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Worldwide Birding Adventures

Madagascar **Masoala Peninsula Extension** *29th October to 3rd November 2016* **Trip Report**



Helmet Vanga by Mark Oberle

Trip report compiled by tour leader Adam Walley

Tour Summary

The group convened in the national capital of Antananarivo. Half the group had just completed a comprehensive tour of Madagascar and were concluding their adventure, the other half, arriving from their international flights, were just beginning theirs. The first news was that our domestic flight to Maroansetra had been brought forward, so after breakfast, we headed to the airport, checked in and observed a few Mascarene Martins as we boarded our aircraft. After initially flying over vast tracts of denuded and eroded land, we began to see the hilly rainforest. After a pit stop in Sambava, we arrived at Maroansetra and as we descended, the Masoala forest extended as far as the eye could see to the port side of the plane, a glorious sight. We headed straight to our brand new hotel and had a very late lunch. What remained of the afternoon was free time as the sun sank slowly over Antongil Bay.

This year's Masoala peninsula trip featured an addition to the usual itinerary, with an overnight visit to the community reserve of Farainkaraina. After breakfast, we boarded our small boat and the adventure began! The estuary and small waterways were full of waterbirds as we slowly cruised past, including Dimorphic, Great and Western Cattle Egrets, Black, Purple, Striated, and Squacco Herons, Black-crowned Night Heron, Reed Cormorants, White-faced Whistling Duck, a few Hottentot and Red-billed Teals, Common Moorhen, Yellow-billed Kite, and a variety of wintering shorebirds: Grey, Common Ringed and Greater Sand Plover, Whimbrel, Common Greenshank, Common Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstone. Other birds seen included Malagasy Coucal, African Palm Swift, Malagasy Kingfisher, Crested Drongo, Malagasy Bulbul, Madagascar Cisticola, Malagasy White-eye, Red Fody and Madagascar Mannikin. All in all, a nice introduction to the widespread birds of the region and certainly a great deal of diversity. The boatman skillfully navigated his way through the narrow, shallow passages and we eventually disembarked the boat for a pleasant walk to our lodgings for the night. Along the way we were delighted to see that Madagascar Pratincoles were very common, flying around and perched on seaside rocks. We had a nice encounter with a perched Frances' Sparrowhawk that was being mobbed by a pair of Malagasy Bulbuls. Much more unexpected were a pair of Madagascar Cuckoo-Hawks soaring for a time over a nearby ridge – *a major bonus*. Eventually, we arrived at our accommodation – basic huts set within an incredible location, where primary forest featuring towering trees come right



White-fronted Brown Lemur by Ron Majors

down to the sandy beaches of Antongil Bay. *Paradise!* After a short break and watching a male Red Fody constructing a nest right outside the restaurant area, we ventured along one of the flatter trails in the reserve. We immediately connected with a pair of Red-breasted Couas that showed reasonably well as they repeatedly crossed the trail - we would return in the afternoon for even better looks at the same pair. In the same area were a couple of sly Ring-tailed Mongoose. Not long afterwards, a shy Madagascar Ibis crept along the forest floor but soon vanished. Moving on, things were very quiet until we bumped into a pair of Madagascar Wood Rail that circled round and round us at close



range, giving superb views of this shy ground bird. *Wonderful!* We also saw a Blue Coua before returning to our lodgings for a lovely lunch and a lengthy siesta. As we set off on our afternoon walk, we were pleased to have a troupe of the localised White-fronted Brown Lemurs showing well for an extended period. The forests were very quiet, but the walk was pleasant. After turning around for the camp, we bumped into a nice mixed vanga flock that offered up good views of Blue and Hook-billed Vanga, along with brief views of Red-tailed and Chabert Vanga plus Madagascar Cuckooshrike. Minutes later, a pair of Madagascar Ibis appeared right in front of us on the trail, but flew off equally quickly.

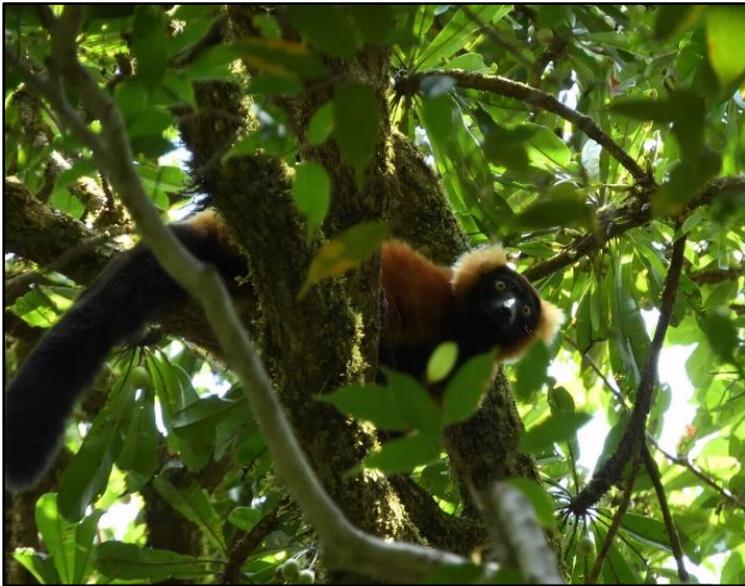
We settled into a late afternoon stakeout in camp for a roosting ibis, but it never materialised. Instead, we watched Madagascar Spinetails and then at dusk, a trio of Eastern Bamboo Lemurs appeared to feed on bamboo shoots. *Excellent!* With darkness descending, it was time to seek out our real quarry, the mythical Aye Aye. Such is the folklore surrounding this bizarre animal that there are even reports that villages have been burnt down and abandoned when this species has wandered into the village! Farainkaraina Reserve offers just about the only reasonable chance of seeing a truly wild Aye Aye anywhere in the world. The good news was that there was a huge *Canarium* tree just a minute away from the lodge that was in fruit, the



Aye Aye by Ron Majors

bad news was that it did not look as though the animal had visited it the night before. Regardless, we set up, with high expectations, under the giant tree. It immediately became apparent that the local troupe of White-fronted Brown Lemurs had decided to spend the night in the same tree, sleeping up high and intermittently feeding in it. The noise they were making was going to complicate our task of finding our quarry. A couple of Greater Dwarf Lemurs were found in the tree and we also had a quick view of Masoala Sportive Lemurs way up high as well. A Rainforest Scops Owl was found in the spotlight for good views as was a delightful Fimbriated Flat-tailed Gecko. This small area was full of wildlife, everything in fact, but the Aye Aye. Minutes turned to hours and we decided to take a break and return for dinner while our local guides kept tabs on the tree. It was a much smaller group that persisted late into the night. The hours rolled on and still nothing. Finally, nearing midnight, the last of the diehards were ready to call it quits, and the guides began to make apologies for our bad luck. Then it happened; the guides heard the distinctive call of the world's largest nocturnal primate and after a frantic few seconds, there it was, an Aye Aye, staring down at us while it contentedly worked its way through a huge pile of *Canarium* nuts. Very fortuitously, it stayed out in this open spot for nearly an hour, during which time everyone was roused from their cabins and arrived in plenty of time to watch this incredible animal use its incredibly long middle finger to scoop out the *Canarium* pulp and eat them one by one – *a feast for the Aye Aye and a magical moment never to be forgotten by those of us watching contentedly below!*





Red Ruffed Lemur by Robin Carle

We had a very short sleep and a very early breakfast before walking back to our boat, returning to Maroansetra town and transferring over to a speedboat for the crossing of Antongil Bay to our next base at Tampolo. The weather was delightful, sunny skies and flat seas, and the crossing took no time at all. We passed numerous groups of Bonitos that were followed by the occasional Great Crested Tern, Lesser Crested Tern and Common Tern. We then checked into our delightful accommodations set on the sandy beach, with the spine of the Masoala peninsula running up right behind us. *What a setting!* We wasted little time before reboarding the boat and exploring Masoala National Park, heading up a steep trail where our main quarry, the Helmet Vanga,

hopefully, awaited. It was not long before we found this iconic bird, in fact, it was more like the bird found us, as it came flying straight past us and then landed right in front of us. We soon realised we were in a nesting territory and over the next few minutes, we drank in prolonged, unbeatable views of the pair! Rather elated at such early success, we carried on higher up and within a large group of White-fronted Brown Lemurs, we found several Red Ruffed Lemurs, one of the most attractive of all primates and endemic to the peninsula. It had been a very long morning, so we headed back down the trail, adding a couple of brief sightings of Red-breasted Coua and returned to our lodgings for lunch.

It was time for a well-deserved siesta and as temperatures cooled off later in the afternoon, we returned into the forests. Things were exceptionally quiet, and apart from a couple of bulbuls, we did not see a single bird. We remained in the forest as dusk descended and saw another Rainforest Scops Owl. We returned to our lodge via a rather lengthy night walk, during which we had much improved views of Masoala Sportive Lemur from the previous evening and then two sightings of Moore's Woolly Lemur - the second one being particularly good. We also saw a Nose-horned Chameleon before returning to the lodge, where we enjoyed dinner and headed off to bed.



**The recently described Moore's Woolly Lemur
by Ron Majors**





Rufous Vanga by Ron Majors

We were up early for a full day in Masoala, with one target, Bernier's Vanga. Before leaving the beach, we were pleased to find a pair of really obliging Madagascan Starlings at a nest. We then walked through the tall secondary forest and paid close attention to any vanga flocks we encountered. This strategy netted us good views of Blue and Rufous Vangas, but little else. We also had brief encounters with Madagascan Ibis and Madagascan Wood Rail. Eventually, we arrived at the large clearing that is favoured by the Bernier's. Madagascan Blue Pigeon showed well here. As the heat of the

day slowly set in and there was no sign of our hoped-for vanga, the realisation set in that we would likely miss this special bird, as so many birders before us have. Suddenly, the farmer who owns the clearing came by and very casually mentioned that we would find the Bernier's if we went down a certain trail just a few hundred meters away. So away we went, through his rice paddies and into the forest. All was very quiet until a scarce Madagascan Sparrowhawk was found perched and sat out for lengthy views, a most unexpected bonus. Just a little bit further on, some calling Blue Vangas beckoned and announced the presence of a mixed feeding flock. The Blue Vangas gave great views and were joined by Crested Drongos, Malagasy Paradise Flycatchers, Nelicourvi Weavers and Malagasy Coucals. The flock was working a small area and it just felt like the Bernier's Vanga had to be around somewhere. After waiting nearly half an hour, the male was suddenly there, but disappeared before many people could see it. At the same time, a female appeared high in some *Pandanus* and this time everyone got on the bird, although it remained mostly obscured by leaves before it slipped away. After spending quite some time in vain as we attempted to relocate the birds, and pondering our next move, the female suddenly returned and spent several minutes out in the open, giving prolonged and excellent views to everyone. The male also made another appearance. *Success!* With this, we slowly made our way back to the lodge through the beautiful forests. Following another lunch and long siesta, we returned for one last walk in the forest. Again, things were relatively quiet but we were rewarded with our best yet looks at Red-breasted Coua, plus a very cooperative pair of Rufous Vangas. Our night walk tonight was very quiet, all we found were a couple species of sleeping day geckos.

With the status of our flight back to Tana somewhat unclear, we had to make a very early speed boat ride back to Maroansetra. We arrived



Tomato Frog by Robin Carle



at the airport and soon our fears were realised as our flight home was cancelled. With things looking grim for getting out of here, the decision was made to charter a plane. As we were sorting out the details, our local guide found us a Tomato Frog – *one last wildlife highlight!* In the early afternoon, two small planes arrived onto the otherwise empty Maroanetra airport and a couple hours later we were settling into our comfortable hotel in Tana, with plenty of time to connect with onward plans and full of great memories from one of the most special places on earth, the Masoala peninsula.

Annotated List of Birds

*Nomenclature and taxonomy follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). 2016. IOC World Bird List (v 6.1)
Notes are provided where Clements differs.*

Key to abbreviations:

E: an endemic species

NE: a near-endemic species (i.e. occurring in the Malagasy region only)

BE: a breeding endemic species

I: an introduced species

Conservation Status

CR: critical **EN:** endangered **VU:** vulnerable **NT:** near-threatened

Ducks & Geese Anatidae

White-faced Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna viduata*

Common in the Maroanetra area with some heavy late afternoon flights.

Red-billed Teal *Anas erythrorhyncha*

A handful near Maroanetra.

Hottentot Teal *Anas hottentota*

A handful near Maroanetra.

Ibises & Spoonbills Threskiornithidae

Madagascan Ibis (E) *Lophotibis cristata*

A total of three birds seen at Farainkaraina and another at Tampolo, all were shy and only seen briefly.

Hérons Ardeidae

Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

A few near Maroanetra.

Striated Heron *Butorides striatus*

Common around Maroanetra. Race *rutenbergi*.

Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*

A few around Maroanetra.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Many at Maroanetra and the Nosy Mangabe heronry. Also a single at the Bernier's Vanga clearing near Tampolo.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

Several around Maroanetra.



Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Many around Maroansetra	
Black Heron	<i>Egretta ardesiaca</i>
A few around Maroansetra.	
Dimorphic Egret	<i>Egretta dimorpha</i>
Many around Maroansetra and at the Nosy Mangabe heronry.	
<i>NOTE: This species is sometimes lumped by authorities as a distinct subspecies of the widespread Little Egret, Egretta garzetta. Clements treats it as a subspecies of Little Egret.</i>	

Cormorants Phalacrocoracidae

Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>
Very common around Maroansetra.	

Hawks & Eagles Accipitridae

Madagascan Cuckoo-Hawk (E)	<i>Aviceda madagascariensis</i>
A complete surprise. Two birds in flight at Farainkaraina.	
Frances's Sparrowhawk (NE)	<i>Accipiter francesii</i>
Good perched views at Farainkaraina.	
Madagascan Sparrowhawk (E) (NT)	<i>Accipiter madagascariensis</i>
Excellent views near Tampolo, a major bonus.	
Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius</i>
A handful at Maroansetra.	

Rails & Gallinules Rallidae

Madagascan Wood Rail (E)	<i>Canirallus kioloides</i>
Brilliant views of a pair at Farainkaraina, and more brief looks at Tampolo.	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
A few near Maroansetra.	

Plovers Charadriidae

Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
A single near Maroansetra.	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Three near Maroansetra.	
Greater Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>
Five near Maroansetra.	

Sandpipers & Allies Scolopacidae

Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
A few near Maroansetra.	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
A few near Maroansetra.	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Tringa hypoleucos</i>
Several near Maroansetra.	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
A small flock near Maroansetra.	



Pratincoles Glareolidae

Madagascar Pratincole *Glareola ocularis*
 Wonderfully common in the Masoala, with many observations at Farainkaraina and Tampolo.

Gulls & Terns Laridae

Greater Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*
 At least two in Antongil Bay.

Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis*
 A few in Antongil Bay.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
 At least one in Antongil Bay.

Pigeons & Doves Columbidae

Rock Dove (I) *Columba livia*
 Maroansetra.

Malagasy Turtle Dove (E) *Columba picturata*
 A couple were seen at Farainkaraina.

Madagascar Green Pigeon (NE) *Treron australis*
 A few near Maroansetra and at Tampolo.

Madagascar Blue Pigeon (E) *Alectroenas madagascariensis*
 Good views of a single bird near Tampolo.

Cuckoos, Couas & Coucals Cuculidae

Malagasy Coucal (NE) *Centropus toulou*
 Regularly seen both in marshlands and primary forest.

Blue Coua (E) *Coua caerulea*
 Several observations of this stunning bird in the Masoala forests included one spying the Helmet Vanga nest.

Red-breasted Coua *Coua serriana*
 Seen exceptionally well at Tampolo. Also good sightings at Farainkaraina and Masoala NP.

Typical Owls Strigidae

Rainforest Scops Owl (NE) *Otus rutilus*
 Good nocturnal views on consecutive nights at Farainkaraina and Tampolo.

Swifts Apodidae

Madagascar Spinetail (NE) *Zoonavena grandidieri*
 Regularly seen in flight over the Masoala forests.

African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus gracilis*
 A few near Maroansetra.

Cuckoo-Rollers Leptosomidae

Cuckoo Roller (NE) *Leptosomus discolor*
 Heard only near Tampolo.



Kingfishers Alcedinidae

Malagasy Kingfisher (NE)

Several good views.

Alcedo vintsioides

Bee-eaters Meropidae

Olive Bee-eater

A few at Tampolo.

Merops superciliosus

Falcons Falconidae

Malagasy Kestrel (NE)

Brief views at Farainkaraina.

Falco newtoni

Parrots Psittacidae

Lesser Vasa Parrot (NE)

A pair in flight at Tampolo.

Coracopsis nigra

Vangas Vangidae

Red-tailed Vanga (E)

A brief view of a female at Farainkaraina.

Calicalicus madagascariensis

Hook-billed Vanga (E)

Good views at Farainkaraina.

Vanga curvirostris

Bernier's Vanga (E) (VU)

A major success of the extension was getting great views of the female, along with more brief views of the male. It took quite a bit of effort to track these down and that made it all the more rewarding.

Oriolia bernieri

White-headed Vanga (E)

Heard at Tampolo.

Artamella viridis

Chabert Vanga (E)

A few scattered sightings.

Leptopterus chabert

Blue Vanga (NE)

Good views of this attractive bird at Farainkaraina and Tampolo.

Cyanolanius madagascarensis

Rufous Vanga (E)

Excellent views at Tampolo.

Schetba rufa

Helmet Vanga (E) (VU)

The iconic bird of Masoala, if not all of Madagascar. We could enjoy a pair at length in Masoala NP. Wow!!

Euryceros prevostii

Tylas Vanga (E)

Heard only at Tampolo.

Tylas eduardi

Common Newtonia (E)

Widely heard and a couple were seen at Tampolo.

Newtonia brunneicauda

Crossley's Vanga (E)

Heard briefly at Tampolo

Mystacornis crossleyi

Cuckooshrikes Campephagedae

Madagascar Cuckooshrike (NE)

Good views at Farainkaraina and Tampolo.

Coracina cinerea



Drongos Dicruridae

Crested Drongo (NE)

Seen in all types of habitat.

Dicrurus forficatus

Monarchs Monarchidae

Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher

Regular observations in the forest, mostly of rufous birds.

Terpsiphone mutata

Crows & Jays Corvidae

Pied Crow

A handful at Maroansetra.

Corvus albus

Bulbuls Pycnonotidae

Malagasy Bulbul (NE)

Seen in all forest habitats.

Hypsipetes madagascariensis

Swallows & Martins Hirundinidae

Mascarene Martin (BE)

Seen at Maroansetra and also the Tana airport.

Phedina borbonica

Cisticolas & Allies Cisticolidae

Common Jery (E)

A couple at Tampolo.

Neomixis tenella

Madagascan Cisticola (NE)

A couple sightings near Maroansetra.

Cisticola cherinus

White-eyes Zosteropidae

Malagasy White-eye (NE)

A few seen in forest edge.

Zosterops maderaspatanus

Starlings Sturnidae

Common Myna (I)

Abundant at Maroansetra.

Acridotheres tristis tristis

Madagascan Starling (E)

Fantastic views of a pair near their nest hole at Tampolo.

Hartlaubius aurata

Chats, Old World Flycatchers Muscicapidae

Madagascan Magpie-Robin (E)

A couple of rather shy birds, of the distinctive and localised nominate race.

Copsychus albospecularis

Sunbirds Nectariniidae

Souimanga Sunbird (NE)

A regular sight and sound in the Masoala forests.

Cinnyris sovimanga



Weavers Ploceidae

Nelicourvi Weaver (E)

Ploceus nelicourvi

Sightings at Farainkaraina and Tampolo.

Red Fody (E)

Foudia madagascariensis

Common with lots of bright males including a nest building bird in front of the restaurant at Farainkaraina.

Waxbills, Munias & Allies Estrildidae

Madagascar Mannikin (E)

Lemuresthes (Lonchura) nana

Commonly seen around Maroansetra, mostly in flight.

Annotated list of Mammals

Garbutt, N. (2007) *Mammals of Madagascar, A Complete Guide*.

IUCN 2015. *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2015-4*. <<http://www.iucnredlist.org>>.

Downloaded on 19 November 2015.

Malagasy Carnivores Eupleridae

Malagasy Ring-tailed Mongoose

Galidia elegans

2-3 cheeky animals were rummaging around near the camp kitchen and along the trails at Farainkaraina. Another one in the rainforest at Tampolo followed us with curiosity but kept its distance.

Mouse and Dwarf Lemurs Cheirogaleidae

Greater Dwarf Lemur

Cheirogaleus major

Good sightings of up to about 6 animals at night around Farainkaraina.

Sportive Lemurs Lepilemuridae

Masoala Sportive Lemur

Lepilemur scottorum

A couple briefly at Farainkaraina, then excellent views of one during a night walk at Tampolo.

Lemurs Lemuridae

White-fronted Brown Lemur

Eulemur albifrons

Excellent views of a large group at Farainkaraina, although their presence in the Aye Aye's feeding tree through the night might not have been preferred! We saw more at Tampolo.

Eastern Grey Bamboo Lemur (VU)

Hapalemur griseus

Excellent views of three on dusk at Farainkaraina.

Red Ruffed Lemur

Varecia rubra

Good views of a small group at Masoala NP was much enjoyed; they are only found here.

Avahis, Sifakas and Indri Indriidae

Moore's Woolly Lemur

Avahi mooreorum

Really good views of two at night around Tampolo, a recently described species.



Aye Ayes Daubentonia

Aye Aye

Daubentonia madagascariensis

After a lengthy and concerted nocturnal effort, we were ultimately rewarded with unforgettable views of one of these mythical creatures feeding on *Canarium* nuts above our heads. A magical moment !

Climbing Mice, White-tailed Rat, Malagasy Rats and Mice Nesomyidae

Lowland Red Forest Rat

Nesomys audeberti

We saw a couple of these around Tampolo.

Annotated list of Reptiles and Amphibians

Glaw, F. & Vences, M. *A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Madagascar*; Third Edition (2007).

Chameleons Chamaeleonidae

Nose-horned Chameleon

Calumma nasutum

One seen during a night walk at Tampolo.

Geckos Gekkonidae

Speckled Day Gecko

Phelsuma guttata

One of these sleeping on a *Pandanus* frond during a night walk at Tampolo.

Peacock Day Gecko

Phelsuma quadriocellata

One of these was also sleeping on a *Pandanus* frond during a night walk at Tampolo.

Fimbriated Flat-tail Gecko

Uroplatus fimbriatus

A bizarre and wonderful creature and the second largest of its genera, we had one at night at Farainkaraina.

Plated Lizards Gerrhosauridae

Madagascar Girdled Lizard

Zonosaurus madagascarensis

These were common in the Masoala forests.

Brygoo's Girdled Lizard

Zonosaurus brygooi

At least one of these at Farainkaraina.

Reed Frogs Hyperoliidae

Spotted Reed Frog

Heterixalus punctatus

Our local guides showed us one of these beauties hiding on the inside of a *Pandanus* frond during our walk into Farainkaraina.



Microhylidae

Tomato Frog

Dyscophus antongilii

An amazing beast – our guide found us one in Maroansetra. We couldn't decide if it was ugly or beautiful.

Madagascar Frogs Mantellidae

Undescribed Madagascar Frog

Mantidactylus sp. nov.

We saw a couple of these frogs on the walk into Farainkaraina, apparently an undescribed species that is related to *Mantidactylus grandidieri*.

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