

Madagascar trip report part 1 SAVA (Marojejy and Anjanaharibe-sud)

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This August me and my girlfriend have spend a monthlong trip to the great island of Madagascar! I had a clear goal of spending as much time in the unique ecosystems here looking for both **mammals** as well as **birds**. As far as mammals are concerned it has for a long time been a dream to see lemurs in the wild, but also the Malagasy carnivores are of great interest to me. I am interested in all birds, but my personal goal was to see the gorgeous Helmet Vanga as well as the unique ground-rollers. We are both fairly new to wildlife watching, started birdwatching only a year ago and mammal watching even more recently. But there is not place like Madagascar to start practising! All species recorded were put online with location on observations.org

The first part of our trip would consist of going to the SAVA region and visiting Marojejy national park as well as Anjanaharibe-sud protected area for a total of 12 days. We arranged this personally by contacting the local national park guide Franco Rajaonarison by email. Franco has been an amazing guide spotting and recognizing all animals alongside our trail while being incredibly reliable and nice. We highly recommend having him as a guide and are planning to hire him again on a future return trip! After these 12 days we would spend 16 days following the RN7 in a private tour arranged by GMT+3 and seeing all the more popular parks alongside this road alongside some more niche destinations.

Day 0: Arrival at the airport:

The long trip from Netherlands to Madagascar gave us opportunity to stay in Addis Ababa airport for 4 hours. My girlfriend spend this time catching up on some sleep but I was more interested in using this opportunity to start birdwatching from the glass windows on this airport. This gave me my first non-Dutch bird species: **Swainson's sparrow**, **Pied crow**, **Tacazze Sunbird**, **White-collared Pigeon**, **Speckled pigeon**, Cape crow and my personal Favorite, an **African sacred ibis** flying over! I bought a camera specifically in preparation for this trip, and at this point we were still struggling figuring out how the camera works. Because of this reason pictures taken here were a bit to low quality for me to add to the report. After the stop in Ethiopia, we went on the Antananarivo where we spend the night.

Day 1: Marojejy towards camp 1

Early in the morning we went toward Tana airport to head to Sambava. At the airport we were greeted with the frog-like sounds of **Madagascar nightjars** and we saw **Madagascar martins**. From Sambava we met with our guide and went towards Marojejy. On the way to the park, we were incredibly lucky with seeing the endemic birds. We saw the first of many **Common Myna**, **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Malagasy kestrel**, **Crested drongo**, **Malagasy bulbul**, **Madagascar magpie-robin**, **Malagasy paradise-flycatcher**, **M. Coucal** and heard a **lesser vasa parrot**. As far as mammals are concerned, we found a **red forest rat**. We were having so much fun finding and photographing birds that before we knew it was getting dark (and fast) while we were only halfway towards the first camp. For this reason, we sped through the second part but even in

our rush we had to stop for some more uncommon and charismatic birds. We very surprisingly encountered a **Brown Emu tail** and heard a **Crested coua** as well as a **blue coua**. The real highlight would come a bit later where we out of nowhere had a **Pollens vanga**, and a few seconds later we were joined by a **Helmet vanga** sitting right in front of us! My goal species found in day 1 already! After spending some time making pictures of this charismatic bird and figuring out how the camera works in the dark, we finally made our way to the camp where we would enjoy the meal our cooks prepared for us and spend the night. We would later find out that we were accidentally making short videos instead of pictures, so the pictures once again are quite unusable. I was able to salvage the most important one though!



Helmet vanga sitting on a branch

Day 2: towards camp 3:

In the morning, we were woken up by a medium to small sized vanga-flock that gave us some new lifers: **M. Cuckoo shrike**, **M. Blue pigeon**, **M. Spine tail**, **Red-tailed Vanga** and we also heard a **M. Green pigeon** as well as a **Cuckoo-roller**. During breakfast we were approached by a very excited cook that signed for us to come with. After following we found out what the excitement was about as an arms length away, we saw our very first **Northern Bamboo Lemur!**

After breakfast we made our way towards Hubbert's waterflow, seeing once again a lot of birds on the way. **Common newtonia**, **M. Kingfisher** were new lifers for us. Later on, we were joined by a large size vanga flock, giving us a total of 5 Helmet vanga's and even more special, one vanga that our guide could not recognize. It is unknown if this is a new species, a weird variation of a blue vanga or something else. After asking around and describing the species (both me and my guide to a lot of bird guides or other people knowledgeable about birds, the common consensus was that the likeliest explanation was a wildly out of place juvenile **Van Dam's Vanga**, giving us a very rare species that should not be native in the rainforest habitat. After the pitstop at the gorgeous waterfall we went our way back, enjoying the local giant leaf-tailed gecko along the way and went towards camp 2 to have lunch. At camp 2 we would encounter another large flock, this time of swifts. **M. Palm swift** and **M. Black swift** and an **M. Buzzard** would be new lifers here. During lunch there was also an excited **Ring-tailed Vontsira** trying to steal our food. The way up would only bring us one new lifer, a calling **red-breasted Coua**.



Potential juvenile Van Dam's Vanga



Ring-tailed Vontsira enjoying some rice



curious Northern bamboo lemur

Day 3: Camp 3 rain

Today we spend some quiet birding around the camp due to the rain making the peak inaccessible. We found some new higher elevation lifers being: **Dark newtonia**, **Blue vanga**, **Tyla's Vanga**, **Cryptic warbler**, **Wedge-tailed Jery**, **Grey-crowned Tetraka**, **Wards flycatcher**, **Yellow-bellied sunbird asity** and **Common sunbird-asity**. We searched for the Red-bellied lemur but with no luck



Blue coua and Blua vanga in the distance

Day 4: Back to camp 2

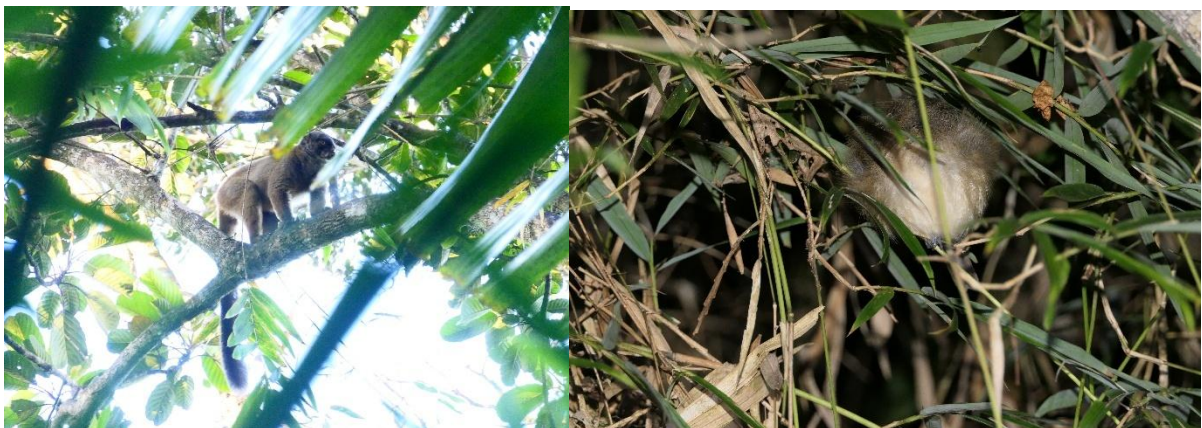
Today would be a wildly successful day for mammal watching! This day would be led by the silky sifaka tracker, who reported to find a small family of this ultra endangered primate. He led us through the middle of the forest, until after more than an hour of walking on a terrain that felt very adventurous (most of the road we had to hold hands with the tracker to prevent ourselves from falling, not great for my fear of heights but it was definitely worth it!) we finally arrived at the target location. Here we saw it! A small family of 5 **Silky sifaka**, one of them has a baby! These lemurs were so much more adorable in real life than they seem in pictures, and we were incredibly lucky to see them this close! Following our detour to see the silky sifaka we proceeded to camp 2 where we were rewarded with an extremely luxurious bungalow that even had a huge window! As we took a little break in our new bungalow for the night, we opened the window and immediately had to go get out guide. There were bamboo lemurs right outside our bungalow! The true Madagascan dream! We followed them for a bit and also saw a female **White-fronted lemur** above us. Our lemur luck still wouldn't be done for the day as after dinner we saw another excited tourist run to the dinner spot. He and his guide spotted a little mouse lemur right outside the camp! The mouse lemur was my girlfriend's childhood Favorite animal and she has never been more excited as at that moment. We ran down to see it but sadly we were too late. Right then and there I declared that we would not go to sleep until we saw the mouse lemur, something our guide heard and took very seriously. We spent a very extended night walk around the camp following the sound, until we were finally rewarded with, an incredibly clear view of this new Favorite animal of ours, the **Mittermeier's mouse lemur**. We could not be happier as at that moment as both of us had somewhat given up hope to see it. Not to brag, but I also think we may have the best picture of this species I could find on the internet, that's how clear we saw it! During our search we also saw a little ball of fluff, presumed to be a sleeping **common Jery**, as well as the rare lined leaf-tailed gecko.



Silky sifaka with baby



Mittermeier's mouse lemur



White-fronted lemur

A sleeping common Jery

Day 5:

From camp 2 we returned back to the start of the hike. On our way we once again were greeted with plenty of birdlife! Starting with a small Vanga flock giving us: Velvet asity, white-throated Oxylabes, stripe-throated Jery, Green Jery. And a lot of small flocks containing primarily spectacled Tetraka with appearances of nelicourvi weaver and Long-billed berniera. One of these Tetraka flocks brought a much rarer lifer, the Red-tailed Newtonia! We once again saw another few helmet vangaas, proving its prevalence in the park and a resting M. Pygmy kingfisher. Our last new lifer of Marojejy would be encountered would be right at the entrance

itself, where a few **M. Starlings** joined us. After getting out of Marojejy we walked a few more hours next to the rice fields, containing many **Malagasy turtle dove, Red fody, Cattle egret, M. Mannikin, black heron and Olive bee-eater**. One rarer guest also got our attention, as we were very happy to unexpectedly see a **Malagasy pond heron**! This would end our incredible day for birding.



Pygmy kingfisher



Female Paradise flycatcher



Curious red-tailed newtonia

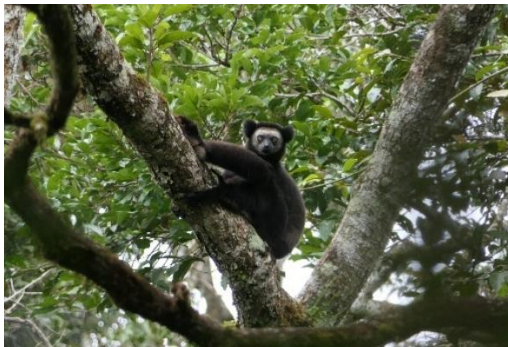
Day 6: the road the Anjanaharibe-sud

The rainy road to Anjanaharibe-Sud provide little birdlife, but we did get a few lifers with a flock of **Chabert vanga** and a **little swift**. At night we were woken up by a calling **Madagascar owl**.

Day 7-9: Anjanaharibe-sud

After starting a hike to search for the indri, we were instantly startled by some calling **White-headed vanga** and a very showy red-breasted coua. After a little bit of searching we also found the rare all-black **Indri**. We spend a lot of time watching these giant lemurs pull some poses that definitely do not look comfortable and along the way also found a **Forest fody**. On our way back we found another group of silky sifaka sleeping in the tree near our camp. After we returned from our day of lemur-watching, we got a very good surprise waiting in the camp, as a **short-legged ground-roller** decided to search for spiders right next to us! Something he would do every afternoon that we were here.

The next day we were joined for breakfast by a **White-throated rail**. We spend the day going on a more relaxed hike but far from unsuccessful. We once again found the Indri, a very showy white-fronted lemur and some new lifers as **a grey emu-tail** decided to call near us as well as a **M. Swamp warbler**, **Rands warbler**, **M. Brush warbler**, **Red-fronted coua** and at night a **scops owl**.



Indri doing some yoga pose



Short-legged ground-roller



White-fronted brown lemur laughing



Red-breasted coua

Day 10: Sambava

While after returning from the national parks we were not focussed on spotting wildlife and took a relaxed day in the city, we still saw the **Pied crow** and during a canoe ride the **Common sandpiper** and **Squacco heron**.

Note about the RN7: as there was less of a birdwatching focus on this part of the trip and most days were predominantly travelling, I will go through these days much quicker.

Day 12:

The next two days would consist purely of travel days with not much interesting in terms of wildlife happening. We went by plane to Tana, and then by car and boat towards the Palmarium reserve. only at night of the twelfth day we would head to Palmarium reserve where we saw semi-wild **Aye-aye**. It felt a bit like a zoo so I would still like to see this species properly, but this will have to do for now. At night we were joined by some kind of rat trying to destroy our bags

while we were sleeping, waking us both up. This unwanted guest could not be identified, however.



Day 13-14: Palmarium reserve

The Palmarium reserve consists of mostly imported lemurs that can not be called wild, however, as there still is some forest there still seem to be a few animals that are wild. However in between enjoying the tame lemurs and trying to deal with the horrible service, we did spot some wildlife. During the day we were blessed with a hook-billed Vanga curious about our presence and during a night walk we saw a much more wild-than-the-usual Rufous mouse lemur, Lesser hedgehog tenrec and Woolly lemur. On the boat ride back from the reserve we also saw a lesser crested tern, black kite and house sparrow.



Woolly lemur



Rufous mouse lemur

Day 15: Andasibe

After some travelling we would arrive in Andasibe national park. Here we saw next to our hotel the Crossley's vanga and nuthatch vanga, while later in the park we would also find a common moorhen. Despite looking for it for a while, the collared nightjar could not be spotted, being our first major miss of the trip. As far as lemurs were concerned, we saw the eastern bamboo lemur, diademmed Sifaka, Brown lemur. Being in such a popular park was an entirely different experience however, as we spend our time in SAVA looking for lemurs ourselves with a guide. Here we could tell whenever a lemur was spotted as there would be a huge group of tourists

staring at it and all guides would instantly get notified on their walky-talky. Sadly this experience would continue throughout most of the RN7, but it did allow wildlife spotting to be significantly easier. At night we saw a **Goodman's mouse lemur**, however after we found it our local guide notified other guides and the tourists swarmed him while shining bright light in his eyes, making for an incredibly sad scene. In the future I would recommend making sure the guide you are with cares about animal health. **A tanala tufted-tail rat** also joined our night walk.



Paradise fly-catcher



Mouse lemur hiding from the bright light and tourists



Eastern bamboo lemur



Pile of diadeemed sifaka

Day 16-18: ranomafana

Ranomafana proved to be a great spot for both birds and mammals! The evening, we arrive we immediately went on a night walk and saw one of our biggest surprises, a **Fanaloka**! The next day the hike in the park proved equally impressive with a lot of old recognizable species as well as some amazing new lifers. New lifers include **Alpine swift, Mascarene martin, pitta-like ground roller** and even a **Scaly ground roller**! The scaly ground roller was showing his gorgeous tail colours beautifully. Not bad for our 4th tropical rainforest of the trip. The mammals didn't disappoint either, providing all the **Golden bamboo lemur, Red-bellied lemur, Red-fronted brown lemur, Milne-Edwards sifaka and Greater bamboo lemur**. All in all, ranomafana proved to be an amazing place to spot wildlife. Around the ranomafana village we also found a **Humblot's Heron** from the car!



“Simon” The greater bamboo lemur



Scaly ground roller being incredibly colourful

Day 19 – 22: Andringitra

The focus of Andringitra was not spotting wildlife, but that did not stop wildlife from coming to us while we were ascending the most difficult hike of our lives towards peak bobby. On lower elevation we saw plenty of Madagascar larks, Hamerkop and a M. Cuckoo hawk. While climbing up I also decided to take a picture of what everyone was convinced was just a buzzard. When checking the pictures in the evening however, it became quite clear that it was not a buzzard... it was not even a raptor... It was a gigantic marsh owl! On higher elevation we started finding a few different species such as African Stonechat, M. Cisticola, Forest (Bensons?) rock thrush and a very out of place Eleonora's falcon.



Marsh owl fleeing from some pied crows



View from peak bobby

Day 23: Anja Park

Anja Park naturally provided us with a very high density of Ring-tailed lemur, but it was also a raptor haven. Providing us with two new lifers, M. Harrier-Hawk and M. Harrier



Ring-tailed lemur stretching

Day 24-25: Isalo

Isalo is not a destination people go to for the wildlife, but more for the incredible landscape. This did not stop a few new lifers however, as we scared a **M. Partridge** on our way to the Isalo window. Meanwhile the inside of the park provided us with great views over a sleeping Scops owl, Grey-headed lovebirds and the new **Verreaux's sifaka**. This park also provided a barbeque joined by plenty of ring-tailed and common brown lemurs!



Verreaux's sifaka resting along the road.

Day 26: Zombitse

Zombitse proved itself a major haven for new lifers, being our only transitional forest of the trip. We were instantly shown a sleeping **white-browed owl** as we arrived. After that we went on a two-hour trip into the small forest with the focus on searching for the endemic (to this forest) **Appert's Tetraka**. We sadly only heard this bird, but we did see the **Rufous vanga**, **Giant coua**, **Coquerel's coua** and **M. Hoopoe**. As well as the **Zombitse sportive lemur** and a hybrid between the Milne Edward and Verreaux's sifaka.



A very round White browed owl



Coquerel's coua joining our path



Zombitse sportive lemur

Day 27: Spiny forest and ifaty

We spend our last free morning in the spiny forest near ifaty. Here we had amazing guides that managed to quickly find a lot of lifers, including the Olive-capped Coua, Sakalava weaver, Archbold's newtonia, Subdesert brush warbler, Thamnornis, Namaqua dove, running coua and greater vasa parrot. Most impressive however were the M. Buttonquail, an incredibly well camouflaged little bird, and the gorgeous long-tailed ground roller. We were sadly too late to see the subdesert mesite, but all in all amazing luck for the one morning spend in this ecosystem. On the car ride from the spiny forest towards Toliara we also spotted a grey-headed gull. We ended the day at a luxurious Toliara hotel where we were incredibly sad that our vacation was coming to an end. We decided to go out on our own for once trying to spot animals near our hotel. We quickly heard a grey mouse lemur. One we sadly could not find. But after a bit of walking we saw a giant creature with huge wings come from the palm tree. An eagle possibly? We thought? But when we were searching the palms, we noticed that it was not a bird at all. It was a M. Flying fox! There was an entire colony of this gorgeous and gigantic creature. Finding such an amazing mammal on our own really brought our incredible dream-like vacation to such a positive end!



Well-hidden Madagascar buttonquail



Long-tailed ground roller



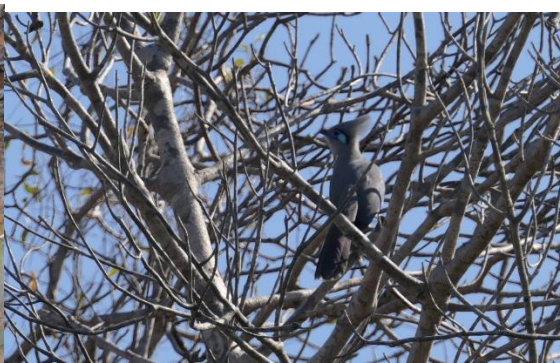
Archbold newtonia



Long-tailed ground roller in a tree



Madagascar nightjar



Crested coua



Madagascar flying fox perched under a tree

Day 28: Tsarasaotra lake

After a flight to Tana, we had a quick few hours to spare so we decided to visit the Tsarasaotra lake. I have never seen this many birds at one place as here, the duck density was truly so high. This gave us a few new lifers in quick succession including **Striated heron**, **Black-crowned night heron**, **great egret**, **White-faced whistling duck**, **fulvous whistling duck**, **red-billed teal** and **blue-billed teal**. In this lake there were always a few Meller's duck which are somewhat difficult to spot due to the lack of unique colours. While at the moment I could not spot them I decided due to lack of time to just start making pictures of duck groups to analyse later. At home I did manage to spot some **Meller's ducks**. In the pictures I had made.



Black-crowned night heron



Lot of ducks



More ducks.



Meller's duck

End note:

We were so in love with Madagascar during this trip. It was everything we dreamed it would be and so much more. Particularly the first few weeks in SAVA were an amazing first jungle experience, just us and our guides and we barely saw any tourists the entire two weeks. The RN7 was a bit more intensive travelling (but less intensive hikes with much better roads in the parks) and a lot more tourists, but also brought a lot more variation in habitats and a lot of wildlife spotting in quick succession. We did not expect that we would see so many rare animals, we kept getting lucky with everything. It was our first vacation without parents outside of Europe, and it truly became an incredible experience!

Life list:

Birds: total: 126

**: for birds only heard or seen at Addis Ababa airport*

White-faced whistling duck
Fulvous whistling duck
Blue-billed teal
Red-billed teal
Meller's duck

Madagascar partridge

Madagascar Nightjar

Madagascar spinetail
Malagasy Palm swift
Alpine swift
Malagasy Black swift
Little swift

Malagasy coucal
Crested coua
Blue coua
Olive-capped coua
Red-fronted Coua
Coquerel's coua
Giant coua
Running coua
Red-breasted coua

*Speckled pigeon
*White-collared pigeon
Malagasy turtledove
Namaqua dove
Malagasy green Pidgeon

Madagascar blue pigeon

White-throated rail

Common moorhen

Madagascar buttonquail

Common sandpiper

Lesser crested tern

Grey-headed gull

*African sacred ibis

Madagascar ibis

Black heron

Black-crowned night heron

Squacco heron

Malagasy pond heron

Great egret

Dimorphic egret

Humblot's heron

Western cattle egret

Hamerkop

Madagascar Harrier-hawk

Madagascar Harrier

Black kite

Madagascar buzzard

White-browed owl

Scops owl

*Madagascar owl

Marsh owl

*Cuckoo-roller

Madagascar hoopoe

Short-legged Ground Roller

Scaly ground roller

Pitta-like ground roller

Long-tailed ground roller

Madagascar Pygmy kingfisher

Malagasy kingfisher

Olive bee-eater

Malagasy kestrel

Eleonora's falcon

Lesser vasa parrot

Greater vasa parrot

Grey-headed love bird

Velvet asity

Common sunbird-Asity

Yellow-bellied sunbird-asity

Red-tailed vanga

Pollen's Vanga

White-headed vanga

Chabert Vanga

Madagascar Blue vanga

Rufous vanga

Helmet vanga

Van Dam's Vanga (potentially)

Tyla's Vanga

Nuthatch vanga

Hook-billed vanga

*Crossley's vanga

Dark newtonia

Common Newtonia

Archbold's newtonia

Red-tailed newtonia

Ward's flycatcher

Madagascar Cuckooshrike

Crested drongo

Malagasy paradise flycatcher

*Cape crow

Pied crow

Madagascar lark

Malagasy bulbul

Madagascar Martin

Mascarene martin

Madagascar brush warbler

*Madagascar swamp warbler

Grey emu-tail

*Brown emu-tail

*White-throated Oxylabes
Long-billed Berniera
Cryptic warbler
Wedge-tailed Jery
Thamnornis
Spectacled Tetraka
*Appert's Tetraka
Grey-crowned Tetraka
*Rands warbler

Common Jery
Green Jery
Stripe-throated Jery
Madagascar cisticola

Malagasy white-eye

Madagascar starling

Madagascar magpie-robin
Forest rock thrush
African stonechat

Souimanga sunbird
Green sunbird

*Swainsons sparrow

Nelicourvi weaver
Sakalava weaver
Red fody
Forest fody

Madagascar mannikin

Madagascar wagtail

Mammals: total: 24

Lesser hedgehog tenrec
Mittermeier's mouse lemur
Goodman's mouse lemur
Rufous mouse lemur
*Grey mouse lemur
Zombitse sportive lemur
White-Fronted Brown lemur
Common brown lemur

Red-bellied lemur
Red-fronted brown lemur
Northern bamboo lemur
Golden bamboo lemur
Greater bamboo lemur
Eastern woolly lemur
Indri
Silky sifaka
Verreaux's sifaka
Milne-Edwards sifaka
Diademed sifaka
Tanala tufted tail rat
Red forest rat
Ring-tailed Vontsira
Spotted fanaloka
Madagascar flying fox