

# Madagascar

*All the photos here were taken on Birding Africa tours by Callan Cohen and Deirdre Vrancken*

Madagascar is famous for being unusual and unique, to the extent that it is often referred to as the eighth continent. Its birds exemplify this: a remarkable 140 species are endemic or near-endemic, including several spectacular and rather strange families: the spectacular Ground Rollers, Vangas, Mesites, Cuckoo Roller, Asities, and Couas (the latter a subfamily of the cuckoos). Although the Birding Africa tours focus on these amazing birds, we'll have time to sample some of the island's other oddities. Among these are the fantastic and diverse lemurs, chameleons and frogs flaunting a riot of colour.

We offer a 13 day highlights tour to the best of Madagascar's wildlife and birding sites and endemics.

Our **13 day tour** explores the famous forests of *Andasibe-Mantadia* and *Anamalazoatra* where the largest living lemur, the Indri, is regularly seen and our birding highlights include four Ground Roller species (Rufous-headed, Short-legged, Pitta-like and Scaly Ground Roller). *Ranomafana* National Park in the eastern highlands has primary forest and is famous for its recently discovered but endangered

**Golden Bamboo Lemur**, and the birding is spectacular – amongst other Madagascar endemics we'll search for **Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity**, **Brown Mesite** and **Pollen's Vanga**. Our expert guides will also take you birding in Isalo and *Zombitse* National Park in the central highlands. *Ifaty* in the southeast, haunt of the fabulous **Sickle-billed Vanga**, offers spiny forest specials like **Subdesert Mesite**, **Long-tailed Ground Roller** and **Running** and **Green-capped Coua**. We also take in Tulear for the Madagascar Plover and La Table for some excellent coastal birding and the recently discovered **Red-shouldered Vanga**. From *Toliara*, we explore the island of *Nosy Ve* in the south west, offering the splendid **Red-tailed Tropicbird**.



*Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity MADAGASCAR*  
(c) Callan Cohen www.birdingafrica.com

## Day-by-day Itinerary of the 13 day tour.

### Day 1 and 2: Antananarivo (Tana) to Ifaty's spiny forest

Welcome to Madagascar!

You will meet your guide at the airport and shortly thereafter fly from Madagascar's capital city to the otherworldly south for four days' birding in the spiny desert, the mudflats and the coastal 'coral-rag' scrub.

With splendid aerial views over the southern coast, we will land at the airport of *Toliara* and drive to the south-west coast, the *Ifaty* area. On the drive, scanning the mudflats could deliver **Crab Plover**, **Madagascar Plover** if we are lucky, and many other Palaearctic wader species.

The beach resort town of Ifaty is a popular place for birders. Its famous spiny dry-forest is a landscape of interwoven baobabs, octopus trees and euphorbias so weird and wonderful that you might as well be on a different planet. This area is loaded with extravagant semi-desert endemics which we will explore our first afternoon and the next day.

This ecologically diverse wonderland, the 'Spiny Desert', is dominated by 3-meter tall cactus-like plants. We'll carefully wind our way among these *Didierea*, avoiding the sharp spines, but trying to find **Madagascar Green Pigeon**, **Green-capped Coua**, **Running Coua**, **Archbold's Newtonia**, **Thamnornis Warbler**, **Sub-desert Brush Warbler**, **White-headed, Sickle-billed, Lafresnaye's and Hook-billed Vanga** and **Sakalava Weaver**. The real stars of the show are the highly localised and spectacular **Sub-desert Mesite** and **Long-tailed Ground Roller** and we'll make a special effort to find them. The elusive **Banded Kestrel** would be a good bonus! The middle of the day will be very hot, and we'll retreat to our accommodation for a welcome break (and perhaps even a refreshing dip in the ocean!).

### Day 3: Ifaty to Toliara and St. Augustine Bay's coral rag scrub

This morning we'll explore more of the spiny desert, in search of any target birds that we may have missed. We'll also visit a nearby site in search for the localised **Madagascar Plover**.

From Toliara, in the afternoon, we'll explore the surrounding area. Arid hillsides surround the bay and are home to Madagascar's most recently described endemic, **Red-shouldered Vanga**. We will also search for **Grey-headed Lovebird** and **Verreaux's Coua**. We may even be lucky with **Madagascar Sandgrouse** at one of their regular drinking points.

The mudflats around Toliara are great for all sorts of waders, **Saunders's Tern** and possibly **Humblot's Heron**.

### Day 4: Toliara to Prince Anakao and Nosy Ve's Red-tailed Tropicbirds.

If we have time this morning, we'll search again for **Madagascar Sandgrouse** before we head onto the boat to Anakao and Nosy Ve.

At Anakao, we'll have breakfast and a short birding walk in search for the **Littoral Rock Thrush**. We'll then make the very short boat trip across to Nosy Ve, where we'll be able to enjoy splendidly close views of **Red-tailed Tropicbird** as they hover overhead. Nosy Ve is the iconic tropical island paradise, with



long white beaches and aquamarine waters. We'll check the roosting seabirds for **Lesser Crested Tern**, **White-fronted Plover**, and **Crab Plover** if we are lucky. We've even seen the vagrant **Sooty Gull** here for two years running, the only record for Madagascar. Optional snorkelling can also be arranged in advance.

We will return by mid-afternoon (depending on wind conditions). We stay overnight at Toliara.

### Day 5: Toliara to Zombitse's dry deciduous forest and to Isalo's scenic palm savanna

We will depart early for Zombitse National Park, in order to arrive before it gets too hot. **Cuckoo Rollers** displaying over the canopy is one of the highlights here. Males of this huge forest endemic engage in flapping displays and loops accompanied by their shrieking whistles. This forest's speciality, **Appert's Greenbul**, is one of Madagascar's rarest endemics. This highly threatened species is restricted to Zombitse and a small adjacent forest patch. Here we could also find **Giant Coua**, **Coquerel's Coua**, **Rufous Vanga** and **Stripe-throated Jery**.

The forest is a very special transition zone between the south's flora and the western deciduous forest (which we will explore in Ankarafantsika National Park). Similar in appearance as the latter, it contains baobab species of the former.

We will continue on the long drive to Isalo's remarkable landscape: eroded 'ruiniforme' sandstone outcrops, with hints of silver and green reflections of sunlight and interspersed with endless palm savanna.

Surrounded by the spectacular mountains of the Isalo massif, we will stay at one of Madagascar's most scenic places. Key target birds this evening and the following morning will include **Madagascar Partridge**, **Torotoroka Scops-Owl**, **White-browed Owl** and **Benson's Rock-Thrush** (although noticeably different in plumage and structure, this species is now often considered to be conspecific with the Forest Rock-Thrush from further east).

### Day 6: Isalo to Anja's ring-tailed lemurs and to Ranomafana's pristine rainforests

This morning will offer another chance to target our key birds, before traveling northwards towards Ranomafana's rainforests. On this spectacularly scenic long drive, we'll search for the elegant **Madagascar Harrier**.

We'll have picnic lunch at Anja, where a protected and sacred forest and may offer us splendid photographic opportunities of the very social and charismatic Ring-tailed Lemurs.

During the late afternoon, the habitat we'll drive through will become more and more forested until we'll reach our first rainforest destination: Ranomafana National Park.

We'll arrive just before dark, take a stroll around our accommodation and prepare for the next day's early start.



Sickle-billed Vanga Madagascar  
(C) Callan Cohen www.birdingafrica.com

**Day 7 and 8: Ranomafana National Park, the eastern mid- and higher altitude montane rainforest**

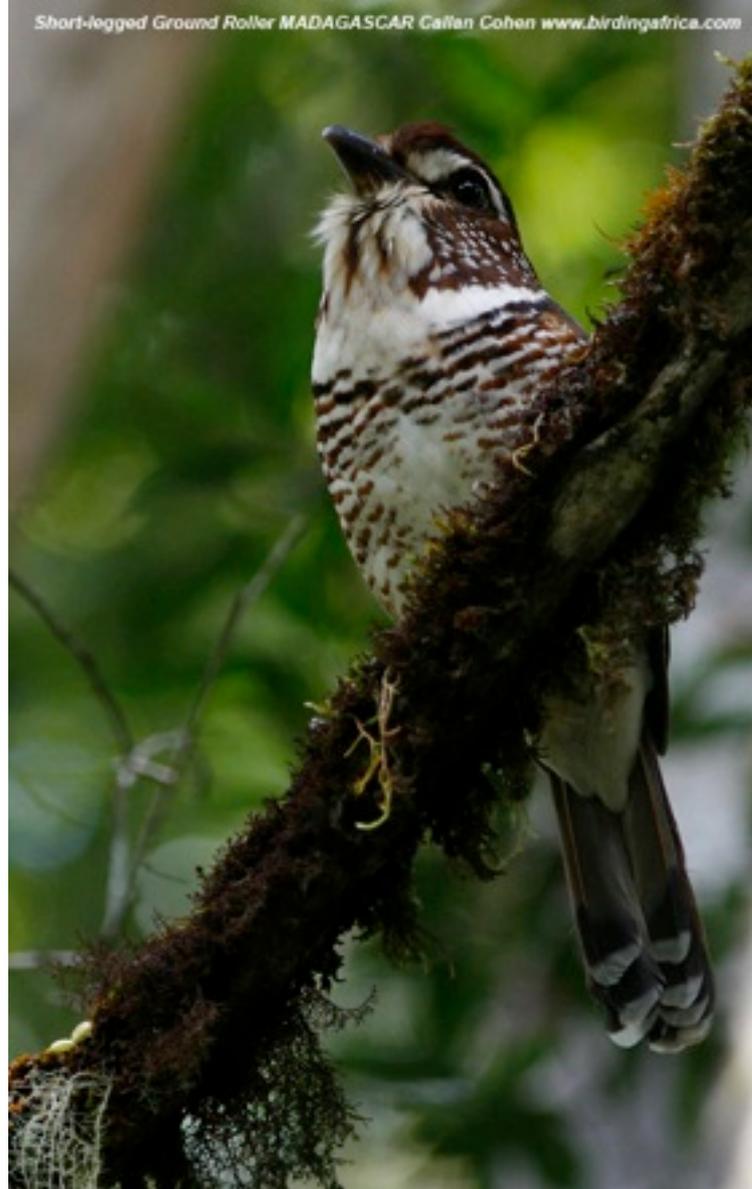
We'll have two full days and one morning in this very important rainforest area.

Ranomafana was set aside to protect one of the largest remaining rainforest patches of eastern Madagascar. It is a superb area, holding 39200 ha mid-altitude rainforest and higher-altitude mountain cloud forest. A new species of lemur, the Golden Bamboo Lemur, was discovered here as recently as 1986, and this is the best place to seek one of the world's rarest primate species, the Greater Bamboo Lemur! We'll explore the excellent network of paths through the forests and dense stands of giant bamboo..

Birding is excellent, and we'll see a lot of new species as this is the first time that we'll be exploring this rich habitat, home to most of Madagascar's endemics. Good birds that we may well encounter include, **Pitta-like Ground Roller, White-throated Oxylabes, Crossley's Babbler, Green Jery, Wedge-tailed Jery and Tylas Vanga.** We'll also search for the more retiring **Madagascar Wood-Rail, Brown Mesite, Madagascar Crested Ibis** and **Henst's Goshawk.**

We will also explore Vohiparara, a nearby high altitude site of mossy, cloud forest that includes forest trails and a small marsh. This is the best site in the world to get to grips with Asitys, a brightly-coloured family of birds endemic to Madagascar that are related to the broadbills. The undisputed special here is the threatened **Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity**, which will be a major focus of the walk. We'll

prick our ears for sign of its soft call, and search special places along the trail where its favoured flowers will be in bloom. We'll also look out for **Common Sunbird Asity** and fruit-eating **Velvet Asity** (with its bright green head wattles). **Rufous-headed Ground-Roller** occur here too, as well as **Cryptic Warbler** (discovered in 1996!). Other excellent bird are **Pollen's Vanga, Grey-crowned Greenbul, Forest Rock-Thrush. Madagascar Yellowbrow** and **Brown Emutail** are highly secretive and we'll have to work hard to get a good view of these mega-skulkers. Marsh restricted specials such as **Grey Emutail** and **Madagascar Snipe** could be



Rufous-headed Ground-Roller Madagascar (C) Callan Cohen www.birdingafrica.com



found in the ever smaller patches of habitat. We've even seen the declining Meller's Duck here a number of times, but we'd need to be very fortunate to see this declining species as it dwindles into extinction. A nearby river holds **Madagascar Pratincoles** and we've been lucky enough to discover a spot where this local species breeds.

A global hotspot for lemur diversity, Ranomafana sports 12 species, including the spectacular Milne-Edwards's Sifaka and the endangered Golden and Greater Bamboo Lemurs mentioned previously. During our evening visit to the nocturne, we'll likely get very close views of Brown Mouse Lemur and Malagasy Striped Civet. We often see Ring-tailed Mongoose during the day.



Velvet Asity MADAGASCAR  
(c) Deirdre Vrancken [www.birdingafrica.com](http://www.birdingafrica.com)

### Day 9: Ranomafana to Antsirabe

After our last morning in search for any specials that may have eluded us, we'll head northwards for a necessary transit to our next birding area. We'll overnight at Antsirabe, a very picturesque and interesting town historically known as the "place of much salt". It is renowned for its warm springs and thermal bath, its cool climate (at about 1500m altitude) and having hundreds of registered rickshaw taxis.

### Day 10: Antsirabe to Tana to Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, eastern mid-altitude rainforest

After a good night's rest, we will head on further northwards, via Antananarivo (Tana), to the Andasibe-Mantadia National Park. The journey will take much of the day, with several stops for snacks and birding.

We will arrive in the afternoon at our accommodation nearby the park's entrance and may do a short stroll in search for nocturnal lemurs and chameleons.

### Day 11 and 12: Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, eastern mid-altitude rainforest

We will have another two full days to explore this spectacular wilderness.

The protected area consists of the Anamalazaotra Special Reserve (also named Andasibe or the colonial name Perinet) and the larger Mantadia National Park. Together, these protect one of Madagascar's most important primary rainforest areas. We have ample time to explore the area thoroughly, on various trails and with local guides. The list of birds we can see is very long, but some highlights may include **White-throated Rail, Madagascar Flufftail, Madagascar Blue Pigeon, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Red-breasted, Blue and Red-fronted Couas, Madagascar Long-eared Owl, Madagascar Spine-tailed Swift, Madagascar Kingfisher, Madagascar Cuckoo-Roller, Common Sunbird Asity, Ward's Flycatcher, Dark Newtonia, Rand's Warbler, Nuthatch Vanga, Madagascar Blue Vanga, Pollen's Vanga, Madagascar Starling, Forest Fody and Nelicourvi Weaver**. We may also be fortunate enough to encounter **Collared Nightjar** roosting almost imperceptibly on the forest floor.

Mantadia is also the very best place in the world for Ground-Rollers. We'll need some luck and perseverance, but we've seen all four rainforest species in a single morning: **Pitta-like, Scaly, Rufous-headed and Short-legged Ground-Roller**.

Despite this long list of bird endemics, there are few natural history experiences that can compare to the Indri's morning calls echoing through the misty forests. More than anything else, these echoing calls from the world's largest lemur sound like whales! The park also forms the ideal habitat for the iconic Black-and-White Ruffed Lemur and Diademmed Sifaka.



### **Day 13: Perinet to Antananarivo**

After our last morning walk near Andasibe, we will head back to the capital Antananarivo where our **13 day tour ends.**