

## Seeing all the Madagascar endemics using public transport only

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**Foreword:** I actually did not see all the endemics. I am still missing red-tailed newtonia, which is not a very difficult species, but its attractiveness/distance ratio was deemed too low at the time of planning. The reason for writing this report is to expand the client base for the ecotouristic projects by helping lower-budget travelers get to them. Also, if you saw Helmet Vanga on nest in Iaroka forest in late November 2017, you kind of owe it to me (see Iaroka account below), so feel free to express your gratitude.

**Best time to visit:** mid-October to November. This is the transition into the rainy season, most roads are still passable (they get muddier by the day though), lemurs carry young on their backs. The drawback is that many key species are incubating, so can be either more difficult than later on (if the nest was not located by local guides) or too easy (if the nest was located). Bemanevika represents a special case of trading logistical nightmares against quality of views (see the Bemanevika account below). Also, by November, expect to cross path with many birding tour groups, which tend to book entire hotels, hire all of the local guides (the latter being compulsory to visit most places that hold any birding potential), etc.

**Cost:** About \$1800pp for 5 weeks in country (the minimum time to attempt a clean-up) might be enough. For the international flight, Turkish Airlines was excellent value for money, recommended.

**Health & safety recommendations:** If using public transport this is NOT a trip for first timers. You will need to eat local food and your stomach should be up to it. You will need to know how to react in unexpected situations that would announce impending collapse of society should they happen in Europe but are just part of everyday life in Madagascar. Bring a range of antibiotics and first aid supplies; Madagascar pharmacies are well stocked, but some sections of the trip are very remote. Mosquito nets are provided in most hotels but bring your own anyway. Impregnate clothes with permethrin to reduce not only mosquito bites but also fleas (a major issue with the recent plague epidemics) and leeches (a bit of a nuisance in the eastern forest, but not a health issue). Finally: Do not attempt independently without a basic command of French. Basic Malagasy: Salama = Hello, Rano = water, Vary = rice, Mafana = hot, Ranovola = burnt rice water that is safe to drink, Anana = vegetables. The more Malagasy you have, the more you will enjoy the long taxi-brousse drives. I have none and I did not enjoy.

**Food:** There is cheap tourist food in many of the birding areas (\$4-6 per plate). In a local "hotely" a meal of rice + some boiled meat costs less than \$1. Eau Vive bottled water and THB beer are available in most villages. For Ambinda and Iaroka you need to bring everything in (pasta + canned sauce from France + vegetable from the nearest village was practical for me). At the Peregrine Fund sites you can either eat with the staff (rice + beans) or bring your food in (but it would be awkward not to have enough for the staff, i.e. 5-10 people). You'll also need to bring the water in or purify it.

**Camping:** Bring at least a lightweight inflatable mattress, travel cotton sheet, lightweight very warm blanket, and sweats, the latter two for Bemanevika. In Ambinda (tsingy wood-rail site) and Mandrozo (Sakalava rail site) you'll need your own tent, or if willing to rough it for one night, just a mosquito net. Bringing a water-proof tent will give you more flexibility and/or save a little money in Iaroka, Zombitse, Ranomafana, and Ankafarantsika.

### What I would add if time was really not an issue:

- Visit Arrol Lodge near Masoala NP as an alternative site for Helmet Vanga, Bernier's Vanga, Brown Mesite, White-browed Owl, and Banded Kestrel, and for apparently quite awesome ecotourism.
- Visit Marojejy NP as an alternative site for Yellow-bellied Sunbird-activity and Rufous-headed Ground-roller, with bonus silky sifaka and a chance of Helmet Vanga. Rarely visited, so would require several days exploring on site except if local folks prove themselves knowledgeable.
- Visit the Fort-Dauphin area for Red-tailed Newtonia, and alternative sites for White-browed Owl, Madagascar Cuckoo-hawk, and Banded Kestrel. Also the Madagascar subspecies of Kelp Gull.
- Visit the Kianjavato station run by the Madagascar Biodiversity Partnership. They are currently tracking aye-aye from nest to nest, so visitors have a good chance of seeing one. They also monitor greater bamboo-lemur, another endangered and weird primate. The forest probably holds the same avifauna as the Ranomafana visitor center (without the guiding issues at that place).

Below I am detailing the info for the lesser-known sites that I visited. For well-known sites there is ample information available, including access detail in generic travel guides.

### Bemanevika

This is the famous 'Pochard lake', where the Madagascar branch of The Peregrine Fund, supervised by Dr. Lily-Arison René de Roland (Lily), runs a permanent research camp. The local staff can act as highly specialised birding guides.

### Contacts

You should email Mr. Tolo with Lily in cc a few weeks or months in advance. You should ask Tolo and Lily for the phone number of TPF local representative in Bealanana, Michel, and call Michel upon leaving Antsohihy. Michel should arrange someone to meet you in Bealanana.

Lily : Lily-Arison René de Roland <lilyarison@yahoo.fr>

Tolo (recently in charge of birders' requests, which used to be handled by Lily) : Tolojanahary Andriamalala <tollens37@yahoo.fr>

**Access:** From Tana you take a taxi-brousse to Antsohihy [Ant-soo-hee]. You spend the night there, both cheap and more expensive options available, the cheap one accessible on foot from the taxi-brousse station. Next you take a taxi-brousse to Bealanana [Beh(a)-lan(an(a))]. You should make a reservation for that ride as soon as you can as this is one of the few destinations in Madagascar with more demand than offer. Note that there is a direct overnight taxi-brousse that runs between Bealanana and Tana (leaves Bealanana in the late morning on Sun and Mon, you'll need to enquire a day in advance if you want to take it from Tana to Bealanana).

In Bealanana, you must have pre-arranged a meeting with TPF staff, expectedly either Michel or Loukman. If you can't find them, head to TPF local office just two blocks from the taxi-brousse terminal (ask around for Michel who lives downstairs). If you do not have your own transport, or if the road is too bad even for 4x4, they should have arranged a motorcycle transfer for you (1-2 hours with dry conditions, up to 48 hours with rain).

Note on road conditions: the stretch between Antsohihy and Bealanana can already have muddy bouts by November, in which case normal taxi-brousse may not be able to pass, but slower

alternatives will expectedly be set up. Between Bealanana and Bemanevika, there are permanently unpassable bouts where even motorcycles struggle. I understood that a 40km hike is sometimes the only way in and out by December. In late October, there wasn't any extraordinary logistical struggle and I was on site by mid-afternoon.

**Birding targets:** Madagascar Pochard, Madagascar Serpent-eagle, Red Owl, Slender-billed Flufftail, Madagascar Owl, Madagascar Harrier, Grey Emutail, Madagascar Snipe, Madagascar Rail, Nuthatch Vanga, Common Sunbird-asity, Velvet Asity, Schlegel's Asity, Pitta-like Ground-roller, Grey-crowned Tetraka. YEP. Also, Dusky Tetraka features in the reports. I saw one bird that looked different enough from the ubiquitous Spectacled Tetraka.

Non-birding targets: endemic Avahi

**Birding strategy:**

You need at least two full days, three would allow you more tries at the flufftail and more time for secondary targets like the Asio, Dusky(ish) Tetraka, and general forest birding.

First day: Morning: Slender-billed Flufftail and other marsh birds. There is a small wooden structure into the marsh and some open spans have been cut into the grass. You play the tape hoping that the flufftail will respond in typical fashion by circling around the origin of the sound thereby crossing the spans. Madagascar rail easy, Snipe needs to be flushed upon hearing one call, emutail is abundant even without tape. Afternoon: Pochard and Red Owl. After years of telemetry, the staff knows many potential roost sites for the red owl and will check them one by one upon your arrival.

Second day: Morning: marsh if some targets are still missing, otherwise Serpent-eagle at its nest. Afternoon: Serpent-eagle at its nest. The staff are currently tracking one female eagle, the device should last into 2018 and there are plans to renew it or its battery during the 2018 breeding season. Another territory is known but the nest has yet to be found. The incubation period is from mid October to mid November. So during that time there is the risk that you only see the nest and have to wait several hours that something happens (either a short flight in and out by the parent on duty, or the return of the second bird). In late November you will have a better experience when the parents regularly feed chameleon to the young, but this comes at the cost of more difficult logistics.

Third day: either again marsh and serpent-eagle if bad luck the previous days, or focus on other targets such as Madagascar Owl, any other raptor nest, and general forest birding. Also Madagascar Partridge early morning in the grassland if you have not seen it yet.

Note: TPF staff offer to beat the marsh and catch a slender-billed flufftail for you to look at. I would not recommend encouraging these practices. Please remember this is one of only a handful of breeding localities for this bird, and there are no more than three pairs at this location based on my (uninformed) assessment. Remember that although it does not feel like it when on site, quite a few birders visit every year with the same requests, so if everyone requests a marsh beating there won't be anything left in a few years.

**Costs:** I paid a bill in the 300-400 kAr range for a three night stay sleeping in the robust tents provided by TPF, eating with the staff, and being guided all the time. I tipped generously (or at least I hope it was generous). The motorcycle transfer was 100 kAr each way.

## Betsiboka delta

The large Betsiboka river reaches the sea south of Mahajunga. Its silted delta is one of the few known sites for both Bernier's Teal and Bernier's Ibis (the latter treated as a subspecies by Clements, not sure on what grounds).

**Contact:** I went with this guy Patrick 0328184199. He does not own the boat. He knew where to find the birds. There are other guys that can do the same. One of the owners of Chez Kantor (an hotel in Mahajunga, not recommended to spend the night because of creepy sex tourists there) also can take you. Alternatively, there is John Rivo, a certified (?) guide that offers tours in the area and apparently is used by the big birding tour companies, but his quote started at 800 kAr !

**Access:** In Mahajunga, head to the terminal for the "barge de Katsepy" (ferry that crosses the river towards Katsepy). Just say Cat-sseh-p(ee) to a tchouc-tchouc driver. There, you should find several boatmen hanging around. Bring your bird book and show it around until you find enough light in someone's eye to trust him. Ask to see the boat in question and agree on a price.

**Targets:** Bernier's Teal, Bernier's Ibis, Crab-plover, Humblot's Heron, Terek's Sandpiper, Greater Sand-plover.

**Birding strategy:** Leave about 1-2 hours before low tide

[http://www.tides4fishing.com/af/madagascar/mahajanga#\\_tides](http://www.tides4fishing.com/af/madagascar/mahajanga#_tides)

My guy headed straight to the right area that hold a small quantity of birds feeding on exposed mud, including all the targets at once.

Note: You can stop in Katsepy on the way back, where it should be possible to arrange a visit to Antrema for crowned sifaka. Ask your boatman the day before as this implies less time in the delta so that you get to Antrema before the midday heat, or a long stop in Katsepy to go to Antrema in the afternoon. A free-range group of sifaka is also kept on the ground of the Chez Chabaud restaurant in Katsepy.

**Costs:** I paid 260 kAr for the speedboat + 2 men, not including 50L of gasoline, so a hefty 450,000 Ar total. You could spare 10L if boating strictly to and from the birding spot. You probably could bargain the boat rental down to 200 kAr but that would be a hard negotiation over \$20.

## Ambinda

This is the type location for the Tsingy Wood-rail, and one of only two known locations if my information is correct.

**Contacts:** Cooperatives that run taxi-brousse between Tsi/didy and Maintirano. very basic French in both cases. Call a few days in advance. State your wished departure date and confirm that a convoy is going out on this day and if they can predict the departure time. Ask for a "siège devant" or if not available or there are two of you, "fenêtre derrière le chauffeur"

First one: 0347966583 (coopérative Kofimandidy)

Second one: 0346892166 (coopérative FIFITSI)

**Access:** For that bit, you should DEFINITELY consider renting your own transport. But if you want to do it using public transport, here is the info. From Tana, you first go to Tsiraonomandidy [Tsee-r(a)o-(no)-mandeedee], a 4 hour drive. The road stops there. You book yourself in a taxi-brousse to Maintirano [Mane-tee-rahn(o)]. This might depart the next day, requiring a night in Tsi/didy. Ideally,

you should have booked your place in the taxi-brousse a few days in advance. The taxi-brousse that ply that road are decades-old, multi-repaired Land Cruisers or similar, in which 13 passengers + driver and mechanic are packed in like sardine. The smell is similar to sardine too due to dried fish and sometimes formerly fresh fish being carried on the roof. In any case, you REALLY want the best seat by the window. The departures are conditional on the military escort showing up. There have been occasional violent muggings, so now the taxi-brousse travel in convoys with the first and last vehicles carrying an armed soldier in the front seat. The trip takes two days. There will be multiple stops to rebuild parts of the vehicles from random bits of metal. The night is spent in the first village one reaches after night fall. You should be able to obtain a spare bed in someone's house, but the normal way is to sleep on one's seat in the taxi-brousse. You finally drop out of that hell in Ambinda, about 3 hours before the final stop in Maintirano.

In Ambinda, you should quickly find someone to show you the research station run by Biodiversity Conservation Madagascar. At the time of my visit, I could use water from a well, a more or less clean shower area, a gaz stove and utensils in a definitely dirty kitchen, a solar power electricity outlet (but that would have deprived the locals from a worshipped way to charge their credit-less mobile phones), and fenced camping spots. The rest of the facilities were either off bounds or ill-functioning. Local villagers request payment to guard your tent at night and to guide you in the forest, but you can use the facilities for free. Their strategy was to look very conflictual at first, but once a price was agreed upon they were fine (although definitely a bit bullyish towards the younger lads from the village). A call to the BCM supervisor settled the initial behavior issues (bring Orange mobile phone credit). To get out the next day, I got one of the younger guys to take me on the project's motorcycle to Belitsaki. There, a (very) local taxi-brousse goes to Maintirano once a few clients have accumulated.

**Birding targets:** Tsingy Wood-rail, Schlegel's Asity (common), Sickle-billed Vanga, White-browed Owl (not seen or heard by me but did not go near the forest at night)

**Non-bird targets:** Decken's sifaka, Western bamboo-lemur, Aye-aye (the feeding remains of it)

**Birding strategy:** You just follow the guides into the forest until you locate the rail by the noise they make when foraging in the dry leaf litter. Random taping would be less efficient.

Note: the harrowing trip to Ambinda holds the best chance of seeing Madagascar Sandgrouse, Madagascar Pratincole, Harlequin Quail, and Marsh Owl, all species that can be tricky to see otherwise. Also Madagascar Partridge, Buttonquail, and Madagascar Harrier.

**Costs:** I left 100 kAr in Ambinda, plus the motorcycle transfer. Malagasy salaries start below 10,000 Ar for a day of hard physical labour, so up to you to find the right balance. The taxi-brousse from Tsi/didy was also 100 kAr one way (if you want my opinion they should have paid me for the abuse).

## Mandrozo

Lac Mandrozo is another one of TPF field sites, where they work towards sustainable fishing and waterbird conservation. There used to be a breeding pair or fish-eagle, but nowadays the main draw for birders is Sakalava rail.

Contact Lily from TPF a few months in advance so he has time to contact someone from the field site during one of their rotations.

**Access:** From Maintirano, this is a 3h off road motorcycle drive including three river crossings: one on a shaky looking bridge that seems to be in a constant state of repair, one that required carrying the motorcycles on mens' back on the way in but was passable on the way out, and one that required putting the motorcycle into a small pirogue on the way out, but was passable on the way in. You are not expected to drive the motorcycle, but to sit behind the driver with your luggage strapped behind you. This whole excursion WILL remind you that you have an ass in case you forgot that fact about yourself. Importantly, this is not a generic destination, so make sure the motorcycle driver really knows how to get there. I was lucky that a rotation of TPF staff was scheduled for the day of my visit, so my driver could learn the way. I would expect TPF do you the same favor provided you warn them in advance. The motorcycle guy name's Felix and I got him through the lady at the Voanio hotel in Maintirano.

**Birding targets:** Sakalava rail, Madagascar Jacana, Madagascar Pond-heron (uncommon), Humblot's Heron, the complete set of Malagasy water-bounded rails, African Open-billed Stork, Yellow-billed Stork, a large array of ducks.

Non-bird targets: Decken's sifaka, Brown lemur

**Birding strategy:** TPF staff will take you on a pirogue trip in the morning to check one or two of the four known rail territories. If you do not locate the rail on your first passage, a bit of tape should entice them out in a timely manner. Later, they will paddle further to get you to a lily-covered bay where waterbirds of all sorts congregate while Malagasy women fish for tiny chevaquine prawns. They make the place unsuitable as a waterbird breeding area, but they sure look lovely.

Note: The last and largest river to cross before Mandrozo yielded sightings of Madagascar Sandgrouse coming to drink, Madagascar Pratincole flying over and calling (suggesting local breeding for both), as well as a few waders. Even more exciting, I spotted a pair of Bat Hawk from the bike about 20 minutes north of Maintirano, and a Madagascar Cuckoo-hawk depredated a nest of Frances's Sparrowhawk below my eyes during a short break about 30 minutes south of Mandrozo village. The latter serendipitous sighting was my only sighting of this tricky endemic...

**Costs:** Less than 100 kAr for TPF staff and food, and 200 kAr for the motorcycle (including fuel).

## Forêt d'Iaroka

This primary forest just a few km south of Andasibe surfaced into the birding world a few years ago. It has most of the species in Mantadia NP (with the notable exception of Scaly Ground-roller), plus Helmet Vanga and Bernier's Vanga, two species that otherwise are only realistically observed by visiting birders in the Masoala peninsula, after a very long and rather expensive trip. In addition, Rufous-headed Ground-roller and Short-legged Ground-roller appear to maintain high densities in Iaroka forest, whereas they are really hard to spot in Mantadia. The same goes for the two oxylabes.

**Access:** Just before the crossroad between the RN2 and the road into Andasibe and Mantadia, that is about 500m from the accommodation at Feony Ala, there is a pink building with "Iaroka" painted on it, that's the office of the ecotourism effort. However, it does not seem to be attended very often. Your best bet is to ask around for Etienne, either in the accommodation area, around the Andasibe NP visitor center, or at the houses near the Iaroka office. He'll collect your entry fees, and should be able to set you up with a local trail guide (pisteur).

**Strategy:** You need to decide whether you want to walk the c.20km into the forest (c.3h30 hike each way) or rent a 4x4 (c.1h drive + 2h hike), and whether you want to spend the night camping in the forest or visit for the day. Obviously, presented with these options, I walked and spent the night. And walked again the following day. But I did see both vanga species and many more. I actually found my own nest of Helmet Vanga while I had sent the pisteur away to increase the probability of detection.

The decision to spend the night depends on whether a Helmet Vanga nest has been located yet (if yes, seeing the vanga will only take the time it needs to get to the nest, so you won't need to spend the night for that species), and on whether you really want to locate Bernier's Vanga (if yes, you need to put some time going through mixed-species flocks, so best spend two days). If you spend the night, bring in food for you plus the pisteur; the pisteur will bring cooking utensils from home. For best peace of mind, bring a tent for your pisteur (mine had to sleep under a leaking thatched roof).

**Birding targets:** Helmet Vanga, Bernier's Vanga, Short-legged Ground-roller, Rufous-headed Ground-roller, White-throated Oxylabes, Yellow-browed Oxylabes, Henst's Goshawk, Common Sunbird-acity, Velvet Asity, Nuthatch Vanga, Pollen's Vanga, Brown Emutail, Crested Ibis, Rainforest Scops-owl, Collared Nightjar.

Non-bird targets: Small-toothed Sportive-lemur (not seen by me), Mantella baroni, Giraffe-necked weevil, Madagascar green boa, ...

**Birding strategy:**

For Helmet Vanga if no nest has been located yet: enquire about recent sightings and carefully browse through all saplings and small trees in a 200m buffer around sighting clusters or around very recent sightings that were not in a mixed-species flock, while playing the tape often. From what I can tell from limited experience (one active nest and one failed nest), the vanga seems to prefer low lying swampy forest or perhaps the areas where solid ground sinks into those marshy bits. Detected nests were c2-3 meters above ground.

For Bernier's Vanga: Find large mixed-species flocks, follow them for as long as you can with the help of your pisteur, play a lot of Pollen's Vanga tape, and look up. Also reputedly works for Helmet Vanga, except look a bit further down.

For Rufous-headed Ground-roller: pursue any calling bird. That bird is Madagascar's answer to rusty-naped pitta (a.k.a. puta): it will entice you into leech infested rotten gullies at 5am and not give itself up, only to show up without warning in the middle of a trail at 10am.

For Short-legged Ground-roller, tape randomly between 1 and 3pm, pursue any response. For both ground-rollers, my pisteur had a few places he claimed were territories, but none yielded anything.

For Henst's Goshawk, you need to go in the large man made clearing (where I camped) around midday and hope for the best.

For oxylabes, you need to locate them by ear and then call them in (they are very tape responsive). Random taping did not work at all for me.

**Costs:** 40 kAr community fees per day (did not pay the last day since I found the helmet vanga nest thereby providing the community with a steady income for the next few weeks). For the pisteur, 40 kAr per day seems to be the going rate but it is not fixed. Jeep rental was quoted at 150kAr (same as if going to Mantadia NP). If walking the whole way seems too much, and the jeep is too expensive or not your kind of travel, and the weather has been quite nice lately, you may consider renting a bike in Andasibe for 25kAr a day. I did it for Mantadia NP (not for Iaroka because I did not know of that

option at the time). It's quite a bit of fun to bike through Malagasy countryside and into rainforest with indris, ruffed-lemurs, and sifakas.