

Madagascar: 9 October – 3 November 2012

Madagascar is truly a lovely place, for us maybe the best place there is to watch wildlife, so we decided to go back yet another time.

We divided the tour in 2 parts: The first part took us from Sambava in the north-east to Diego Suarez in the north and included Marojejy NP, the Daraina region and Andrafiarana Classified Forest. We organized this part through Eric Mathieu (info@marojejy.com) and we can really recommend him. The guides, food and transports were excellent.

Marojejy NP was our first stop. Marojejy is a fantastic national park teeming with wildlife. It is not overrun like some other of the more famous parks and the scenery is nothing short of breathtaking. We can imagine that this is how some of the other parks felt like many years ago.

Our guide was Moses, and he was great. You may have seen him in one of the BBC documentaries from Marojejy a couple of years back. Our cook, Romeo, prepared some of the best food we have had in any national park around the world. You can sleep in some rustic but adequate 4-bed bungalows or pitch the tent in each of the 3 camps.

You can drive as far as the village of Manantenina. From there to camp 1 it is an easy 2-3 hours walk, albeit very hot. There is a lot to see on the way to camp 1 and it took us 6. Panther Chameleons au masse;



Day Geckos (*Phelsuma madagascariensis*);



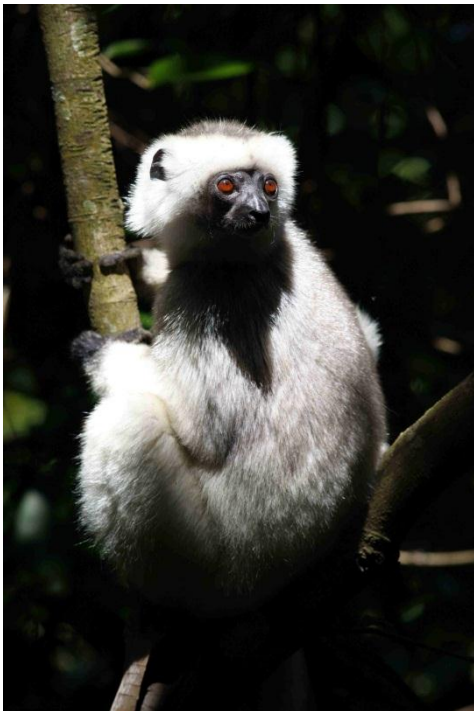
a nesting Blue-helmed Vanga;



a tree climbing **Eastern Ring-tailed Mongoose** and a group of **Western Lesser Bamboo Lemur** (*H. Occidentalis*) preoccupied us. The Bamboo Lemur was reclassified this year only. They are usually seen in the bamboo forest close to camp 1. We saw them on the way up as well as on the way down. They are somewhat shy, but we got some decent looks.



The trail from camp 1 to up to camp 2 is still relatively easy going and should take some 2 hours. We had a bit longer than that as we had to follow a group of **White-fronted Brown Lemurs**. We saw this species a few times during our stay at various locations and the area between camp 1 and 2 is the best place to see them. The star of the show is arguably the endangered **Silky Sifaka**.



You are guaranteed to see them around camp 2 as a group of researchers are following a habituated family of 7 individuals daily. The first day we saw them close to the trail so that was reasonable comfortable. But usually we had to follow the steep and muddy paths. It is hard work, and they move a lot, but that is part of the fun. You may also see them on the way to camp 3 or close to camp 3, but camp 2 is for sure the best place to see them. We were even lucky to see a newborn baby, which is very unusual for this time of the year. A few days after we left the park the group split in two, which happens from time to time.

Camp 2 is the best place to see a variety of animals. An Eastern Ring-tailed Mongoose hangs around the kitchen mornings and afternoons. He is cheeky and steals food. Around the toilet we saw one **Greater Dwarf Lemur** (*Cheirogaleus major*), 2 **Brown Mouse Lemurs** and 1 species of **Tuft-tailed Rats**, which species I cannot say. Around camp 2 we also saw a few Brown Leaf Chameleon (*Brookesia superciliaris*);



one Two-lined Leaf-tailed Gecko (*Uroplatus lineatus*), which has taken up his residence close to the camp for guides. We found him every time we looked (which was every night);



a few Common Leaf-tailed Geckos (*Uroplatus fimbriatus*), and a few Blue-nosed Chameleons (*Calumma boettgeri*).

The trail to camp 3 is very steep and slippery. Much of the time you have to climb over roots and drag yourself up. If you carry a heavy backpack and a tripod take care as it is very easy to slip and hurt yourself (I speak from experience). On the way up to camp 2 and also on the way down, we saw 3 **Red-bellied Lemurs**. They are usually seen here, but not as well as in

Ramonafana NP. Our goal was to climb to the top, which should be spectacular, but due to my fall, we never went. It is rather cold up in camp 3, but Romeo boiled some hot water for our shower and he had also brought some nice rum, so we were comfortable enough. The mossy forest around camp 3 is very beautiful so it is well worth the (painful) climb and we saw some fantastic Chameleons; Vence's Chameleon (*Calumma vencesi*) and the rare *Calumma marojezense*, and on the way down the next day a *Brookesia vadoni*.



We cannot praise Marojejy highly enough. There are many species to be found, the locals are very friendly and you get a feeling of adventure in a beautiful setting. Most likely, we will spend Christmas there next year.

After 2 nights in the nice Mimi hotel in Sambawa, we headed for Daraina, a small rural town in the middle of nowhere, some 70 km from Vohemar (3 hours). You need a 4*4 as the road is terrible. You drive so slow you cannot oversee the many Oustalet's Chamelonts, the largest of all chameleons, along the road. Our driver was Christian and cook was Dolph, both very recommendable.



The Key mammal species to see in Daraina is the **Golden-crowned Sifaka**.





This is also a very easy Sifaka to see and you are guaranteed to see it and you do not have to work very hard for it. If you are just passing through, which you are not, a few hours suffice. That would be a shame however as the region got a lot to offer. The gold diggers may be a nuisance and you have to look down as much as up, not to fall down in the many holes. On a couple of occasions during our 2 nights stay, we saw the **Crowned Lemur**. We did not see them very well, and by far not as well as in Ankarana Special Reserve or in Mountain d'Ambre further north. The night walks are an endemic affair. When the dark sets the forest echoes with a loud, high-pitched call. It is a Fork-marked lemur making the noise, and it is believed to be a new species. Mittermeier call it **Head-bobbing Lemur**. I guess DNA test will give the answer, but it looks different to the other Fork-marked Lemurs and it lives in a different habitat than its northern cousin. Twice we also saw a species of Fat-tailed Lemur, and twice also a **Mouse Lemur**, the latter only described as a new species a few months ago, the name I do not know yet..



The star of our night walks were 2 **Aye Aye's** however. On the first day some gold miners told us they had seen an Aye-Aye early in the very same morning close to the old Tattersalli camp. They knew of 2 nests close by, so after dark we went to one nest and our guide to the other. It did not take long and Amidou, another guide, came running. 2 Aye-Aye's had just come out of their nest. We ran as fast as we could with cameras and tripods. We saw them on 2 consecutive nights using the same nest. A few have seen them here on different occasions, so outside the fake Aye-Aye island, this may be your best shot for them. But you may want to hurry up as the gold miners are destroying the area.



Do not expect much from the guides here. The guide that made the best impression, although we did not walk with him, was Amidou (amidoubensoulemany@yahoo.fr). Our guide

was Leonard and we cannot recommend him. Dolph, our great cook and Christian our cheerful driver were in fact acting as our guides and porters and light-givers so we could film and get some footage. We stayed in the town of Daraina in a hotel run by Fanamby (fanamby@fanamby.org.mg) where you also can eat. The best option would be to camp but you need to be self-sufficient as Fanamby tore down their tented camp only a few months back. The gold-diggers seemed friendly enough and we did not feel threatened. The atmosphere is quite different here to the Sapphire field around Ilakaka in the south. We can only hope that Fanamby begins to take tourists to other parts of the forest away from the gold-miners.

Our last stop was Andrafiarana Classified Forest some 70 km south of Diego Suarez, just opposite Ankarana Special Reserve. You can make the drive from Daraina in a very long day, but we decided to split the tour in 2 as the road is very bad and exhausting. The wildlife in Andrafiarana is in general pretty much the same as in Ankarana, and some species you see better there. To Andrafiarana you come to look for **Perrier's Sifaka**. This is another Lemur not easily seen and once you find them they are very difficult to follow. Researchers have recently found new groups of them so they are not that endangered as they once were thought to be, but only one group of 6 has been somewhat habituated. The guide will often ask you to wait on the trail while he disappears for 20-30 min in the very thick undergrowth looking for them, not always successfully. Of the 5 walks we saw them on 4 occasions however. Getting good shots of this black Lemur against the white sky was not easy however, but that is a different story.



Our guide was Guito and we can recommend him. He worked hard and could explain a lot about wildlife and plants in good English. Other Lemurs we saw during our 2 nights stay were

one brief look of a group of **Sanford's Brown Lemur**, decent views of a group of 6 Crowned Lemurs and some excellent views of a few **Ankarana Sportive Lemurs**, one having a baby.



Just beside our tent high up in a beautiful lush mango tree a **Northern-Rufus Mouse Lemur** had his nest.

We also saw a beautiful boa, a *Acrantophis madagascariensis*.



At the time of our visit the only option was to tent and you must bring your own food. This may change soon however as Fanamby was building new bungalows inside the forest,

including a restaurant. It was planned to open in November, but it may be better to check this first (fanamby@fanamby.org.mg).

The second part of our trip took us to Kirindy Forest and Tsingy de Bemaraha. We organized the 4*4 car with Jean-Michael Golfier, and we can recommend him. To drive to Kirindy you do not need a 4*4 but for the Tsingys you do.

Kirindy is nothing short of brilliant and the night walks are as good as it gets. Our guide was Christian and he is very recommendable (chrisnaturalist@gmail.com). The drive to the Tsingys would take some 10-12 hours from Morondava, so we divided it in 2, with a couple of nights in Kirindy first.

In the restaurant in Kirindy a family of **Grey-mouse Lemurs** resides. They are fed bananas, so they are easily seen. They sleep inside the restaurant and come out after 18 or so. During the day you may see a tail or a foot sticking out. The **Red-fronted Brown Lemurs** (*Eulemur rufifrons*) patrols the camping ground looking for food as do the **Narrow-striped Mongoose**.



There is no particular effort needed to see these species. It is a shame that they have not been able to solve the rubbish problem, so their label ECO does not mean very much. During our first afternoon walk through the forest we also spotted a group of **Verreaux Sifakas** as well as one Narrow-striped Mongoose. Later on, just beside our bungalow, a **Western Tuft-tailed Rat** foraged the forest floor. The first night tour produced a few **Red-tailed Sportive Lemurs**, some **Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemurs**;



many **Pale Fork-marked Lemurs**;



and 2 **Coquerel's Dwarf Lemurs**.



The latter is not easily seen, the formers are. Another specialty of Kirindy is the **Giant Jumping Rat**. They are also feeding them so they usually, but not always, come out after 22 or so. On a couple of nights we had them jumping in front of us through the forest. The highlight of the evening was however the mating Grey Mouse Lemurs. This is a very rarely seen event in the wild and the females are only receptive for one night. There were 3 or 4 males competing for this one female and the winner hung on for his dear life.



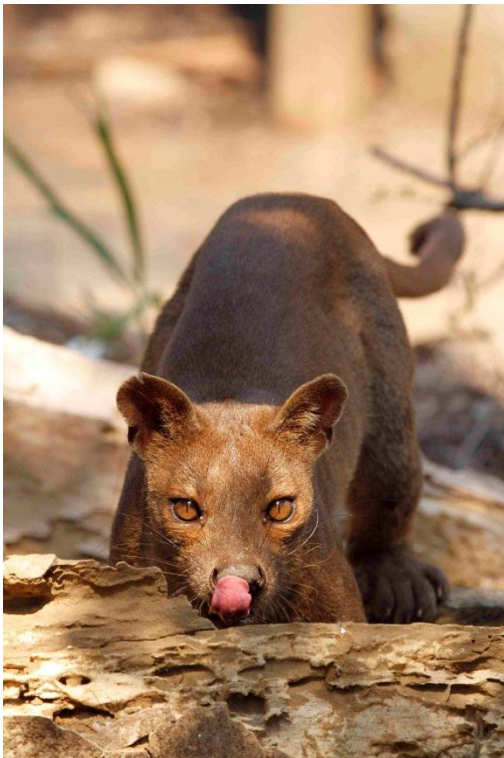


Not a bad first day (and night)!

Kirindy is often full at this time of the year. We had made no booking and the camp was full, so we had to stay in a Fanamby camp some 20 min from Kirindy. We were a bit frustrated at first. However, the Fanamby camp turned out to be quite lovely, with plenty of space between the african safari tents. It is a bit more expensive than Kirindy, but the airy tents are less hot than the bungalows in Kirindy and the food is much better (and cheaper). The trail system is not as good as in Kirindy but the wildlife is the same, so sleeping in Fanamby and wildlife watching in Kirindy is not a bad combination. Another redeeming feature in Fanamby was the family of 3 Pale Fork-marked Lemurs nesting in a hollow tree-trunk at the car park. At about 18:30 each night they came out one after the other.

The 2nd day in Kirindy produced the usual suspects as well as 2 species of Scops owl, the Malagasy Scops Owl and Torotoroka Scops Ow. We were disappointed not having seen a Fossa yet. This is the prime season and Kirindy is arguably the best place in Madagascar to see them. A couple of days before we came, one had caught a Red-fronted Brown Lemur in the camp, so we hoped that was the reason. The new species for the evening was the **Commersons Leaf-nosed Bat**.

Next morning, having only driven 30 minutes towards the Tsingys, a **Fossa** came out on the road and rested on the roadside for the better part of 5 minutes. We would see Fossa's on numeral occasions later on in Kirindy.



From Fanamby to Tsingy de Bemaraha it took us 9 hours. We stayed in the nice hotel L'Orchidee du Bemaraha. It is fairly close to the Petit Tsingy, the food is good and some endemic mouse lemurs are nearby. In the forest by the hotel entrance we saw our first **Peters Mouse Lemur** and during our first 2 hour walk we spotted 10 of them. They were easily seen and we saw some on each of the three night walks we did. Also in that forest we spotted several snakes, including one Boa, a *Sanzinia madagascariensis* volontany.



To the Grand Tsingy it takes about 1 hour from the village. It gets very hot during the day so leave early. After only a few minute walk from the car park we saw our first, and only, group of 4 **Decken's Sifaka** and shortly thereafter we saw a group of **Red-fronted Brown Lemur** (*Eulemur fulvus rufus*), which is a different sub-species from Kirindy's. In the afternoon, also close to the car park, we spotted a **Randriansolo's Sportive Lemur** sleeping in a tree. Without the excellent eyes of our guide we would not have seen that one. The lemur we really wanted to see was Cleese's Avahi but without success. A few days later we talked with Prof. Goodman, and on his 6 expeditions looking for them he had only found them twice.

The best way to see the Grand Tsingy and to look for the rarer species would be to camp. You would need to bring your own food. The camp was unfortunately closed when we were there but was supposed to open in April again.

On our one visit to the Petit Tsingy we encountered one Decken's Sifaka and a group of 5 Red-fronted Brown Lemur as well as one Malagasy Kestrel catching a lizard on the Tsingy's.



The Tsingy guides are not very used to looking for mammals as most tourists are interested in the 2 Tsingys only. Our guide was Tovonasy and he was good.

Back in Kirindy we were desperate to see **Madame Berths Mouse Lemur**. They are not easily seen and not easily separated from the common Grey Mouse Lemurs. And they are getting rarer. No one knows why the density in the area is decreasing. If it is because they

are being outcompeted by the numerous Grey Mouse Lemurs and are moving or for any other reason no one knows for sure. After many hours on the trails we eventually found a few.

We had 3 lovely nights in Kirindy finding all the usual suspects over and over again, including the Fossa.

If you decide to come to Kirindy in November it is probably good to book a bungalow well in advance. Mr. Goodman and other teachers have classes for overseas students for 4 weeks. At that time the camp is pretty full.

We had one day to kill after Kirindy, and as we do not like Tana very much, we decided to take a taxi to Andasibe as it is only a 3 hour drive. We had our international flight in the late afternoon the next day giving us a night walk and one morning walk. We have been there a few times before but it is always worth a visit. As usual we stayed in Feon y Ala. Our guide was Donna Marcel (donna.andasibe@gmail.com) and he is very good. He is a reptile specialist, but for Andasibe this is fine as the Lemurs are not very difficult to find. Just follow the crowd.

We arrived late in the afternoon and after an early dinner we went on a long night walk. Donna knew where to find the parks two species of Leaf-tailed Geckos, Mossy (*U. sicorae*) and Fantastic (*U. phantasticus*), and it did not take long until he found both of them.



We saw plenty of **Goodman's Mouse Lemurs** along the road, many **Greater Dwarf Lemurs**, some adult Parson's Chameleon as well as a baby Parson's Chameleon.



The Lemur we wanted to see during the day was the **Eastern Bamboo Lemur**. We have seen it many times before but wanted to see it again. They are usually found close to the first bridge in the bamboo forest. Donna also found us an **Eastern Avahi** as well as one Mossy Leaf-tailed Gecko.

We were taken aback over the crowds of tourists in the park. We even saw one with a tiara on her head, which made a memorable end to a great mammal watching tour.

Carmen and Torbjörn Lundqvist