

The aye-aye and the dance of the seven veils:

First, a titillating teaser: *Next to appear was a broad, delicate, plume-like tail, dangling into view, further enticing us to yearn for more.*

...and then a dry-as-dust summary: *Our second trip to Madagascar focused on two families—sucker-footed bats and aye-ayes—and we found both in one day at Kianjavato, along with 6 other species of lemur and a greater hedgehog tenrec.*

For further details on this day and the 20 days that followed read the attached report

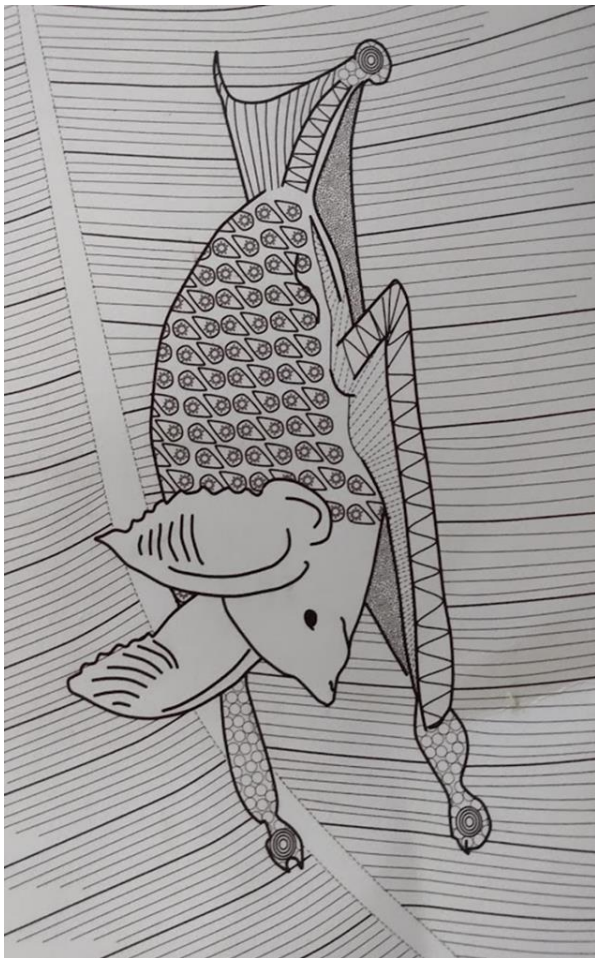
A brief background: In 2005 Aram Calhoun, Larry Master, Sally Stockwell, David Wilcove, and I had a fabulous trip to Madagascar, especially from a family-ticking perspective: 7 new families of mammals, 6 of birds, 2 of reptiles, 1 of frogs. The only major dip was the aye-aye, despite being our prime target for three nights. In the Farankaraina Forest we had some promising eye-shine but at >100 m it was nothing more than that until weeks later Larry, photographer-extraordinaire, produced an enhancement of the photo he had taken and we could discern a shadowy shape surrounding the eyes. Within hours, our friend Eleanor Sterling, who had written her PhD dissertation on aye-ayes, had assessed the photo and judged it very likely to be an aye-aye. But all we really saw were two round reflections, so this was a consummate BVD (Better View Desired) situation and eventually we would need to return to Madagascar when our aye-aye odds were better.

Now fast forward to 2019 and reading an [article](#) on finding aye-ayes by Ian Lloyd at Reef & Rainforest, which led to a series of emails with him about our options. It was apparent that we could return with a high level of certainty of seeing “compromised” aye-ayes, either reintroduced captives or radio-collared individuals. We opted for the latter after learning that Paul Racey had studied sucker-footed bats at the same site, another endemic family that we had judged too difficult in 2005. And within a couple months “we” expanded from Aram and me to include Ron Joseph, Bonnie Lamb, and Alyson McCann.

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We arrived at Kianjavato, a research site for the [Madagascar Biodiversity Partnership](#) on the morning of Oct 29 and in the spirit of “in for a penny, in for a pound” we decided to take advantage of their collars on **greater bamboo lemurs** and **black and white ruffed lemurs** and had wonderful views of each, as well as incidental sightings of a **red-bellied lemur** and a troop of **red-fronted brown lemurs**. (Mammal species names follow Garbutt’s 2007 book; first sightings are in bold.)

Mid-afternoon, we turned our attention to **eastern sucker-footed bats**. Apparently our guide Ranto, who had worked with the bat research crew, had scouted out a roost while we were lemur-watching: he led us directly to a ~25m tall traveler’s palm and in the unfurling central leaf we could see at least six bats, huge ears silhouetted in the green glow of the leaf interior. Even with good binoculars the view was rather distant, but at least we were not disturbing them and 30 minutes later he found a roost that was only ~7m high.



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Around 17:00h we walked to the base of a densely crowned tree, sat down about 12m away and waited for sunset and the appearance of a radio-collared male **aye-aye**.



He started moving around at 18:15, initially giving us just totally shrouded, frustrating glimpses of movement. Undeterred by our lights, as time unfolded he slowly revealed himself. First to be discernible was a white triangle, his head gazing in our direction. Soon he showed his ears: was he wiggling them to listen to our whispering? Next to appear was his broad, delicate, plume-like tail, dangling into view, further enticing us to yearn for more. But what we most wanted to see, that amazing middle digit, remained hidden, even as he gave us tantalizing peeks at his hands. Finally, after about 10 minutes, he came out into full view on an open limb for a few seconds, even demonstrating his agility by hanging by one leg while he scratched his ear with that extraordinary digit. But then the show was over and he disappeared into the night, and like all great performers, he left his audience dazzled and eager for more.

On our walk out of the forest we had two more lemurs (**greater dwarf** and **brown mouse**) and a **greater hedgehog tenrec**, so an amazing day all told and we could relax about the rest of the trip. Emerging from the forest around 19:30pm we had a 90-minute drive to our hotel but future visitors may be able to spend the night in new guest cabins the MBP is building. For Oct 29-31 the focus turned to birds and herps in Ranomafana National Park but we had some incidental sightings of red-bellied lemur and red-fronted brown lemurs and a successful search for **Milne-Edwards sifaka**.

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On Nov. 1 we drove to the Kirindy Forest in quest of a fossa (another BVD situation given our dark, distant glimpse of one in 2005) but after a 12.7 hr drive, we were too tired and hungry to venture out until 05:30 the next morning. Then we had five pleasant hours watching a **narrow-striped mongoose**, troops of red-fronted brown lemurs and **Verreaux's sifaka**, and some feathered targets like white-breasted mesites. For the afternoon, 40<sup>0</sup> C and a rumor that the best place to see a fossa was in camp, where males took a break from mating to seek water, kept us on a short leash until sunset. Between 18:00-20:00 spot-lighting gave us nice views of **gray mouse lemurs** (3), **red-tailed sportive lemurs** (2), and **pale fork-marked lemurs** (2), but now we had only 15 hr until departure and no one had seen a fossa in two days except for a 23:00 visit the night before. So we napped until 22:00 and then gathered again, first for a **giant jumping rat** appearance ... but no midnight-rambling fossa. The next morning we walked the camp perimeter from 0500-0700 and then decided to search for fossa in the forest. At about 08:00 a distant car horn suggested that someone was trying to call in all fossa seekers so we loped back to camp about half a kilometer to find a **Fossa Circus** in progress. A dozen people—mostly bearing lens that resembled small cannons—were following a fossa around the camp as one of the guides orchestrated its movements with small bits of meat on the end of long pole. We joined the tumult for 20 minutes then went back into the forest, where 40 minutes later we saw a fossa trotting down the path away from us, possibly the same individual in retreat.



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On Nov. 5 we flew to northern Madagascar, inspired by a BBC video of lemurs cavorting on karst formations, known as tsingy, for our last 4 days of terrestrial explorations. A 15:30-19:30 walk at Mount Amber National Park gave us nice views of two new lemurs, **crowned** and **Sanford's brown**, and some brown mouse lemurs, but not the Mount Amber versions of other nocturnal lemurs. Nov. 6 and 7th were spent in Ankarana National Park and we added two more lemur species to the tally (16 in total): **Ankarana sportive lemur** and **northern sportive lemur** and also had nice views of a **Commerson's leaf-nosed bat** perched along the road. However, we did not explore the huge Grotte des Chauve Souris because we are still frightened by Aram's

horrific bout with [histoplasmosis](#) contracted in a Nicaraguan bat cave. In hindsight I wish we had planned to watch bats emerge from the cave; the walk back in the dark (~500 m over a relatively easy trail by tsingy standards) would not have been too difficult. We also had many more good views of the crowned, Sanford's, and brown mouse lemurs plus fleeting glimpses of a **common tenrec** and **feral pigs**.

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From Nov. 9-14 we chartered a small catamaran on Nosy Be from [Madagascat](#) for diving and snorkeling and went to sea with unrealistic visions of dugongs, Omura's whales, and zebra sharks dancing in our head. In the end we had some nice coral reef diving but no new fish families and for mammals just **Madagascar flying foxes** and a few **bottlenose dolphins**. Black lemurs should have been easy but a medical issue on our last morning curtailed our visit to their sanctuary.

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Overall, we were very happy with the outcome (ticking all the endemic mammal and bird families) and with trip logistics: enjoying excellent food, reasonably comfortable accommodations, and the attentive service of Fano, Antonio, and too many other guides and drivers to name here. We were dismayed how few of the guides had binoculars, especially decent ones, or books, so consider bringing "extras" you can leave behind. The only downside was too much time spent on bad roads. If you would like to examine our detailed itinerary, prepared by Reef and Rainforest, email me, mhunter at maine.edu.

In short, those distant eyes, penetrating the night in 2005, eventually led us to return for a dance performance and many other wonderments that we will never forget.

Malcolm "Mac" Hunter, University of Maine