



ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Trip Report CNC Madagascar Masoala Extension

29th October to 3rd November 2015 (6 days)



Short-legged Ground Roller by Doug Chang

Trip Report compiled by Tour Leader: Glen Valentine

Tour Summary

Our exotic Masoala Peninsula extension that ran between the two Cincinnati Nature Center trips for 2015 kicked off with a chartered flight from Tana to the small, tropical, coastal town of Maroantsetra,



Panther Chameleon by Doug Chang

tucked away at the edge of the Bay of Antongil in the extreme north-east of the island. A rather remote part of Madagascar and a little 'off the beaten track'; the beautiful and scenic peninsula is most famous amongst naturalists for hosting the magnificent Helmet Vanga, Red Ruffed Lemur and near mythical Aye-Aye. All three species were very high on our wish-lists and quite remarkably we were treated to knockout views of all three of these highly sought-after species during the trip!

With Mad Air being on especially poor form, we were forced to charter a flight both to and from Maroantsetra but at least we were able to reach our destination and did not miss out

on any field time. Arriving in the much laid back Maroantsetra we caught two cabs and began bouncing our way along a bumpy beach-side track towards our accommodation for the night. Situated right on the beach, it was a pleasant establishment that had definitely seen better days and sadly looked as though it was on its way out. It did however suit us fine for the night and did mean that we were in perfect striking distance for our main quarry in the Maroantsetra area: the legendary Aye-Aye!

In the late afternoon we ventured out into town to observe another extremely range-restricted and quite impressive species: the Antongil Red Toad. We visited a local homestead in town in order to save time and secure a guaranteed sighting of the species as it is here, in a few gardens that the toads breed en masse in the correct situations, that being layers upon layers of rotting debris and rubbish. Certainly not the most aesthetically pleasing setting but the results were seriously impressive as we witnessed dozens of these large and localized frogs seemingly thriving in their sanctuaries. In the late afternoon we returned to our accommodation to prepare for our night walk in pursuit of the Aye-Aye. A brightly-coloured Panther Chameleon was found hanging around the



Tomato Frog by Doug Chang



lodge restaurant and Malagasy Coucals occupied the dense canopies of the surrounding palms. Our Aye-Aye attempt felt like a real long shot as are all Aye-Aye attempts. My expectations were not very



Aye-Aye by Glen Valentine

high and at dusk we began our quest, prepared to be out for several hours and hoping at best to acquire even the quickest, distant glimpse of this bizarre creature. We started out along the beach in front of the lodge with our two local guides who seemed rather optimistic of our chances. We'd barely left the lodge grounds when suddenly our head guide, Julian began shouting, 'AYE-AYE! AYE-AYE! I couldn't believe it! With goose-flesh all over and a heart rate of around 180 our legs kicked into gear and ran up to where Julian was pointing up into a coconut palm. There it was, the legendary Aye-aye! What an incredible mammal! One can completely understand how it was taxonomically regarded for so long as everything but a lemur! We ended up spending a good 10 minutes with the individual and were really able to soak in all the detail and strangeness of this very rare and special mammal. We left the Aye-Aye to continue feeding and started heading back to the lodge when Nancy suddenly exclaimed that she'd spotted a strange mammal scurrying about on the ground. It turned out to be another superb mammal, the spiny Lowland Streaked Tenrec, a unique, endemic mammal that is not often seen, is

mainly crepuscular and nocturnal and only becomes active during the onset of the summer rains. The THB flowed upon our return to the lodge and never tasted so good!

The next morning we made our way to the nearby jetty where our boat trip to our lodge at the edge of Masoala National Park awaited us. Heading out of the estuary, we soon felt the first bits of swell and as we continued past the island of Nosy Mangabe the chop and swell increased and would continue for the next two hours until we reached the lodge. It was quite a rough trip out but not unexpected and we made it without getting too wet and without too many bruises. We also passed very close to Nosy Mangabe and were able to obtain good, close views of some of the more common and widespread herons and egrets that occur in the area like Great, Dimorphic and Western Cattle Egrets, Purple and Black Herons, and Black-crowned Night Heron. A real surprise in the form of several Reed Cormorants was a great bonus as this is a strangely localized and scarce species on Madagascar. After a tasty lunch we embarked on a short walk up into the forest behind the lodge and



White-fronted (headed) Brown Lemur by Glen Valentine

although fairly quiet, we did still managed to locate a Blue Coua, a close and confiding Short-legged Ground Roller, several Madagascar Spinetails swirling around overhead, as well as troops of White-



fronted Brown Lemur and barking Red Ruffed Lemur.



Red Ruffed Lemur by Glen Valentine

Both of our night walks were unfortunately a little disappointing, although we did still encounter Geoffroy's (Greater) Dwarf Lemur and the recently recognised Seal's Sportive Lemur that sat motionless right in front of us for several minutes.

Our two full days on the Masoala Peninsula was spent in the two core areas of the accessible portion of Masoala National Park. The steeper, more uneven trails that led up into the primary forest either side of our lodge, just east of Andranobe were excellent for both species of diurnal lemur: the noisy Red Ruffed Lemur and White-fronted (headed) Brown Lemur, both of which were seen on several occasions. This area also proved most reliable for Short-legged Ground

Roller, which was heard and seen on every hike into this section of the forest. A pair of the range-restricted Red-breasted Coua also frequented the area and showed very well on two occasions. One of the major highlights during our time in this part of the forest was when our local guide showed us an active Helmet Vanga nest. The nest was about 20 meters away and about 6 feet off the ground, with one of the adults nestled on top. We watched and photographed this handsome bird at length before continuing our way up the trail. What an outstanding bird! We were also treated to an unforgettable mammal sighting one morning when Guy calmly mentioned from the back of the line that he'd seen a Ring-tailed Mongoose. I turned around so quickly that I had a mild case of whiplash and with serious excitement we retreated to where Guy had seen the mammal. Ring-tailed Mongoose is a beautiful and rarely seen mammal that inhabits the forest floor and would be fantastic to see! However, when we relocated the mongoose it turned out to be one of Madagascar's rarest and least known mammals, the sensationally rare and little-known Brown-tailed Mongoose, a species very few people have ever had the privilege of seeing. We watched the animal for several minutes as it stood and twitched this way and that until we noticed another smaller head pop out from behind a rock. There was a baby with the adult! Unbelievable! Not only had we found a Brown-tailed Mongoose, we had single-handedly and without intention located its den! This was off the charts! A lifer mammal all round, even for our local guide who had been perfecting his skills in Masoala National Park for over ten years! Other avian delights that



Helmet Vanga by Glen Valentine

entertained us here included a very responsive Brown Mesite, Red-tailed, Hook-billed and White-



headed Vangas, Madagascar Cuckooshrike, the spectacular Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Spectacled Tetraka, Long-billed Bernieria and the very attractive Nelicourvi Weaver.



Madagascar Pratincole by Glen Valentine

The more stunted, *pandanus*-dominated forest just inland of the tiny village of Tampolo, which lies just east of our lodge was our second focal area and our morning here gave us views of the shy and reclusive Madagascar Wood Rail that dashed across the trail on a few occasions and scurried about rat-like in the dense forest undergrowth. A pair of nesting Rufous Vanga was another thrilling sighting and the dug-out canoe trip to and from the trail yielded the large and slightly more confiding White-throated Rail, along with the brilliant Malagasy Kingfisher, Crested Drongo, Blue Coua, Lesser Vasa Parrot and the gaudy Broad-billed Roller. The large boulders on the gorgeous, white sand beaches

provided nesting sites for the migratory and breeding endemic Madagascar Pratincole that showed well at close range.

On the reptile front we were spoilt with some real goodies such as a superb female Leaf-nosed Snake, several more Panther Chameleons, the huge Common Flat-tail (Leaf-tailed) Gecko, Madagascar Girdled Lizard, Gravenhorst’s Skink, and two stunning day geckos: *Phelsuma guttata* and *Phelsuma pusilla*.

After a splendid time on the Masoala Peninsula it was time to make our way back to Maroantsetra. This time the Bay of Antongil was incredibly calm and we whizzed back to town within no time at all and we were soon boarded on our chartered flight back to Tana. We had some time in the afternoon and decided to visit the nearby Crocodile Farm, which actually proved to be quite interesting. Besides the many reptiles in their respective enclosures we also encountered a fairly large, wild Oustalet’s Chameleon, as well as a decent range of wild birds in the surrounding trees and occupying the small wetland at the edge of the center. The reed-beds were literally teeming with a variety of herons and egrets that included Black-crowned Night Heron, Squacco Heron, Great, Dimorphic and Western Cattle Egrets and an unexpected bonus in the form of the rare Malagasy Pond Heron sporting full nuptials. A great end to a most enjoyable and successful trip!



One of very few known photographs of the very rarely seen and little-known Brown-tailed Mongoose by Doug Chang

Unfortunately our extension had drawn to a close and we ended our trip with one last scrumptious



dinner at our beloved Relais des Plateaux; our trusted sanctuary on the eighth continent, Madagascar.

Annotated Checklists of Birds, Mammals and “Herps”

ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS (64 species recorded (58 seen and 6 heard only))

Note: Names and taxonomical order of the bird species list follows that of IOC (International Ornithological Congress), Gill, F. and M. Wright. 2015; Birds of the World: Recommended English Names. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press (version 5.4). Names in round brackets represent alternative names for the species. A notes section can be found where the taxonomy of a species differs between the major taxonomic lists of the birds of the world, i.e. IOC and Clements.

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: critically endangered

En: endangered

Vu: vulnerable

NT: near-threatened

Ducks, Geese & Swans *Anatidae*

White-faced Whistling Duck

Dendrocygna viduata

A few birds were seen in the estuary at Maroantsetra.

Bitterns & Herons *Ardeidae*

Black-crowned Night Heron

Nycticorax nycticorax

A juvenile was found on Nosy Mangabe with many more at the Croc Farm in Tana.

Striated (Green-backed) Heron

Butorides striatus

At few were encountered soon after leaving the jetty in Maroantsetra.

Squacco Heron

Ardeola ralloides

Good numbers at the Croc Farm in Tana.

Malagasy Pond (Madagascar Squacco) Heron (BE) (Vu) *Ardeola idae*

One adult in breeding plumage was seen well at the Croc Farm in Tana.

Western Cattle Egret

Bubulcus ibis

Good numbers on Nosy Mangabe and at the Croc Farm.

NOTE: Clements lumps this species with Western Cattle Egret B. ibis as Cattle Egret B. ibis.

Purple Heron

Ardea purpurea

Small numbers around the Masoala Peninsula.

(Western) Great Egret

Ardea alba

Good numbers on Nosy Mangabe with a few at the Croc Farm.

Dimorphic (Western Reef) Egret (NE)

Egretta dimorpha

Also seen in large numbers on Nosy Mangabe and in Tana.

NOTE: IOC splits Western Reef Heron Egretta gularis into two species: Western Reef Heron Egretta gularis and Dimorphic Egret Egretta dimorpha, whereas Clements only recognizes one species, Western Reef-Heron Egretta gularis.

Cormorants *Phalacrocoracidae*

Reed Cormorant

Microcarbo africanus



A scarce and strangely localized bird in Madagascar! Several birds were seen around the estuary at Maroantsetra and on Nosy Mangabe./

Kites, Hawks & Eagles Accipitridae

Frances's Sparrowhawk (Goshawk) (NE) *Accipiter francesii*

A male was seen in the forest in Masoala NP.

Yellow-billed (Black) Kite *Milvus aegyptius*

A couple were found around Tana and Maroantsetra.

NOTE: IOC splits the above species into two separate species; Black Kite M. migrans and Yellow-billed Kite M. aegyptius whereas Clements only recognizes one species, Black Kite M. migrans.

Madagascan Buzzard (E) *Buteo brachypterus*

Singletons were seen around the Masoala Peninsula.

Mesites Mesitornithidae

Brown Mesite (E) (Vu) *Mesitornis unicolor*

Good views were had of this scarce, localized and often tough-to-see, forest interior ground-dweller next to a trail in Masoala NP.

Flufftails Sarothruridae

Madagascan Wood Rail (E) *Canirallus kiolooides*

Fleeting views were had of this shy, forest interior rail as it crossed the path on three occasions in Masoala NP.

Madagascan Flufftail (E) (H) *Sarothrura insularis*

A species which can be difficult to see! Its characteristic call was heard on one occasion in Masoala NP.

Rails, Crakes & Coots Rallidae

White-throated Rail (NE) *Dryolimnas cuvieri*

This large, striking rail was seen during our canoe trip up the Tampolo River.

NOTE: Some authorities consider the nominate Madagascar race of this bird as distinctive from the near-flightless Aldabra Island race, making this another endemic rallid to Madagascar.

Plovers Charadriidae

Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii*

A single bird was seen at the estuary in Maroantsetra.

Pratincoles Glareolidae

Madagascan Pratincole (BE) (Vu) *Glareola ocularis*

Excellent views were had of this species around the large boulders on the beach on the Masoala Peninsula.

Gulls & Terns Laridae

Greater Crested (Swift) Tern *Sterna bergii*

A single bird was seen during our boat trip to the Masoala Peninsula.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Small numbers of this widespread tern were encountered during the boat trip to and from the Masoala



Peninsula.

Pigeons & Doves *Columbidae*

Rock Dove (Pigeon) (I) *Columba livia*

Widespread in urban areas throughout.

Cuckoos *Cuculidae*

Malagasy (Madagascar) Coucal (NE) *Centropus toulou*

Commonly heard and a few seen around Maroantsetra and on the Masoala Peninsula.

Blue Coua (E) *Coua caerulea*

A few good sightings were had of this species in the forests of Masoala NP.

Red-breasted Coua (E) *Coua serriana*

Heard throughout Masoala NP and seen very well on a few occasions in the forest behind our lodge.

Owls *Strigidae*

Rainforest (Malagasy) Scops Owl (E) (H) *Otus rutilus*

This species was heard on consecutive nights from the forest behind the lodge.

Nightjars *Caprimulgidae*

Madagascar Nightjar (NE) (H) *Caprimulgus madagascariensis*

Heard from our accommodation in Maroantsetra and at the Relais in Tana.

Swifts *Apodidae*

Madagascar (Malagasy) Spinetail (NE) *Zoonavena grandidieri*

A few of these fast-flyers were seen hunting above the rainforest on the Masoala Peninsula.

African Palm Swift *Cypsiurus parvus*

Common in suitable palm habitat throughout the extension.

Malagasy Black (Madagascar) Swift (NE) *Apus balstoni*

A single bird was seen in flight while walking to the plane in Tana.

Rollers *Coraciidae*

Broad-billed Roller *Eurystomus glaucurus*

A widespread, common and gaudy breeding migrant from the African mainland, which was observed on several occasions on the Masoala Peninsula.

Ground-Rollers *Brachypteraciidae*

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

Often a very difficult bird to find! This species undoubtedly proved to be one of the star birds of the extension as we were rewarded with several extremely close sightings in the forest behind our lodge.

Kingfishers *Alcedinidae*

Malagasy Kingfisher (NE) *Alcedo vintsioides*

Seen right in front of our Masoala lodge in the beachside vegetation and along the Tampolo River.



Bee-eaters *Meropidae*

Olive (Madagascar) Bee-eater *Merops superciliosus*

This common but extremely striking bee-eater was seen throughout the extension.

Falcons *Falconidae*

Malagasy (Madagascar) Kestrel (NE) *Falco newtoni*

Singletons were seen around Tana and Maroantsetra.

Parrots *Psittacidae*

Greater Vasa Parrot (NE) *Coracopsis vasa*

A much scarcer bird than Lesser Vasa Parrot! We encountered one in flight on the Masoala Peninsula.

Lesser Vasa Parrot (NE) *Coracopsis nigra*

A widespread and common bird and exceedingly vocal, this species was recorded daily.

Vangas *Vangidae*

Red-tailed Vanga (E) *Calicalicus madagascariensis*

A few pairs were found in the forests in Masoala NP.

Hook-billed Vanga (E) *Vanga curvirostris*

One of these large vangas was seen briefly in a mixed flock in Masoala NP.

White-headed Vanga (E) *Artamella viridis*

Two separate males were found during our time on the Peninsula.

Blue Vanga (NE) (H) *Cyanolanius madagascarensis*

Heard on one occasion in Masoala NP.

NOTE: Sinclair I. and Langrande O., consider the Comoros race of this species to be distinct, resulting in the Madagascar Blue Vanga being another Madagascar endemic. This stance is not widely accepted.

Helmet Vanga (E) (VU) *Euryceros prevostii*

Undoubtedly the top bird of the extension! This spectacular vanga was seen extremely well on its nest. Often regarded as one of the top 50 birds earth to see!

Tylas Vanga (E) (H) *Tylas eduardi*

We heard this species in the distance in Masoala NP.

NOTE: Recent DNA evidence suggests that this “vanga” is more closely related to the cuckooshrikes.

Common Newtonia (E) (H) *Newtonia brunneicauda*

Heard on a few occasions in Masoala NP.

Cuckooshrikes *Campephagedae*

Madagascan (Ashy) Cuckooshrike (E) *Coracina cinerea*

Two separate sightings were had in Masoala NP.

Drongos *Dicruridae*

Crested Drongo (NE) *Dicrurus forficatus*

A common, noisy and highly conspicuous species of wooded habitat throughout the trip.

Monarchs *Monarchidae*

Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher (NE) *Terpsiphone mutata*

A flashy and extremely attractive species that was seen daily in Masoala NP.



Crows & Jays Corvidae

Pied Crow
Seen in Tana. *Corvus albus*

Bulbuls Pycnonotidae

Malagasy (Madagascar) Bulbul (NE) *Hypsipetes madagascariensis*
Common and ubiquitous, with daily sightings throughout.

Swallows & Martins Hirundinidae

Mascarene Martin *Phedina borbonica*
Madagascar's commonest hirundine and a regional breeding endemic. Seen around Tana and Maroantsetra.

Malagasy Warblers Bernieridae

Long-billed Bernieria (Tetraka) (E) *Bernieria madagascariensis*
A handful were seen on the Masoala Peninsula.

Spectacled Tetraka (E) *Xanthomixis zosterops*
Several groups were seen in the forest understory in Masoala NP.

Cisticolas & Allies Cisticolidae

Common Jery (E) *Neomixis tenella*
Heard daily and seen a few times.

White-eyes Zosteropidae

Malagasy White-eye (NE) *Zosterops maderaspatana*
Seen on a few occasions on the Masoala Peninsula.

Starlings Sturnidae

Common Myna (I) *Acridotheres tristis tristis*
Unfortunately this introduced pest was commonly seen around Tana and in Maroantsetra.

Madagascan Starling (E) *Hartlaubius aurata*
One of these scarce birds was seen briefly in Masoala NP.

Chats, Old World Flycatchers Muscicapidae

Madagascan Magpie-Robin (E) *Copsychus albospectularis*
Common and obtrusive throughout.

Madagascan (African) Stonechat (E) *Saxicola sibilla*
Seen around Tana.

NOTE: IOC recognizes Madagascan Stonechat Saxicola sibilla as a distinct species whereas Clements treats it as a distinct subspecies of African Stonechat Saxicola torquatus.

Sunbirds Nectariniidae

Souimanga Sunbird (E) *Nectarinia souimanga*
This common and beautiful species was seen on most days.

Malagasy (Long-billed) Green Sunbird (NE) *Nectarinia notata*



A handsome and widespread but uncommon species! One male was seen in Masoala NP.

Weavers Ploceidae

Nelicourvi Weaver (E) *Ploceus nelicourvi*

A striking bird of the eastern rainforest areas, where we saw a few different individuals including some that were nest-building.

Red Fody (E) *Foudia madagascariensis*

Small flocks were seen on most days.

Waxbills & Allies Estrildidae

Madagascar Mannikin (Madagascar Munia) (E) *Lonchura nana*

One was seen at the Relais in Tana on the morning of our departure to Maroantsetra.

Wagtails Motacillidae

Madagascar Wagtail (E) *Motacilla flaviventris*

Individuals were seen around Tana.

ANNOTATED LIST OF MAMMALS (7 Species seen)

Names and taxonomical order of the mammal species list follows the mammal list of Madagascar according to iGoTerra's website.

Tenrecs and Otter Shrews Tenrecidae

Lowland Streaked Tenrec (E) *Hemicentetes semispinosus*

Nancy's keen eyes produced one of these cute little forest mammals on the return from our successful Aye-Aye quest.

Malagasy Carnivores Eupleridae

Brown-tailed Mongoose (E) *Salanoia concolor*

One of the island's rarest and most seldom-seen mammals! We were ridiculously fortunate to see this species along with a baby at extremely close range and for several minutes on a hike in the forest behind our lodge on the Masoala Peninsula. Amazing!

Mouse and Dwarf Lemurs Cheirogaleidae

Geoffroy's (Greater) Dwarf Lemur (E) *Cheirogaleus major*

We encountered this species on one of our night walks on the Peninsula.

Aye-Aye Daubentoniidae

Aye-Aye (E) *Daubentonia madagascariensis*

The star mammal of the extension! I couldn't believe our luck at finding this near-mythical and ultra-bizarre lemur so soon after beginning our search near our accommodation at the edge of Maroantsetra. We ended up achieving walkaway views of this little known and very rare species! Incredible!

Lemurs Lemuridae

White-fronted (-headed) Brown Lemur (E) *Eulemur albifrons*



Several troops were found during our walks in the forest in Masoala NP.

Red Ruffed Lemur (E) *Varecia rubra*

We were thrilled to obtain excellent views of several troops of this range-restricted and very handsome lemur during our time on the trails behind our lodge on the Masoala Peninsula.

Sportive Lemurs *Megaladapidae*

Seal's Sportive Lemur (E) *Lepilemur seali*

Excellent views were enjoyed of this nocturnal lemur during our second night walk on the Masoala Peninsula.

ANNOTATED LIST OF REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS (8 Species seen)

Names and taxonomical order of the reptiles and amphibians list follows that of iGoTerra.

Reptiles

Chameleons *Chamaeleonidae*

Oustalet's Chameleon *Furcifer oustaleti*

Panther Chameleon *Furcifer pardalis*

Geckos *Gekkonidae*

Mercator Tropical House Gecko *Blaseodactylus antongilensis*

Common (Fimbriated) Flat-tail (Leaf-tailed) Gecko *Hemidactylus mercatorius*

Common (Fimbriated) Flat-tail (Leaf-tailed) Gecko *Uroplatus fimbriatus*

Phelsuma guttata

Phelsuma pusilla

Plated Lizards *Gerrhosauridae*

Madagascar Girdled (Plated) Lizard *Zonosaurus madagascariensis*

Typical Snakes *Lamprophiidae*

Leaf-nosed Snake *Langaha madagascariensis*

Skinks *Scincidae*

Gravenhorst's Skink *Trachylepis gravenhorstii*

Amphibians

Madagascar Frogs *Mantellidae*

Antongil Tomato Frog *Gephyromantis rivicola*

Antongil Tomato Frog *Dyscophus antongilii*



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