

## **DESTINATION ANDASIBE-MANTADIA, MADAGASCAR - SOME NOTES FOR TRAVELING BIRDERS AND MAMMALOGISTS (January 2007)**

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The following text will provide some up-to-date experiences on visiting the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park in Madagascar, based on eight and half days of birding in January 2007. Originally, I had other plans, but had to cancel them as one of the main bridges on the (only) highway from Antananarivo to Majunga collapsed, and we had to turn around about midway to Ankarafantsika. From Tana, I made a futile attempt to visit Soa Camp, and continued back to Andasibe for another stay, including a half day trip to Brickaville.

Having visited 70 nations in search of birds, Madagascar clearly belongs to most difficult destinations for a traveler. In there, days and days are easily lost because of logistical and health problems. Therefore, it is a good idea to plan well and have the best contacts available, right from the beginning, especially if you travel by yourself. In addition, you need patience and luck. I myself lost three days due to road problems, and another one as a consequence of severe diarrhoea (full recovery took three weeks). At the peak of the diarrhoea, I visited toilet about 50 times per night, understanding why the British call the illness "the runs".

Few birders go to Madagascar in summer. Visiting the island in the middle of rainy season certainly has its disadvantages. Rain and floods risk to interfere with your plans. The water levels at Mangoro River, on the way to Andasibe-Mantadia, remained high, and I never saw **Madagascar Pratincoles** on the rocks there, despite checking the place four times. Fortunately, my third visit produced a flying pair. On the other hand, there are several advantages, as well. First of all, certain species such as **Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawk** are easier to see this time of the year. Second, the best guides at Andasibe-Mantadia may be difficult to hire during peak tourist season, but compete for your attention when there are no other customers available. Third, rooms, cars and drivers are more easily found, for competitive rates.

What is more, the weather is not necessarily that bad at all. Brian Finch had just returned from Andasibe-Mantadia when we met in Tana, and complained about ceaseless rain. There was a risk of serious flooding in the village itself. The next day it was all sunshine, and I never had a rainy day during the next two weeks, just occasional showers! Unfortunately, it was therefore also pretty hot and humid in the sunny Andasibe-Mantadia, not to mention Brickaville, a fat birder like me "over-heating" easily on forest trails. Antananarivo was much more pleasant with comfortably warm day temperatures and cool evenings.

All the uncertainties combined, it is quite difficult to know how much time you need in a particular location. You may arrive in Andasibe-Mantadia, and spend five days in heavy rain, unable to do much at all. The next week may be sunny. Therefore, it is best to invest plenty of time, and wait patiently.

The nomenclature of birds follow the first edition (1998) of Sinclair & Langrand, Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands. Prices are given in ariaries, 10 000 ariary being an approximate equivalent of 4 € in summer 2007.

### **ANTANANARIVO (TANA)**

#### **AIRPORT**

The international airport in Tana is small and efficient, and a great place to exchange euros to ariaries. A word of caution, however, in regard to late arrivals: prospective taxi drivers have free access to the arrivals area, and will do their best to contact you. They may also follow you to the currency exchange counter, observe the amount you exchange, and act accordingly, either by adjusting their prices up, or (in the worst scenario) robbing you on the way to the city. It is therefore safer to arrange a pick up beforehand, or try to share a taxi with Malagasy passengers. Even though not the most dangerous place in the world, Tana has its risks: in January 2007, one of the stories I heard considered three foreign travelers, who had been seen walking naked on a street, after they had been relieved of all their belongings, including underpants.

Personally, I called to Ninah at Tonga Soa, and she arranged a (de luxe) taxi to pick me up for 15 000 ariary (€6). Later on, I took two trips from Tonga Soa to airport by regular taxis, arranged by Ninah, to exchange money. Probably looked like a caged gorilla on the backseat of the tiny Renaults ("tipparellu" model in Finnish), with several interesting mechanical details, including plastic 1,5 l lemonade bottles being used as

petrol tanks, inside the cabin! The return trip from Tonga Soa was 8000 ariary (€3). The exchange facilities at the airport are fast and reliable, and the process takes less than five minutes. I can only imagine the trouble and expense of doing the same in one of the banks in the city centre.



Fig 1. Antananarivo International Airport – Air Mad ready to depart to Joburg.

## TONGA SOA

An obvious base for birdwatchers in Tana, the above-mentioned guesthouse Tonga Soa, is located just minutes away from the airport. The place is owned by three partners, Ninah (caretaker), Patrick and Brian (Finch, the well-known East Africa bird guide), with a special interest in birding tourists, both groups and individuals. Located in a suburb, the guesthouse is surrounded by high walls, which guarantee the peace of its small, but well-cared gardens, and a new accommodation building with pleasantly decorated, spotlessly clean, and comfortable European standard doubles. There is a restaurant, small bar and library available. In the rainy season, there were hardly any mosquitos, but coils and nets were nevertheless included in the rooms, electric outlets enabling other mosquito repellents, as well. The rooms cost 60 000 ariary (€24) per night, breakfast was 8000 (€3), lunch around 25 000 (€10), and dinner also around 25 000 (€10).

Several **Rainbow Chameleons** and turtles adorn the garden, which also has a variety of “Mad bird species”, including **Madagascar White-Eye**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Madagascar Brush Warbler**, **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Madagascar Green Sunbird**, **Madagascar Bulbul**, **Common Mynah** and **Madagascar Fody**. **Great, Dimorphic, and Cattle Egrets**, a **Hamerkop** and a party of eight **Madagascar Bee-eaters** were seen passing by on the sky. The chameleons breed at Tonga Soa, their behavior (Fig 3-5) being interesting to observe, with plenty of photography opportunities.

The main problem with arranging accommodation in Madagascar continues to be the difficulty of communication. Snail mail is slow and unreliable, to say the least (my two air mail letters to Tonga Soa never arrived; one to Feon’ny ala (see below) arrived). Phone lines are an on and off thing, and email still a rare thing. Fortunately, Tonga Soa has recently acquired an email address, [tongasoahotel@mel.moov.mg](mailto:tongasoahotel@mel.moov.mg). Ninah can also be contacted by mobile phone at +261 32 0218111 (or +261 33 1201282).

The dynamic caretaker of Tonga Soa, Ninah, is the person who can arrange your meals and the room, local transportation and the invaluable driver with a car. The latter will cost around €50 per day + petrol, depending on the car and the driver. The "petrol" includes filling the tank once in the beginning (for my van, this was 132 000 ariary, €54), and filling it up again as you finish. It is more convenient, and economical, to travel to Andasibe-Mantadia by car than to attempt to hire one on spot. There is a variety of smaller and larger cars available, and Ninah knows the market. I got Thierry and his van. He slept in his car, or used the drivers' rooms at Feon'ny ala, when available. Drivers are also invited to Feon'ny ala's kitchen, for meals.



Fig 2. One of the cosy rooms at Tonga Soa.

There is a new hypermarket, Jumbo, in Tana, catering for all basic needs and accepting international credit cards, notably Visa. It is a good idea to stock up with manufactured goods before visiting Andasibe-Mantadia, which has but limited selection available. Carrying the food is not a problem, as long as you have a hired car. On the way to Jumbo, you can also do the main sights of the city, and some birding. My tour produced a pair of **Frances's Sparrowhawks**, circling over the zoo area. **Squacco Herons** were common at rice fields in Tana, but I failed to see any **Madagascar Squacco Herons**. Other species seen there included **Great** and **Dimorphic Egrets**, and **Common Moorhen**. In the centre, Lac Anosy has herons and egrets, especially at its western end, towards the Jumbo hypermarket. **Black**, **Great** and **Intermediate Egrets**, **Black-Crowned Night-Herons** and **Squacco Herons** were seen there, as well as a lone **Humblot's Heron**. A city tour with a rented car and driver cost 50 000 ariary (€20) in January 2007.





Fig 3. Pomegranates give a bountiful harvest at Tonga Soa garden. Can you spot a large chameleon hiding in the tree?



Fig 4. Here I am! One of the several **Rainbow Chameleons** at Tonga Soa garden.





Fig 5. A female **Rainbow Chameleon** digging a hole for its eggs at Tonga Soa courtyard.



Fig 6. There are many rice fields in Tana, a city of many hills and unique character.



Fig 7. Lac Anosy, a site for **Humblot's Heron**, **Black Egrets** and **Black-crowned Night-Herons**, and the Monument aux Morts.

### ON THE WAY TO ANDASIBE-MANTADIA

The village of Andasibe is located 145 kilometers west of Tana. Be sure to start your drive to Andasibe-Mantadia early enough, by 7 AM if possible. The road is slow, especially in the beginning, as there is a lot of congested traffic on the streets. Therefore, it takes 4 to 4.5 hours to reach Andasibe, 1 hour being spent in Tana. A later start, suggested by Ninah, led me in trouble, as locating guides took time and we could start birding only in the afternoon, when the risk of rain showers is high. Consequently, we had a severe thunderstorm in Ampatsipotsy, where most of the time was spent standing on a patio of an abandoned house, and contemplating the sunny hours of the rest of the day. We got wet, and walking with wet, slippery sandals in Andasibe, later on, caused bleeding blisters, which restricted my walks for the rest of the stay. A bad start for the visit, and the problems could have been avoided if our arrival was a couple of hours earlier.

On the way to Andasibe-Mantadia, the only place really worth a stop before Moramanga appears to be the Mangoro River bridge (Fig 8), with its **Madagascar Pratincoles**. Do not stop on the Mangoro side, as the soldiers of the checkpoint will arrive to bother you. It is also good to keep one's eyes open in the car: my best roadside bird was a **Sooty Falcon**. **Striated Herons** were common at rice fields in rainy weather, and scarce in sunshine. Other species seen between Tana and Andasibe were **Hamerkop**, **Yellowbilled Kite**, **Madagascar Kingfisher**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Pied Crow** and **Madagascar Fody**.

On the unfortunate drive towards Majunga, to the northwest, a stop was made at a known site for the **Meller's Duck** at km post 76, a large lake on the left well visible from the road. Unfortunately, all the ducks dabbling on the lake proved to be **Redbilled Teals**. Along the way to the collapsed bridge, passing through deforested and in places seriously eroded grasslands, the only two **Madagascar (Réunion) Harriers** of the trip, a **Namaqua Dove**, and a **Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo** were seen. **Madagascar Kestrels** were common, a party of 8 birds providing an enjoyable presentation of their flying skills at one site. Four **Madagascar Larks** were seen on a long grassy ridge. Another attempt at Soa Camp, a hill station 90 km northeast of Tana, was aborted as we discovered the last 4+ km being a muddy 4x4 track, impossible for the van. On our way up and down, police stopped us twice, requesting for money (in vain).





Fig 8. Mangoro River bridge, few km before Moramanga, with **Madagascar Pratincoles** regularly resting on rocks on the right.



Fig 9. Rickshaws at Moramanga. Madagascar is one of the last places in the world where you may still experience the traditional rickshaw, the rickshaws of India being bicycle-operated (except some in Calcutta).

## ANDASIBE- MANTADIA

### ACCOMMODATION

Feon'ny ala resort (tel. +(261 20) 56 832 02), with its cabins and restaurant, remains the best option to stay at Andasibe-Mantadia. My snail mail reservation had arrived, and the cabin cost 26 600 ariary (€10) per day. Ask for the cabin in the corner (nr. 400?), right after a staff building and opposite of a new stone building, which has a great view to forest, birds and lemurs. The best birds and animals recorded from the cabin's tiny veranda, relaxing naked (no mosquitos) after a hot day's walk and a shower, included the only **Pollen's Vanga** of the trip, a **Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk**, a **Madagascar Long-eared Owl** and a large group of **Common Brown Lemurs** foraging within a few meters distance. A **Red-breasted Coua**, **Madagascar Flufftails** and **Madagascar Scops Owls** were frequently heard calling nearby, on the other side of a stream opposite the cabin, in the Andasibe forest reserve. Feon'ny ala = the voice of the forest.

The cabins of this well-run enterprise were in great condition, having apparently been renovated after some Internet reports claiming the opposite. Service was very good all the way, and the restaurant a pleasant place to have one's meals. The food is good, and the menu variable enough to support a long stay, especially if complemented by some private delicacies purchased in Tana. Nevertheless, a word of warning on restaurant food: I got my three-week feverish diarrhoea at the Feon'ny ala restaurant, possibly after eating tilapia, as some other travelers had also had problems with the fish. Frozen tilapia does not necessarily remain frozen enough in the local conditions, and provides ample breeding ground for some nasty bacteria, with prolonged consequences.

The real culinary treat of Andasibe are the wild mangoes. The best mangoes I have ever had, even better than the best domesticated ones! Shopping at the village market is a treat in itself, and not an expensive one. Six wild mangoes and twelve finger bananas cost 800 ariary (0,35 cents).

The restaurant has two patios, one down at the lake. From there, good views of the forest and bushes with hundreds of flowers could be had. The ever present distinctive song of **Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller** dominated the scene, the restaurant staff imitating it. **Lesser Vasa Parrots** frequented the lakeside trees. There were many smaller birds by the lake also at lunchtime, feeding in the flowery bushes, **Madagascar White-eye** and **Souimanga Sunbird** being the most numerous ones. My only **Common Sunbird-Asity** was seen in the same bushes, in the last morning. Beforehand, only calls had been heard. The only party of the supposedly common **Chabert's Vanga**, 28 funny-looking birds, was also observed here, at the edge of primary forest. There usually was one or two **Madagascar Blue Vangas** and **Red-tailed Vangas** around, as well. **Indris** are frequently calling on the hill opposite Feon'ny ala, behind Lac Rouge and farther on, but are extremely difficult to spot.

In the evenings, a special feature of the Feon'ny ala restaurant are the many interesting insects that arrive to the lamps, out in the patio. There are moths, of course, but also large beetles and praying mantis, and guests often photograph the most interesting ones. A "**Giant Rhinoceros Beetle**" (not sure of its proper name) was one of the highlights. Years ago, habituated **Greater Dwarf Lemurs** also used to come here, to feed on banana pieces placed for them. Once in the evening, two **Madagascar Nightjars** flew across the lake – my only record of the species.

There are other options for accommodation at the village of Andasibe (see Lonely Planet, Bradt's). Most birdwatchers do, however, prefer to stay close to the forest, in a peaceful location. There is also the Vakona Lodge next to Mantadia, but it is not as good a deal as Feon'ny ala. It is also a bit too upmarket for the average specialist wildlife tourist, who tend to feel uncomfortable in places such as this, and do not really enjoy the captured lemurs of Vakona's Lemur Island, either.





Fig 10. A view from the Feon'ny ala restaurant patio, the Andasibe reserve forest right next to it, Indris calling up the hill. The lake is called Lac Rouge, the Red Lake.



Fig 11. At nightfall: a lone **Short-horned Chameleon**, sleeping on a branch in front of cabin, in light rain.

## GUIDES AND PERMITS

On arrival at Andasibe reserve entrance (Fig 12), wildlife guides will approach you and propose to become your guide. Entering the reserves themselves, there is no other option, as a guide is compulsory in Madagascar, even though not really necessary, especially in the case of the Andasibe enclosure, with its easy to follow path system. Time being available, the best option is to resist (requires some persistence!) for a day or preferably two, as there is abundant birdlife available along the Andasibe road, and around accommodations such as Feon'ny ala. Meanwhile, you are able to relax, and discover and learn the common (and some rare) species by yourself, at your own pace, and save money for the forthcoming days. During the first days, you could also buy your permits for the remaining days, at the Andasibe reserve gate.

When the time is right, make a comprehensive deal with your chosen guide, and visit the Andasibe entrance early on the first day, to buy your permit, if you have not already done so. Ticket sale may start any time between 6 and 6.30 AM, depending on how long the responsible person sleeps. A four day pass cost 50 000 ariary (€20) in January 2007. The permit is valid for both Andasibe and Mantadia reserves. At the moment, the best and most professional birdwatching guide available is Patrice Ratsisakanana (he has a mobile, but I lost the number). Alternatively, you may try his brother Maurice, or Florent Razafimahatratra. Jean-Claude knows his mammals, and is specializing on them. Any of the guides present may help you to contact Patrice, whose house is located on the northwestern corner of the Andasibe village, deep down under a steep ridge.

Patrice has a tape-recorder and tapes for each of the target species in Andasibe-Mantadia. He also knows how to use them, guiding skulking species such as **Madagascar Flufftails** to walk right by his customer. He charged 100 000 ariary (€40) per day, the day meaning as many hours as you are able to bird. Patrice himself will not give up, unless you request it. During the second visit, we negotiated a less than full programme for 80 000 (€32) per day, me being sick and tired. Bird activity depends on weather. In a fair weather it is possible to watch birds soon after 5 AM, the best time beginning around 6 and continuing till around 1.30 PM, the birds once again becoming more active after 3.30 PM. At 6 Pm it is already dark.



Fig 12. Brothers and professional birdguides, Patrice and Maurice Ratsisakanana, in rain by the Andasibe reserve entrance. On the background is a restaurant, from where cold drinks and meals may be bought.



Among the species we did not even try to see because of my walking restrictions were **Brown Mesite** and **Rufous-headed Ground-Roller**. Patrice does, however, know places for these species, high up on the slopes of Mantadia. Patrice is very fit and energetic, and known for his willingness to carry things for people. Having seen how difficult it was for me to walk with the injured foot, in the heat, also being sick and having the overweight, and how difficult it often was to find a place to sit for a rest in the forest, he brought a sturdy wooden bench with him, and carried it for me in the forest. At first I protested, but as this appeared to be quite easy to him, I accepted with gratitude. Afterwards, walking on trails became much easier and more enjoyable for me, being finally able to periodically rest the aching, banded foot.

On one day we drove down to Brickaville, on the eastern coast. Unfortunately, no good forests, marshes or lakes were seen on the way, the habitats being quite degraded. On Brickaville bridge, we asked permission from the police and did some birdwatching from there, in hope for **Humblot's Heron**, but failed. It was possible to see the coast, with its birdy mangroves and lagoons, but the roads on the map proved to be poor 4x4 tracks, and driving to the seashore was impossible. The only interesting discovery was **House Sparrows** in Brickaville, a range extension and news for Patrice, as well. The cosmopolitan species can only be seen in two (?) east coast towns. All in all, do not bother to go there, and if you do, be prepared to drive all the way to Toamasina, from where it is possible to see some seabirds.



Fig 13. Andasibe reserve trail map.

### ANDASIBE VILLAGE ROAD

I was surprised to discover a well maintained tarmac road to connect the highway to Andasibe village, formerly named Perinét by the French colonial masters. The roadsides were also well forested, with occasional openings around buildings, and the forest reserve close by on the east, in parts reaching the road. There is some traffic, mostly cyclists and walkers, but the 3 km long access road is very good for birdwatching. There were many mixed species flocks, especially around a small bridge in the southern section. **Ward's Flycatchers** were particularly often seen along the Andasibe road, as well as **Green Jeries**. The road appeared to be the best site for the latter species, which has some general resemblance to **Willow Warbler**. The same can be said about **Nuthatch Vangas**, which were frequently seen by the road, e.g. in pines 100 m north of Andasibe reserve entrance. Also **Forest Fodies** (not uncommon) were often seen between Feon'ny ala and Andasibe village, in roadside shrubs.

**Madagascar Harrier Hawks** and **Madagascar Starlings** appeared easier by the village than in the Andasibe reserve. The latter species moved around in considerable flocks, staying high in treetops. **Madagascar Green Pigeons** were only seen by the road, close to the railway station, 100 m south towards a hotel complex under construction. The hotel grounds appeared to be the stake out in January 2007, but the birds also flew to the opposite side of the road, providing good views to the patient observer. **Madagascar Turtle Doves** were uncommon in Andasibe-Mantadia, but a few were seen daily along the main road, and around human habitations.

Finding a **Madagascar Button-Quail** was not an easy task. Patrice asked around, as the birds prefer cassava fields and other cultivated locations, which villagers visit on a regular basis. Several tips were received and the first attempt was made right in the middle of the village, by railway tracks. Nothing. The second site was too far away for me. The third tip was, however, a good one. We went to the Tana road, drove a short distance west, and turned left on a hill with a school building. The first two searches were futile, but then Patrice told me to sit down on top of the hill, walked down and started to criss cross the hillside. Soon afterwards, two male button-quails appeared walking in front of me, with excellent, prolonged view. As one flew off, Patrice shouted “Look! Look! Look!”, not sure if I had seen them on the ground. A chorus of 40 school children repeated with gusto “Luglugluglugluglug!!!”, having silently observed the crazy foreigner for an hour already, and anxious to take part in the strange performance. Later on, this call always greeted us whenever we returned to the spot, for other species. Another male **Madagascar Button-Quail** was heard calling later on. The hill was a good spot for **Mascarene Martins**, and supposedly also for **Madagascar Partridges**.



Fig 14. The attentive audience of the Madagascar Button-Quail hunt: “Luglugluglugluglug!!!”

Other species seen along the Andasibe road, outside of the reserve, included **Madagascar Buzzard**, **Madagascar Lesser Cuckoo**, **Madagascar Black Swift**, **Madagascar Spine-tailed Swift**, **Mascarene Martin**, **Madagascar Bulbul**, **Spectacled Greenbul**, **Madagascar Magpie Robin**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher**, **Common Newtonia**, **Madagascar Brush Warbler**, **Common Jery**, **Stripe-throated Jery**, **Madagascar Blue Vanga**, **Red-tailed Vanga**, **Madagascar Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Crested Drongo**, **Madagascar Fody**, **Nelicourvi Weaver** and **Madagascar Mannikin**. In regard to mammals, **Indris** are heard all the way, calling from their protected primary forest haunts.



The Andasibe road is also a great place for spotlighting walks to see lemurs and other nightly creatures. They are active soon after darkness, night walks often starting around 6 PM. People usually walk between the Feon'ny ala and Andasibe reserve entrance. This stretch of road has, among others, the 3 cm long **Perinét Leaf Chameleons**, several species of pretty frogs, **Rainforest Scops Owls** and up to 20 **Greater Dwarf Lemurs**. Several **Rainforest Scops Owls** also called along the road, when weather was right. They were, however, quite unresponsive to tapes.

### ANDASIBE RESERVE (PERINÉT)

Out of the two easily accessible parts of the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, the Andasibe reserve is more well-established. There are more visitors here than in Mantadia, not to mention the adjacent Analamazaotra reserve. The trails are wide and well maintained, with bridges and stone surface in the beginning. There is an information centre, restaurant and souvenir stalls by the entrance. The start of the trail, soon beyond the information centre, is the place to get close views of **Madagascar Crested Ibis**, which forage on the trail early in the morning. The trick is to be here early enough, before others arrive. The species were also seen deeper in the reserve, with brief views of flying or walking birds. In the morning, the entrance had a fairly reliable **Frances's Sparrowhawk** and a **Blue Coua**.

**Red-breasted Couas** were frequently heard calling on the ridges of Andasibe reserve, but for some reason we failed to see one. The same can be said about **Red-fronted Couas**. **Crested Coua** does not occur in Andasibe-Mantadia. **Madagascar Cuckoo Hawks** were regularly seen, also with close perched views (large yellow eyes!) at the southern end of the reserve, and also at the close by Feon'ny ala. The species is so similar to **Madagascar Buzzard** that there is a danger of overlooking it. The tail may be longer, but only slightly so, and the general color is rather similar. The Andasibe reserve appeared to be better for **Henst's Goshawk** than Mantadia. The species was difficult to see, even though its loud calls were regularly heard. The one I saw gave brief views at the shrubby opening after canal crossing. **Single Purple Herons** were seen on three occasions, flying over the reserve, and also along the Tana road, and at Mantadia.



Fig 15. A pair of **Collared Nightjars** (a speciality of Andasibe reserve) on a day rest, well-camouflaged in leaf litter.

On my first visit to Andasibe-Mantadia, Patrice had failed, to his frustration, to show the **Madagascar Wood Rail**, a peculiar inhabitant of primary forest floor. On the second visit, one was hunted down on one of the Andasibe reserve ridges, Patrice guiding it to walk right to his stalking customer. **Madagascar Flufftails**, on the other hand, were common in the marshy habitats of reserve, and could be seen right by the main trail, a stake-out being by a bridge, where one was seen far too close for binoculars! The graceful **White-throated Rails** inhabit stream-sides, and excellent views were had with the aid of a tape.

Both **Vasa Parrots** were frequently recorded in the reserve, the **Lesser** dominating. **White-headed Vangas** were only seen in the Andasibe reserve, albeit not far from the road, together with several **Hook-billed Vangas**. **Nuthatch Vanga** was not exactly common, most individuals being seen close to the entrance, in tall trees, creeping in a sitta-like fashion. The attractive **Madagascar Blue Pigeons** were regularly seen by the large shrubby opening, in one occasion from a very close distance. Patrice knows several places, where **Rainforest Scops Owls** rest during the day. Nevertheless, it took days to find one of these to be occupied (the site had been empty on two previous visits). Therefore, do not expect to see the species at once. **Collared Nightjars** (Fig 15) were more reliable, which is great, as this is one of the “must see” target species of Andasibe.

One male **Velvet Asity** was discovered, briefly in a trailside bush. The best close views of **Rand’s Warblers** were had here, with their nuthatch-like appearance, even though more of them were seen in Mantadia, along the main road, and at Feon’ny ala. The mixed bird parties had a few **Long-billed Bulbuls**, **Ward’s Flycatchers**, **Green Jeries** and **Tylases**. **Madagascar Starlings** were occasionally seen, flying high or standing perched on top of a tall tree. Other common species included **Madagascar Buzzard**, **Madagascar Coucal**, **Madagascar Black Swift**, **Madagascar Spine-tailed Swift**, **Madagascar Kingfisher**, **Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller**, **Madagascar Bulbul**, **Spectacled Greenbul**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher**, **Common Newtonia**, **Madagascar Brush Warbler**, **Common Jery**, **Stripe-throated Jery**, **Madagascar White-eye**, **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Madagascar Green Sunbird**, **Madagascar Blue Vanga**, **Red-tailed Vanga**, **Madagascar Cuckoo-Shrike**, **Crested Drongo**, **Nelicourvi Weaver** and **Madagascar Mannikin**.



Fig 16. A pretty mushroom at the old nursery, Andasibe reserve.



Andasibe reserve is the place for habituated **Indris**, and your best chance to see them. Tourists with more general interest in nature come here to admire the largest living lemur species. It is quite an experience to observe the **Indris** calling from a close distance, the eerie calls being very loud and penetrating. The groups are practically always on top of hills and ridges, and control their territories from these power positions. The density of **Indris** guarantee quite a chorus, as different families respond to each other's calls. Other daytime lemurs are scarce, but **Common Brown Lemurs** are frequently seen.

There are also many other interesting things to see in the forest: one of the most amazing creatures discovered was a **Leaf-tailed Gecko**, a lizard so flat and well camouflaged that it was difficult to consider it an animal at all (Fig 17). The flat animal did not leave any shadow when it was resting on a tree trunk! Tree-frogs, chameleons (e.g. **Parson's and Short-horned**), mushrooms, flowering plants, butterflies and other insects, and a large variety of unique endemic trees were observed. In addition, both of the snakes seen in Andasibe-Mantadia were spotted along the Andasibe reserve trails: **Madagascar Boa** and **Madagascar Leafnosed Snake**, an attractive tree-snake.



Fig 17. A **Leaf-tailed Gecko**, camouflaged head down on a trunk of a trailside tree.



## MANTADIA FOREST RESERVE

In the Mantadia section of the national park, we focused on the Chute Sacre trail, and on the main road, with one visit to the graphite mine road. The trails are fine here, even though not quite as wide and well-trodden as the main routes of Andasibe reserve, with more genuine rainforest atmosphere and less habituated animals. Unlike in Andasibe, there were plenty of leeches on Chute Sacre and donating some blood to the ecosystem could not be avoided. Insect repellent on shoes was enough to keep most of them at bay.

A traditional stake-out for **Madagascar Rail** is located by the road to Mantadia. In January 2007, it had not been visited for some time, as the species had been easier in Ampatsipotsy (cf. below). After failing with the passive Ampatsipotsy birds, we tried the Mantadia site (not in Fig 18). As usual, Patrice organized things properly, also for a Victor Emanuel Tours group which would arrive the next week. I was waiting on the road, above the marsh, together with a number of villagers. Patrice cleared the undergrowth between us and the edge of the marsh, some 10 meters downhill. A man from the close by house was invited to clear a narrow zone in the marsh itself, about 15 m long, and he did this, walking waist-deep in the muddy water. Then, Patrice started to play the tape, down below us. A pair of rails responded, but were really difficult to see. At one point, one of them was briefly visible to Patrice, but not for us. Finally, great views of flying birds were had as the agitated rails moved around their territory! The rails (and other species) do experience some stress because of us birdtourists. On the other hand, the money from us protects the marsh, which could also be used for growing rice, for example. The marsh also had **Madagascar Swamp Warblers**.



Fig 18. Marshy habitat on the way to Mantadia N. P., by a check point. **Madagascar Snipe** is possible here.

At Chute Sacre, we checked a recent nest site of **Scaly Ground-Roller** three times, and once sounds of movement indicated that one was around. Unfortunately, we narrowly failed to see it. In another morning a **Short-legged Ground-Roller** was actively calling higher up, but was not attracted to tape. Rainy season is not the best time for these two ground-rollers. The colorful **Pitta-like Ground-Rollers** were, however, readily seen at the beginning of Chute Sacre trail, spotted by their “boo” calls. **Madagascar Crested Ibises** were seen on couple of occasions from the road, flying between trees on the forested slopes. **Madagascar Harrier Hawks** were regularly seen in Mantadia, with stunning close views along Chute Sacre. Once, a



**Madagascar Cuckoo Hawk** was discovered perched on a roadside tree, early in the morning, **Madagascar Buzzards** being common in similar situations. **Madagascar Sparrowhawk** proved to be a tough bird to find. Only in our last morning in Mantadia, in light rain, one arrived to meet me, with excellent views as it tried to dry itself on top of a close-by tree.

The pond along graphite mine side road is, at the moment, the only site for **Madagascar Dabchick** in Andasibe-Mantadia. The breeding birds are shy, and one should approach the site with caution. The track is easy to locate, being the first and only road to left after Chute Sacre trail parking lot. **Dark Newtonias** were only seen in Mantadia, which appears to have a healthy population. Two territories were at the graphite mine junction, and others by the main road, where close views of a singing male were had. **Madagascar Blue Pigeons** were frequently seen from the main road, either perched in tall trees or flying between ridges, in flocks of up to 10 birds. Similarly, both **Vasa Parrots** were often seen (and heard!) here, **Greater Vasa Parrot** being the common species. In our last morning in Mantadia, we were also lucky enough to be met by an immature **Red-breasted Coua**, right in the beginning of Chute Sacre. The bird came to investigate us, providing stunning looks from a close distance. **Red-fronted Couas** were more often heard than seen, but one gave prolonged views by the trail in the first morning. **Blue Coua** is more common, and a few were seen along the main road.

One of the two **Velvet Asities** of the visit, a female, was spotted by the trail around midway, low in a tree. Around there, a pair of the ground-dwelling **Crossley's Babblers** were also seen, creeping at our feet. **Grey-crowned Greenbul** is an uncommon resident and was recorded only once, in a mixed species flock. The really long-billed **Long-billed Greenbuls** were seen together with **Spectacled Greenbuls** (somewhat variable color), with a nice setting for comparisons. The mixed bird parties also had several **White-throated Oxylabes** on three occasions, and the only party of five **Wedge-tailed Jeries**. **Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher** is not as easy to find as its larger cousin. Patrice knows couple of stake-outs in Mantadia, where the species can readily be seen with the aid of a tape. Even then, it is not that easy to spot these small birds in the roadside bush. One was also recorded at the beginning of Chute Sacre trail, together with the **Red-breasted Coua**.

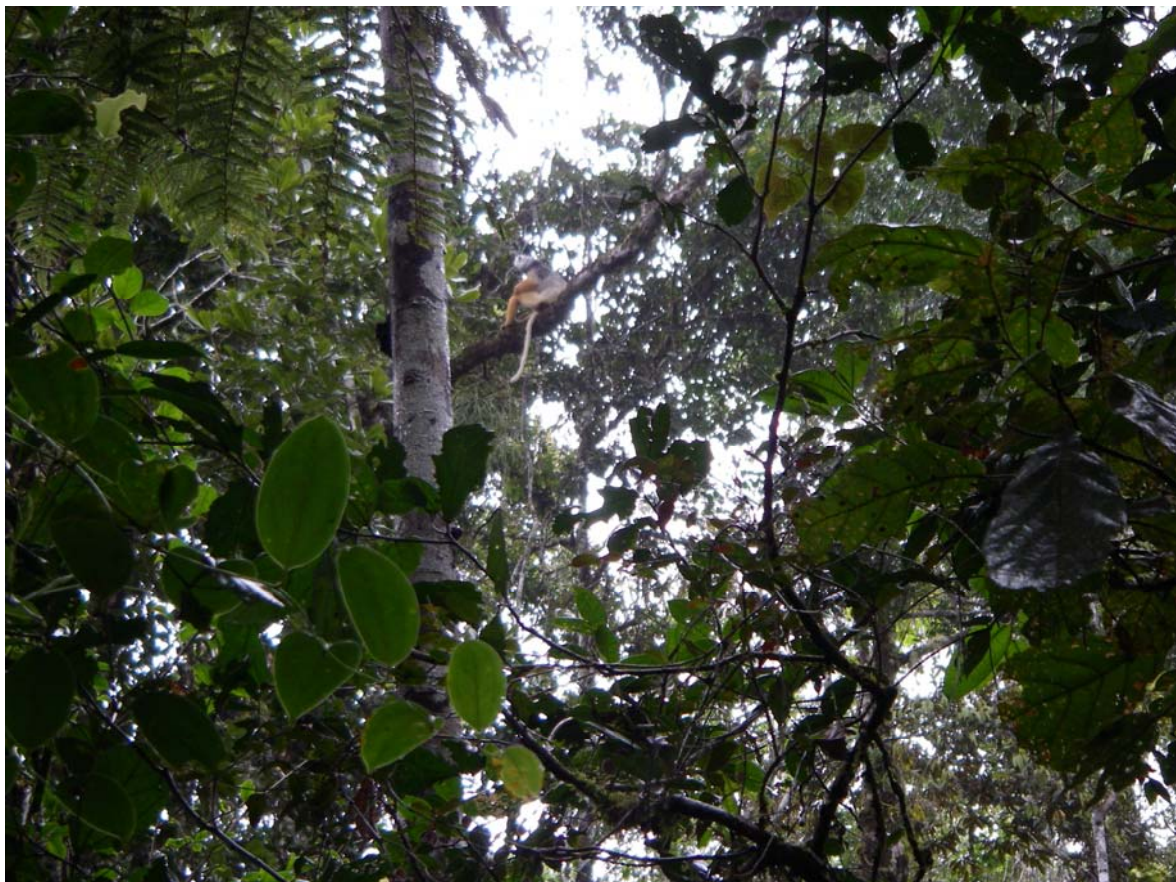


Fig 19. A wild and free Diademed Sifaka at Mantadia.



**Forest Fodies, Rand's and Cryptic Warblers**, and one **Tylas** were among the more uncommon species observed along the main road, early in the morning. We were also looking for **Forest Rock-Thrushes**, which can be seen in Mantadia in the rainy season, but did not score with this one. Other common species included **Madagascar Coucal, Madagascar Black Swift, Madagascar Black Swift, Madagascar Spine-tailed Swift, Alpine Swift, Madagascar Kingfisher, Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller, Madagascar Bulbul, Madagascar Magpie Robin, Madagascar Wagtail, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Ward's Flycatcher, Common Newtonia, Common Jery, Stripe-throated Jery, Madagascar White-eye, Souimanga Sunbird, Madagascar Green Sunbird, Madagascar Blue Vangas, Red-tailed Vanga, Madagascar Cuckoo-Shrike, Crested Drongo** and **Madagascar Mannikin**.

Mantadia is a great place for **Diademed Sifaka** and **Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur**. The first one, a lemur of size rivalling the mighty Indri, was seen twice (five individuals), the first one thanks to Jean Claude. The guides work together and alert each other if something nice is spotted in the forest. Also the latter species was seen twice, the second time being one of the highlights of the whole visit. Two groups with a total of about ten individuals met at the border of their territories, and provided quite a spectacle defending their areas against the others; no violence, but chasing and pressuring the others. **Indris** are common in Mantadia, as well, but quite difficult to spot as they are not habituated to humans like their cousins in Andasibe. You will, however, be sure to hear them. **Common Brown Lemurs** were also here, as well as ten **Grey Bamboo Lemurs** (Chute Sacre). Once I spotted an **Eastern Red Forest Rat** on the road, crossing over and stopping to observe us. Passing the Lemur Island of Vakona Lodge, a pair of captive **Ring-tailed Lemurs** were seen on its wet shore, in an environment rather alien for this dry country species.

Other interesting sights were plentiful, more so than in Andasibe: bright red and dark brown millipedes, an enormous ground worm, huge snails, noisy beetles, **Giant Wood Lice**, tree-frogs and butterflies.



Fig 20. **Giant Wood Lice**; 10 cm long, thick “sausages” often seen along the Mantadia road.





Fig 21. An almost 20 cm long forest snail, on the Chute Sacre trail. They are usually in pairs.

## AMPATSIPOTSY

The forests of Andasibe-Mantadia may be the main attraction of the region, but there are also interesting bird species which prefer more open habitats. Some of the best birds of Andasibe-Mantadia are discovered in a location along the main road to Tana, at Ampatsipotsy (signposted), a railway stop for charcoal (the curse of forests here!) in a place dotted by marshes and small farms. The number one speciality is the enigmatic **Grey Emutail**. There are several territories around, none of them close to the main road. One needs to visit the farms around, and check lush shrubby areas at the edge of rice fields to spot the song. At their territories, the emutails readily come to inspect tape recordings, peeping from the shrubbery. The landowners were very nice and welcoming, but it certainly helped to have Patrice around, to explain things in Malagasy.

Ampatsipotsy is also the site for **Madagascar Snipe**, and a great effort was spent to locate one, especially by Patrice, who waded waist deep in marshland to flush one off. In the end, we dipped out with this species. **Madagascar Swamp Warblers** are easy by the main road, at the marsh opposite of the Ampatsipotsy sign. There are a number of **(Madagascar) Stonechats** around the junction. The marshy habitat also has **Madagascar Flufftails**, but they are easier to see at Andasibe reserve. There are several **Madagascar Rails** at the marshes of Ampatsipotsy, but during our visits, they were unresponsive to tapes, preferring to call from their hiding places. **Madagascar Coucal** is common here, and relatively easy to see in the open agricultural environment. Others were regularly seen at Andasibe-Mantadia.

Little bit towards Moramanga, there are some small ponds on the northern side of the road which have **Madagascar Squacco Herons**, with their bright blue breeding plumage beaks. We made an attempt to see **Madagascar Partridges** in Ampatsipotsy, in place villagers had seen them a day or two ago, but failed. Fortunately, I had already seen the species in Mauritius, a few years ago. The site also had several **Madagascar Cisticolas**, a widespread species in rural Madagascar. Other common species seen here were **Madagascar Black Swift**, **Madagascar Kingfisher**, **Madagascar Bee-eater**, **Madagascar Bulbul**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Madagascar White-eye**, **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Madagascar Green Sunbird**, **Common Mynah**, **Madagascar Fody** and **Madagascar Mannikin**.



Fig 22. One of the several interesting spots around Ampatsipotsy – prime habitat for **Grey Emutail**.

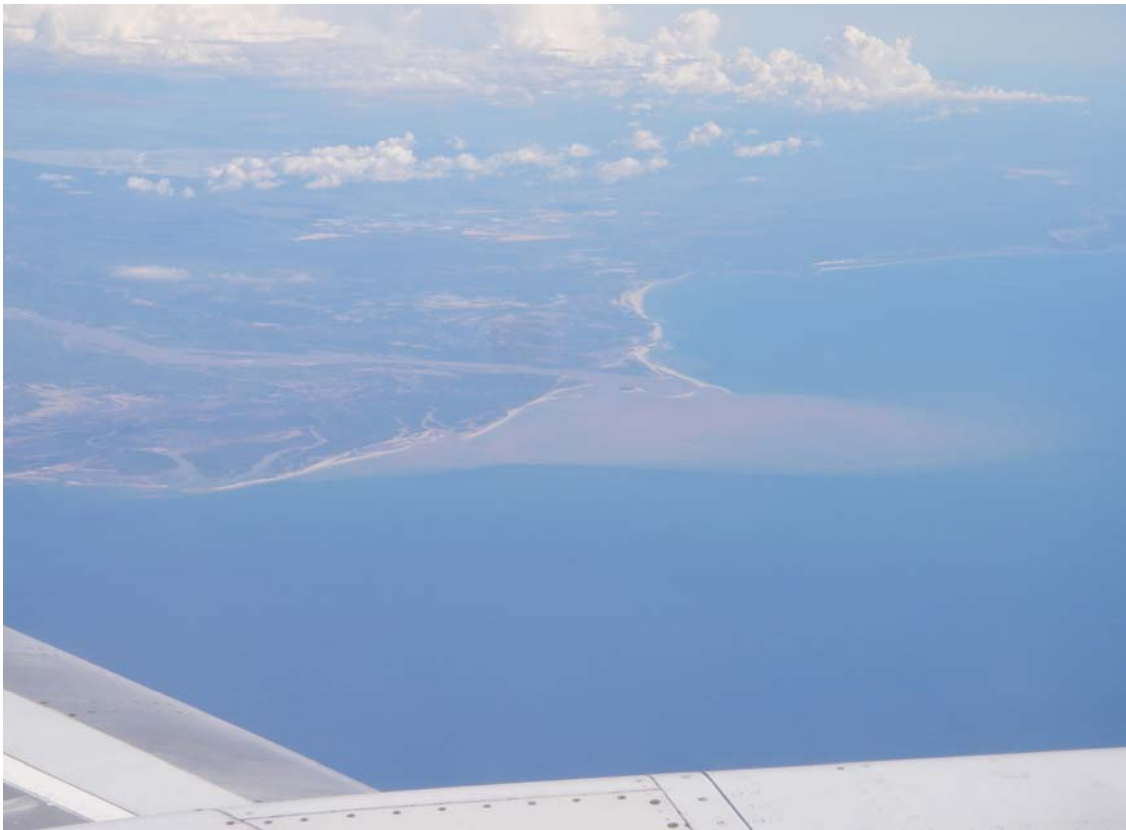


Fig 23. Veloma Madagascar! An aerial photo of red wash in a rivermouth, a sign of severe erosion.