

Birding Africa: Madagascar 2013

Tour report by leader Michael Mills

Our comprehensive 2013 Madagascar once again showcased Madagascar's best birds and wildlife, finding almost all available bird endemics, more than 20 lemur species and lots of other great critters. Logistics ran smoothly, apart from the continuous rescheduling and delays from Air Madagascar and some sandy roads. We commenced our birding with a pre-tour extension at Anjozorobe with **Madagascar Rail, Red-fronted Coua, Grey Emutail, Rufous-headed Ground Roller, Madagascar Flufftail, Madagascar Snipe** and brief views of **Brown Emutail** as the highlights. On the main tour we kicked off at Lake Alorobia where **Malagasy Pond Heron** showed briefly. Next on the schedule was Andasibe-Mantadia National Park – with **Madagascar Pratincole** en route – were we worked hard for good views of **Short-legged Ground-Roller, Scaly Ground-Roller** and **Red-breasted Coua**. Fortunately **Meller's Duck, Madagascar Grebe, Madagascar Wood Rail, Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, Nuthatch Vanga, Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk, Madagascar [Long-eared] Owl, Madagascar Sparrowhawk, Collared Nightjar** and **Blue Coua** 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, Pollen's Vanga, Common Sunbird-Asity** and **Henst's Goshawk**, whereas the Vohiparara section produced **Rufous-headed Ground-Roller, Madagascar Yellowbrow**, point-blank views of a dazzling male **Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity** and a glowing male **Velvet Asity**. From here we continued to the more arid south-west of the country, seeing **White-browed Hawk-Owl, Appert's Tetraka, Banded Kestrel, Giant Coua** and fantastic **Cuckoo Roller** en route. At Ifaty we quickly found **Madagascar Plover, Long-tailed Ground-Roller, Thamnornis, Archbold's Newtonia, Running Coua, Madagascar Buttonquail** and **Subdesert Mesite**. Then to the Tulear area where **Red-shouldered Vanga, Verreaux's Coua** 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**. In the north-west the Betsiboka Delta quickly produced several **Bernier's Teal** and **Malagasy Sacred Ibis**, and our first **Humblot's Heron**. Ampijoroa forest station in Ankarafantsika National Park produced good views of the three tricky endemics, **White-breasted Mesite, Schlegel's Asity** and **Van Dam's Vanga** (after some persistence!), with other noteworthy sightings including **Madagascar Fish Eagle, Madagascar Jacana, Malagasy Pond Heron, Humblot's Heron, Rufous Vanga, Sickie-billed Vanga** and **Allen's Gallinule**. For those who stayed on after the main trip, the Masoala peninsula produced the goods with fantastic views of both **Helmet Vanga** and **Bernier's Vanga**, plus more **White-throated Oxylabes, Red-breasted Coua** and **Madagascar Pratincole**.

Top 10 birds as voted for were:

1. Yellow-bellied Sunbird Asity, for its sheer dazzle at close range
2. Helmet Vanga, the beak with a bird
3. Rufous-headed Ground Roller, for great head-bobbing calling and a snazzy neck tie
4. Madagascar Pratincole, for neatness and elegance
5. Madagascar Yellowbrow, for bringing us to our knees
6. Short-legged Ground Roller, the Afrotropical puffbird
7. Nuthatch Vanga, for revealing its nesting secrets
8. Pitta-like Ground Roller, for sheer prettiness, and
9. Madagascar Flufftail and Madagascar Jacana, for the great views.

An early arrival by most of the group allowed for some pre-tour birding at Anjozorobe, where a one-night stay made for an excellent introduction to Madagascar. On our arrival we immediately concentrated our efforts on the now-famous marsh where Slender-billed Flufftail is occasionally seen. 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 not even heard this year. Still, there was plenty else to make the journey worthwhile, especially in the forest: **Rufous-headed Ground Roller** entertained with its head-bobbing calling, **Madagascar Flufftail** showed brilliantly, **Madagascar Nightjar** was seen well, we spotted our first **Madagascar Blue Pigeon**, a **Frances's Sparrowhawk** circled overhead, a relaxed **Red-fronted Coua** approached us and **Brown Emutail** gave brief views, before we headed back to 'Tana with reasonable views of **Madagascar Partridge** en route.

We started the main tour admiring a lovely **Sooty Falcon** in our hotel garden (along with more common species such as **Malagasy Brush Warbler**, **Madagascar Bulbul**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Red Fody** and **Souimanga Sunbird**). This was followed by a brief stop at Lake Alorobia where the heronry was in full swing. Here **Malagasy Pond Heron** was tracked down and good numbers of duck were present, including our only **Knob-billed Duck** of the trip. However, with lots of tricky rainforest species awaiting us we pressed on towards Andasibe, the only stop en route for a much-admired **Madagascar Pratincole** with its 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 first on the more remote Mantadia section of the park, where we did well enough on the key species to allow ample time for birding at Andasibe. However, we initially acclimatised with a stint of easier, introductory birding in open areas and along the road with **Madagascar Cuckooshrike**, **Madagascar Stonechat**, **Malagasy White-eye** and **Nelicourvi Weaver**. The highlight of our first afternoon, however, was been shown a lovely **Rainforest Scops Owl** on its day roost, only an arm's length from us. Early in the morning several small warblers favour exposed, bare snags from which to sing, and we had good looks at **Rand's Warbler** and **Stripe-throated Jery**. Single sightings of **Madagascar Green Pigeon** and **Madagascar Starling** were even more appreciated, and this year **Madagascar Blue Pigeon** seemed to be more common and conspicuous than before. At the other extreme, highlights of the understorey included two sightings of **Crossley's [Babbler] Vanga**, **Collared Nightjar** on the nest and a handsome pair of **Red-breasted Coua**. Other forest highlights included **Madagascar [Crested] Ibis** on the nest, **Madagascar Sparrowhawk** at the nest that was watched feeding young, flight views of **Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk**, brilliant views of mating **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher**, **Red-tailed Vanga**, **Tylas Vanga**, **Hook-billed Vanga**, male **Velvet Asity**, the unusual **Ward's Flycatcher [Vanga]** and two excellent sightings of **Nuthatch Vanga**. 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**. A marsh outside the reserve turned up brief 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. We failed to hear any **Short-legged Ground Roller** in the early morning, but lucked into one which we think we flushed off a nest. It sat still for ages, giving us time to admire it from every angle. **Scaly Ground Roller** took longer but eventually we tracked down a confiding individual for prolonged views. Mammalian highlights included *Goodman's Mouse Lemur*, *Common Brown Lemur*, *Lowland Streaked Tenrec*, *Crossley's Dwarf Lemur*, close up view of fantastic *Indri* and some very neat *Diademed Sifaka*.

It was now time to pack our bags and start the long journey south to Ranomafana National Park, with **Hamerkop** and **Dimorphic Egret** in the rice paddies en route, **Madagascar Hoopoe** at our first lunch stop, **Madagascar Cuckoo**, **Common Quail** and **Madagascar Partridge** near our overnight accommodation and **Madagascar Snipe** and **Baillon's Crake** at our second 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 **Pitta-like Ground Roller**, **Wedge-tailed Jery**, fantastic looks at a pair of **Brown Mesite** and brilliant views of **Henst's Goshawk** near its nest. 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. Along the pass on the way there **Malagasy Black Swift** and **Forest Rock Thrush** were welcome additions, and a **Ward's [Flycatcher] Vanga** was seen at the nest. **Grey-crowned Tetraka** welcomed us at Vohiparara, giving better-than-normal views almost as the first bird seen. **Madagascar Yellowbrow** took longer and got us down on hands and knees, but showed well in the end and was very much appreciated. A male **Velvet Asity** impressed everyone with its jet black feathers and dazzling green wattles. Another **Pitta-like Ground Roller** was tracked down for superb views. **White-throated Oxlables** and a male **Forest Fody** showed for some. **Dark Newtonia** showed for all. **Cryptic Warbler** was seen twice. A **Madagascar Flufftail** was well-spotted bathing at a forest pool. **Rufous-headed Ground Roller** was tracked down in little time. And the undoubted highlight was **Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity**: for the first few hours of waiting at its nest only the female was seen well, but in the end an incomparable male came in, perching just above our heads and dazzled us with its luminous plumage. WOW! Non-bird highlights at Ranomafana included *Rufous/Brown Mouse Lemur*, *Golden Bamboo Lemur*, *Milne-Edward's Sifaka*, *Red-fronted Brown Lemur*, *Red-bellied Lemur*, *Small-toothed Sportive Lemur*, *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 everyone enjoyed some intimate time with *Ring-tailed Lemurs*. Driving towards Isalo we made several roadside stops, which unfortunately failed to turn up the hoped-for Malagasy Harrier but did produce a pair of **Marsh Owl** that allowed surprisingly close approach. After dark a short foray around our comfortable accommodation turned up great looks at **White-browed Hawk-Owl** before dinner and **Torotoroka Scops Owl** after dinner (a good day for owls!).

With Madagascar Partridge already under our belts 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 National Park before the sweltering heat and enjoyed a productive walk through this "different" habitat. While organising guides a very obliging **Banded Kestrel** flew in a perched nearby, giving us ample time to study it in the scope before we set off on the regular circuit. Very soon we were rewarded with a confiding **Appert's Tetraka** that fed on the ground just a couple of metres from us. Next was the localised **Giant Coua** which required a little more patience, but a pair was eventually tracked down sitting in a tree. Other noteworthy birds included a couple of **Rufous Vanga**, **Coquerel's Coua**, our best views of **Cuckoo Roller**, **White-browed Hawk-Owl** on its day roost and an impressive display by a rather ugly, female **Greater Vasa Parrot**. *Verreaux's Sifaka* and a *Hubbard's Sportive Lemur* peeking out of its day roost were the mammalian highlights of our walk. After lunch in Sakahara we continued on towards the coast, with a short stop near *Le Table* that turned up **Lafresnaye's Vanga**. The last section of road was sandy, bumpy and slow and took more time and sweat than normal to navigate, so we were pleased to arrive at our accommodation on the beach and near to the Spiny Forest.

We awoke early the next morning for an amble through Madagascar's most unusual habitat, the famed Spiny Forest with its Octopus Trees and own special set of birds. On entering the reserve we were instantly rewarded with a friendly **Running Coua** and it didn't take long to track down a couple of singing **Thamnornis**. **Red-capped [Green-capped] Coua** on the nest was hard to appreciate with just the tail visible, but the views of the subtly-coloured (at least by familial standards) **Long-tailed Ground Roller** were superb and the long tail made it hard for the big lenses to fit the whole bird in the camera frame. **Subdesert Mesite**, too, provided little resistance and we were quickly led to a treed female where she froze for us to admire as long as we liked. The final local specialty was **Archbold's Newtonia**, a pair of which circled around us in full song. During our shorter-than normal walk we also enjoyed two excellent sightings of female **Madagascar Buttonquail**, our first views

of the impressive **Sickle-billed Vanga**, **Crested Coua** and **Subdesert Brush Warbler** before we headed for the coastal grass plains where **Madagascar Plover** was our target. A rather long, hot march eventually located our quarry, and we spent a considerable amount of time admiring them and giving the camera wielders among us time to approach to within a few metres.

After a bit of down time and a relaxed lunch we bounced our way back to Tulear, where the afternoon was spent in the nearby coral rag scrub. The clear whistles of **Red-shouldered Vanga** soon led us to the bird and we enjoyed some excellent views of a lovely male. **Lafresnaye's Vanga** showed again, better views of **Green-capped Coua** were obtained and a **Verreaux's Coua** showed well, albeit a bit briefly. The next morning our sandgrouse vigil produced excellent views of two **Madagascar Sandgrouse** drinking, but soon we were at sea, heading for the sand dunes of Anakao where a male **Littoral Rock Thrush** took no time to find. A short hop-and-a-skip across to Nosy Ve found us admiring **White-fronted Plover** and many **Red-tailed Tropicbird**, before we returned to Tulear to catch our afternoon flight to 'Tana, and onwards to Mahajunga the next day.

In the cool of the next morning we found ourselves heading up into the Betsiboka Delta, where our arrival at the first mudflats was greeted with a pair of very confiding **Bernier's Teal** and two **Malagasy Sacred Ibis** nearby. Once we'd admired them we turned our attention to a nearby **Humblot's Heron**, and then made a wider study of the area seeing three more pairs of teal, several more ibis, **Terek Sandpiper**, **Greater Sand Plover** and several other wader species. A **Madagascar Harrier-Hawk** circled overhead. With all the specials seen well there seemed little reason to linger longer and submit ourselves to the savage sun, so we turned for Mahajunga with a pod of *Indian Bottle-nosed Dolphin* circling our boats as we approached town. By lunch time we were at our accommodation near Ampijoroa forest station in Ankarafantsika National Park and had an afternoon ahead of us to become acquainted with some of the areas inhabitants. Some popular *Coquerel's Sifakas* lulled around the entrance to the reserve along with **Sickle-billed Vanga** and **Grey-headed Lovebird**. Climbing up to the sandy plateau, first **Coquerel's Coua** and later **Red-capped Coua** showed well on the track and we enjoyed close-up views of a pair of **White-breasted Mesite**. The next morning a heavy and persistent rain storm cooled things down and gave us a couple of extra hours of sleep, but once it abated we were once again out on the trails where a male **Schlegel's Asity** was tracked down in a tall, bare tree and admired preening in the scope. The much drabber female sat nearby, keeping an eye on her nest. We also enjoyed another excellent sighting of **White-breasted Mesite** before turning our attention to the missing **Van Dam's Vanga**. **Red-capped Coua** (renamed as Path Coua) hopped and skipped along in front of us, but our vanga efforts went unrewarded except for some handsome **Rufous Vanga**. Van Dam was not giving up easily, and only after much persistence were we rewarded with good views of this bulky, dark-billed species. Besides birding the dry forests at Ampijoroa we also allowed ample time for wetland birding, focussed on Lac Ravelobe. Large numbers of **Western Cattle Egret**, **Common Squacco Heron** and **Glossy Ibis** made it a challenge to pick out **Malagasy Pond Heron**, but eventually we succeeded in finding two of these smart birds. **Allen's Gallinule** was a welcome addition, a single **Humblot's Heron** was seen and we enjoy two good sightings of the very rare **Madagascar Fish Eagle**. **Madagascar Jacana** was harder to spot at Lac Ravelobe so a detour to another wetland was in order and here we enjoyed a pair of **Madagascar Jacana** down to a couple of metres with the added bonus of some lovely **African Pygmy Goose** nearby. Mammalian highlights of Ampijoroa included *Mongoose Lemur*, *Grey Mouse Lemur*, *Common Brown Lemur*, *Milne-Edwards Sportive Lemur* and *Western Avahi* during the day.

With some of the group now heading home, we bade our farewells in 'Tana and most of us continued on to Maroanetra. An afternoon stroll along the beach from our accommodation turned up a few surprises, most notable two **Crab-Plover** and a single **Saunders's Tern**, plus **Bar-tailed Godwit** and lots of **Lesser Crested Tern**. 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, with two **Arctic Skua** on the way as an unexpected bonus. By mid-morning we'd dropped our bags at our comfortable new lodge and were admiring some lovely *Red-ruffed*

Lemurs nearby. A little later we had our first encounter with the incomparable **Helmet Vanga**, although it didn't stay very long and left us wanting more. During the rest of our visit to Masoala we very successfully tracked down another pair of **Helmet Vanga**, which stayed longer and impressed us enough to slot in at number two on the "bird of the trip" competition. The other key highlights were rather marvellous looks at a pair of scarce **Bernier's Vanga**, eventually watched at close range; of all the birds in Madagascar, this one made us work the hardest! Other highlights were a couple of sightings of **Red-breasted Coua**, our best views of **Madagascar Spinetail**, more **Blue Coua**, **White-headed Vanga**, **Blue Vanga**, lots of **Madagascar Starling**, black morph **Madagascar Magpie-Robin**, **Madagascar Cuckooshrike**, **Tylas Vanga**, **Cuckoo Roller**, excellent views of **White-throated Oxylobes**, brief views of **Brown Mesite** and **Crested Coua**. Mammals played along nicely, with *White-fronted Brown Lemur*, a new species of *Mouse Lemur*, *Greater Dwarf Lemur* and *Masoala Woolly Lemur* all seen. But all too soon our time at Masoala and in Madagascar had come to an end and all that was left to do was to return to Maroansetra (with **Sooty Tern** and **Brown Noddy** on the return trip) and catch our flight back to 'Tana.