

endemics, anyone?

MADAGASCAR'S BIRDS

TEXT **MARTIN BENADIE**

Rated as one of 12 mega-diversity hot-spot countries in the world, Madagascar seems to belong to neither Africa nor Asia, but exudes an atmosphere distinctly its own. For the first-time birder to the island, it abounds with lifers. Mesites, ground-rollers, couas, vangas, Malagasy warblers and a host of other species are found nowhere else on the planet.

Although an island – albeit the fourth largest in the world, with an extent of about 587 000 square kilometres – Madagascar is sometimes referred to as the earth's eighth continent because its wildlife is so unique. Among the several reasons for its extraordinary assemblages of flora and fauna is a long period of isolation; the island split away from Africa about 165 million years ago and reached its current position some 80 million years ago. Another contributing factor is the combination of random colonisation from Africa and speciation from a small population of founders. As a result, more than 80 per cent of the wildlife is endemic, including mammals such as lemurs and a host of fascinating reptiles and amphibians. >

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above *White-breasted Mesites* are ground dwellers and rarely fly, choosing instead to freeze if predators threaten.

When it comes to birds, what Madagascar lacks in diversity (in terms of numbers), it most certainly makes up for in quality, with a fascinating roll-call of unusual

species and quirky endemics. The country's bird list runs to almost 300 species, more than 220 of which breed there. Of these, 118 species are endemic and another

22 are near-endemic. There are at least 40 endemic genera – more than in any country in Africa – and many of these contain a single species. In short, Madagascar's complement of birds is very different from that of Africa – or anywhere else in the world.

What makes Madagascar so exciting is the phenomenal rate of endemism among the higher orders. The island boasts no fewer than five endemic bird families and one endemic subfamily, as well as many taxonomic oddities.

The most celebrated of the families is probably the monophyletic Vangidae, which represents one of the most spectacular evolutionary radiations on earth. Vangas, with their differing sizes, plumages and bill structures, occupy various forest habitats. Most of the 22 species are arboreal, but one fills a terrestrial niche and five others are small flycatchers



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right *Schlegel's Asity* has near-fluorescent blue-green caruncles around its eyes.

previous spread
During the day, pairs of the cryptic *Collared Nightjar* often roost snugly in leaf litter.

represented by the newtonias and Ward's Vanga. Overall, they take on roles occupied elsewhere by woodpeckers, woodhoopoes, shrikes, tits, treecreepers and nuthatches.

The mesites of the family Mesitornithidae are rail-like terrestrial birds with short, rounded wings and long, constantly flicking tails. They can fly, but rarely do so and are usually found in vocal pairs or small groups on the forest floor. Also terrestrial are the ground-rollers of the family Brachypteraciidae, but they are harder to see as they are secretive and elusive. These bizarre and colourful birds with large heads and stout bills occur in rainforest and thorn scrub, where they dig tunnels in which to nest.

The enigmatic Cuckoo Roller, in the family Leptosomidae, is a large bird with loud and evocative whistling calls. Its phylogenetic relationships are still unclear.

Research undertaken on Madagascarian birds over the past decade has led to a number of taxonomic changes, the most significant of which was the creation of a new monophyletic endemic family, the Bernieridae. It includes the tetrakas and oxylabes, some of which were previously classified as greenbuls and warblers. They are now considered a distinct adaptive radiation of Malagasy warblers. Eleven species are currently allocated to this family, but more are likely to be added in future. Related to Old World warblers, Bernieridae species are small, insect-gleaning passerines that occupy various forest strata and elevation ranges and have specific diets and morphology. They include such eccentric species as Yellow-browed Oxylabes and Long-billed Tetraka.

Now grouped in the endemic subfamily Philepittinae, asities are birds of both rainforest and dry forest. They all have characteristically rounded bodies and short tails, as well as coloured bare skin



THE MOST CELEBRATED OF THE FAMILIES IS PROBABLY THE MONOPHYLETIC VANGIDAE, WHICH REPRESENTS ONE OF THE MOST SPECTACULAR EVOLUTIONARY RADIATIONS ON EARTH

around the eyes. The two larger species are frugivorous, while the two smaller ones feed on insects and nectar, using their long, decurved bills to do so. Velvet Asities are polygynous, the males forming leks and performing elaborate displays such as somersaulting around a perch and hanging upside down. The past decade has also seen the description of a few species new to science, like the Tsingy Wood Rail.

Other species unique to Madagascar are jeries, emutails and couas. Jeries are small, prominent, insect-gleaning passerines that are often found in mixed-species parties, while emutails are aberrant warblers and shy inhabitants of marsh and forest. The 11 coua species, allies of the Asian malkohas, are both terrestrial and arboreal. Distinguished by their



top *The Helmet Vanga* is best looked for in Masoala.

Even Madagascar's Greater Vasa Parrots are unlike parrots found elsewhere, being drab >



DANIEL LÓPEZ VELASCO (2)

above *The Blue Coua adds a startling splash of colour to the eastern rainforests.*

below *The remote, untouched Masoala Peninsula.*

black in colour and exhibiting highly promiscuous breeding behaviour.

It is clear that most of Madagascar's endemic birds are totally dependent on forest of one kind or another, be it rainforest, deciduous forest or dry, spiny forest. It takes time to reach any

of these habitats, so if you want to target as many endemics as possible you should allow a good three weeks in the country. The majority of the key sites have knowledgeable local guides and accommodation for varying budgets.

A mountain chain running north-south down the centre of the island creates different

climates, with most rain falling in the east while the coastal plain in the west lies in the rain shadow. Rainforest is found chiefly in the north-east, deciduous forest in the north and west, and dry, dense, xerophytic forest in the south-west. The dry climate of the south and the south-western coast supports spiny forest and baobab trees, while in the central region broad valleys, terraced rice fields, canyons, rivers and lakes make up the typical landscapes.

The moist rainforest cloaking Madagascar's eastern escarpment protects the richest assemblage of birds overall and is divided into different types depending on altitude and rainfall. Lowland rainforest occurs below 800 metres and receives an average of 3500 millimetres of rain per year. The largest remaining tract of this type, at 400 000 hectares, is on the Masoala Peninsula in the north-east. Fortunately some 230 000 hectares of it are protected in Masoala National Park.

Remote, untouched and with forest extending right down to the rocky shore, Masoala is reached



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by crossing the Bay of Antongil by boat from Maroansetra. Staying at Masoala Forest Lodge gives you access to the heart of the national park, where you stand a chance of finding Helmet Vanga and other stunners such as Bernier's Vanga, Red-breasted Coua, Brown Mesite and Scaly Ground-roller. Madagascar Pygmy-kingfishers and Short-legged Ground-rollers are regularly seen, while you only have to stroll around the lodge to find chameleons and tenrecs. Night walks often produce mouse lemurs.

Most of the rest of Madagascar's remaining rainforest lies between 800 and 1400 metres above sea level. Once continuous, it is now fragmented into patches on the eastern side of the island's spine. Of these, Andasibe-Mantadia and Ranomafana are probably the key ones to visit.

Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, comprising the Analamazaotra (or Périnet) Special Reserve and the much larger Mantadia National Park, lies in mid-altitude forest and, being

close to the capital, Antananarivo, is the country's premier rainforest destination. At Analamazaotra the haunting 'songs' of indri lemurs resonate through the forest, making birding there an unforgettable experience. Some of the specials are Blue Coua, Velvet Asity, the elusive Collared Nightjar, Tylas Vanga, White-throated Oxy-labes, Madagascar Long-eared Owl and the bizarre Nuthatch Vanga. Mixed-species flocks typically include Common Newtonia, Red-tailed and Ward's vangas, Madagascar Cuckooshrike, Nelicourvi Weaver and Souimanga Sunbird. Madagascar Brush Warblers and Madagascar Mannikins flit about the forest fringe, while in open areas fast-flying Madagascar Spine-tailed Swifts feed overhead. It takes a little longer to walk to the Torotorofotsy Marsh, but this is an excellent locale for Madagascar Snipe, Madagascar Rail, Madagascar Swamp Warbler and Grey Emutail.

A short distance away and at a slightly higher altitude, Mantadia National Park protects a



15 000-hectare expanse of primary forest. Here sought-after birds include Common Sunbird-Asity, Madagascar Flufftail and Scaly Ground-roller, but others likely to be seen are Dark Newtonia, Green and Stripe-throated jeries, Madagascar Starling, Cryptic Tetraka, Forest Fody, Rufous-headed and Short-legged ground-rollers and the terrestrial Crossley's Vanga.>

above *The Madagascar Red Owl is the island's rarest owl species.*

top *The Long-tailed Ground-roller frequents spiny bush in the south-west of Madagascar.*



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above A Running Coua, which behaves much like the Roadrunner found in the south-western United States, perches in a tree in the early morning to warm up.

A secluded highland pond often hosts Madagascar Grebe and Meller's Duck.

Close to the entrance to Ranomafana National Park, it's worth making a slight detour to see the impressive Namorono River

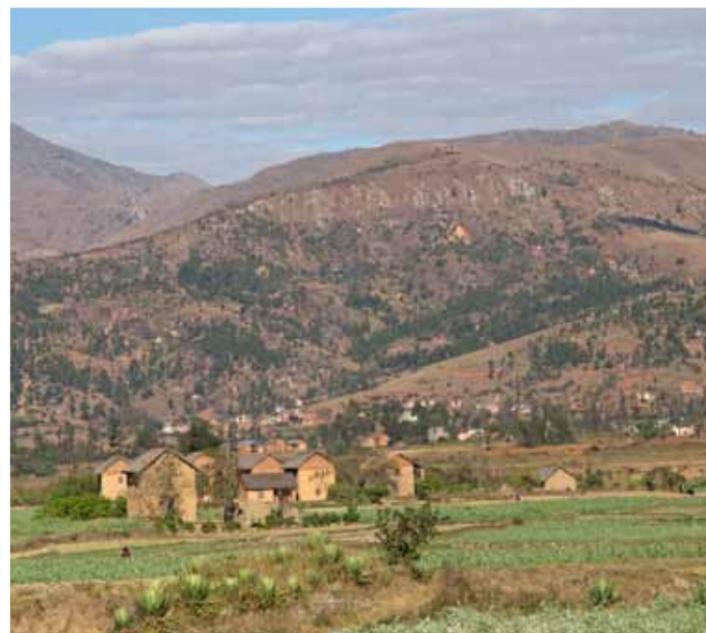
plunging down the eastern escarpment. In addition to lemurs and endemic reptiles and frogs, the park hosts an exciting suite of eastern rainforest specials. The birds of Anasibe-Mantadia occur here too, as do Spectacled, Wedge-tailed and

Grey-crowned tetrakas, Yellow-browed Oxylabes, Brown Emu-tail, Yellow-bellied Sunbird-Asity, Pollen's Vanga, Henst's Goshawk and the undeniably gorgeous Pitta-like Ground-roller.

The deciduous forests of western Madagascar are equally fascinating, although they too are now found only in patches, which are separated by sterile grassland. One of the larger tracts, at 65 520 hectares, is protected by Ankara-fantsika National Park, where a number of the rarer western endemics are frequently seen. Along any one of the trails that wind through the park's dry forest White-breasted Mesite, Schlegel's Asity and Van Dam's Vanga (considered to be the island's rarest and most threatened vanga) may be encountered, as well as the two coua species restricted to this forest type: Red-capped and Coquerel's. Lesser Vasa Parrot, Rufous and Hook-billed vangas and Crested Drongo are other notable species of this area and local guides can often find a Torotoroka Scops Owl at its day roost. Lac Ravelobe, a sacred lake in the park, is home to a nesting pair of the Critically Endangered Madagascar Fish Eagle, while White-throated Rails favour the waterside vegetation. An elevated hide is a superb late-afternoon vantage point over the lake.

The tidal Betsiboka Delta near Mahajanga in the north-west provides excellent habitat for wetland birds, including the Endangered Bernier's Teal and Madagascar Sacred Ibis. Further south, Zombitse National Park protects a remnant of deciduous forest that hosts the dainty Appert's Tetraka. Listed as Vulnerable, this species has a range that is limited to only four forest sites. Giant Couas are often seen along Zombitse's forest trails and Cuckoo Rollers announce their presence with their raucous calls.

Covering 81 500 hectares of the Isalo Massif, the landscape of



right The present-day central plateau of Madagascar has lost much of its wetland habitat to rice paddies.



Isalo National Park is unusual for Madagascar, comprising sandstone outcrops and remnant canyon forest of fire-resistant tapia trees and pandanus palms surrounded by grassland. The park serves as a rough divide between eastern and western forest types and harbours Benson's Rock Thrush and Madagascar Hoopoe, which can be common, as well as White-browed Owl and flocks of Grey-headed Lovebirds. Madagascar Buttonquail, Madagascar Cisticola and Madagascar Lark can all be found in the grassland.

The south-west is the most arid part of the island and it is here that deciduous thicket grows. This, Madagascar's most unusual vegetation, forms a surreal landscape of spiny bush over which baobabs, pachypodiums and sentinel-like, thorn-clad octopus trees tower. Inland of the fishing village of Ifaty, a narrow band of this spiny thicket stretching 180 kilometres northward to the Mangoky River comprises the global range of two

SPECTACULAR ISLAND ENDEMICS SUCH AS CHABERT'S VANGA, RED-CAPPED COUAS AND ARCHBOLD'S NEWTONIA ENSURE THAT BIRDING IN THIS BIZARRE FLORA IS EXCITING

threatened species: Long-tailed Ground-roller and Subdesert Mesite. Spectacular island endemics such as Chabert's Vanga, Banded Kestrel, Sakalava Weaver, Running and Red-capped couas and Archbold's Newtonia ensure that birding in this bizarre flora is exciting, while the eerie, wailing calls of Sickie-billed Vangas betray the birds' presence. Salt pans in this area are good for the uncommon Madagascar Plover. Unfortunately there is little formal protection for this habitat.

South of Toliara, the coral rag scrub is home to another two species with highly restricted ranges:



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Verreaux's Coua and the recently discovered Red-shouldered Vanga. Nosy Ve, a sacred island lying four kilometres offshore of the fishing village of Anakao, has the southernmost breeding colony of Red-tailed Tropicbirds in the world and also hosts Dimorphic Egrets, Humblot's Herons and, seasonally, Crab Plovers. Also accessible from Anakao – though seldom visited >

above The stunning Pitta-like Ground-roller is best located in early summer.

top The large Sickie-billed Vanga feeds in noisy flocks.



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above *The Dimorphic Egret occurs in white and grey colour morphs; the latter is more common along the coast.*

– is Tsimanampetsota, a national park with extraordinary scenery: spectacular specimens of tall pachypodiums, baobabs and giant fig trees, healthy tracts of spiny thicket and a 15-kilometre-long

blue soda lake frequented by Greater and Lesser flamingos. Mascarene Martins nest in the sacred Mitoho Cave and Madagascar Sandgrouse are easily seen – and heard – as they fly overhead

in the mornings. Running Coua, Lefresnaye's Vanga and Madagascar Partridge are other good finds at Tsimanampetsota.

Over the past decade, one million hectares of Madagascar's rainforest have been destroyed and the island's unique dry forest has fared little better. Nevertheless, birds are still abundant, although more and more are becoming confined to national parks and reserves. And although the widespread deforestation in the country generates bad publicity, not all the news is bad: the Madagascar Pochard has been rediscovered after it was thought to have gone extinct, and the Madagascar Serpent Eagle, Madagascar Red Owl and Sakalava Rail have all been found in unexpected locations.

If you would like to visit Madagascar, www.parc-madagascar.com is a useful source of information. Increased ecotourism offers the local people the best chance to lift themselves out of extreme poverty and help to conserve what is left of the forest. ♦

right *The Endangered and highly localised Sakalava Rail favours wetlands such as Lac Kinkony.*



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