



Rockjumper Birding Tours

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Masoala Extension I

22nd - 27th October 2007



Helmet Vanga by Cuan Rush

Trip Report compiled by Tour Leader Cuan Rush

Tour Summary

Our trip began with a visit to Lake Alarobia, a wetland sanctuary within the city limits of the capital, Antananarivo. Here we observed large numbers of waterfowl and a number of very active heronries. Specials for the morning visit included Malagasy Pond Heron, African Openbill and Fulvous Whistling Duck. We then headed out to Ivato airport for our flight to Maroanetra, however, in usual Madagascar Air fashion; they had altered the flight schedule without informing us. Finally, we boarded the flight

and after an hour or so, landed in Tamatave (Toamasina) on the east coast. By now, it was late in the afternoon and with inclement weather conditions our connecting flight to Maroansetra was cancelled. While waiting for transport into town we added House Sparrow, Madagascar Nightjar (great views of a bird on the tar road outside the airport building) and Barn Owl (good flyover views in the spotlight) at the airport. Not a bad way to overcome our misfortune!

We boarded our flight to Maroansetra early the next morning and all went to plan. Upon arrival we transferred to our awaiting boat, loaded up and journeyed on to the Masoala peninsula. The weather conditions were not ideal, but after the initial rain showers, we enjoyed the great scenery of Nosy Mangabe and some other islands where we located a colony of Madagascar Flying Foxes. As we approached our destination, bird activity increased and we recorded both Lesser Crested and Swift Tern. The tranquil setting of Masoala Forest Lodge was a welcome sight. Shortly after disembarking, we had two Blue Coua feeding in the fruiting trees around the lodge and screeching Greater Vasa Parrot flying overhead. After lunch we made for the famed forests of the peninsula and were slightly disappointed as the birding was very quiet but we did find 10+ Madagascar Pratincoles while walking along the shoreline. We did have a good end to the day with a great sighting of Rainforest Scops Owl in the lodge grounds!

Two full days of forest birding lay ahead of us on the Masoala peninsula and we had a number of targets to notch-up, including one of the most highly sought after birds in Madagascar, Helmet Vanga. So began our search of the forests and on our first morning we found large numbers of specials namely Banded Kestrel, Henst's Goshawk, Madagascar Wood Rail, Red-fronted Coua, Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, Rufous Vanga and Spectacled Tetraka. Shortly before leaving the forest for lunch we stumbled upon an active Helmet Vanga nest and fortunately the bird was on the nest. Jackpot on the first morning – what a bonus! After enjoying good scope views we left the bird in piece and headed back to the lodge. Other highlights included the stunning Red-ruffed Lemur and White-fronted Brown Lemur. Another quiet afternoon was punctuated by sightings of Lowland Streaked Tenrec, unsatisfactory brief views of Crossley's Babbler and a pair of Hook-billed Vanga and Red-tailed Vanga.

The second full day on the peninsula started with an excellent sighting of Lowland Streaked Tenrec in the lodge grounds. We observed these delightful little creatures foraging around Rod's bungalow before we raced-off into the forest on our morning walk. It was a great morning's birding and it was not long before we found White-headed Vanga and a male Velvet Asity. In some good forest habitat we had an outstanding sighting of Red-breasted Coua, perched and calling about ten feet away. Then we tracked down a calling Short-legged Ground Roller which turned out to be a pair and shortly thereafter we surprised a pair of Scaly Ground Rollers on the forest path. They shot around us and landed nearby affording brilliant views. The birding high continued and we added White-throated Oxylabes, Helmet Vanga (off the nest for several minutes) and another "tame" Scaly Ground Roller which proceeded to hop along the forest trail in front of us, fanning and displaying its beautifully marked tail. We also had another sighting of both the special lemurs and most of us agreed that the Red-ruffed animals are absolutely stunning and one of the most attractive mammals in the world! At dusk we followed up on a lead for the mysterious Aye-Aye, but this denizen of the night eluded us on this occasion. Nevertheless, it was great day in the forests of the peninsula.

After an early breakfast we once again boarded the boat and cruised for the town of Maroansetra. The trip was much smoother, no rain and a glassy ocean aided us, and we made good time into the town. Our flight back to Tana was on schedule but we still had to go via the small town of Antalaha (just a 20 minute jaunt) where we had to disembark and board the same plane to get us back to the capital. Upon

arrival we transferred to our hotel for a relaxing afternoon before the start of our Madagascar Comprehensive tours. And so ended a short, but very successful tour of the stunning Masoala Peninsula.

Annotated Checklists of Birds, Mammals and “Herps”

Nomenclature and taxonomy follows Morris, P. & Hawkins, F. (1998) *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Madagascar*, with the notable exception of a few of the recent taxonomic changes; Garbutt, N. (1999) *Mammals of Madagascar* with recent changes as adopted by Mittermeier *et al* (2006) *Lemurs of Madagascar*, and, Glaw, F. & Vences, M. (1994) *A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Madagascar*. Insect names were derived from various sources.

BIRDS

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

e: an endemic subspecies

ne: a near-endemic subspecies

be: a breeding endemic subspecies

CONSERVATION STATUS

C: critical **En**: endangered **V**: vulnerable **NT**: near-threatened

Ducks & Geese Anatidae

White-faced Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna viduata*

Large numbers, an estimated 200+, were recorded at Lake Alarobia on the first day of the tour.

Fulvous Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna bicolor*

Scanning through the masses of White-faced Duck, we found five of these attractive birds at Lake Alarobia.

Knob-billed Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos*

Lake Alarobia in Tana produced views of this large duck.

Red-billed Teal *Anas erythrorhyncha*

Large numbers seen at Lake Alarobia in Tana.

Grebes Podicipedidae

Madagascar Grebe (E) (V) *Tachybaptus pelzelinii*

We recorded four of these endemic birds at Lake Alarobia.

NOTE: Globally threatened and declining due to habitat loss, introduction of exotic fish, and competition (and possibly hybridization) with Little Grebe.

Storks Ciconidae

African Openbill *Anastomus lamelligerus*

An uncommon species in Madagascar, we were fortunate to find a single bird at Lake Alarobia.

Hérons Ardeidae

Black-crowned Night-Heron*Nycticorax nycticorax*

A good-sized breeding colony of these attractive herons were recorded during the visit to Lake Alarobia.

Striated Heron*Butorides striatus*

Small numbers were seen at most freshwater wetlands during the extension.

NOTE: Represented in Madagascar by the race *B. s. rutenbergi*, which tends to be darker than its African counterpart, with a reddish neck reminiscent of the American *B. s. virens* (Green Heron).

Squacco Heron*Ardeola ralloides*

Peak numbers of 50+ breeding birds recorded at Lake Alarobia.

Malagasy Pond Heron (BE) (V)*Ardeola idea*

Lake Alarobia provided us with our sightings of this species where 10 birds were seen.

NOTE: A regional endemic breeder that is considered vulnerable and declining due to competition with Common Squacco Heron.

Cattle Egret*Bubulcus ibis*

Common throughout the tour and recorded daily.

Purple Heron*Ardea purpurea*

Small numbers of this attractive heron were seen on our boat ride from Maroansetra to Masoala and on return trip.

Great Egret*Ardea alba*

Recorded during the tour at various wetland sites.

Black Heron*Egretta ardesiaca*

Good numbers of these charismatic birds were seen at Lake Alarobia.

Dimorphic Egret (NE)*Egretta [garzetta] dimorpha*

Recorded daily during this extension.

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.

Cormorants Phalacrocoracidae**Reed Cormorant***Phalacrocorax africanus*

A single bird seen in the river at Maroansetra.

Falcons Falconidae**Malagasy Kestrel (NEe)***Falco newtoni*

Small numbers seen in Tana during the tour.

Banded Kestrel*Falco zoniventris*

A single bird was seen on a morning walk on the Masoala Peninsula along the forest edge.

Hawks & Eagles Accipitridae**Black Kite***Milvus migrans*

Only four birds seen on the extension at Lake Alarobia.

NOTE: This species is often lumped by some authorities with Yellow-billed Kite. Although considered a separate species from Black Kite by some authorities, in the south of Madagascar at Berenty it is possible to witness both Yellow-billed and Black Kites interbreeding, hence one of the reasons for confusion in taxonomy.

Frances's Sparrowhawk (NE)*Accipiter francesii*

This species was seen at Masoala Forest Lodge by some of the participants.

Henst's Goshawk (E) (NT)*Accipiter henstii*

This visually impressive bird was seen briefly in the forests of the Masoala Peninsula.

NOTE: A scarce endemic that occurs at low densities; usually detected by its far-carrying and distinctive calls.

Rails & Gallinules Rallidae**Madagascar Wood Rail (E)** *Canirallus kiolooides*

A particularly tricky forest undergrowth species to see well, we had views on our first full day on the peninsula.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Small numbers were encountered at Lake Alarobia on the first day of the tour.

Plovers Charadriidae**Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*

This species was seen on the sandbanks near Maroansetra.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

On the last morning of the tour, we had an individual at the Andranofotsy river mouth in Maroansetra.

White-fronted Plover *Charadrius marginatus*

Upon entering the Andranofotsy river mouth we spotted a single bird.

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

As for the above species, we had one bird in the river mouth at Maroansetra.

Sandpipers & Allies Scolopacidae**Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus*

Small numbers recorded on the sandbanks near Maroansetra.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Two birds seen on the last morning of the tour on our approach to Maroansetra.

Common Sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*

Small numbers recorded throughout our tour.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

An attractive shorebird, it was found on the sandbanks of the Andranofotsy River.

Pratincoles Glareolidae**Madagascar Pratincole (BE)** *Glareola ocularis*

Good numbers, 20+, of these stunning birds were seen on the jagged rocks not far from Masoala Forest Lodge during the tour.

Terns Sternidae**Lesser Crested Tern** *Sterna bengalensis*

Recorded during our boat transfers and from the beach on our walks on the peninsula.

Swift (Greater Crested) Tern *Sterna bergii*

Small numbers recorded at most coastal sites in the Ifaty area and the mouth of the Betsiboka Delta.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Small numbers of this usually common and widespread species were had on the peninsula.

Pigeons & Doves Columbidae**Common Pigeon (I)** *Columba livia*

Fairly common in urban areas of Tana, Tamatave and Maroansetra.

Madagascar Green Pigeon (NE) *Treron australis*

This attractive bird was seen along the forest edge on the Masoala peninsula.

Parrots Psittacidae**Greater Vasa Parrot (NE)***Coracopsis vasa*

Small numbers of these large, noisy parrots recorded on the Masoala peninsula.

Cuckoos, Couas & Coucals Cuculidae**Madagascar Coucal (NEe)***Centropus toulou*

First seen at Lake Alarobia, it was later recorded at various sites on the tour.

Crested Coua (E)*Coua cristata*

A single bird was found on a morning walk in the forests of the Masoala peninsula.

Blue Coua (E)*Coua caerulea*

Literally, as soon as we arrived at Masoala Forest Lodge, we had fantastic sightings of these really stunning forest couas. Certainly one of the most beautiful birds of the tour, it was seen on several other occasions.

Red-fronted Coua*Coua reynaudii*

Found in a mixed bird party on the first morning walk we had on the peninsula.

Red-breasted Coua (E)*Coua serriana*

One of the top birds of the tour, we eventually had outstanding views of a bird perched and calling not more than ten feet away! A super encounter with a difficult forest bird.

Typical Owls Strigidae**Madagascar (Rainforest) Scops Owl (NE)***Otus rutilus*

This recently split form of the Madagascar Scops Owl was observed well in the gardens of Masoala Forest Lodge after dinner on our first night on the peninsula.

NOTE: These Scops Owls have recently been split, based on morphological and vocal differences and habitat preferences.

Nightjars Caprimulgidae**Madagascar Nightjar (NE)***Caprimulgus madagascariensis*

While waiting at Tamatave airport for transport into the town, we taped in this species and had excellent views of the bird perched and on the ground. A good way to pass the time!

Swifts Apodidae**Madagascar Spinetail (NE)***Zoonavena grandidieri*

Recorded over forests of the Masoala Peninsula around our lodge.

African Palm Swift*Cypsiurus parvus*

This elegant swift was seen almost daily during this extension.

Madagascar Black Swift (NE)*Apus balstoni*

Seen on the first day of the tour at Ivato Airport in Antananarivo.

NOTE: These Malagasy birds are usually considered a species distinct from the African Black Swift (A. barbatus), however no dedicated research has been done. There seems to be two distinct sizes of all black swifts in Madagascar, and these may represent two or more species.

Rollers Coraciidae**Broad-billed Roller***Eurystomus glaucurus*

This breeding migrant from the African mainland was recorded several times at forest edge habitat on the peninsula including sightings around our lodge.

Ground Rollers Brachypteraciidae

Short-legged Ground-Roller (E) (V)*Brachypteracias leptosomus*

After tracking down a calling bird, we were treated to good views of a pair for a lengthy period! This was another top bird for the extension.

Scaly Ground-Roller (E) (V)*Brachypteracias squamigera*

This usually scarce and secretive bird, was found shortly after our encounter with the Short-legged Ground Rollers. We had amazing views of a pair and later another bird which hopped along the trail in front of us, affording incredible close-up views.

Kingfishers Alcedinidae**Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher (E)***Ispidina madagascariensis*

A pure gem of the forests of Madagascar, we found a very co-operative bird in the forests of the Masoala peninsula which showed extremely well for 10+minutes.

Malagasy Kingfisher (NE)*Alcedo vintsioides*

Recorded at Lake Alarobia and along the coastal streams on the Masoala peninsula.

Bee-eaters Meropidae**Olive (Madagascar) Bee-eater***Merops superciliosus*

Recorded on most days during our extension.

Asities Philepittidae**Velvet Asity (E)***Philepitta castanea*

We had a single sighting of this species in the forests of the Masoala peninsula. The bird was a breeding male and was seen low to the ground in a tangle of vines.

Vangas Vangidae**Red-tailed Vanga (E)***Calicalicus madagascariensis*

Good numbers were seen in the forests of the peninsula, most being female birds observed in mixed feeding flocks.

Hook-billed Vanga (E)*Vanga curvirostris*

Two birds seen at the edge of the stunted mangrove forest on the peninsula.

White-headed Vanga (E)*Artamella viridis*

This vanga was seen in mixed flocks during our visit to Masoala.

Chabert's Vanga (E)*Leptopterus chabert*

Several birds found around the village on the Masoala peninsula.

Rufous Vanga (E)*Schetba rufa*

A pair recorded on our first morning walk in the forest of Masoala.

Common Newtonia (E)*Newtonia brunneicauda*

First seen on our initial afternoon walk on the peninsula, we later observed several in the forests.

Crossley's Babbler (E)*Mystacornis crossleyi*

An individual responded well to tape, but it was only seen briefly flashing across the path and low in the dense undergrowth. Not seen by all the participants.

Cuckooshrikes Campephagedae**Madagascar Cuckoo-shrike (NE)***Coracina cinerea*

Small numbers observed in the forests of the Masoala.

Drongos Dicruridae

Crested Drongo (NE)*Dicrurus forficatus*

Common and highly conspicuous, it was observed on most days of the tour.

Monarchs Monarchidae**Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher (NE)***Terpsiphone mutata*

This very attractive bird was found in the forests on the peninsula.

Crows & Jays Corvidae**Pied Crow***Corvus albus*

Small numbers seen at various sites on this extension.

Swallows & Martins Hirundinidae**Mascarene Martin (NE)***Phedina borbonica*

Good numbers around the Masoala peninsula. We managed to scope a couple of these martins which showed off their streaked underparts.

Family Uncertain**Common Jery (E)***Neomixis tenella*

Up to four birds were seen in the scrubby vegetation at Lake Alarobia.

Bulbuls Pycnonotidae**Madagascar Bulbul (NE)***Hypsipetes madagascariensis*

Common and ubiquitous, we had sightings of these birds on everyday of the tour.

Old World Warblers Sylviidae**Malagasy Brush Warbler (NE)***Nesillas typica*

This denizen of the undergrowth was recorded on the first day of the tour.

Madagascar Swamp Warbler (E)*Acrocephalus newtoni*

We struggled to get views of this bird at Lake Alarobia, but after some gentle coaxing we managed to have a good sighting of this skulker.

White-throated Oxylabes (E)*Oxylabes madagascariensis*

A secretive endemic of the rainforest under-storey, we found two birds in the forests of the Masoala peninsula.

Long-billed Bernieria (E)*Bernieria madagascariensis*

This large Greenbul with an extremely long bill was seen in the forests of the peninsula.

Cryptic Warbler (E)*Cryptosylvicola randrianasoloi*

This recently described species was seen calling from an exposed perch during a morning walk in the forests of Masoala.

Wedge-tailed Jery (E) (NT)*Hartertula flavoviridis*

This special endemic was recorded in a mixed flock on a morning walk in the rainforest.

Spectacled Greenbul (E)*Phyllastrephus zosterops*

The forests of the Masoala peninsula produced small numbers of this rainforest specialist.

White-eyes Zosteropidae**Madagascar White-eye (NE)***Zosterops maderaspatana*

This common but beautiful little bird was regularly encountered during the tour.

Starlings Sturnidae

Common Myna (I) *Acridotheres tristis*
Common and widespread with peak numbers in the urban areas.

Chats, Old World Flycatchers Muscicapidae

Madagascar Magpie-Robin (E) *Copsychus albospecularis*
We recorded the dark plumaged male at Masoala on a number of occasions.
Eurasian Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*
Seen in the gardens of our hotel in Antananarivo.

Sunbirds Nectariniidae

Souimanga Sunbird (NE) *Nectarinia souimanga*
Common and widespread, this bird was seen on most days of the tour.
Long-billed Green (Madagascar) Sunbird (NE) *Nectarinia notata*
A single male bird was seen at our hotel in Tana.

Old World Sparrows Passeridae

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
Half-a-dozen of these introduced birds were seen around Tamatave airport en route to Masoala.

Weavers Ploceidae

Nelicourvi Weaver (E) *Ploceus nelicourvi*
A beautiful weaver, it was observed in the forests of the Masoala peninsula. One of the sightings was of a female at a nest over a stream where we made many famous (or infamous) streams crossings!
Madagascar Red Fody (E) *Foudia madagascariensis*
Common and ubiquitous, it was recorded on everyday of the extension.

Waxbills Estrildidae

Madagascar Mannikin (E) *Lonchura nana*
We had few sightings of this species during the tour the first day of the tour.

Wagtails & Pipits Motacillidae

Madagascar Wagtail (E) *Motacilla flaviventris*
Small numbers of this attractive bird seen on the extension.

MAMMALS**Old World Fruit Bats Pteropodidae**

Madagascar Flying Fox *Pteropus rufus*
A large colony of these strange creatures was seen during our boat trip from Maroanetra to Masoala.

Tenrecs and Otter Shrews Tenrecidae

Lowland Streaked Tenrec *Hemicentetes semispinosus*
What an amazing little creature! We had awesome encounters with these beauties around our accommodation at Masoala Forest Lodge following a brief sighting in the forest.

Old World Rats and Mice Muridae

Eastern Red Forest Rat*Nesomys rufus*

A denizen of the forest floor, it was seen on the Masoala peninsula.

Mouse and Dwarf Lemurs Cheirogaleidae**Brown Mouse Lemur***Microcebus rufus*

Three of these diminutive lemurs were seen during a night walk on Masoala.

"True" Lemurs Lemuridae**Red-ruffed Lemur***Varecia rubra*

This absolutely stunning lemur was observed on two occasions in the forests of the Masoala peninsula. It is restricted to this area and as far as I'm concerned, it is the most attractive lemur in Madagascar.

White-fronted Brown Lemur*Eulemur fulvus albifrons*

This lemur is range-restricted to north-eastern Madagascar and is also an attractive primate. We found several family groups in the forests during our walks on the peninsula.

Avahis, Sifakas and Indri Indriidae**Eastern Avahi (Woolly Lemur)***Avahi laniger*

A tight huddle of these lemurs was found during a night walk on the Masoala peninsula.

Reptiles

Chameleons Chamaeleonidae**Greater Stump-tailed Chameleon***Brookesia superciliaris*

An individual was expertly located in the leaf litter of a forest trail in Masoala.

Peyrieras' Pygmy Chameleon*Brookesia peyrierasi*

This extremely small *Brookesia* was also seen in the forests of the Masoala peninsula. It was a full grown adult and only measured approximately 1 inch in length.

Panther Chameleon*Furcifer pardalis*

Three of these pretty chameleons were seen during our stay on the Masoala peninsula.

Plated Lizards Gerrhosauridae**Plated Lizard***Zonosaurus karsteni*

Recorded on the Masoala peninsula.

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