

Birding Africa: Madagascar 2012

Tour report by leader Michael Mills

This comprehensive Madagascar tour was a resounding success. On the main tour we were just one bird away from seeing 100% of the gettable endemics, and on the Masoala extension we added one of the country's best birds, **Helmet Vanga**, and one of the rarest, **Bernier's Vanga**, to our tally. Logistics ran very smoothly, apart from the continuous rescheduling and delays from Air Madagascar. We commenced our birding at Ampijoroa forest station in Ankarafantsika National Park, with **Madagascar [Crested] Ibis** and **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher** obliging on the first afternoon. During the rest of our stay here we enjoyed good views of the three tricky endemics, **White-breasted Mesite**, **Schlegel's Asity** and **Van Dam's Vanga**, with other noteworthy sightings including **Madagascar Fish Eagle**, **Madagascar Jacana**, **Malagasy Pond Heron**, **Humblot's Heron**, **Rufous Vanga**, **Sickle-billed Vanga** and **Allen's Gallinule**. On our return to 'Tana we visited the Betsiboka Delta for **Bernier's Teal** and **Malagasy Sacred Ibis**. Next on the schedule was Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, where we worked hard for good views of **Short-legged Ground-Roller**, **Scaly Ground-Roller** and **Red-breasted Coua**. Fortunately **Meller's Duck**, **Madagascar Grebe**, **Nuthatch Vanga**, **Madagascar [Long-eared] Owl**, **Collared Nightjar**, **Crossley's [Babbler] Vanga** and **White-throated Oxylobes** came more easily. En route to Ranomafana National Park we did well to notch up **Madagascar Partridge** and **Madagascar Snipe**. At Ranomafana the lower-altitude forest treated us to **Brown Mesite**, **Madagascar Wood Rail** and **Henst's Goshawk**, whereas the Vohiparara section produced both species of emutail, **Rufous-headed Ground-Roller**, **Pollen's Vanga**, **Madagascar Yellowbrow**, point-blank views of **Common Sunbird-Asity**, a pair of **Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity** at their nest, a glowing male **Velvet Asity** and prolonged views of **Madagascar Sparrowhawk**. From here we continued to the more arid south-west of the country, seeing **Malagasy Harrier**, **White-browed Hawk-Owl**, **Appert's Tetraka**, **Giant Coua**, **Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk** and fantastic **Cuckoo Roller** en route. At Ifaty we quickly found **Madagascar Plover**, **Long-tailed Ground-Roller**, **Thamnornis** and **Archbold's Newtonia**, although **Running Coua**, **Subdesert Mesite** and **Banded Kestrel** made us sweat a little. Then finally to the Tulear area where **Red-shouldered Vanga** and **Lafresnaye's Vanga** proved easy to find and other highlights included **Littoral Rock Thrush**, **Red-capped [Green-capped] Coua**, **Verreaux's Coua** and **Red-tailed Tropicbird**. For those that stayed on after the main trip, the Masoala peninsula produced the goods, with fantastic views of both **Helmet Vanga** and **Bernier's Vanga**, plus better views of **Red-breasted Coua**, **Madagascar Pratincole** and **Madagascar Wood Rail**. And we even heard **Madagascar Serpent Eagle**! Add to all these fantastic birds more than 20 species of lemur, the rare Brown-tailed Mongoose, some unusual habitats and beautiful landscapes, and you have a wildlife destination hard to beat!

A few of the early arrivals opted for some pre-tour birding, and made an overnight visit to Anjozorobe to the north-east of the capital. We concentrated our efforts on the now-famous marsh where some lucky birders lay eye on Slender-billed Flufftail, one of the country's most difficult species. The marsh was alive with activity when we arrived, with **Madagascar Swamp Warbler**, **Madagascar Snipe**, **Grey Emutail** and **Madagascar Rail** all seen with ease. However, the said flufftail

was in no way obliging. It called a few times and at one time approached within 20 metres, but during none of our three wades through the swamp did we feel like it had given us even the slightest chance. Still, there was plenty else to make the journey worthwhile, not least some excellent views of **Madagascar Partridge** on the path in front of us and **Madagascar Nightjar** in the garden. The forest produced many first, including smart **Madagascar Blue Pigeon**, a very tame **Red-fronted Coua** and surprisingly good views of **Brown Emutail**, before we headed back to 'Tana to meet the rest of our travel companions.

Our main tour commenced with a rescheduled Air Madagascar flight to Mahajanga, hinting at what the airline might have in store for us in the weeks ahead. We touched down in rather warmer conditions than those we'd left behind in 'Tana, and immediately escaped to a nearby hotel for lunch before heading for Ampijoroa forest station in Ankarafantsika National Park. We swiftly settled in to our lakeside bungalows before heading off into the surrounding dry forest for *hors d'oeuvre*; the main course would have to wait until tomorrow. Around the park headquarters our first **Chabert Vanga**, **Crested Drongo**, **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Madagascar Green Pigeon** and **White-headed Vanga** on the nest entertained, while *Coquerel's Sifaka* posed in a mango tree. However, we already had a target bird in mind, so soon set off. As we went we paused for a **Crested Coua** that sat up nicely and enjoyed our first looks at **Madagascar Magpie-Robin** and **Malagasy Green Sunbird**. Once near our target destination our local guide crept ahead on the trail to the nest of a Madagascar [Crested] Ibis. A few minutes later he returned to say that the bird was around, but had flushed. So we moved forward and carefully scanned the forest undergrowth. While we waited patiently a lovely **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher** perched right beside us, so close we dared not move. Unfortunately it darted off before everyone managed to see it. Then some gentle scuttling in the leaves drew my attention and suddenly the whooshing of white wings broke the silence. Very fortunately the **Madagascar [Crested] Ibis** that was the source of the noise landed in view, admittedly in a very difficult spot to see, but the scope was soon trained on it for prolonged and clear views. What a great start! By now the light was beginning to fade so we happily walked back, pausing for close up views of **White-throated Rail** as we went.

Our next day at Ampijoroa was an important one, as thanks to Air Madagascar's tinkering it was all we had here. We hit the trails at first light, with **Sickle-billed Vanga** already seen, and a lovely **White-breasted Mesite** obliged very quickly. With a little persuasion it walked up the track, hesitated a while and then carefully crossed, giving everyone clear views. Our other main target, **Schlegel's Asity**, required a bit more patience. As we ambled in search of it our first **Hook-billed Vanga**, **Long-billed Bernieria** and **Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher** showed well, but it wasn't long before we heard calls from the asity. A pair of birds tested our patience and persistence, constantly on the move and teasing us with several brief views before the young male, with faintly streaked underparts, came a bit lower and showed off to the whole group! We happily returned for breakfast, before once again hitting the trails in a race to beat the heat. Nothing happened quickly, but over the course of a couple of hours first **Red-capped Coua** and then **Coquerel's Coua** showed exceptionally well, a juvenile **Sooty Falcon** circled overhead, **Madagascar Hoopoe** put in its first appearance, a pair of **Blue Vanga** impressed, a handsome male **Rufous Vanga** was watched at close range and we spend some time watching a male **Van Dam's Vanga**. The focus of our afternoon's efforts was Lac Ravelobe, birding from both land and water. More widespread species included **African Darter**, **White-faced Whistling Duck**, **Glossy Ibis**, **Great Egret**, **Squacco Heron**, **Black Heron** and **Common Moorhen**, and **Allen's Gallinule** was especially welcome for Andy. **Olive Bee-eater** and

Malagasy Kingfisher darted over the water. But the highlights were a single **Humblot's Heron**, great looks at a pair of **Madagascar Fish Eagle**, first drinking at the lake and later in flight and perched in a tree, a single **Madagascar Jacana** along the shore and a statuesque **Malagasy Pond Heron** that posed ready to strike. The rest of our time at Ampijoroa allowed good comparisons of **Greater Vasa Parrot** and **Lesser Vasa Parrot**, including the angles of the upper mandible, and turned up small flocks of **Grey-headed Lovebird**, **Common Jery** on its night roost, **Madagascar Buzzard** in flight and on the nest, our first **Common Newtonia**, some brief views of **Cuckoo Roller** overhead and our best views of the trip of **Malagasy Turtle Dove**. Mammalian highlights included great looks at both *Grey Mouse Lemur* and *Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur* after dark, and *Common Brown Lemur*, *Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur* and *Western Avahi* during the day.

Time had come to commence our journey back to 'Tana, first making a very significant detour into the Betsiboka delta. En route to Mahajanga we couldn't resist a roadside stop to admire a colony of busy **Sakalava Weaver**. It was already quite warm by the time we hit the water, but we arrived at the delta just as wading conditions were becoming excellent. Quite quickly we spotted a single **Bernier's Teal** out on the mudflats, but it was too far to appreciate fully. Our captain suggested a different approach to get nearer to the bird, so we headed off in a different direction but the tide was dropping quickly so we had to give up and try the initial approach again. Just as we were getting nearer Gerry drew our attention to a white speck on some distant mudflats. It was our first **Malagasy Sacred Ibis**, and we managed to approach much closer for some reasonable views, before it took flight and flew right past us. Soon our attention was back on the teals, but our job was now harder with the very low tide. We maneuvered the boat close to a sand bar, and with a little bit of effort managed to land on it, where we were treated to great views of the pair of **Bernier's Teal** from *terra firma*. After a short while they took off and flew right past us, showing off their bold white-marked wings. Well pleased we killed time looking at the likes of dark morph **Dimorphic Egret**, **Terek Sandpiper** and **Greater Sand Plover**, and on the way back enjoyed some even better views of **Malagasy Sacred Ibis**. Back on land we spent a relaxed (and somewhat entertaining) afternoon at the beach, with some nice views of **Malagasy Kestrel** and interesting social goings-on. Eventually it was time to head for the airport, but the dreaded Air Madagascar struck again, and on arrival we discovered that our already rescheduled flight was now many more hours delayed. Suffice to say we were pleased to arrive at our comfortable hotel in 'Tana at around midnight.

After our late arrival the night before we had a more relaxed start to the day, with a late breakfast before heading to Lake Alorobia. The lake was full of birds, although we'd seen most species before. We spotted a few **Hottentot Teal** amongst the many **Red-billed Teal** and saw our first **Black-crowned Night Heron** and **Madagascar Swamp Warbler** before fighting our way through 'Tana's traffic and continuing on to Andasibe. The only stop en route was a very welcome one, made to enjoy a pair of **Madagascar Pratincole** with their fluffy chick.

We were now at Andasibe, gateway to the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, arguably the most accessible patch of eastern rainforest. During our time here we focussed our attention mostly on the more remote Mantadia section of the park, but also spent some time birding at Andasibe and in the habitats outside of the park. Birding was mostly pretty slow going, but we were well rewarded for our efforts, which included a couple of off-trail expeditions for some of the trickier species.

We initially acclimatised with a stint of easier, introductory birding in open areas and along the road, enjoying **Malagasy Coucal**, **Red Fody**, perched views of male and female **Frances's Sparrowhawk**, **Madagascar Cuckooshrike**, **Madagascar Stonechat**, **Malagasy Brush Warbler**, **Malagasy White-eye**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Nelicourvi Weaver**, a singing **Stripe-throated Jery** and, best of all, a trio of very confiding **Nuthatch Vanga**, before the really hard stuff started. Early in the morning several small warblers favour exposed, bare snags from which to sing, and at our first stop we had good looks at **Rand's Warbler**, **Stripe-throated Jery** and **Cryptic Warbler** (rarely seen here) in the same tree, joined by the only **Madagascar Starling** of the trip, a smart male. At the other extreme, highlights of the undergrowth included two fantastic sightings of **Crossley's [Babbler] Vanga**, point-blank views of a male **Madagascar Flufftail**, **Collared Nightjar** roosting on the ground, **Dark Newtonia**, a handsome **Red-breasted Coua** that took some time to show, two parties of **Wedge-tailed Jery**, very good looks at **White-throated Oxylabes** and a pretty **Red-fronted Coua**. Other forest highlights included good looks at a male **Forest Fody**, **Madagascar [Crested] Ibis** on the nest and seen again perched, roadside views of **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher**, several **Madagascar Blue Pigeon**, **Red-tailed Vanga**, of which the female was especially confiding, **Tylas Vanga**, several female **Velvet Asity** (where are the males?), the unusual **Ward's Flycatcher [Vanga]** and, after dark, good looks at **Rainforest Scops Owl**. More open areas added to our growing list, with a forest pond producing a pair of **Meller's Duck**, several **Madagascar Grebe** and the buff-vented subspecies of **Common Moorhen**, with small flocks of **Madagascar Mannikin** feeding at its edge and **Brown-throated Martin** and **Madagascar Spinetail** overhead. A marsh outside the reserve turned up excellent views of **Madagascar Rail** and a patch of pine plantation a roosting **Madagascar [Long-eared] Owl** to everyone's delight. However, the area's real specials are the forest ground rollers, which gave us a hard time this year. Where my group last year had seen all four species on the very first morning, this year they made us work hard until the end, and left us with one to catch up with later. The first to relent was a pair of **Pitta-like Ground Roller** near their nest hole. As is often the case, **Short-legged Ground Roller** gave us the round around, with a couple heard before finally we clambered through tangled forest to come face to face with a fantastic bird sitting mid-storey, allowing prolonged views and calling occasionally. **Scaly Ground Roller** was harder than usual, with several other birding groups hot on their heels. With some patience and persistence we were finally rewarded with excellent, close-up views of a pair feeding on the ground near us. Mammalian highlights included *Red-bellied Lemur*, *Crossley's Dwarf Lemur*, *Eastern Avahi*, *Grey Bamboo Lemur*, superb *Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur*, close up view of fantastic *Indri* and some very neat *Diademmed Sifaka*.

It was now time to pack our bags and start the long journey south to Ranomafana, with **Hamerkop** in the rice paddies en route, **Madagascar Cuckoo**, **Common Quail** and a trio of **Madagascar Partridge** near our accommodation en route, and **Madagascar Snipe** a lucky find at a lunch stop.

Having made good inroads into the forest avifauna at Andasibe-Mantadia, we could be very much more focussed at Ranomafana, which given the number of tricky skulkers to contend with was a good thing. Highlights of the lower section of the park were several excellent sightings of **Pitta-like Ground Roller**, **Spectacled Tetraka**, nice looks at **Blue Coua**, **Madagascar Wood Rail** that crossed the track a couple of times and fantastic looks at a pair of **Brown Mesite**. A male **Henst's Goshawk** noisily came to its nest in the evening, where the female had presumably been sitting out of sight. And a pair of **Madagascar Harrier-Hawk** were seen perched and in flight near their nest.

However, most of our time was focussed on the higher altitude sections of the park around Vohiparara. En route **Mascarene Martin**, **Malagasy Black Swift** and **Forest Rock Thrush** were welcome additions. In the swamps around Vohiparara we had good looks at **Grey Emutail** and another great sighting of **Madagascar Rail**. The forest itself was hard work but very rewarding. **Madagascar Yellowbrow** got us down on hands and knees, but showed well in the end. A pair of **Pollen's Vanga** was watched feeding a very close range. A male **Common Sunbird-Asity** with its scimitar-bill showed superbly. **Grey-crowned Tetraka** was a bit elusive at first, but was seen well in the end. A male **Velvet Asity** impressed everyone with its jet black feathers and dazzling green wattles. **Brown Emutail** was typically difficult to spot, but most people got some sort of look. **Rufous-headed Ground Roller** was fairly reluctant to come any closer, but one individual showed really well for the whole group. For the second year running we found **Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity** building a nest. Initially we enjoyed superb views of only the female, which seemed to be doing all the work, but in the end the male showed exceptionally well too, sitting and preening nearby. And the biggest bonus was a **Madagascar Sparrowhawk**, which we watched for ages enjoying its meal. After dark we enjoyed point blank views of a lovely **Rainforest Scops Owl**. Non-bird highlights at Ranomafana included *Rufous/Brown Mouse Lemur*, *Golden Bamboo Lemur*, *Red-fronted Brown Lemur*, more *Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs* and a large tree boa.

With all realistically possible forest birds now under the belt it was time to head for the more arid habitats of the south-west, another long drive split with an overnight stop. Our first port of call was Anja lemur reserve, where Andy spotted a male **Greater Painted Snipe** and everyone enjoyed some intimate time with *Ring-tailed Lemurs*. Driving towards Isalo we made several roadside stops, the first for satisfying views of a female **Malagasy Harrier** spotted by Gerry. Almost as soon as we stopped she landed out in the open and sat there long enough for everyone to enjoy scope views. A little further on we stopped for a roadside **Madagascar Buzzard** sat nicely for the scope, and further on a pair of **Marsh Owl** allowed surprisingly close approach. After dark a short foray around our fancy accommodation turned up great looks at **Torotoroka Scops Owl** before dinner and **White-browed Hawk-Owl** after dinner.

With Madagascar Partridge under the belt we had the luxury of leaving Isalo earlier than normal, as soon as we'd studied a male **Forest [Benson's] Rock Thrush** on the roof of our accommodation. This meant we got to Zombitse forest before the sweltering heat and were instantly rewarded. As I walked up to the park building to pay our entrance fees a **Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk** came flying low over the trees. I bellowed at the top of my voice to forewarn everyone as it was heading their way, and most people got on to it, but unfortunately some were lingering on the bus and others were caught with their pants down (literally) and though I'd called "**Cuckoo Roller!**". The latter obliged soon after, giving an exceptional low-flying display over our heads and landing nearby to be studied in the scope. Then it was into the forest, where **Giant Coua** obliged almost immediately, walking right past the group. However, the real specialty of the area took some time. The first pair of **Appert's Tetraka** we found was in a particularly dense bit of thicket and kept moving away from the trail, and managed to avoid being seen by almost half the group. However, the second pair was far more cooperative, and fed at our feet for minutes, allowing everyone to study them in detail. During our tetraka quest our attention was also diverted by **White-browed Hawk-Owl** on its day roost, a female **Rufous Vanga** on the nest, a lazing party of *Verreaux's Sifaka* and a *Hubbard's Sportive Lemur* peeking out of its day roost. After lunch in Sakahara – not the gastronomical capital of Madagascar – we continued on towards the coast. The last section of road was sandy, bumpy and slow. We broke

the journey with a couple of stops, the first at some large wetlands, where **African Swampphen** called from the reeds and widespread species such as **Barn Swallow**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Greater Flamingo**, **Lesser Sand Plover**, **Kittlitz's Plover** and **Little Grebe** were seen. Flocks of **Grey-headed Lovebird** fed in the reedbeds and a distant **Baillon's Crake** was watched bathing on the edge of the lake. A little further on we stopped for our first good looks at **Madagascar Lark** which fed beside the vehicle, and later a lovely pair of **Madagascar Plover** that allowed close approach. As the sun set we rolled into our beachside resort.

We awoke early the next morning for a march through Madagascar's most unusual habitat type, the famed Spiny forest with its own special set of birds. Before even reaching the reserve, we spotted a pair of **Madagascar Buttonquail** next to the track, the male giving excellent views. On entering the reserve, the very first bird we saw was **Long-tailed Ground Roller** sitting in a tree and calling. We admired its delicate plumage for some time before moving on in search of other goodies. Very quickly an **Archbold's Newtonia** was circling around us and **Thamnornis** climbed to the top of a nearby octopus tree, in full song. But after this things got considerably more difficult, as the last few birds proved tricky. A **Red-capped [Green-capped] Coua** slipped off its perch before most people could see it and **Running Coua** melted into the thicket all too quickly. **Lafresnaye's Vanga** called nearby but out of view and **Subdesert Mesite** kept evading our local guides. Eventually the vanga showed up, perching out in the open by rather distantly and briefly, although **Sickle-billed Vanga** was much more cooperative, demonstrating to us how its unusual beak is used to pry pickings from bark. With the temperature rising rapidly and the birds growing quieter by the minute we decided to try a new area for the mesite. Along the way we finally found a friendly **Running Coua** that walked past the group for excellent looks, and at the same spot saw another pair of **Madagascar Buttonquail**. Not long afterwards our guide called us to a spot where he'd finally manage to tree **Subdesert Mesite**, and we were all relieved to be enjoying close views of this fantastic bird, displaying its very unusual and birder-friendly behaviour of freezing in full view. Whew! Now it was on to the nest of a **Banded Kestrel**. For the first 15 minutes all we could see where the tips of the tail and wing, but fortunately the male returned to the nest with brunch and the female joined him off the nest to collect her meal, which she proceeded to eat on top of the nest. By now it was getting very hot and we found ourselves a long way from our accommodation, so when we rounded the corner to find some cattle carts waiting to ferry us back I suspect most of the group was rather relieved. Back at the beach we enjoyed a prolonged siesta and slow lunch before heading back down the coast towards Tulear, a brief late afternoon foray into the nearby coral rag scrub quickly rewarding our efforts with fantastic looks at a male **Red-shouldered Vanga**, **Subdesert Brush Warbler** and much better views of **Lafresnaye's Vanga**. Finally, just before sunset we managed to grab some distant views of a perched **Verreaux's Coua**, but the light was terrible so this was one to be worked on again later.

The next morning our sandgrouse vigil was surprisingly unsuccessful, but this was soon forgotten as not long after we were standing on the sand dunes of Anakao admiring a male **Littoral Rock Thrush** and several more **Subdesert Brush Warbler**. A short hop-and-a-skip across to Nosy Ve saw us walking the perimeter of the island, seeing various Palaeartic waders, **Greater Crested Tern**, **Lesser Crested Tern** and **White-fronted Plover**, but the highlight was certainly close up views of **Red-tailed Tropicbird** in flight and on the nest. Unfortunately the wind was becoming unbearably strong, so instead of picnicking on the island as planned we returned for lunch at the shelter of our hotel. The wind persisted all afternoon, making for some very unproductive birding, although we did make a

special effort to improve our views of **Madagascar Nightjar** after dark, with a couple of birds seen well in flight and perched.

The final morning of the main tour had arrived, and we attempted another unsuccessful attempt at seeing sandgrouse before finally catching up with good looks at **Red-capped [Green-capped] Coua**, which first climbed a tree and then strode across the road in front of us. After breakfast a journey south along the coast found us scanning mudflats and spotting several **Humblot's Heron**, not seen for some days now. We also enjoyed much improved views of a perched **Verreaux's Coua** and another sighting of a **Red-shouldered Vanga**, this time a female, before heading to the airport for our last flight. By this time we were not surprised to find that our flight was several hours delayed, so we went to a nearby hotel to enjoy a relaxed pool-side dinner before finally taking our late night flight to 'Tana.

With some of the group now heading home, we bade our farewells and most of us continued on to Maroansetra, to our horror departing on time for a change! At the airport a smart **Sooty Falcon** sat on the roof of international arrivals (quite a welcome for anyone arriving in Madagascar!) and was worth the effort of getting the packed scope and tripod out of the luggage for. Our journey to and stay at Maroansetra was otherwise uneventful. Early the next morning saw us boarding two speedboats and heading out across the Bay of Antongil for the lush lowland forests of the Masoala peninsula. We paused briefly at Nosy Mangabe to admire a pair of **Madagascar Pratincole**, but by mid-morning were settled in to our rustic accommodation and heading out in search of birds. Not even thirty minutes later the incomparable **Helmet Vanga** sat perched nearby, giving great views for all but a couple of the group who somehow missed it entirely in the excitement. We persisted for a while, but the bird had moved off. We would return!

During the rest of our visit to Masoala we very successfully caught up with **Helmet Vanga**, much to Andy's relief, the second sighting even better, as we got to watch it hunting near to us. The other key highlights were rather marvellous looks at a pair of scarce **Bernier's Vanga**, watched feeding on and off for almost half an hour, and several excellent sightings of **Red-breasted Coua**, which we'd only seen once before and not nearly this well. We almost got lucky, as a **Madagascar Serpent Eagle** called nearby but unfortunately remained unseen. And there was plenty else to keep us entertained, with repeat views of many special birds, not least **Madagascar Wood Rail**, **Madagascar Spinetail**, **Blue Coua**, **White-headed Vanga**, **Blue Vanga**, **Madagascar Starling**, black morph **Madagascar Magpie-Robin**, **Madagascar Cuckooshrike**, **Tylas Vanga**, **Hook-billed Vanga**, **Chabert's Vanga**, **Lesser Vasa Parrot**, **Cuckoo Roller**, **Collared Nightjar** (again!), **Crested Coua** and **Madagascar Blue Pigeon**. Mammals played along nicely, and *Red Ruffed Lemur* was certainly one of the mammalian highlights of the trip, as was the excellent sighting of the rare *Brown-tailed Mongoose*. But all too soon our time at Masoala had come to an end and all that was left to do was to return to Maroansetra (more bumpy and wet than the trip out) and catch our two hours early flight back to 'Tana. For the first time we were ahead of schedule, and at that we all headed home!