

Mammal trip to Madagascar

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Introduction

This was my long awaited first trip to Madagascar and it fully lived up to expectations. The lemurs are just great and there are plenty of other mammals and reptiles, snakes being especially common (we saw about 12). The plan in the three weeks was to visit four or five of the prime reserves with the maximum number of lemur species and also to try to see fosa and aye-aye.

Ground arrangements were booked through ZA -Tours based in Tana (www.zatours.com.mg) and they were excellent and reasonably priced.

Travelling around Madagascar can involve some pretty long road journeys, notably from Tana to Ranomafana and back, around 10 hours each way through boring rice paddies. Other places were reached by flights with air Madagascar who despite all the stories were actually pretty good.

We'd also heard grim stuff about the food and stomach issues but I had no problems at all and good fresh bread and chips were available everywhere. We did however meet several people who were suffering and my travelling colleague Steve Morgan did get a two day bug. If you order chicken don't expect any meat on it!

We'd set a target of 30 mammals for the trip and ended up seeing an exceptional 41 species including fosa and only missed out on aye-aye and Madam Berthe's mouse lemur, which was disappointing as it's the worlds smallest primate.

Site Visited

Andasibe/Mantadia national park
Maroantsetra
Masoalo peninsula
Island of Nosy Mangabe
Ranomafana national park
Anja community reserve
Kirindy forest

Sat 3rd Oct

We left the hotel Lapasoa in Tana after an early breakfast for the 3 hour drive to Andasibe and a 3 night stay in the very nice Vakona lodge. We kicked off the mammal list with distant views of 3 indri by the park entrance and then met our excellent guide Maurice for our first walk in the Analamazoatra reserve. Around 500 metres along the trail we crossed a bridge with a stand of bamboo on one side and located 4 eastern

grey bamboo lemurs, which were pretty nervous and didn't show very well. Later back at the park entrance we waited until darkness for a night walk outside the park. Night visits in the parks have now been stopped, which makes some species now virtually impossible. The evening started with some good birds including Madagascar long eared owl and Madagascar crested ibis. Goodman's mouse lemur proved quite common and we found one furry eared dwarf lemur, newly out from it's winter sleep. The final lemur of the day was an eastern avari high in the canopy around the orchard garden, ending an excellent first day.

4th Oct

Today we drove into Mantadia national park and a chance for Diademed sifaka. These proved really difficult to find and after about 4 hours on some sometimes steep trails we located a troop of 5 animals. Following a picnic lunch back at the vehicle we walked along the road to a different area and Maurice taped out a Madagascar flufftail for really close views. We then cut back into the forest and hiked for a further couple of hours. late on locating a single black and white ruffed lemur high in a tree.

Later a night walk in the Mitsinjo community reserve found us plenty of chameleons, frogs and bugs, but the only mammal was a poor view of an eastern avari.

5th Oct

Back into Perinet and the highlight so far, close encounters with the indri, the largest lemur and the only one with a short tail, their calls and vertical leaps were stunning.

6th Oct

Up at 2am to drive back to Tana for our 7:40 air Mad flight up to Maroantsetra, which arrived on time. The short bumpy transfer to the Relais hotel in a 30 year old renault 4 was an experience. Arrived for a good lunch and spent an hour in the swimming pool just like on a real holiday! Later met with our guide Joseph and he led us on a long night walk to find Rufus mouse lemur and greater dwarf lemur.

7th Oct

This proved to be a mega day. Up at dawn for a 2 hour boat trip out to the Masoala peninsula at Lohotrozina. We quickly located a small group of red ruffed lemurs which became the star lemurs of the trip. Fantastic animals. Birds out here included a stunning helmet vanga. We later found a troop of white fronted brown lemurs and then returned to the boat for a picnic lunch on a paradise beach. On the boat ride back to the mainland we diverted to an island with a large roost of Madagascar flying foxes. Arrived back at the hotel around 3:30pm and there was a lowland streaked tenrec in the hotel grounds. By 4pm we were heading out again to the Farankarina forest and our search for the aye-aye. This involved a 1 hour plus boat ride upriver followed by a 5 kilometre walk to the stake out beneath a fruiting tree. We drew a blank. On the walk back to the

boat found we found a greater hedgehog tenrec. The boat couldn't pass a low bridge at night and so the hotel sent out bicycles and we had to ride the last 2 or 3 kilometres back to the hotel on a sand track, collapsing into bed at about 2am.

8th Oct

Up early again for the boat out to Nosy Mangabe and a nights camping. White belted black and white ruffed lemurs were easy to locate at the top of the island, around the tombs. The island was a great place and we were well looked after with good food, cold coke and beer and time for swimming in the bay. The night walk was really tough going and no aye-aye again but on the way back to camp a hova mole (rice) tenrec gave a brief view before disappearing in the leaf litter.

9th Oct

Travel day, flight back to Tana and a night at the Sakamanga hotel in a cramped room but with a great restaurant.

10th Oct

10 hour drive to Ranomafana now tarmac all the way to the park entrance. A shortish night walk got more mouse lemurs and a pair of mating greater dwarf lemurs.

11th Oct

Early into the park, started with some good birds, a male velvet asity, blue vanga and a Crossley's babbler on it's nest. By 7:20 we'd found 3 golden bamboo lemurs and by 8:15 were watching a pair of the now very endangered greater bamboo lemurs (reportedly under 100 animals left) these were soon followed by a troop of red fronted brown lemurs and half an hour later a pair of red bellied lemurs. Add in a couple of snakes, a large chameleon and back outside the Domaine nature hotel a large Madagascar ground boa and we'd had a fantastic first morning in Ranomafana.

The village of Ambolotahy close to the park entrance has a stream running through it where aquatic tenrec occur and having located a rock latrine site we decided on a night stake out. We set up some lights and spent 3 hours sat on rocks in the middle of the stream, but with no success.

12 Oct

This morning we visited the higher Vohipara area of the park to look for Milne - Edward's sifakas. These we were told had become hard to locate and we had no luck but the morning produced 3 eastern red forest rats along with a beautiful pygmy kingfisher. That afternoon we drove to Ambolavao and a night in the hotel Bourgainvillea.

13th Oct

A great visit to the Anja community reserve today to see ring tailed lemurs in a setting of large granite boulders. It was a beautiful place and the lemurs looked superb, as opposed to the tatty animals we had heard about at Berenty reserve down south. This place is really worth a visit and needs the tourist support.

14 Oct

Back to Ranamofana and today we eventually caught up with a pair of the Milne - Edward's sifakas. While we were watching these a local village guide had gone into the forest and found us a white tailed tree rat in its tree hole. We then made a lunch stop at the Bellevue clearing and I put down some food scraps including some smelly fish in the hope of attracting out a ring tailed mongoose. Within an hour amazingly one appeared and it came straight out into the sunlight and was a real stunner.

15 Oct

Day to forget, a long drive back to Tana. The vehicle breaking down 30 kilometres short of our destination adding 3 hours to the journey and a late arrival back at the hotel Sakamanga.

16 Oct

Up at 5:30 for a flight to Morondava on the west coast. Followed by a very bumpy two and a half hour drive up to Kirindy via the Avenue des Baobabs and it was now getting very hot.

Kirindy proved to be a wonderful place with basic huts in a forest clearing. The outside showers were just a wooden screen with cold water tap and a bucket. This was to get plenty of use over the next few days as the place was seriously hot. The BBC were there making a series of wild Madagascar programmes as there was a fosa mating tree in the forest behind the camp, which raised our hopes of a sighting. That night we walked into the forest first spotlighting a red tailed sportive lemur then fast moving pale fork-marked lemurs. Later grey mouse lemurs and a fat-tailed dwarf lemur. The place seemed stacked with lemurs and later on the main road ahead of us a fosa ran across. Fortunately it re-crossed the road and entered the forest. We picked it up in the spotlight and followed for about 5 minutes as it walked parallel to us about 5 metres inside the forest. It was a really impressive large male, and fortunately not wearing a radio collar.

17 Oct

Sitting at breakfast in the morning and a radio collared fosa appeared in camp, quickly disappearing on us. We spent the morning walking the forest and the highlight was a pair of narrow striped mongoose. That evening back in camp and a female fosa appeared hanging around to give some good views and even going into the shower

area to find a drink. The animals around camp it seemed were mostly radio collared. Tonights night walk was quieter but we did find a Coquerel's giant mouse lemur feeding on cockroaches around one of the rubbish pits near camp. After a long hot walk we returned for a late dinner and later on I decided to go back into the forest alone and then had a really good night finding bush pig, giant jumping rat and big-footed mouse.

18 Oct

A really hot day. Wandered around the camp looking at some birds. During the day another fosa appeared. While following it as it skirted around camp I jumped across one of the rubbish pits which was covered with some rotten timbers and was just lining up for a photo of the animal as it was coming into view when there was a scream behind me. Steve has fallen into the rubbish pit. He didn't seem to have broken any bones luckily just picking up a few scrapes so I went back to get my picture.

That night, our last night in the field, we went out looking for our last target Madame Berthe's mouse lemur. But despite our best efforts we dipped. Back in the hut that night I finally caught up without resident western tuft tailed rat, which came to finish off our biscuits.

19th Oct

Final morning in Kirindy before flying back to Tana where unfortunately we had two days to kill due to air Madagascars flight schedules.

20th Oct

We ended with a depressing visit to Tana zoo and paid the park director to stay after closing time for a look at the aye-aye. These were larger than I was expecting, really weird animals and I must return to try to see a wild one.

So ended a fabulous trip to Madagascar. What a great place!

Mammal list

- 1) Indri
- 2) Eastern grey bamboo lemur
- 3) Goodman's mouse lemur
- 4) Furry eared dwarf lemur
- 5) Eastern ahavi
- 6) Diademed sifaka
- 7) Common brown lemur
- 8) Black and white ruffed lemur (editorum)
- 9) Brown mouse lemur

- 10) Greater dwarf lemur
- 11) Red ruffed lemur
- 12) White fronted brown lemur
- 13) Black and white ruffed lemur (subsincta)
- 14) Golden bamboo lemur
- 15) Greater bamboo lemur
- 16) Red fronted brown lemur
- 17) Red bellied lemur
- 18) Ring tailed lemur
- 19) Milne - Edward's sifaka
- 20) Verreaux's sifaka
- 21) Red tailed sportive lemur
- 22) Pale fork marked lemur
- 23) Fat-tailed dwarf lemur
- 24) Grey mouse lemur
- 25) Coquerel's giant mouse lemur
- 26) Lowland streaked tenrec
- 27) Greater hedgehog tenrec
- 28) Madagascar flying fox
- 29) Hova mole tenrec
- 30) Major's tuft tailed rat
- 31) Greater long fingered bat
- 32) Eastern red forest rat
- 33) White tailed tree rat
- 34) Ring tailed mongoose
- 35) Fosa
- 36) Commerson's leaf nosed bat
- 37) Western tuft tailed rat
- 38) Narrow striped mongoose
- 39) Bish pig
- 40) Giant jumping rat
- 41) Big footed mouse
- 42) Brown rat