midday. The 4 hours after that were gradually uphill, but pleasantly sheltered by forest.

Our first mammal was an **Eastern Red Forest Rat** that scurried over moss-covered logs. Next, not halfway through his first day, we secured Phil's top bird target. The *Helmet Vanga*, an exemplary bird that even I yearned for after choosing to skip them in Masoala. Soon after, a noisy *Cuckoo-Roller* flew directly overhead. My second and final bird target, thus completing my set of Avian Orders! Further along we were treated to the first lemurs of part deux: **Northern Bamboo Lemurs**, peaking between stalks and branches. We eventually reached Camp Mantella (Camp 1) in the late afternoon, where accommodations were simple but comfortable bunk beds inside forest green bungalows.





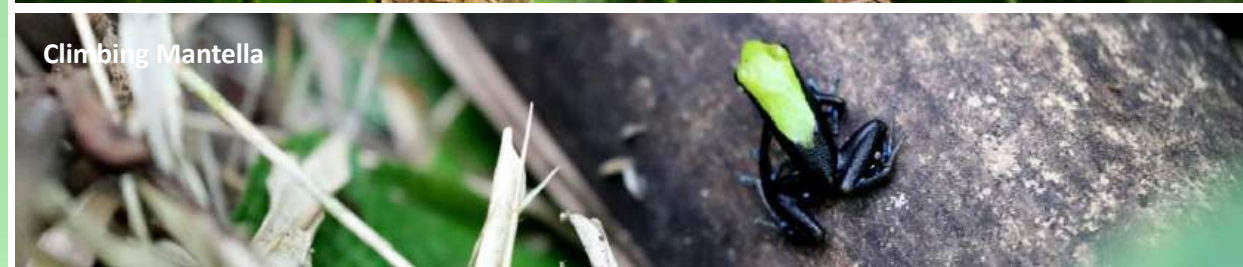
Helmet Vanga



Northern Bamboo Lemur



The night walk started with a bang, as we came across our one and only **Mittermeier's Mouse Lemur** a few minutes from camp. It remained enveloped by shrubbery, and was never quite interested in posing. *Lucky Cophyla*, *Giant Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko*, *Marojejy Side-striped Chameleon* and *Panther Chameleon* rounded out the evening before a surprisingly tasty meal prepared at camp.



The next day, we passed a colorful *Climbing Mantella* as we trekked to Camp Marojejia (Camp 2). Although steeper, the distance was much shorter than the day before, and took under 2 hours. Along the way a **Ring-tailed Mongoose** appeared in the middle of the trail, before bounding off. Richelin explained we'd soon be listening for a call from the Sifaka tracker. One "Woo" meant no Sifakas yet, but two "Woos" meant he's found Sifakas! A bit before reaching Camp 2, our tracker's call rattled through the trees. One Woo, followed by the longest empty second of my life, mercifully accompanied by a second Woo!

We glided through dense vegetation off trail to reach the source of the call. Surrounded by lush rainforest, we found ourselves on a high ridge that placed us nearly at eye level with a small group of canopy-dwelling **Silky Sifakas**. With cottony-soft white fur, this critically endangered primate was stunning against the green backdrop. I remember feeling very at one with nature with no one else around and nothing but untouched forest as far as the eye could see.



One thing that was hard to ignore in Madagascar: its mutant bugs. The *Giant Emerald Pill Millipede* was a stunning favorite of mine. As a kid I was always looking for pill bugs under rocks and logs. But this species is 5 times bigger (up to 3.5 inches long) and shellacked with a metallic olive-green coating. Island gigantism at its finest. To complete the holiday theme here were *Madagascar Fire Millipedes*, tinted bright red with black accents.

Once at Camp 2, we saw **Ring-tailed Mongoose** 4 additional times throughout the afternoon, always combing around the kitchen for scraps. Our night walk was devoid of mammals but did feature *Englaender's Bright-eyed Frog*, *Lined Flat-tail Gecko*, *Madagascan Black Scorpion*, and a *Praying Mantis*.





We began at sunrise the next morning, with a long day ahead. Benefiting from a downhill climb we made it from Camp 2 to Mandena village in half the time. Along our way **Eastern Red Forest Rats** were plentiful, particularly in the early morning hours. A last-minute group of **White-fronted Lemurs** added a lucky lifer for Elias and Phil. Reunited with Lee and our vehicle by 10am, we strapped in for the 5-hour drive that lay ahead.



Daraina (Loky-Manambato Protected Area)

Short on time, we met Meo, our Aye-aye tracker directly on site. This was quite the unfortunate location, crowded with deep trenches carved out by gold miners. In the remaining daylight, we watched a handful of **Golden-crowned Sifaka's** strip mostly bare trees of their last remaining nourishment. They seemed totally unfazed by the myriad of ditches awaiting below. This was our second Sifaka in as many days, and my sixth overall. They're a certified stunner, wearing their iconic golden beanie with pride. A brief sighting of a **Crowned Lemur** closed out diurnal lemurs, and readied us for the night show.

Daraina is famous for its unique opportunity to see wild **Aye-ayes** emerging from their nests. Local trackers are familiar with their nesting sites and spend the day climbing trees to determine which one an Aye-aye had chosen the night before. By the time the tourists arrive, all that's left to do is wait for the ghoulish beast to slink out from its branchy treehouse. Our surroundings continued to be littered with gold-mining trenches, now joined by several small huts and their residents who not so quietly joined us to watch. The scenery couldn't compare with Farankaraina's lush jungle, but the potential for proximity more than made up for that.



The show began at 6:45pm, when this creature of nightmares first came into view. Its fur was coarse and blackish, heathered with white highlights. A large bushy tail hung down and shook, as the animal proceeded to spend 40 minutes thoroughly cleaning and scratching every inch of its scraggly body. All of this took place just 20 feet above us. Then, in an instant the animal was on the move across the tree tops and out of sight. What a singular experience!





The distinctive high-pitched chirps of a Phaner caught our attention next. Patrick focused on its calls and located the animal. This **Daraina Fork-marked Lemur** (a proposed split) froze like an opossum on a low branch. The smallish trees in Daraina were mostly bare, allowing for exceptional wildlife viewing. Nearby, we had a fleeting view of a wary **Daraina Sportive Lemur**, before braving the long walk back to the car.

Once at Camp Tattersall, I met with a sizable group of French-speaking tourists and traded stories about the other parks we had visited. They acknowledged Ranomafana and Kirindy but struggled to understand “Andasibe.” I went on further, “Perinet, the park with Indri?” Still nothing. “Indri, the biggest lemur?”

“Ahhh, In-DREE...” They said as we all laughed. Talk about adding insult to Indri...

“Indri ... In-DREE, oh come on that’s close enough!” I cheekily replied. Funny how a slight change in pronunciation makes a world of difference.

A night walk near camp yielded a possible **Carleton’s Tufted-tailed Rat**, another Phaner, and a photo shoot with a camera happy **Tavaratra Mouse Lemur**.



The next morning began with **Crowned Lemurs** swarming the camp and rifling through disposed food. Meo brought us to a known roost for **Daraina Sportive Lemur**, where one was wonderfully perched outside of its hole. A brilliant session with **Golden-crowned Sifakas** concluded the morning, this time in a much more natural setting.

On our way out we somehow failed an attempt at **Western Sheath-tailed Bats** under a nearby bridge, even though Cheryl Antonucci saw some there a few days later. 4 more hours of driving found us at Black Lemur Camp.



Crowned Lemur (male)



Crowned Lemur (female)





Andrafiamena-Andavakoera Protected Area

Black Lemur Camp's name is rather misleading. It has neither "Black Lemurs," nor is it a camp. It's instead a top-notch eco-lodge with Perrier's Sifaka, which are at least black. While we checked in, another group was on the way out. Their tour-leader looked strangely familiar, but none of us could place him. It wasn't until days later we learned it had been none other than Nick Garbutt, author of the outstanding guidebook I used to plan this trip. What a shame, we passed like ships in the night!

From our room's balcony, we caught some binocular views of **Perrier's Sifaka** towards the far limit of the property. This only fueled our desire to venture closer. Before we knew it, we were standing ten feet from one of these ebony wonders. Our guides, Fulgence and Jaonjara, then delivered us to an active **Ankarana Sportive Lemur** nesting hole, before finding another small group of Sifakas, alternating between feeding and resting.





Tavaratra Mouse Lemurs

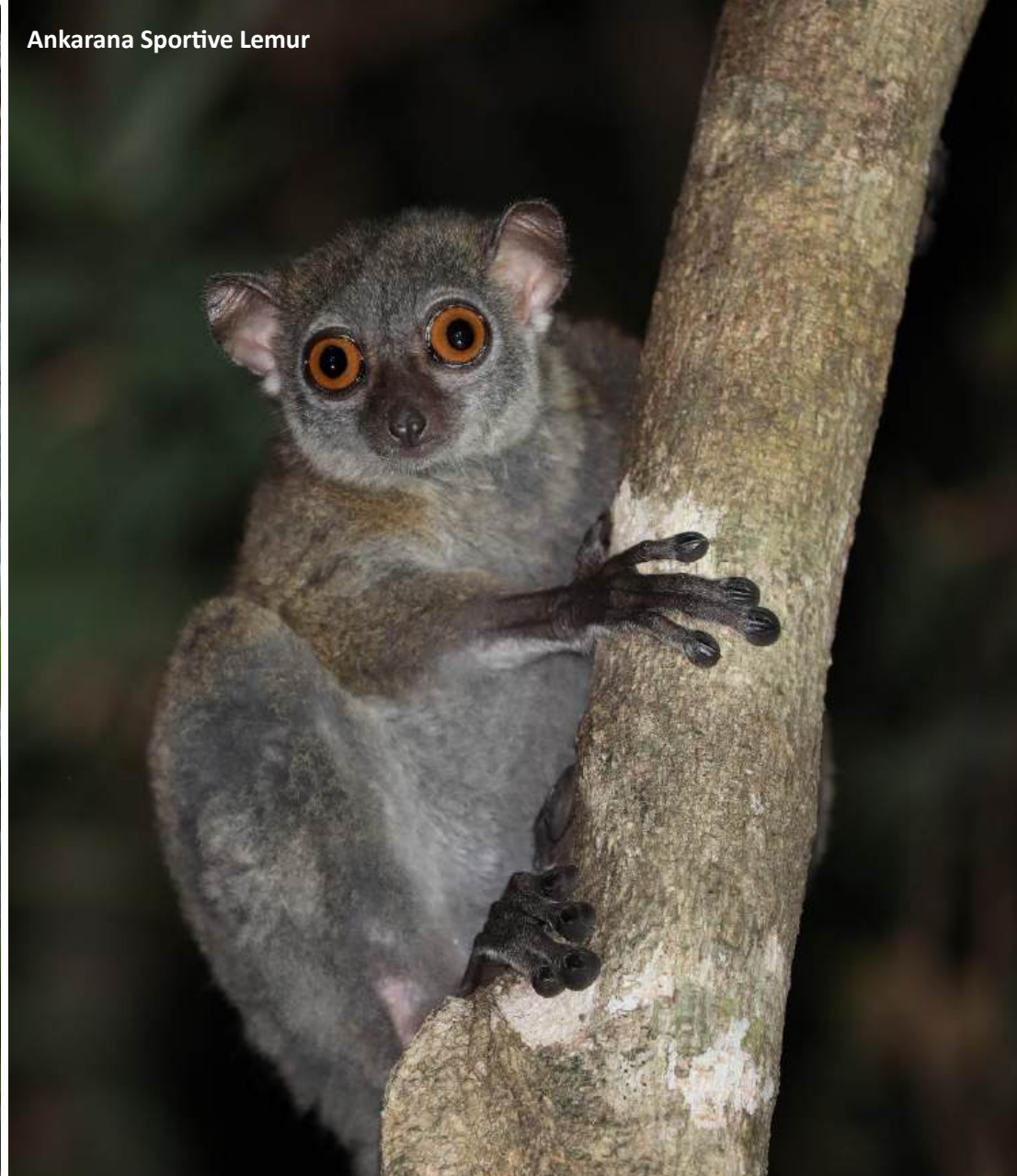
After an early dinner, we returned to the same bit of forest for a nightcap. We searched tirelessly for **Ankarana Dwarf Lemurs**, but only came across another **Ankarana Sportive Lemur**. I had multiple views of a large, distinctly yellowish bat hunting insects along the trail, likely a **Commerson's Leaf-nosed Bat**.

The next morning, Jaonjara showed us five **Tavaratra Mouse Lemurs** huddled together in a bush a few feet from the lodge's pathway. He knew this spot from a time his manager offered a reward for which guide could find the most mammals in a day. These guys secured him the win!

Ankarana Sportive Lemur



Ankarana Sportive Lemur



On our way back to the main road we of course stopped at the nearby batcave. Quite a narrow one at that. I have never felt more claustrophobic in my life. I just couldn't get the idea of a rock collapse out of my head. Focusing on the many bats inside was my only relief. Long-fingered Bats dotted the ceiling around every corner. From their blunt, rounded tragus, these appeared to be **Griveaud's Long-fingered Bats**. We also saw a pair of **Malagasy Mouse-eared Bats**, one seemingly protecting another underneath it. As we exited, I joked with Phil "happy to see light, right?" to which he replied "well, now's a good time to mention that I, uh, suffer from extreme claustrophobia." His deadpan delivery was hilarious, until I realized he was totally serious. Good on him for facing his fears head-on!

4 more hours on the road before we'd hit the next park.



Malagasy Mouse-eared Bat



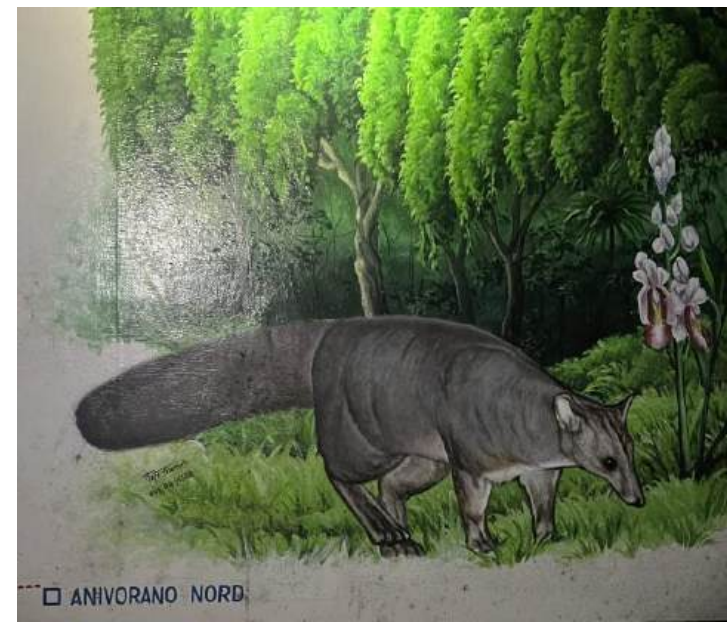
Griveaud's Long-fingered Bat



Montagne d'Ambre National Park

Once we pulled up to the entrance sign, contact with the outside world soon faded. Nearby, a mural featured our biggest target, the Falanouc. We would soon find out if Patrick could catch lightning in a bottle twice in the same week. To ensure access to the park after dark, Patrick reserved our camping permits for two nights at Station des Roussettes and set up the tents he brought along.

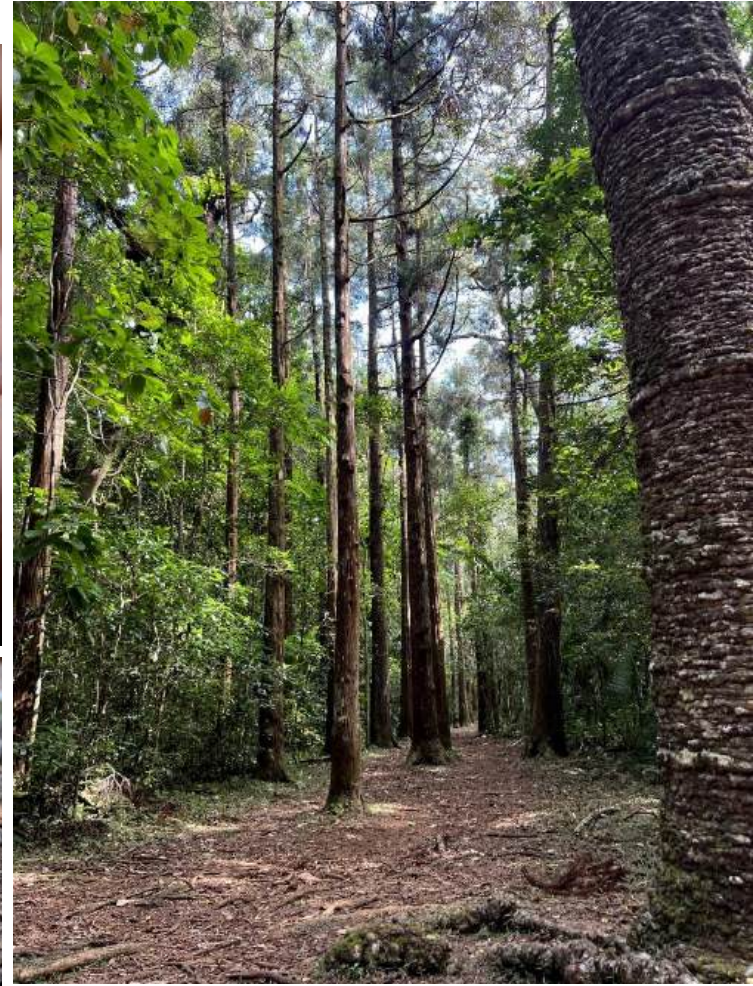
Our veteran guide, Angelin, started us off in a wooded area where they have seen **Falanouc** passing through (although worryingly, none yet this year.) While staked-out here, we were visited by **Crowned Lemurs** and our first **Sandford's Brown Lemurs**. Darkness fell and after a few hours with no Falanoucs, we began wandering a loop trail. All three types of nocturnal lemurs were readily seen within an hour, with **Montagne d'Ambre Dwarf Lemurs** and **Montagne d'Ambre Fork-marked Lemurs** both along the trail and **Montagne d'Ambre Mouse Lemurs** high in the trees bordering the camp site. Non-mammalian standouts included *Mount d'Ambre Leaf Chameleon*, *Mount d'Ambre Globe-horned Chameleon*, *Blue-nosed Chameleon*, *Petter's Chameleon*, *Mount d'Ambre Leaf-tailed Gecko*, *Madagascar Jumping Frog*, *Madagascar Tree Boa*, and *Amber Mountain Rock Thrush*.



Mount d'Ambre Leaf Chameleon



Amber Mountain Rock Thrush



Mount d'Ambre Dwarf Lemur



Mount d'Ambre Mouse Lemur



Mount d'Ambre Fork-marked Lemur





The next morning started a bit slow following a night of cramped tent-sleeping. We walked a trail near camp until we found some **Sandford's** posed for photography. After a quick break at camp, we returned to the Falanouc spot for another multi-hour stake-out. Unfortunately, the only carnivore to appear was an incredibly brazen **Ring-tailed Mongoose**, ambling by mere inches from our feet. Despite being my 10th encounter with the species, it was the most memorable. We returned to camp for lunch, and were treated to more antics from a pair of mongooses play fighting.

By nightfall we returned to the park entrance to track down some better views of the **Mouse Lemurs** in shorter foliage. Plenty more **Dwarf** and **Fork-marked Lemurs** appeared along the way. After a quick dinner, we set out for one final **Falanouc** trek, this time hoping to stumble across one in the trails around the Guardian's House (an area Dr. Goodman had suggested.) 3 more hours made for a valiant effort, but still no glimpses of the exceedingly unencountered carnivore. As I feared, we had used up all our luck in Masoala but I had nothing to show for it.

By morning, we wasted no time before shipping off on another 4-hour drive to our next destination.



Sandford's Brown Lemur (male)



Sandford's Brown Lemur (female)



Ankarana Special Reserve

We pulled up to Soa Lodge at lunchtime, more than ready for a sit-down restaurant. This comfortable lodge is conveniently located a short drive from Ankarana Special Reserve and had great food too. On the afternoon walk our guide, Emmerick, ushered us to the nest hole of a **Ankarana Sportive Lemur**, where it was nestled in-between a V-shaped branch, baby in tow. This reserve is also famous for its tsingy rock formations, although they paled in comparison to the ones at Bemaraha. Heading for the lookout, we came across more **Crowned Lemurs** and *White-breasted Mesites*.

We enjoyed dinner back at Soa, before returning at dark. Sadly, night walks are strictly prohibited within the Reserve, but are allowed just outside. We spotted a female **Sandford's Brown Lemur**, a few **Tavaratra Mouse Lemurs**, and a group of sleeping *Madagascar Buttonquails*. At the limit of the permitted area, Elias and I managed a momentary glimpse of a **Ankarana Dwarf Lemur**. A real shame we couldn't approach it any closer. Without much territory to explore, we packed it in at a reasonable hour and caught up on much needed, un-tented sleep.





The spelunking was saved for the next morning, so not to be racing sunset. Emmerick brought us to the right side of the cave complex first. The traversable path here isn't long and one species is found prominently throughout: **Madagascar Fruit Bats**. Their chattery screeches filled the air in an ear-assaulting cacophony. The left side of the complex was more convoluted. Guarding the entrance like upside-down gargoyles clung **Western Sheath-tailed Bats**. Further in, now encased in darkness, we found large groups of **Madagascar Rousettes** roosting together. Pockets of what were likely **Griveaud's Long-fingered Bats** huddled together inside bell holes at the cave's ceiling. Exploring deeper into the cave we encountered two solitary Long-fingered Bats side by side. The darker **Glen's Long-fingered Bat** appeared 50% larger than its neighbor, a probable **Aellen's Long-fingered Bat** with a long straight tragus ending in a blunt point.

We devoured one more scrumptious meal at Soa's restaurant before driving 3 hours to our next lodge in Ambanja. Finally, a drive under 4 hours!



Glen's Long-fingered Bat



Aellen's Long-fingered Bat



Madagascar Roussette





Western Sheath-tailed Bat



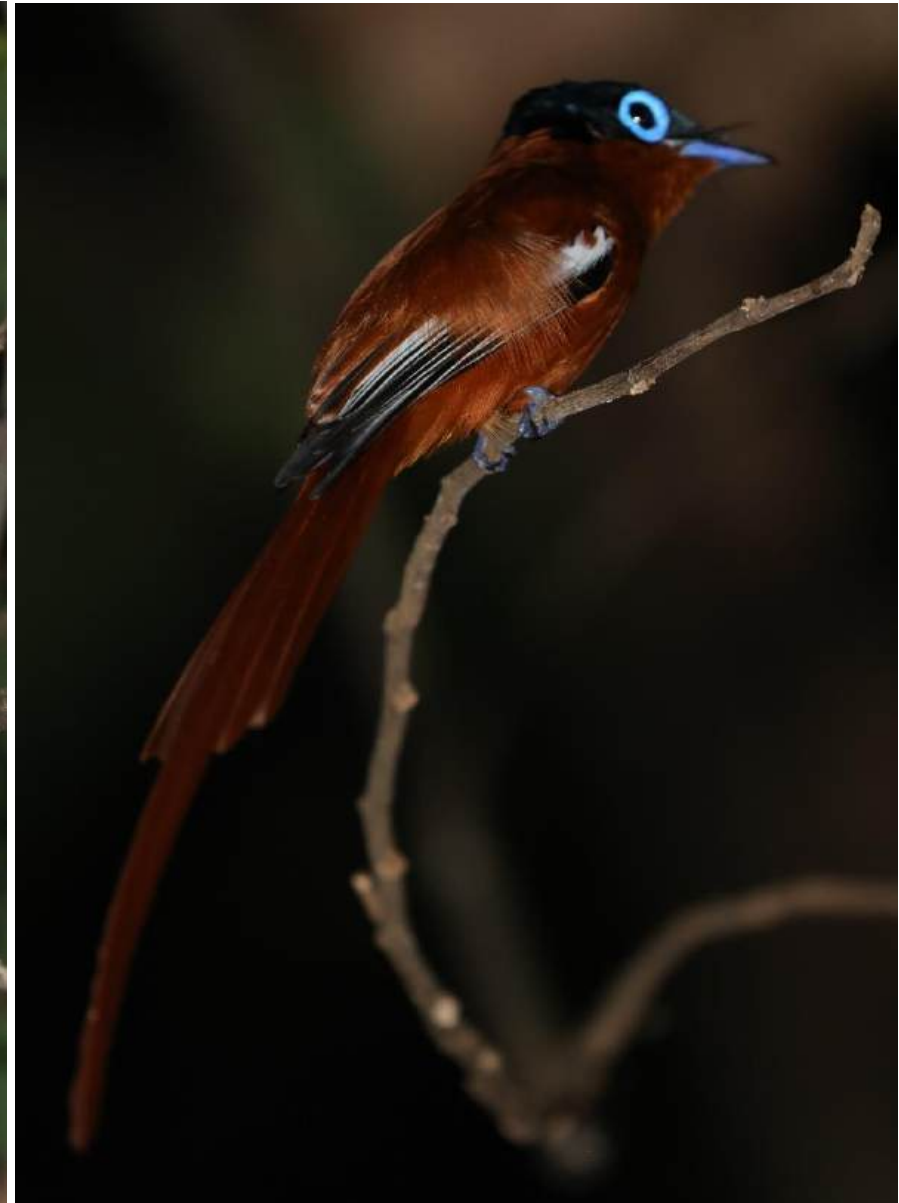
Griveaud's Long-fingered Bats



Ankoala Sacred Forest, Ambanja

An early dinner at Khaïr Lodge powered us for an extensive evening trek. We drove 30 minutes to Antranokarany town where Ankoala, the sacred forest, is found. Our guide, Kenny arrived decked out in an Allen Iverson jersey. He spoke no English, but could communicate well with Patrick. We hardly left the vehicle before the first **Northern Giant Mouse Lemur** was jumping around above us. A new genus for the trip, and a relief after striking out on its cousin in Kirindy. The pressure was mounting to capture a great photo of this speedy critter, but thankfully more lay ahead. Soon, for only the second time on the trip, rain drops began to fall. It was gentle enough that the lemurs were still feeding but also seeking more stationary shelter. This resulted in great views of a **Sambirano Fork-marked Lemur**, multiple **Sambirano Dwarf Lemurs** (another possible future split), and more **Northern Giant Mouse Lemurs**- at times with multiple species on the same tree! Soon we reached the sacred part of the forest.

Northern Giant Mouse Lemur



Here we were required to remove our shoes and walk the forest bare-foot, a notion I was mentally prepared for from reading Jon Hall's report. In fact, I almost relished the uniqueness of it. The most noticeable difference was how closely I needed to watch my feet, which meant less time for mammal spotting. Even with increased caution, my foot crashed through a rotting log, sending chills up my spine. It was then we located our only **Gray-backed Sportive Lemurs**, a mother-child pair well hidden by leaves. The rain soon intensified, driving us to seek shelter under a thatched roof. With weather unrelenting, we scrambled back to our shoes and then to the car. The window for **Sambirano Mouse Lemurs** had closed. Kenny almost never saw these here, but one should have better luck at a cocoa plantation 20 minutes away, like Cheryl Antonucci did a few days later.

I slept easy back at the lodge, looking forward to the following day's packed schedule.





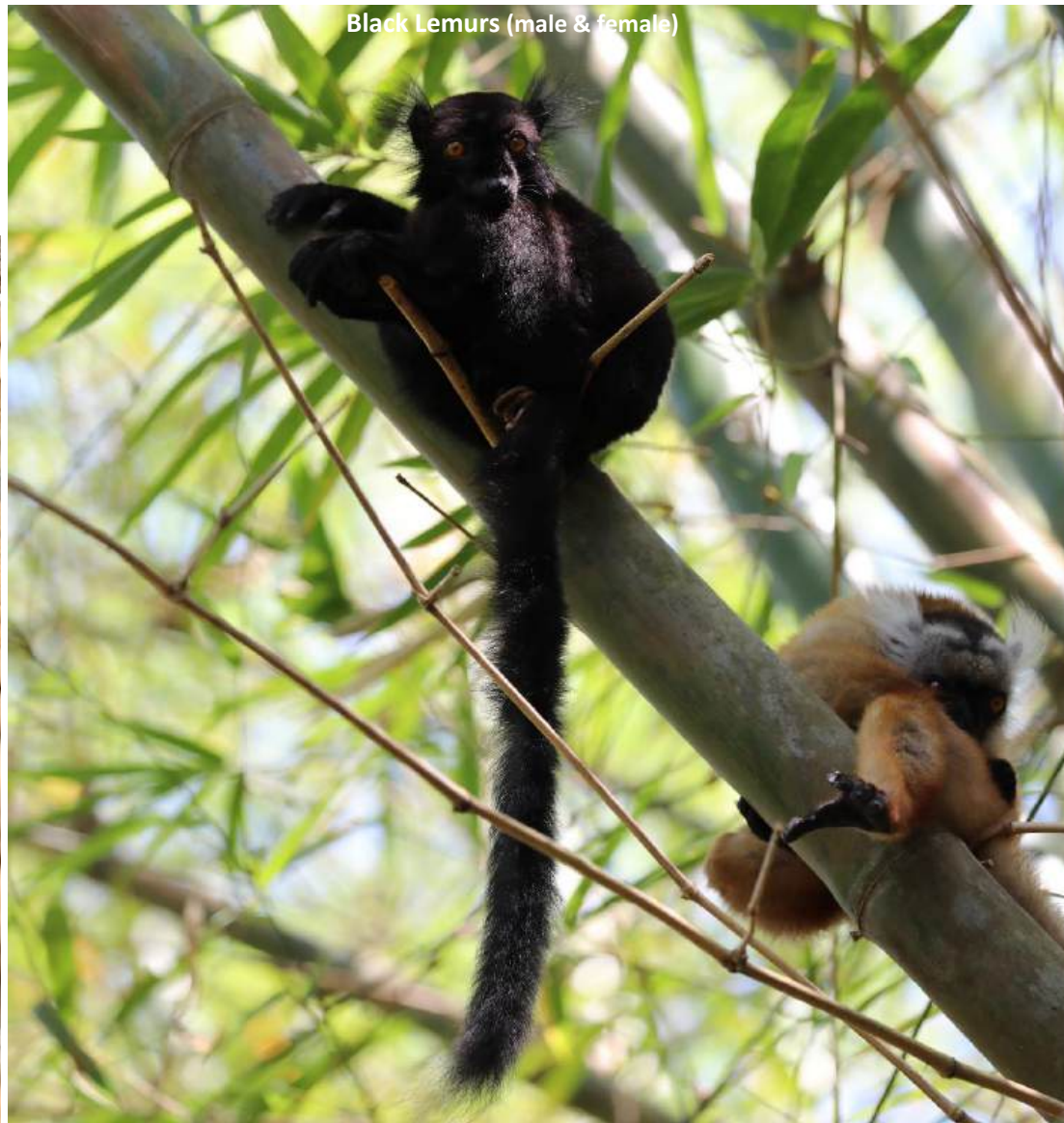
Nosy Be

Amkify Harbor lies about an hour from Ambanja, then figure another hour of boarding and boating until reaching the island of Nosy Be. We had an ambitious itinerary set for the day, and would need to stay focused for success. A new car and driver- Frederic received us in Nosy Be, along with a local guide named Patricio.

Our first stop was Lemuria Land. This zoo, with its Decken's Sifaka was of particular interest to Elias, who would not be making it all the way to Tsingy de Bemaraha to see them. Wild Lemurs also roamed the extensive grounds and the first animal of our tour proved to be a **Nosy Be Sportive Lemur**. Later we came across a couple groups of wild **Black Lemurs** resting on bamboo. Few lemurs show off sexual dimorphism as well as this species. We made it through the zoo tour in a little over an hour, ending with an undetermined Dwarf Lemur species.



Black Lemurs (male & female)



Nosy Be Sportive Lemur

Next up was our whale watch. Patricio attempted to arrange that lunch would be ready for us to pick up, but lines got crossed and we lost 45 minutes to food preparation. Even with the boat waiting for us at Moya Beach, we didn't get out on the water until almost 1pm. Which meant just 3 hours max to look for **Omura's Whales**. Our boat's captain, Achiraf, employed a method of following groups of feeding seabirds in hopes of whales joining from below. Early results seemed promising, as we found a massive creature alongside the birds. A *Whale Shark's* mottled caudal fin peaked past the surface, while its goliath body remained shadowy beneath. Although not a mammal, a mega beast nonetheless. We scoured the sea but time expired without any cetaceans in sight. With our failure I concocted a backup plan to return first thing the next morning in hopes of better luck.

Back on shore, we completed a circumnavigation of the island and arrived at the airport to pick up the eager fourth member of our crew. Delayed from an untimely bout with Covid, Chad Johnson had finally arrived in Madagascar as he had been yearning to do for decades. Fresh off 20 hours of travel, he was thrown into the fray, as we headed straight for Lokobe Nature Special Reserve. We drove as far as Ambatozavavy, then transferred to the park by motorized pirogue canoe. We made landfall at dusk, and were led by a guide named Tolo through a small village before reaching the park entrance. Unsurprisingly our first mammal was a **Nosy Be Sportive Lemur**, and we would see almost 20 of these throughout the night. **Nosy Be Mouse Lemurs** were less prevalent, with only 3 total. We paid special attention to leaf litter for possible **Tailless Tenrecs**, but the guides said it was probably still too early in the season. The local guides had their eyes peeled for herps. Their unparalleled perception brought in a huge haul including: *Minute Leaf Chameleon* (the world's 2nd smallest reptile), *Henkel's Leaf-tailed Gecko*, *Madagascar Day Gecko*, *Douliot's Bright-eyed Frog*, *Madagascan Brown Frog*, *Mascarene Grass Frog*, and the omnipresent *Panther Chameleon*. Chad was exhilarated with every animal he was seeing- it really was quite infectious.

Nosy Be Mouse Lemur



Nosy Be Sportive Lemur



Minute Leaf Chameleon



Back in civilization, we enjoyed a tasty 10pm dinner in Ambatoloaka before a brief night's sleep. Whale watch attempt #2 began at 6am sharp and lasted 2 hours. Morale was waning, until we saw a spout in the distance, followed by a splash from a large breach! Initial Omura elation was tempered as I realized Humpbacks were the more likely whale to breach. Some moments later, the distinctively stubby dorsal fins of a mother and calf **Humpback Whale** broke the surface. Don't get me wrong, it is always special to witness any whale, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit some disappointment. The Omuras weren't going to show, but you can't say we didn't try.

We took yesterday morning's route in reverse to return to Ankify Harbor. With Lee back as driver, we started toward Ankarafantsika, with a few stops planned along the way. 5 hours later we arrived at the first of said stops.



Parc Villageois, Antanambao-Antontorona

If an iconically beautiful lemur can be found along our route then of course we're going to look for it! There are a few location options, but Patrick selected Parc Villageois in Antanambao-Antontorona as the most convenient, yet reliable choice. Tsivory Victor, the affable owner of the privately protected land, awaited our arrival and led us uphill for the better part of an hour. At the apex of our climb was a small group of habituated **Blue-eyed Black Lemurs**. Much like Black Lemurs, the males and females are black and tan respectively, but as their name suggests, these lemurs boast striking blue eyes. The lemurs were very comfortable around Tsivory, who mentioned their numbers had been steadily increasing on his land- a welcomed sign! We couldn't stay long, but before we left, Tsivory's family prepared a delightful lunch of mango salad and local chicken.



Anjiamangirana Classified Forest

Another 5-hour drive brought us to a truck stop near Anjiamangirana Classified Forest where we cautiously awaited our guide, Mainty. This hike was long and flooded. Not the ideal type of hike after a long day on precious little sleep. Yet we all trudged along, with new lemurs as motivation. Surely the distance we traversed was longer than usual because a large area of forest had been burned. This was the most overt evidence of habitat destruction I witnessed throughout the trip. A sad reminder of the imminent plight many of these animals face. Once past these charred remains, a **Western Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur** was the first mammal to pop up. Then we hit a stream with a towering wall of green behind it. Amongst these large trees leapt **Danfoss's Mouse Lemurs**. They were quite shy, and I only managed dodgy photos.

We were determined to find **Grewcock's Sportive Lemur**, if only for that impressive name! We spent the next few hours combing the areas along the forest trails with zero hits. Mainty said these forests were also surprisingly good for **Aye-Aye**, but none materialized. Dejected and walking back towards our car, we spotted large lemur activity high in one of the final trees before the burnout. Sportives! Could we be this lucky?? I rushed to take some photos and zoomed in on my screen... Shit! They were **Common Brown Lemurs** monkeying around past 10pm. An agonizing fake-out for a group of guys dreaming of seeing Grewcock's.

It was after midnight by the time we reached Hotel Sofia Bellevue in Antsohihy. Because there weren't any lodging options near Anjiamangirana, we needed to backtrack 1 hour for this one. For any return trip, I'd look into camping at Anjiamangirana to maximize time in the forest after that difficult hike.

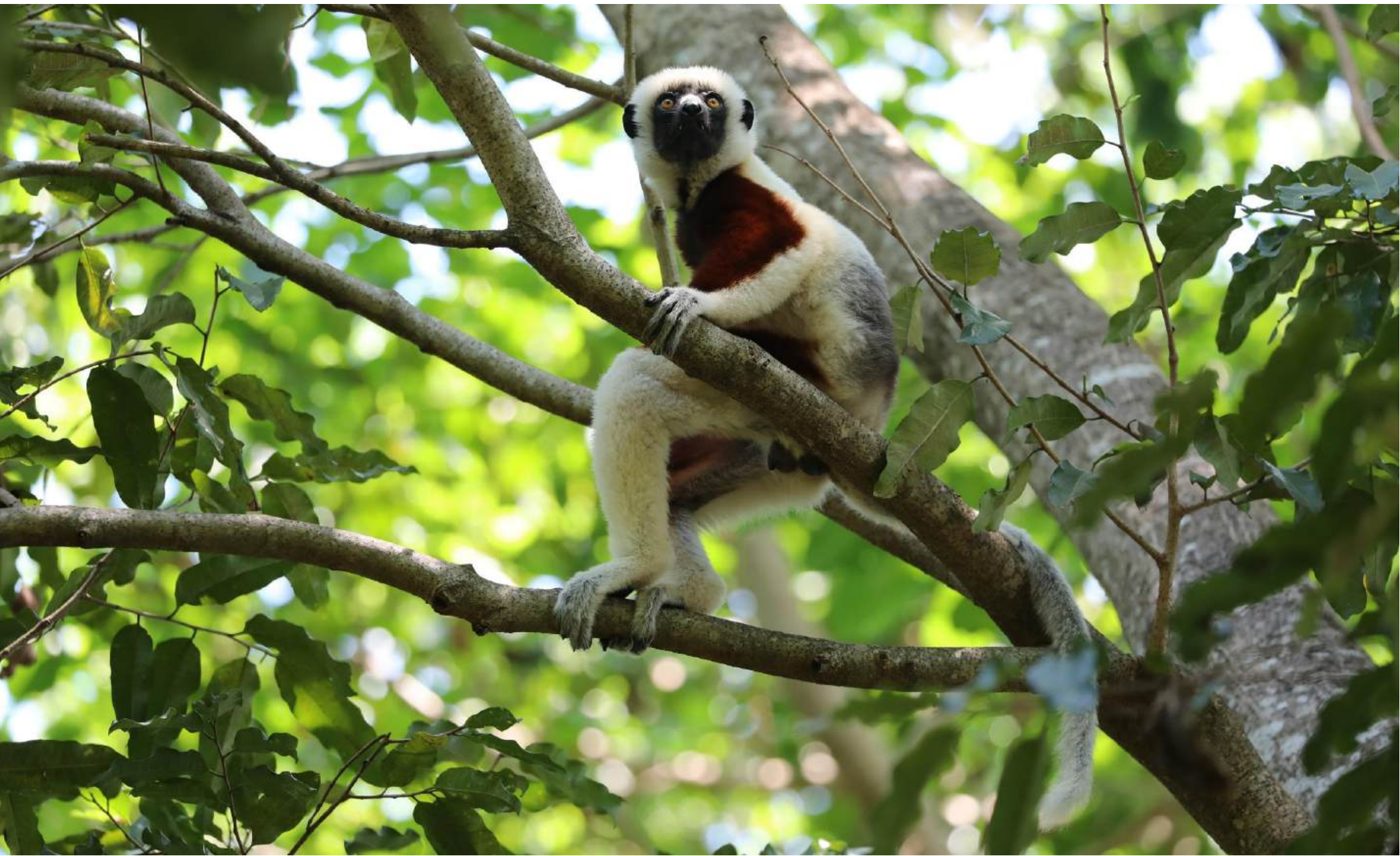


Ankarafantsika National Park

We awoke to our first hint of car trouble. Luckily it was diagnosed as “something that could wait until Tana,” so we continued onwards. We were racing against an impending sunset, so we undertook the 8.5 hour’s drive with stops fast and few. Our original itinerary allotted for two nights at Ankarafantsika, but another change to Tsardia’s flight schedule meant we’d have to leave a day early and drive back to Tana instead. I knew it was risky to attempt consecutive domestic flights with a short layover, but that’s why in Madagascar you always need a backup plan! Sadly, this also meant I’d forego trying for **Crowned Sifaka** to complete the Sifaka set. I suspect it should be tight but doable in a half day by using private ferries between Mahajanga and Katsepy, with enough time to still make the afternoon flight.

From the moment we arrived, our guide, Modeste, and his spotter, Jiovani, worked tirelessly to get our targets in the under 24 hours we had here. The first mammal was a couple steps from the carpark at the park’s entrance. **Mauritian Tomb Bats** viewable in daylight, clinging to the side of a large tree trunk. Chad would also go on to find more of these behind our bungalow at Blue Vanga Lodge. We hardly caught our breaths before Modeste called us over to a large tree. Perched high above in golden sunlight, was a stunning **Coquerel’s Sifaka**, my 8th Sifaka! A pair of **Common Brown Lemurs** closed out the day’s activities, before retreating to Blue Vanga for dinner.







With only one night to explore this area, the pressure was on. As is the case with all national parks in Madagascar, night walks are strictly prohibited. But, like with Andasibe, there are community forests right outside the park which provide a solid work-around. The night started not with a bang, but with a hiss of a *Madagascar Hissing Cockroach*. I was familiar with these goliaths from zoos but was tickled to see one cross our path. As was becoming a theme, **Western Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemurs** were the first and most common lemurs of the night. Next, we briefly saw a **Gray Mouse Lemur**, followed by two **Golden Brown Mouse Lemurs**. A **Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur** high in a tree was our final subject before my camera's flash died. With Modeste well trained on locating lemur eye-shine, I focused my energy on thermaling for **Tailless Tenrec** and rodents, until that battery died too. Loadshedding is common in Madagascar and was in place during our stay at Blue Vanga, which limited device charging.



Golden Brown Mouse Lemur

Frances's Sparrowhawk

We came across several more Sportive Lemurs as well as a perched *Frances's Sparrowhawk*. Then, Modeste noticed small movement from a tree top. As this rodent scurried down a branch, I zeroed in on the tail and found the distinctive tuft of a TTR! At first it seemed like the creature had vanished, but I peeked around the side of a wide trunk, and found our guy frozen inside a natural indentation. I motioned for everyone to join me slowly and quietly. Soon we all had eyes on this **Western Tufted-tailed Rat**, barely more than an arm's length away. It alternated between sitting on the trunk and hiding in a shallow tree hole. A fantastic final species for the night!

Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur



Western Tufted-tailed Rat



The pressure for the remaining targets intensified the next morning as we had to leave by 9am for the long drive back to Tana. Modeste knew several day roosts for Woolly Lemurs and began systematically checking each one. Every site we checked came up empty. Wanting a win, he brought us to a **Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur** peeking out from its tree hole. Time kept dwindling, and Modeste was out of Woolly Lemur spots. Communications with other guides also fell short. Guess he'd just have to find one the old-fashioned way. I was starting to accept the fact that this would go as a miss, when Modeste ran up and urged we follow him. He proudly delivered us to a one-eyed **Western Woolly Lemur** perched on a branch. What a find, Modeste!



Now only **Mongoose Lemur** remained, a species I knew was not consistently reliable here. We gave our best effort in the 30 minutes remaining, to no avail. We began to drive away, when Jiovani ran out from the forest and hailed down our van. Is this for real!? We flew out of the vehicle and dashed with him to a group of trees. Directly above us, at the canopy's crown, was a small group of **Mongoose Lemurs**! This last second miracle stole away the record I had set with Tomer with the Bokis in Kirindy. I mean, we had even started to drive away! Elated, we filed back into the car, and this time actually left.

This was the longest drive of part deux, clocking in around 10.5 hours plus a leisurely stop in Maevatanana. We returned to Tana by 9pm where we said farewell to Elias who flew home the next morning (with a stopover in Dubai for more mammal-watching!) Chad, Phil, and I rested up back at Oceanis Home & Voyages. Our flight time wasn't until 1pm the next day, and it was high time we had a pause from the breakneck pace.

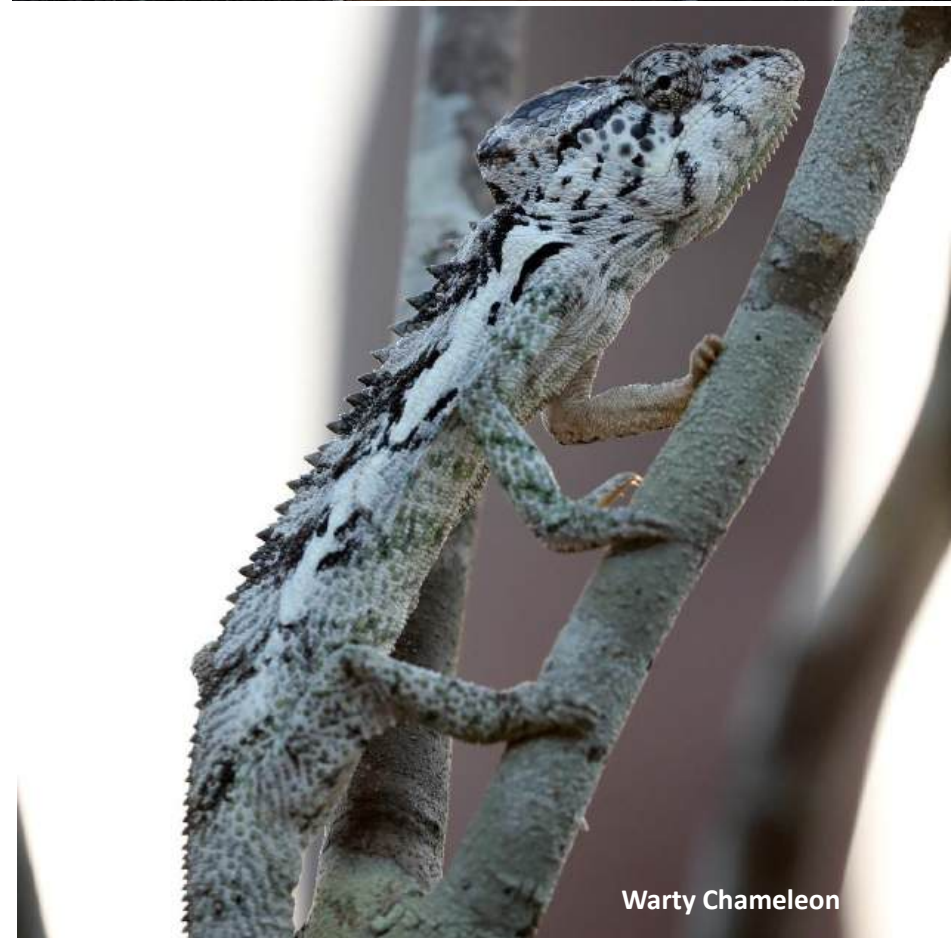
We took off for Toliara in Madagascar's Southwest, on what would be Phil's 99th flight (yes, he keeps track!)



Ifaty Reniala Reserve

In Toliara, a new driver named Zeze was ready and waiting. Airport food isn't reliable in Madagascar, so we hit the ground running and cobbled together a meal at the local supermarket. To my complete surprise, it included some of the best potato salad I've ever had! An hour's drive brought us to La Bella Donna, a very nice hotel along Ifaty Beach.

A silver lining from Tsardia's flight adjustment was that we would have extended time at Ifaty, including the hours before sunset. The setting is a distinctive mix of Baobab trees interspersed with cacti and other desert plants growing from reddish brown soil. These hours shined for birds and reptiles such as *Long-tailed Ground Roller*, *Running Coua*, *Malagasy Bulbul*, *Three-eyed Lizard*, *Warty Chameleon*, *Mahafaly Sand Snake* and *Dumeril's Boa*.



Warty Chameleon

Long-tailed Ground Roller



Red-capped Coua



I asked our guides, Bebe and Olivier, about finding a day roost for an **Ifaty Sportive Lemur** (the exact species in Ifaty is undetermined.) We ending up finding one at dusk, thanks to a group of tourists gathered outside the nest like wildlife paparazzi. After some patient waiting, the animal showed itself a handful of times before heading into the night. We would see one more before the night was through, as well as a **Gray Mouse Lemur**. But, animal of the night undoubtedly went to the **Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec**. This area is great for them, and we were able to see two of these prickly curiosities up close and personal. Interestingly, their quills were stained red from the colorful soil. This was the first ever Tenrec for both Phil and Chad, and my first in the weeks since Masoala. Back at Bella Donna we had a tasty Italian inspired seafood dinner before a great night's sleep.







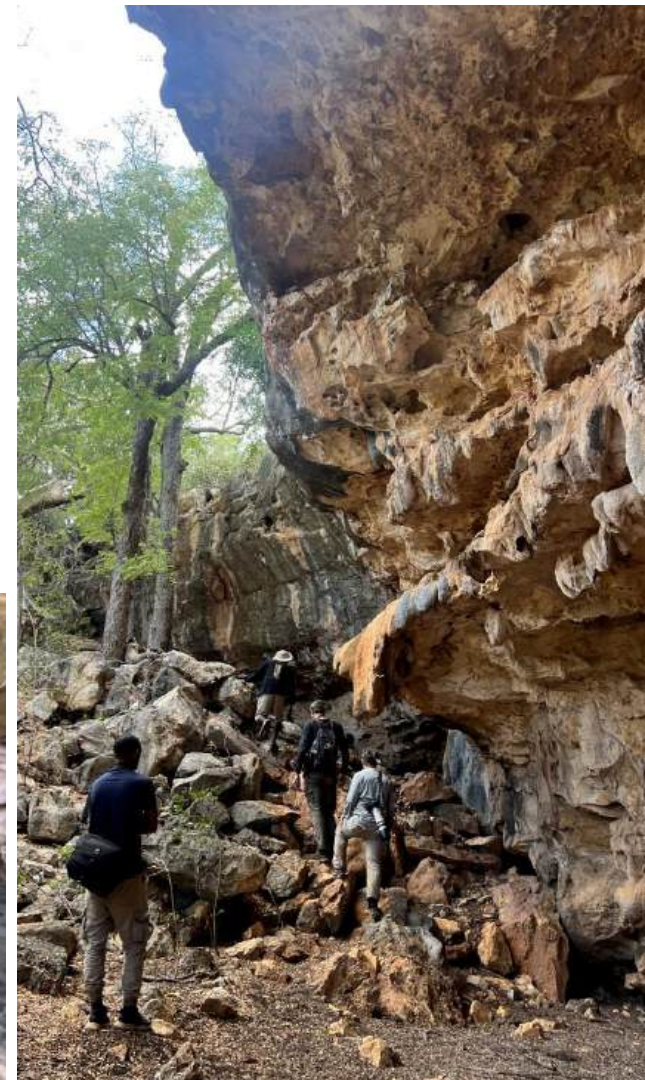
We woke at dawn to make our 7am boat reservation in Toliara. Originally, I had the bold plan of attempting a day trip to Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park for **Hubbard's Sportive Lemur**, then immediately turning around to catch a late afternoon boat crossing in Toliara. However, rough seas had been predicted for the afternoon, so this morning would be our only chance for the boat. I don't think any of us really minded dropping the extra 10 hours of driving. The boat cut across the bay in under 90 minutes and headed south to Anakao. We disembarked at another picturesque beach lodge called Chez Emile, where we were served a sizable brunch. Our next and final driver, Doma, had parked on the beach, a fact his vehicle was not excited about. It fought like a toddler avoiding a nap to emerge from the sand- a scary first impression about the reliability of our ride. It seemed like we were due for some serious car-trouble on Madagascar's crazy roads. With our collective breaths held, we were off to Tsimanampetsotse National Park, another 2 hours away by dirt road.



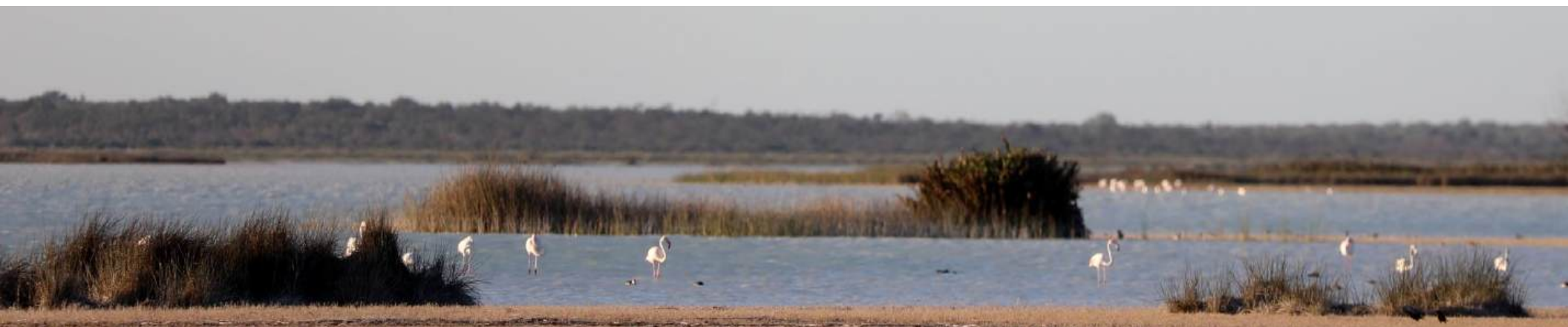
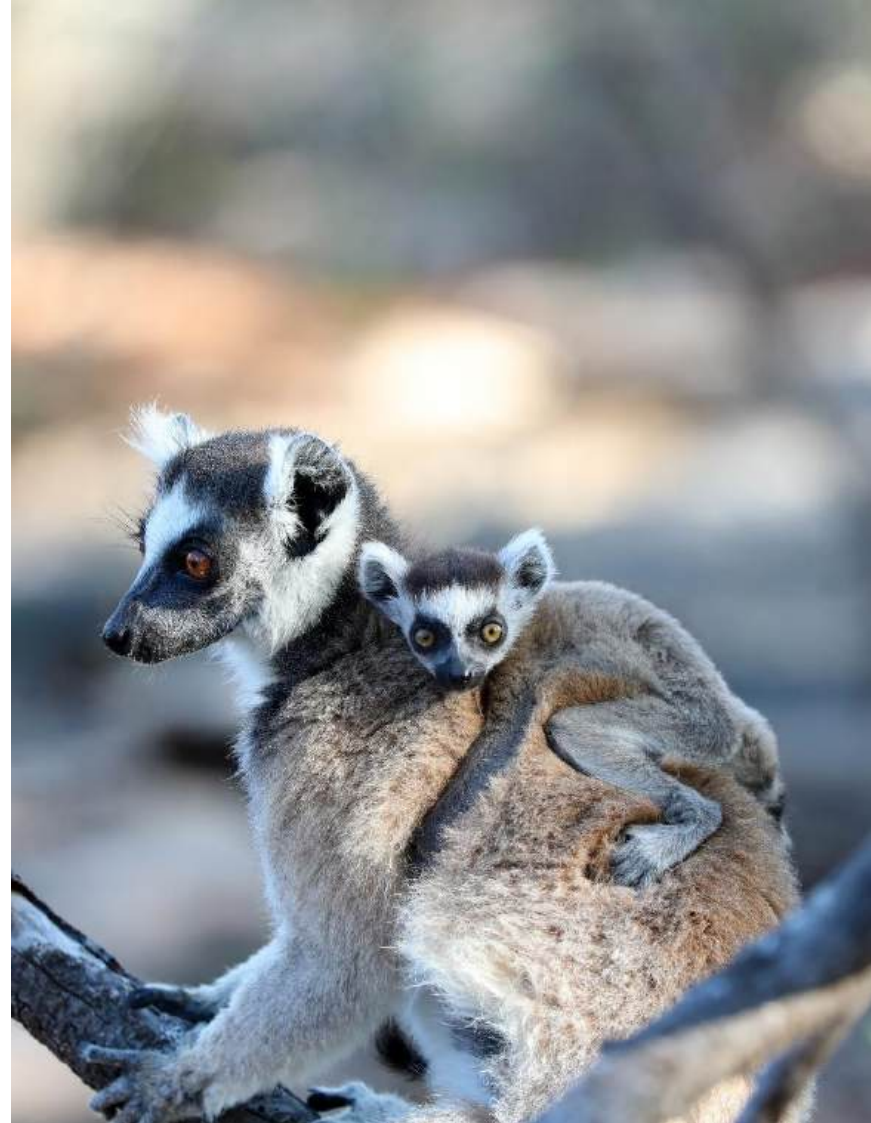
Tsimanampetsotse National Park

We arrived to the campsite before lunch when Patrick and Doma began to set up camp. I couldn't help but notice the car was left running, which compounded my initial concern. To my relief, they were just using the engine's power to blow up a mattress. With all the driving we did in the South, we were extremely lucky to not experience any other hiccups.

After a quick bite, we set out to explore some nearby caves. The first was shallow and had a permanent pool brimming with *Blind Fish* (*Typhleotris madagascariensis*). The second was a proper cave that required contorting around tight spaces to pass through. In the main cavity we spotted a handful of **Mahafaly Long-fingered Bat** roosting individually, as well as heaps of **Rufous Trident Bats** in constant flight. We exited the cave through an infinitely more convenient route, and started walking the nearby trails. Within 30 minutes we laid eyes on a family of THE most recognizable and iconic lemur- the **Ring-tailed Lemur**. I'd seen them hundreds of times in zoos, but never like this in their natural habitat with adorable babies clutching their mother's backs. Phil pointed out how I had to be the first person ever to see 70 other lemur species before seeing a wild Ring-tail.







We had just enough time for a quick drive to Tsimanampetsotse Lake. The road there was littered with *Radiated Tortoises*, requiring many stops where we each took turns carefully moving them off the road. The lake was teeming with waterbirds, including *Greater Flamingos*, but we needed to return to camp before dusk for the main event.

During dinner preparation here, one can expect to be visited by an opportunistic **Grandidier's Mongoose**. Sure enough, by 6:15pm, a gorgeous cream and black-striped individual began snooping around for discarded food. The animal showed no signs of hesitation as it tottered about, shockingly close to our feet. This was my favorite carnivore of the trip. It hung around so long, I even livestreamed it to my wife and daughter after a failed attempt to do the same with Tomer (you were my first call, man!) Just perfect. Eventually, we bored of each other and it was time for dinner.





Not even 10 minutes into our evening stroll, we secured the first of two **Gray-brown Mouse Lemurs**. With mammals effectively out of the way, we took in a broad array of other nature including *Scorpion Leaf-toed Gecko*, *Ocelot Gecko*, *Sakalava Velvet Gecko* and *Madagascar Nightjars*. There was also a dramatic fight to the death between a Scorpion and a Centipede which dragged on for many minutes. It was visceral to watch the Centipede writhe around, fighting for its life until the Scorpion ultimately emerged victorious.



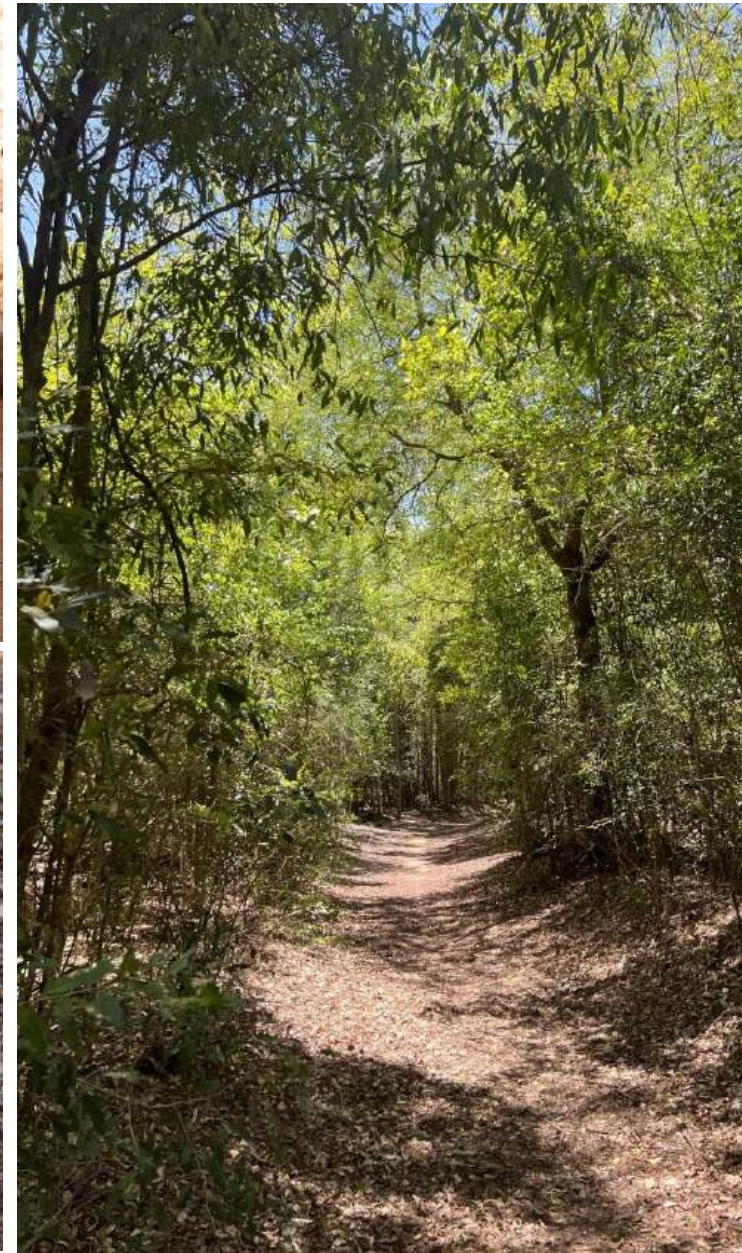
We spent the entire next day on the road, leaving at sunrise. All driving in the South should be done in daylight to be safe from bandits. Our first stop was a memorable one as we got to meet Patrick's father, Richard, and his boss Dr. Ed Louis, a lemur expert from Omaha's Zoo. Dr. Louis has been working diligently in the field to properly classify lemurs, and doubles as a fantastic storyteller. For the majority of the day we drove off-road, alternating between sand and rock laden surfaces. We drove down into huge dried-up riverbeds, over dead aquatic plants, and then up and out again. Our goal was to reach Beloha by dusk, but made such good time that we stretched it all the way to Tsiombe. In doing so, we had to skip **Madagascar Flying Foxes** in Ampanihy, but still expected to see them in Berenty. We shacked up in basic individual bungalows at the Littoral Hotel for the night.



Berenty Private Reserve

We got off to a slow start the following morning and managed to arrive at Berenty by 10am. To our dismay, we learned the dancing **Verreaux's Sifakas** had sashayed past the parking lot an hour earlier. A tough miss on a prominent behavior that Phil had been especially keen to witness. There was limited time available here, so we'd have to make it count.

Minutes into our tour, we ran into a family of **Ring-tailed Lemurs**. They were extremely calm and enjoying shade from the increasingly hot sun. A mother nursed her young as she held onto another adult for support. These animals seemed much tamer than the ones at Tsimanampetsotse, as did the setting.



Nearby, Phil and Chad got their first **Verreaux's Sifaka**, contentedly sitting on a tree branch. Next, our guide, Mahafaka, delivered us a Sportive day roost. This **Petter's Sportive Lemur** was somehow comfortably nestled between two large thorny trunks. Two more were readily seen along our route. These were originally thought to be **White-footed Sportive Lemurs**, which experts now agree are only found on the opposite side of the Mandrare River.



Mahafaka also shared roosts for *White-browed* and *Barn Owls*. In-between owling, we had a brief sighting of two **Berenty Brown Lemurs**, a hybrid between introduced populations of Collared Brown and Red-fronted Lemurs. Lastly, we were sure to pay a visit to the Museum with its hoard of **Malagasy White-bellied Free-tailed Bats** roosting within the dilapidated roof, possibly mixed with **Peter's Golbin Bats**. Unfortunately, the population of **Madagascar Flying Foxes** at Berenty has been dwindling, so management decided to keep their roost off limits to visitors. Luckily Patrick knew one final location to try- more on that later.

The three of us enjoyed a near-gourmet lunch, which stood out against the mostly limited options in the South. Phil and I savored a dessert, which Chad skipped in favor of returning to the trail. He was rewarded with a single dancing Sifaka. Poor Phil. I guess now the new rule is... always skip dessert? After less than an hour's drive to Ankariera, we rendezvoused with park ranger, Eugene, who would accompany us throughout Andohahela.



Andohahela National Park

Andohahela is split into three parcels, each representing markedly different habitats. We visited two. Our introduction to the park was the dry spiny forest of Ihazofotsy-Mangatsiaka. We bumped along 30 minutes of rocky road, before walking the rest of the way. Now East of the Mandrare River, there was only one target and our guide, Remanompy, knew the spot. Thorned trees lined the narrow view we had of this mother-baby pair of **White-footed Sportive Lemurs**. We were in and out like hired assassins before returning to the car with yet another stop ahead on this whirlwind day. 3 hours of steady uphill dirt road driving eventually brought us to Managotry. Along the way we picked up our chef, who was clutching onto live chickens in the back seat.



The habitat shift from dry spiny forest to Managotry's mountain rainforest was remarkable. We arrived just after sunset. It felt extremely remote, even with the small settlement across the road from our camp. We gathered our things in haste for a night walk. Dinner would have to await our return. Resident guide, Justin, joined forces with Eugene as we trudged uphill along the dirt road for 30 minutes. Even at night, the depressing evidence of logging was obvious. Eventually we hit untouched forest and ventured inside. The hiking here was difficult, often gradient, and rarely on well-maintained trails.

The night had been quiet, when Patrick noticed a lemur high in a tree. We all caught a quick glimpse of a long bushy tail from what appeared to be a **Andohahela Sportive Lemur**, our top target. Regrettably, a photo analysis later proved it to be the locally undescribed **Andohahela Dwarf Lemur**. A tough blow for the trip list, but unavoidable without any other hints of Sportives that evening. Following the early lull, the rest of the night exploded with life. **Andohahela Mouse Lemurs** (also undescribed) and more **Andohahela Dwarf Lemurs** were both seen several times with ample opportunities for photography. We found **Southern Woolly Lemurs** twice, including a baby snuggled close to its mothers back. Chad noticed a rodent running next to a small stream, so we all hunkered down to await its emergence.



Within minutes, a **Tanala Tufted-tailed Rat** came into perfect view. We spent 20 minutes watching the creature shift locations while also treasuring the much-needed break. Now approaching midnight, it was high time we returned to camp. We encountered some interesting herps along the way, like *Manantantely Half-padded Gecko*, *Dumeril's Madagascar Frog*, *Grandidier's Madagascar Frog* plus a range-extension for *Jan's Snake* with fascinating white markings on its head that resemble a human skull.

The chef prepared dinner by flashlight and served us at 1am. I considered skipping this meal based on how late it was, but ultimately gave in. A grave error in judgment I came to later realize... We battled with noisy winds to catch, at best, 5 hours of sleep. The next morning was our final chance for **Southern Bamboo Lemur**. We set out at 7am on the same road scanning for signs of lemurs, but came up empty-handed. This can be a difficult species here and is far from guaranteed. Alas, time was up and we had to move onto Saint Luce Reserve, a 5-hour drive and the last destination on our itinerary. I skipped breakfast due to a queasy loss of appetite. A harbinger of things to come...



Sainte Luce Reserve

We picked up our final guide, Randrianasolo, at Sainte Luce's entrance, and he directed us towards our first stop: a **Madagascar Flying Fox** roost. None of us felt particularly great, but it was hard to tell how much could be attributed to lack of sleep. The especially rough roads certainly didn't help. Eventually Chad asked us to pull over, so he could reenact a scene from *The Exorcist* on the side of the road. A cloud of worry rolled over the group, wondering who might be next...

It was already 2pm when the road became un-drivable. With Randrianasolo's guidance, we estimated the timing of this bat-hike to determine we'd still have some daylight leftover for locating **Red Collared Lemurs**. It was going to be tight, but what else was new. After missing out on the Foxes in Ampanihy and Berenty, we simply had to try! Phil, Patrick, Randrianasolo and I set off, while Chad understandably hung back with Doma.

Under the weather and with time constraints abound, this felt more like a death march than a pleasurable hike. I was falling apart. The strap on my hiking sandal had snapped off and my boots were back in Tana. I borrowed a pair of snug sneakers from Patrick which predictably led to blisters. As if traveling with Alice in Wonderland, our arrival time kept increasing the "closer" we got. Mercifully, 90 minutes later we could hear the squeaks and screeches of an enormous **Madagascar Flying Fox** colony. We spent no more than 10 minutes with them, careful to not get too close to disturb this especially flighty group. I feverishly munched on cookies Patrick brought along, as I felt my tank nearing empty. We shaved off a nice chunk of the return hike with the help of a muddy shortcut and our vehicle being closer than it had been.



Racing the setting sun. we called ahead to arrange scouts for Collared Lemurs. We arrived to the lodges with an hour of daylight remaining and wasted no time. The scouts split up, with one of them leading us around a nearby forest. We paced around until another scout ran over to us, beckoning we follow. Our hearts pumped as we dashed after him through thick forest. I couldn't believe we were having another zero-hour sighting. But when we reached the spot where he last saw the lemurs, they were gone. He tried picking back up the scent, but it had gone cold. All this back and forth with no lemurs to show for it was exhausting. I was on the 35th consecutive day of a hectic itinerary and had already dipped deep into my energy reserves. Then, in the dwindling minutes of sunset, Randrianasolo grabbed us for one final chase through Madagascar's forests. We got there with seconds to spare as a pair of **Red Collared Lemurs** faded into the darkening trees. Must have been the 10th such mammal sprint on this marathon of a trip.

I could barely walk, but dinner was enough to tempt me. We took it slow, and in between our bungalow and the dining hall we stumbled across each of the last two targets of the entire trip: **Thomas' Dwarf Lemur** and **Anosy Mouse Lemur**. This was serendipitous indeed. I think my body held on just until this final finish line. I was comatose at dinner- light-headed, breathing deeply. Starved for food, but with hardly enough energy to muster eating it. Patrick helped me carry my equipment back to the bungalow and I tried to get some rest. I had nearly dozed off when I brushed something big off my thigh. It was a large tarantula and I was thoroughly creeped out. Now it was loose in my room and refusing to leave the bottom of a table. Eventually, I just put the entire table outside- problem solved!



I woke up a couple hours later, sweating and in need of my own exorcism, before passing back out. The following day was a blur. I woke up at 5am and caught word Phil had found some more **Red Collared Lemurs**. I slept-walked my way over there to snap my first shots of the species and headed straight back to our van. We had an early flight to Tana and we did not want to miss it! I've never felt so scrutinized while boarding a flight. Between limping with my broken sandal, and the battle I was losing to food poisoning I'm sure I looked too drunk to fly. I tried my damndest to fake it, but was continuously asked "are you alright?" Once again Patrick came up huge and carried my heavy bag the rest of the day. I will truly be forever grateful for his unwavering kindness.

Post-Trip:

I was a zombie during most of my multiple flights home. Running on complete fumes, I still had the pleasure of meeting fellow mammal-watchers Cheryl Antonucci and Deb Bradley who had also just finished a Madagascan tour. It must've been a hilarious first impression. I promise I'm not usually such a vegetative mess! Once home, I reunited with my family, but remained sick for another 10 days before choking down a prescription of Flagyl. That pill was the most nauseating taste I've ever experienced, which only made things worse. At least until the internet helped me crack the case... When coated in butter, the pill slid past my tongue leaving only the taste of delicious Kerrygold. My guess was I had gotten bad Salmonella poisoning from that regretful late-night meal in Managotry. Somehow iron-stomach Phil came out unscathed, well-done sir!

36 days in Madagascar sapped every ounce of my strength, and I'd have it no other way. I far exceeded the triple-digit mammal total I had hoped for, with 125 out of the 127 species seen being lifers (thank you, freakish endemism!) It was an incredible adventure complete with old friends and new. But know, I have unfinished business. Here's lookin' at you Falanouc. Madagascar, I'll be back some day if you'll have me.



Special Thanks:

A heartfelt thank you to Dr. Steve Goodman who both facilitated mammal viewing and offered his unmatched identification expertise when I put this report together. His books, Les Chauves-souris de Madagascar and Les Petits Mammiferes de Madagascar, have been a revelation thanks to Google Lens as translator. Another shout out to Nick Garbutt's latest edition of Mammals of Madagascar, my single greatest source for planning this epic expedition. To Jon Hall for blazing so much of this trail before me, and discovering Patrick: whose patience, enthusiasm and country-wide connections are rivaled only by his animal spotting. José Gabriel for lending his time and Bat-expertise to help with identifications. Venkat Sankar for urging me to add Tsingy de Bemaraha and Tsimanampetsotse to the itinerary, which both ended up as memorable stand-outs. Adam Walley who shared incredibly helpful insights from his many previous visits. My travel mates for sharing this incredible journey and putting up with me along the way. Specifically, Tomer and Jonas for lending me some of their photos in my report. And to my wife, Ann who gave the green light for this mid-life crisis/40th birthday celebration/favorite trip of all time. She's an absolute saint for enduring my mammal passion the way she does and a superhuman mom to our daughter Ava Darwin.





[illegible]

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Rano	Kianj	Kirindy	Tsingy	Andasibe	Farank	Masoala	E. Coast	Marojeje	Daraina	Andrafia	Amber	Ankarana	Ambanja	Nosy Be	Rd to Ank	Ankaraf	Ifaty	Tsiman	Berenty	Andoha	St Luce
51	Western Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus medius</i>			X													X?	X					
52	Sambirano Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus cf. medius</i>														X								
53	Ankarana Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus shethi</i>													X									
54	Sibree's Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus sibreei</i>	X																					
55	Andohahela Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus spp.</i>																					X	
56	Kianjavato Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus spp.</i>		X																				
57	Thomas's Dwarf Lemur	<i>Cheirogaleus thomasi</i>																						X
58	Northern Fork-marked Lemur	<i>Phaner electromontis</i>												X										
59	Daraina Fork-marked Lemur	<i>Phaner cf. electromontis</i>										X												
60	Pale Fork-marked Lemur	<i>Phaner pallescens</i>			X																			
61	Sambirano Fork-marked Lemur	<i>Phaner parienti</i>														X								
62	Ankarana Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur ankaranensis</i>											X		X									
63	Grey-backed Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur dorsalis</i>														X								
64	Milne-Edwards's Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur edwardsi</i>																	X					
65	White-footed Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur leucopus</i>																					X	
66	Small-toothed Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur microdon</i>	X																					
67	Daraina Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur milanoii</i>										X												
68	Weasel Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur mustelinus</i>					X																	
69	Petter's Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur petteri</i>																				X		
70	Bemaraha Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur randrianosoloi</i>				X																		
71	Red-tailed Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur ruficaudatus</i>			X																			
72	Masoala Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur scottorum</i>							X															
73	Seal's Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur seali</i>						X																
74	Ifaty Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur spp.</i>																		X				
75	Nosy Be Sportive Lemur	<i>Lepilemur tymerlachsoni</i>															X							
76	Golden Bamboo Lemur	<i>Hapalemur aureus</i>	X																					
77	Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur	<i>Hapalemur griseus</i>					X																	
78	Northern Grey Bamboo Lemur	<i>Hapalemur occidentalis</i>							X		X													
79	Greater Bamboo Lemur	<i>Prolemur simus</i>	X	X																				
80	Ring-tailed Lemur	<i>Lemur catta</i>																			X	X		
81	White-fronted Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur albifrons</i>							X		X													
82	Red-collared Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur collaris</i>																						X
83	Crowned Lemur	<i>Eulemur coronatus</i>											X	X	X									
84	Blue-eyed Black Lemur	<i>Eulemur flavifrons</i>																X						
85	Common Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur fluvus</i>					X											X	X					
86	Black Lemur	<i>Eulemur macaca</i>															X							
87	Mongoose Lemur	<i>Eulemur mongoz</i>																	X					
88	Red-bellied Lemur	<i>Eulemur rubriventer</i>	X																					
89	Red-fronted Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur rufifrons</i>		X	X																			
90	Rufous Brown Lemur	<i>Euremur rufus</i>				X																		
91	Sanford's Brown Lemur	<i>Eulemur sanfordi</i>												X	X									
92	Red Ruffed Lemur	<i>Varecia rubra</i>							X															
93	Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur	<i>Varecia variegata</i>		X																				
94	Eastern Woolly Lemur	<i>Avahi laniger</i>					X																	
95	Southern Woolly Lemur	<i>Avahi meridionalis</i>																					X	
96	Masoala Woolly Lemur	<i>Avahi mooreorum</i>						X	X															
97	Western Woolly Lemur	<i>Avahi occidentalis</i>																	X					
98	Peyrieras's Woolly Lemur	<i>Avahi peyrierasi</i>	X																					
99	Silky Sifaka	<i>Propithecus candidus</i>									X													
100	Coquerel's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus coquereli</i>																	X					

	Common Name	Scientific Name	Rano	Kianj	Kirindy	Tsingy	Andasibe	Farank	Masoala	E. Coast	Marojejy	Daraina	Andrafia	Amber	Ankarana	Ambanja	Nosy Be	Rd to Ank	Ankaraf	Ifaty	Tsiman	Berenty	Andoha	St Luce
101	Decken's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus deckeni</i>				X																		
102	Diademed Sifaka	<i>Propithecus diadema</i>					X																	
103	Milne-Edwards's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus edwardsi</i>	X																					
104	Perrier's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus perrieri</i>											X											
105	Golden-crowned Sifaka	<i>Propithecus tattersalli</i>										X												
106	Verreaux's Sifaka	<i>Propithecus verreauxi</i>			X																	X		
107	Indri	<i>Indri indri</i>					X																	
108	Aye-aye	<i>Daubentonia madagascariensis</i>						X				X												
109	Fossa	<i>Cryptoprocta ferox</i>			X																			
110	Fanaloka	<i>Fossa fossana</i>	X						X															
111	Falanouc***	<i>Eupleres goudotii</i>							P															
112	Ring-tailed Mongoose	<i>Galidia elegans</i>	X			X			X		X			X										
113	Grandidier's Mongoose	<i>Galidictis fasciata grandidieri</i>																			X			
114	Narrow-striped Mongoose	<i>Mungotictis decemlineata</i>			X																			
115	White-tailed Tree Rat	<i>Brachytarsomys albicauda</i>	X						X															
116	Carleton's Tufted-tailed Rat?	<i>Eliurus carletoni</i>										X?												
117	Ellerman's Tufted-tailed Rat	<i>Eliurus ellermani</i>							X															
118	Grandidier's Tufted-tailed Rat	<i>Eliurus grandidieri</i>							X															
119	Major's Tufted-tailed Rat?	<i>Eliurus major</i>					X?																	
120	Lesser Tufted-tailed Rat	<i>Eliurus minor</i>	X				X																	
121	Western Tufted-tailed Rat	<i>Eliurus myoxinus</i>			J														X					
122	Kirindy Tufted-tailed Rat***	<i>Eliurus spp.</i>			J																			
123	Tanala Tufted-tailed Rat	<i>Eliurus tanala</i>	X						X														X	
124	Webb's Tufted-tailed Rat	<i>Eliurus webbi</i>	X				X		X															
125	Bastard Big-footed Mouse	<i>Macrotarsomys bastardi</i>			X																			
126	Giant Jumping Rat	<i>Hypogeomys antimena</i>			X																			
127	Eastern Red Forest Rat	<i>Nesomys rufus</i>									X													
128	Lowland Red Forest Rat	<i>Nesomys audeberti</i>	X						X															
129	Western Nesomys	<i>Nesomys lambertoni</i>				X																		
130	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>															X							

*** = Not seen by me

P = Patrick only

J = Jonas & Ruta only

Tenrecs = 5

Bats = 23

Primates = 80

Carnivores = 6

Rodents = 15

Cetaceans = 1

Park Totals: 198179155182676611441035554