

# Reef & Rainforest



## **Rare Mammals of Madagascar**

Trip Highlights from November 2019 and May 2016 by  
Ian Loyd

# Introduction

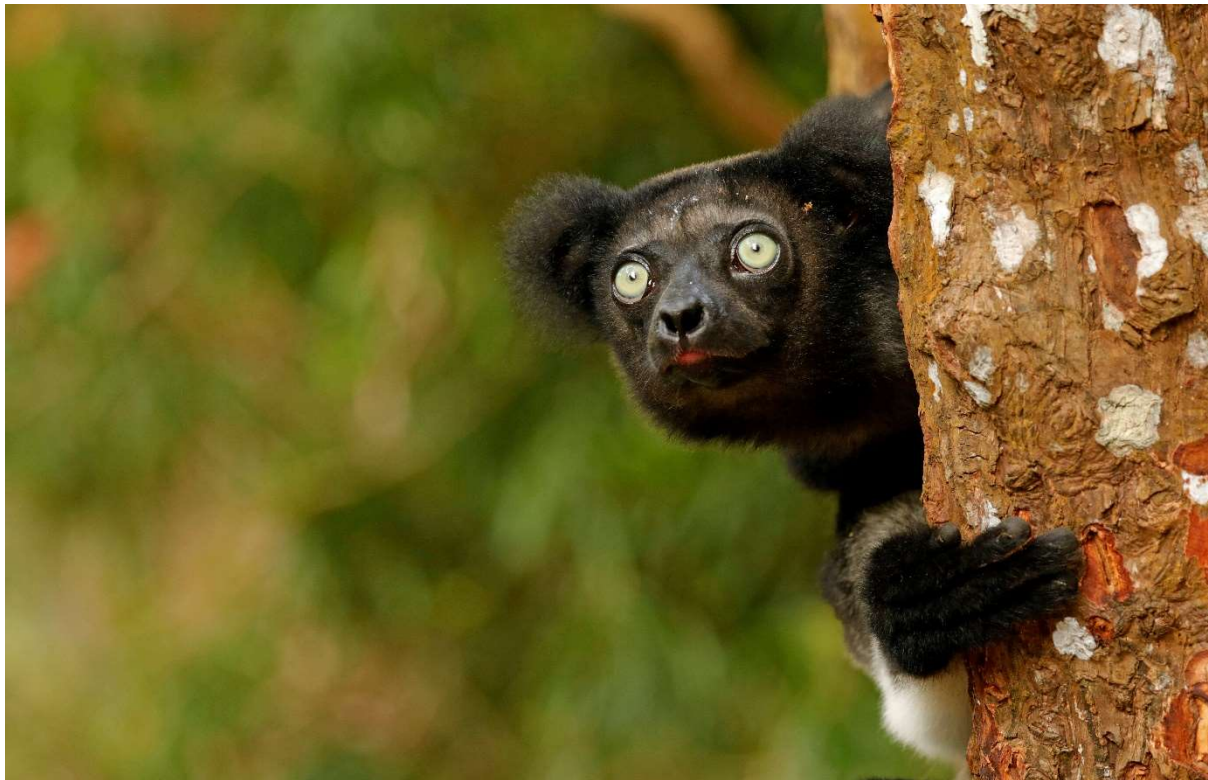
Madagascar must be one of the most extraordinary destinations in the world for those interested in natural history. This record of some stand out sightings and where to find key species will hopefully help those planning a trip.

Often referred to as the “Eighth Continent” and “The Big Red Island”, Madagascar is the world’s oldest and fourth largest island and after millions of years of isolation, a wildlife holiday there is truly unlike anywhere else.

There is a vast range of ecosystems to explore: wet rainforest, dry tropical deciduous forest and the unique spiny forest found only in Madagascar’s far southwest. In addition, there are also coral reefs and stunning white sand beaches to enjoy along the coast, plus the unique stone forests known as tsingy and fascinating cultures to discover.



Nearly all of Madagascar’s staggering biodiversity is found nowhere else and much of it is sadly increasingly threatened with extinction. Wildlife highlights undoubtedly include the mysterious nocturnal aye aye, iconic ring-tailed lemur, the beautiful sifaka family, the agile indri, tiny mouse lemurs, charismatic fossa, both giant and miniature chameleons, camouflaged leaf-tailed geckos, colourful frogs and its fantastically varied endemic birds.



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Wildlife tourism has emerged as a major source of foreign income for Madagascar. By visiting you contribute directly to the conservation of its precious remaining forests with their unique wildlife, and the welfare of its people who are among the poorest (yet friendliest) in the world. Your presence facilitates the hiring of park rangers who guard the precious reserves from illegal logging, slash-and-burn farmers and bush-meat hunters. Fees paid to local guides and hotel staff salaries percolate down through the poor communities near the parks. Isolated lodges also fund local schools and clinics. It all adds up.



Reef and Rainforest has been arranging wildlife holidays in Madagascar for over 25 years, our founder Alan Godwin first went to Madagascar in 1992 when the infrastructure was quite different. He saw the potential and persevered and now Madagascar has an improved infrastructure and a good range of high-quality accommodations and of course, its unique wildlife is as wonderful as ever.

### **When to Travel**

Wildlife activity is at its peak from the third week in September to the beginning of December. This is Madagascar's spring and when baby lemurs are born, birds are on their breeding territories and the hibernating dwarf lemurs, tenrecs and majority of reptiles and frogs will be active and most visible. However nearly all lemurs except for the dwarf lemurs and other species such as fossa and the Eupleridae mongoose like carnivores can be seen very well in the winter months and from April to September. Travelling at this time is also much quieter in the National Parks and can make for more intimate sightings and experiences.

Late October and November can bring some showers, and this is always a consideration, but the increased wildlife activity outweighs the risk of some showers. An umbrella can be a very useful additional for night walks in the rainforests. The rainfall often encourages the frogs to come out in abundance and most of the smaller creatures are easily photographed under an umbrella if it is raining on your walk as they are usually close up. For nocturnal lemurs and looking up into canopy the umbrella technique can still shelter your camera and binoculars but it's not so ideal. Therefore, having multiple night walks in areas that could be wet at night will increase your chance to have some dry nights as well.



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### Where to Visit

Madagascar is vast and unfortunately still has a poor road infrastructure and at times relatively unreliable domestic flight network, making it both challenging and tiring to include multiple destinations over a large area in a short time. It can therefore be more rewarding to focus on key species and habitats that are of most interest and allow longer in each National Park for greater exploration.

Below are some of the top mammal species seen on my most recent trips:

### Aye Aye

Madagascar's most mysterious and elusive lemur, the aye aye is a fascinating primate and a real curiosity of evolution. These nocturnal lemurs are extremely rare to see and sadly still persecuted in some areas of their range. There are three key locations I have seen them, plus others I have yet to visit in which to see this remarkable species.



**Farankaraina Forestry Reserve** At least eight aye ayes are living truly wild in this rainforest reserve and they are regularly seen on dedicated night walks as they feed in favoured fruiting Canarium trees between August and October in particular. They can be seen throughout much of the year though. At least two nights are recommended as this is a very wet region of Madagascar with poor infrastructure and basic accommodation. Sightings are usually quite high in the canopy but usually prolonged.



A roughly 1-hour boat ride followed by a 1 hour walk to bungalows from Maroantsetra.

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### **Palmarium Reserve – Aye Aye Island**

The best location for aye aye photography and close views. Coconuts are placed within forest clearings on a small man-made island providing superb close and eye level views. Flash is not allowed but illumination from torches provides enough light for photography and video. Please note that the aye aye here are not truly wild and there can be many visitors (up to 40) during the peak months. A private viewing can be arranged later in the evening, but sightings are less reliable after their main feeding.



The Palmarium Reserve is 3 hours' drive and 1-hour boat ride east of Andasibe. Access can also be from Toamasina on a flight from Tana.

**Kianjavato Forest Reserve.** The Kianjavato Reserve and Field Station is managed by the Madagascar Biodiversity Project and Lemur Conservation Network. The reserve is the site of both lemur research, education programmes and an active reforestation project. The project has fitted eight individual aye ayes living wild in the forest with radio collars to gain more information and data on the species and thus in turn advise conservation policies. By special arrangement it is possible to wait under an active aye aye nest at dusk for it to emerge and begin feeding.



Please note that this site is a 1 hour and 30 minutes' drive east of Ranomafana National Park. The area where the aye ayes are mostly being seen is also on a very steep, densely forested hillside. The terrain is very slippery, especially after rainfall and is only suitable for those with a high level of fitness. During the day black-and-white ruffed lemurs, greater bamboo lemurs and red-fronted brown lemurs can all be seen.

**Camp Tattersali.** This accommodation is run by the NGO FANAMBY (the same as the Black Lemur Camp and Le Camp Amoureux) and offers simple bungalows with mattress, sheets and blankets. The deciduous and semi evergreen forests of the surrounding Loky Manambato Protected Area support a population of aye aye although are more known for the golden-crowned sifaka, which has its stronghold here. Several ayes ayes are known to nest in the forest near to the camp and with the help a pair of local guides the nests can be checked to see if one is active. Due to the slightly lower canopy here sightings can be better than in the rainforest habitat but are still quite dependent on luck.

The camp is very basic, and access is on one of the worst roads in Madagascar. The best route is an eight-hour drive from Ankarana.



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### Fossa

Madagascar's top predator, the charismatic fossa (fosa) is a fascinating carnivore, that looks somewhat like a cross between a miniature puma and giant mongoose. They are difficult to see anywhere except the Kirindy Reserve, 2.5 hour's drive north of the town of Morondava which is THE place to see them.

They can be seen year-round here, with some exciting mating behaviour sometimes possible to witness in mid-November. However sightings can be just as easy in the winter months from May through to September. There are several individuals that spend a lot of time around the Kirindy Lodge grounds at dawn and again from 1700 in the evening. They visit both the restaurant and rubbish dumping area, looking for food and water and often allow a very close viewing. It is important not to get too close though and give them space especially if they have young. They sometimes rest underneath the bungalows during the day.



In 2019 they have become a little less predictable in October and November and if seeing a fossa is a priority then at least two or three nights in the area is highly recommended. They can sometimes be seen jumping on the kitchen tables showing just how bold they have become. I have even once observed rare lemur hunting behaviour here.



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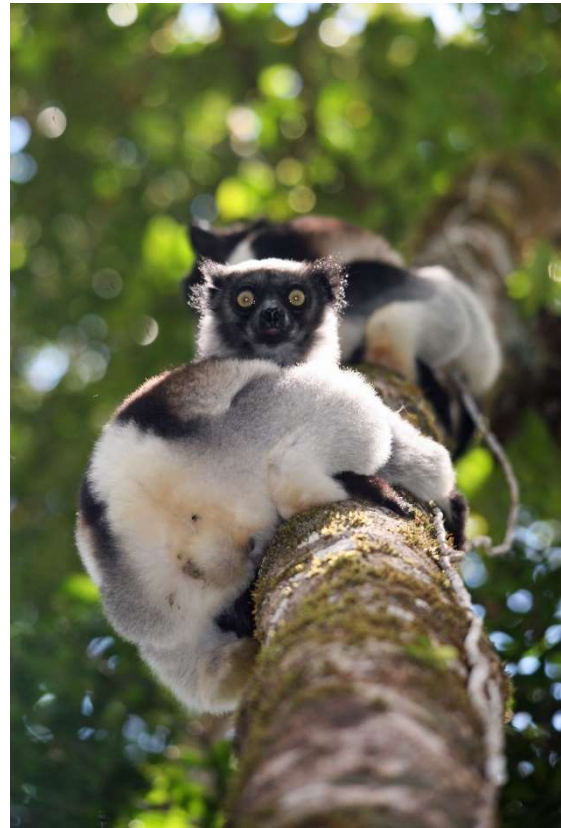
There are several accommodations in the area that can be used to visit the reserve which can still produce sightings, but the ideal is to stay onsite at Kirindy Lodge itself. Most of the other key species of Kirindy can be seen on day and night walks from the lodge, although the Madame Berthe's mouse lemur is more numerous in the forest south around **Le Camp Amoureux**, run by FANABY.

### Indri

The large tail-less indri is often the highlight sighting of a trip to Madagascar. Their powerful whale-song-like cries carry through the forest at dawn, sometimes even reducing visitors to tears of joy. They are most easily observed in the rainforests of Andasibe, where the community run VOIMMA and Mitsinjo Reserves are the top spots for getting close.

In the Mitsinjo Reserve local guides have habituated several family groups so that they are now comfortable feeding just a few meters away from enthralled onlookers. They will even take an offering of their favourite leaves from the hand of a local guide on occasions. These smaller reserves along with nearby Mantadia National Park are quieter and less busy than the popular Perinet (Analamazotra) Reserve.

Indri can also be seen in the Antavalobe Reserve, noted for its helmet and Bernier's vangas and also the Anjozorobe Forest Corridor (Saha Forest Camp), although sightings are not as close or easy.



### Black-and-white ruffed lemur

The fluffy black-and-white ruffed lemur is now very patchily distributed through Madagascar's eastern rainforests. They are reliant on Madagascar's fast vanishing primary forests that feature tall canopy and fruiting trees with wide crowns and are sadly classed as critically endangered by the IUCN.

They are a lemur of the canopy, rarely coming to the ground and also have very large home ranges, making them a more challenging lemur to observe closely and photograph. However, with the expert knowledge of a local guide and some perseverance they can be seen well and photographed in their natural habitat, often tracked by their loud calls.



Below are the best locations for a sighting:



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- **Kianjavato Forest Reserve** This is perhaps the easiest location to observe this species as some individuals have been fitted with radio transmitter collars by the Madagascar Biodiversity Network for research. With the assistance of their local guides these wonderful lemurs are more easily observed here as they are also quite habituated to people. This forest is a roughly 2-hour drive to the east of Ranomafana National Park. This is also the best location to see the greater bamboo lemur which occur in large numbers unlike the two individuals in Ranomafana National Park. Accommodation is in Ranomafana at lodges such as SETAM Lodge, Thermal Lodge, Centrest Hotel and others. There is also simple tented/bungalow accommodation at **Kianjavato**.
- **Mantadia National Park** The ridgeways of this primary forest National Park are a reliable spot to find this agile species. The trail where they can be found is steeper and obtaining good views and photographs can be a challenge, but well worthwhile. (A 1 hour 30-minute drive along a bumpy track from Andasibe village) Accommodation at lodges in Andasibe.
- **Ranomafana National Park** This large National Park also has fairly steep trails, but in general the going is mostly moderate. The black and white ruffed lemurs here are less easy to connect with as they roam areas that often not easily accessible. (Accessed on the overland route between Tana and Tulear) Accommodation is in Ranomafana such as SETAM Lodge, Thermal Lodge, Centrest Hotel and others.
- **Nosy Mangabe** This rainforest cloaked island has a small introduced population of this species and they are relatively easy to find but usually remain on the steeper trails.
- **Palmarium Reserve** This species has been introduced to this small private reserve and they are very habituated here, even often joining guests in the lodge grounds. This is a perfect location for those interested in taking up close and artistic pictures, but the setting is not so wild.



### Red ruffed Lemur

Surely one of the most beautiful of all the lemurs, the red ruffed lemur is a very striking animal and restricted to just the Masoala Peninsula on the remote North East corner of Madagascar. They can be fairly easy to see in the **Masoala National Park** between September and December when family groups are vocalising, making their location easier to track. It is worth noting that there is often very low light under the canopy of the tall trees in this ancient forest and red ruffed lemurs rarely come down to the ground or understory, so photography can be more challenging.





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### Coquerel's sifaka

The endangered Coquerel's sifaka is one of the most colourful and photogenic of all the lemurs. Coquerel's sifakas are only found in the north west corner of Madagascar where they inhabit mixed deciduous, dry and evergreen forests. They are particularly acrobatic lemurs often posing for photographs on vertical trunks and making impressive leaps from tree to tree. There are two key locations to visit if you want to see these stunning lemurs.



- **Anjajavy Hotel and Reserve:** The sifakas are daily visitors to the grounds of this high comfort hotel and regularly bound across the ground in the garden area known as the oasis. This is a perfect location to take action shots and portraits of these beautiful lemurs. (Accessed only by scheduled charter flights from Tana on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays)
- **Ampijoroa Forest Station:** This is the headquarters of the Ankarafantsika National Park and the mango trees around the park office are a roost site for the sifakas. This is a great location to get some mid leap photographs of the sifakas in early mornings or late afternoon light.

### Crowned sifaka

This is a beautiful and less well known species as most of its range is not easily accessible. The best location to see them is in the forest fragment at Katsepe next to the lighthouse. They can be seen here year-round and are habituated to people giving great photographic opportunities. The site is only accessible in the morning via a boat transfer from Majunga due to the tides. Mongoose lemur and rufous-brown lemur are also present, and all three species can be seen in one morning.



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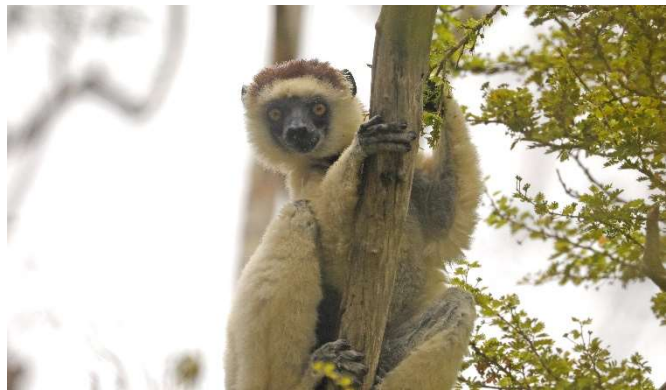
### Perrier's sifaka

By far the best location to now see the highly endangered Perrier's sifaka is the Andrafiarana Protected Area and forest at the Black Lemur Camp run by the NGO FANABY. There are several groups of sifakas in the forest close to the lodge, with a habituated group usually found within a 45-minute walk from the lodge. At least one full day is usually enough to enjoy some close views of them but ideally two nights here is best. Crowned lemurs, Sanford's brown lemurs and the Daraina sportive lemur can also be seen. Night walks sometimes produce sightings of Tavaratra mouse lemur.



### Verreaux's sifaka

Famous for their "dancing" leaps across the ground and all-round athletic behaviour, they are one of the most entertaining lemurs to watch. Top locations to see them include the following:



- **Berenty Private Reserve** The best location to see the impressive dancing behaviour. The sifakas here often leap across the wide forest rides providing the best opportunity to see and photograph this behaviour.
- **Mandrare River Camp** This is the best location to see Verreaux's sifakas in the eerie spiny forest where they can be watched and photographed leaping between the spiny cacti-like Octopus trees. This is a very impressive sight.
- **Kirindy Reserve** Home to a habituated population that can be found very close to the lodge. (A 2.5-hour drive north of Morondava). Accommodation at Kirindy Lodge, Camp Amareaux and at Relais du Kirindy Lodge.
- **Zombitse Voihbasa National Park** Here a small population of Verreaux's sifakas including some of a darker morph can be found in this wildlife rich transitional forest. (A 1-hour drive from Isalo or a 3-hour drive from Tulear).

### Decken's sifaka

The best location to see the agile Decken's sifaka is the Grand Tsingy trail in the Tsingy of Bemaraha National Park. The sunken dry forest at the start of the trail before reaching the tsingy plateau itself is a reliable spot to encounter them. They can also be seen more distantly from the tsingy plateau itself sometimes even jumping through the limestone karst which is a special sight. The Randrianasolo's (Bemaraha) sportive lemur can often be seen in its day roost in this first section of forest with the sifakas. I have also seen the tsingy tuft tailed rat at the base of the tsingy plateau very early in the morning too.



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### **Diademed sifaka**

The best spot for close sightings of this stunning sifaka is the Perinet Reserve in Andasibe. In October they are often seen feeding close to the ground and in general they are most reliable to see here. They are also quite widespread in the other protected areas of Andasibe, although they are absent from the community run VOIMMA Reserve and mostly only seen at distance in the Mantadia National Park.



### **Black Lemur**

This is a striking species of the north west and most famously encountered on the popular island of Nosy Be. The best location to see them here is the entrance of the Lokobe Nature Reserve where the Hawk's sportive lemur can also be found in its day roost.

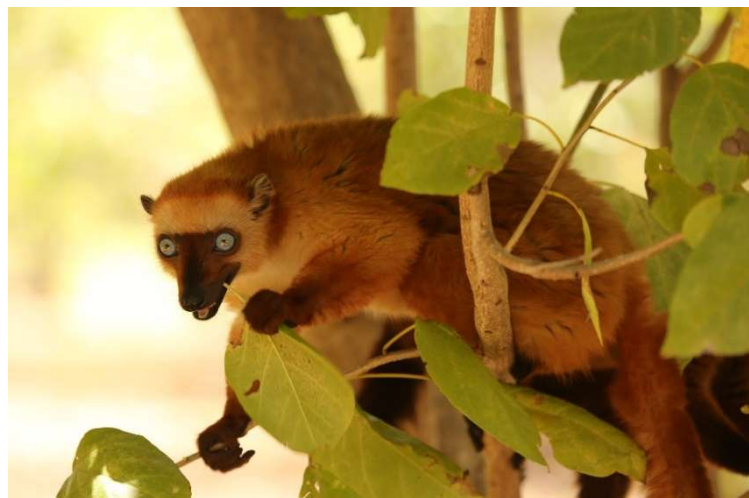
Another spot for those looking for a very close encounter is the Lemur Park on Nosy Komba where the black lemurs are exceptionally habituated and will even feed from your shoulders.



Our favourite location for black lemurs is the grounds of the wonderful Eden Lodge on the Anjanojano Peninsula. This is a remote and beautiful lodge only accessible by boat opposite Nosy Be with lots of other wildlife in the grounds including tenrecs, panther chameleons, green turtles offshore and nocturnal lemurs including Sambirano fork-marked lemur and northern giant mouse lemur easily seen on night walks.

### **Blue-eyed black lemur**

The blue-eyed black lemur (Scatler's lemur) is not only one of the rarest, it is also particularly special as it is probably the only primate species besides humans known to have blue eye pigmentation as adults. The best location for encountering this charming species is the Sahamalaza-Iles Radama National Park.



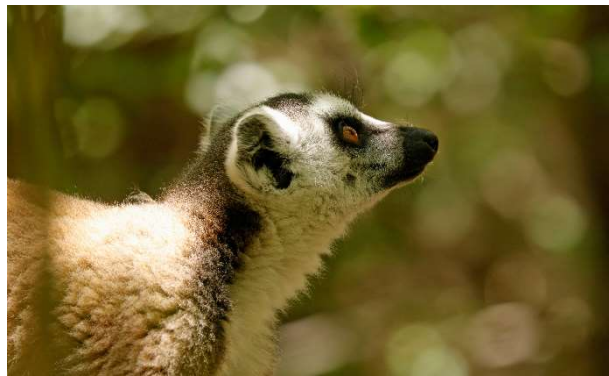
This recently created National Park is also a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve for its important habitats and wildlife both terrestrial and marine as half of the park is underwater and consists of coral reefs, mangroves and dry deciduous and littoral forest.

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Access is quite challenging and is best organized from a lodge such as Eden Lodge near Nosy Be. From there it is a roughly 3-hour boat trip to the village of Marovato. From there you will need to walk approx. 2 hours along a flat sandy track with a small incline to the site where 4WD vehicles can be reached. The last section of the journey is by 4WD along the remaining 9 km track (a journey of approx. 1 hour due to conditions) to the campsite of Ankarafa. This is the gateway to this remote National Park and the blue-eyed black lemurs are quite easily found nearby as local park guides monitor their population. The Sahamalaza sportive lemur is another resident of this park and can be relatively easily spotted in day roosts near the campsite.

### Ring-tailed Lemur

These iconic lemurs are often top of the list of species to see and make for very rewarding photography subjects as they are both curious and particularly entertaining to watch. Below are some of the best locations to see and photograph them:



- **Berenty Private Reserve** Excellent location for getting up close with large habituated family groups. The open gallery forest with sandy backgrounds and soft sun lighting makes it ideal for photography too. They are very abundant and easy to see here on wide, flat and easy trails. It is worth noting that the population here are a little less healthy due to an introduced fruit in the forest, which causes fur loss. (4 hours' drive from Fort Dauphin)
- **Mandrare River Camp:** A fantastic location for seeing abundant ring tails in both gallery forest with dappled sunlight and also within spiny forest Octopus trees, which make for great settings. The forests here are protected by the local Tandroy tribe. (A 4-hour drive from Fort Dauphin or a charter flight direct from Tana) This camp can be combined with its sister property Manafiafy Rainforest and Beach Lodge where the littoral forest is home to the red-collared brown lemur and southern woolly lemur, both of which are easily seen.
- **Anja Park** An excellent community managed reserve to see very relaxed ring tails in open woodland and sometimes also on rocky outcrops with granite mountain backdrops. The ring tails here are stockier and have thicker fur due to their adaptation to the cooler climate and mountainous terrain. (accessed on the overland route between Tana and Tulear) Accommodation can be at the Betsileo Country Lodge.
- **Isalo National Park** The Namahaza Trail and campsite is a great location to see ring tails in a shady canyon with fewer other visitors.





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There are countless other wildlife highlights that could be mentioned at these and other sites. Of particular note though is the increasingly documented marine life found in the waters around the island of Nosy Be. The waters around this and other Mitsio islands have recently emerged as a hotspot for migrating juvenile whale sharks, mobula and manta rays between October and late December.



Besides some great sightings of the sharks, I also had a few sightings of the little known and elusive Omura's whale on my November trip. These shy whales are seen mostly frequently between July and December, but currently only on around 20 -30% of excursions. As their movements become better known they could more frequently observed here.



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