

SW MADAGASCAR: TOLIARA – IFATY – ZOMBITSE AUGUST 2008



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Madagascar is a destination which most birders prefer to visit as a part of a prearranged tour. It has a reputation of being a difficult location for independent travel, particularly because of communication problems. This is not entirely true, because individual visits can today be arranged without too much trouble, and for a reasonable price, especially if one does not attempt to 'do' the whole island on a single trip. It is, however, relatively difficult to find out and contact the services on the island, as many of the operators have not yet entered the Internet-email world, or have their information in French, the dominant foreign language on the island.

Clearly, birder-to-birder support is needed in a situation such as this. The following trip report is based on a two week visit in Madagascar in July-August 2008, mainly in the southwest of the island. It will provide the basic information and guidelines to visit the region by oneself, to see its endemic avifauna. There will be some pocket camera shots to illustrate the conditions, and to help identifying the key persons. The majority of Madagascar birding visits are done in rather exhausting pace. I, on the other hand, had more than enough time, exploring the sites in a relaxed pace. One day was lost as a consequence of food poisoning (bad chicken).

I brought my flights in Namibia and visited Madagascar from there, via Johannesburg (SA Airlink). Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, is however relatively well served with international flights from other airline hubs, as well. From Tana, as Antananarivo is informally known, I took an Air Mad(agascar) flight to Toliara (Tuléar) in the southwest, and made visits to the surrounding region from there. Most of the trips were organized by renting a car and a driver, but the three and half days spent in Ifaty and Mangily, north of Toliara, were based in Le Paradiseur resort, with a hotel car as the main mean of transportation.

One needs a car in Madagascar. Self-drive rental being difficult to locate out of Tana, a car with a driver (taxi or rental car, no difference really) is the best option. Public transportation is less flexible and not always available. In the sandy and rocky southwest, a 4x4 offers ease of mind, even though all my birdwatching could also have, in retrospect, been visited by a sedan.

This was my second self-arranged visit on the island and the daily practicalities of travel felt rather easy. All in all, locating the SW Madagascar endemics was not too difficult, with the help of local bird guides, compulsory in protected forests such as Reniala and Zombitse. The most difficult species probably was the **Madagascar Sandgrouse**, seen only once, albeit with excellent views, at La Table. Some mammal species were also seen on the way, even though my focus was on birds, with some prospecting on coastal lakes in a vain hope of discovering something exceptional, such as a **Bernier's Teal** or **Madagascar Sacred Ibis** south of their normal range.



Fig. 1. Air Madagascar to Tana, ready for departure at Toliara airport.

SEASON

July-August is the best time to visit the dry southwest of Madagascar. Unlike in October-November, when most of package bird tours arrive there, the temperatures are tolerable. The tours visit the southwest at time when even the locals have it difficult to deal with the heat, because that happens to be the ideal timing for the eastern rainforests. Their customers want to see it all in a single trip and therefore have to accept the adverse weather conditions. In July-August 2008, the days were sunny and hot (over +30 C) after 10 PM, the best hours for birding being the first three ones after sunrise and the last two ones before sunset. There was no malaria, dengue or chikunkunya in Toliara at the time of my visit and therefore no need to fear the few mosquitoes around.



Fig. 2. The flora of the southwest is unique, especially in its spiny forests.

ACCOMMODATION

Le Capricorne

Motel Capricorne (Unicorn) is the place to stay in Toliara. It is a spacious hotel with good restaurant and many large trees on its walled, secure grounds. The place is run by a young French lady, who speaks excellent English and looks well after her guests, just like the majority of the large staff (38!). The courteous professionalism of these people was a nice relief after Namibia and South Africa, with their very different attitude and work ethics. They worked as a team to run the place, with pride and efficiency.

In 2008, the rate for a single room with a bath was €30 per day. Dinners cost around Ar20.000, two courses with drinks and tea. The treat of the place was fresh langoustine, which is very cheap there. I myself decided to leave the huge shellfish for the French customers, who happily crunched them. Do not miss the Malagasy rum, which is smooth and tasty. Motel Capricorne has an email address and Internet presence and reservations are therefore easily made. Make sure to contact them before your flight in Tana, and their shuttle will wait for you at the Toliara airport.

The only problem with the place were its early evening power cuts, leading to a few candlelight dinners, as half of the city became dark (bring a torch). The next night, the other half lost its power, and Capricorne was well lit. Because of the high price of petrol (they have a large generator for the city!), the municipality could not anymore provide enough electricity for the whole Toliara, at the dinner cooking time. Only a few establishment with 'special arrangements' with the administration could rely on 24/7 power. Today, the price of petrol has gone down as a consequence of global economic depression and Toliara probably is well served again. In any case, the power normally returned between 8 and 9 PM.

In Toliara, I stayed most of the time in the motel grounds, where food, rest, shower and security were available. Otherwise, stops were made in and out of the town to obtain petrol, groceries and other necessities. Once we went to see the mudflats of the Toliara harbor, but there were very few birds around. Walking around in town in the hot weather had little appeal, partly because there were many rickshaw drivers and touts offering their services as soon as a tourist was spotted.

A single travelling guy may also be easily tempted by the many prostitutes and other attractive young ladies, who look for foreign men (=money) and/or a way out of the relative poverty of Madagascar. The mixture of African, European and Asian genes has created some of the most beautiful women on the Earth, and one is likely to be approached by some of them. The west coast of Madagascar is well known for sex tourism, against which the Unicef and the local police currently campaign. In case you contemplate on disregarding the exploitative nature of prostitution, let me point out that the 'good time girls' are not allowed to enter the Capricorne premises and partying with them involves some serious risks, such as contracting HIV/AIDS.



Fig. 3. The stylish interior of the Motel Capricorne restaurant, small section of the walled 'forest' in the background.

Le Paradiseur

In Ifaty, Le Paradiseur is a more up-market establishment for touristic hedonism (€71 per night), with a number of stone chalets, a lagoon-side swimming pool with a view to breaching **Humpback** and **Fin Whales** (in season, boat trips are arranged to get close to the whales), and a fancy gourmet restaurant with French cuisine. The food was great, and well worth the money. Funny enough, I once accidentally (language problems) ordered a similar plate of crayfish Mr. Bean faced in his holiday movie. I had to return it, being after all not ready to face the challenge of shelling the three dozen pink creatures, which stared me on the plate, with their beady black eyes. Fortunately, the chef did not mind but prepared another dish with no extra charge.



Fig. 4. Le Paradiseur swimming pool. The stone cottages are hidden in the bush.

The small resort is powered by solar panels and a small windmill, but the cabins do not have electric sockets. Batteries can however be charged at reception. There is a

safe in each cottage, spacious enough to protect one's bins in addition to money and documents. No noise, television or radios, and therefore a good chance to focus on healthier activities, such as sleeping. The staff is friendly, even though one may occasionally feel a bit an outsider in the predominantly French cultural environment. On the beach below the main building, the locals sell shells and boat trips to the picturesque greenish blue lagoon. At low tide, many villagers dot the lagoon waters, looking for shellfish and other 'fruits of the sea'.

There are several accommodation options, some of them probably more convenient, around Ifaty and Mangily (closer to Reniala; see below), but this was the only place I was able to contact on time. The communication was done through Holy Ravoninjatovo, email holy.htl@mda.mg. Holy was quite helpful and gave me some important pieces of information, e.g. in regard to car rental.

Tonga Soa Lodge

In Tana, I opted again for the birdwatcher's choice, Tonga Soa Lodge. It is located only minutes away from the airport. The place is owned by three partners, Ninah, Patrick and Brian (Finch, the well-known East Africa bird guide), with a special interest in birding tourists, both groups and individuals. Located in a suburb, the guesthouse is surrounded by high walls, which guarantee the peace of its small but well-maintained gardens, and a new accommodation unit with pleasantly decorated, spotlessly clean and comfortable European standard doubles. There is a restaurant, small bar and library. The rooms cost Ar80.000 per night, breakfast was Ar8.000, lunch around Ar25.000, and dinner also around Ar25.000.

Several **Rainbow Chameleons** and turtles adorned the garden, which also has a variety of 'Mad bird species', including **Madagascar White-Eye**, **Madagascar Wagtail**, **Madagascar Brush Warbler**, **Souimanga Sunbird**, **Madagascar Green Sunbird**, **Madagascar Bulbul**, and **Madagascar Fody**. The chameleons breed at Tonga Soa, their behavior being interesting to observe, with plenty of photography opportunities. Tonga Soa has recently changed their email address. The current one is tongasoahotel@mel.moov.mg. Ninah, the caretaker, can also be contacted by mobile phone at +261-320-218111 or +261-133-1201282. In case you look for high quality vanilla, she is able to get some for the right price.



Fig. 5. Tonga Soa Lodge dining area.



Fig. 5. One of the most comfortable beds and rooms in Madagascar – Tonga Soa.



Fig. 7. Tonga Soa toilet – a good indicator of the general quality.

MONEY

In this report, 'Ar' refers to ariary, the local currency. On the way to the southwest, it is probably best to change a couple of million ariarys in Tana, at the international airport. Currency exchange is more complicated in Toliara and credit cards are seldom accepted. At Motel Capricorne and Tonga Soa Lodge, cash euros were readily accepted. Otherwise, I paid in cash ariarys. Because of the 'French connection', euros are preferable to other foreign currencies in Madagascar. Well, the euro is preferred in most tourism destinations, at the moment...

CAR RENTAL

Toliara being a two day drive from Tana, there is really no sense in renting a car in the capital and driving all the way there and back (4 days!), with considerable stress and petrol expenses, unless one is planning to visit the national parks (e.g. Ranomafana) and other birding sites along the way. It is more sensible to rent one's car on the spot. The problem is, how to find out who to contact. Personally, I spent quite a lot of time and effort on this, and finally found what I was looking for, with the help of the above-mentioned Holy Ravoninjatovo.

The car rental guy in Toliara is Melvín, a young businessman who speaks English. He can be contacted at melsvoy@yahoo.fr. For me he supplied a Toyota Land Cruiser and a Mitsubishi Pajero with a driver for Ar160. 000 per day, excluding petrol. There is an advantage in having a 4x4 on the smaller roads around Toliara, and particularly on soft sand. My driver was Eric, a student of a local university and a part-time driver, who knows the region, has the patience required and is well-connected to get help in times of trouble (**Fig. 14**). The car was well-serviced but we had a surprise problem with suspension, which could not be fixed without special equipment. Early mornings were no problem for Eric, he always arrived on time. He can also be employed directly (email bototo01@yahoo.fr), at a lower rate.

In regard to car rental, a significant expense is petrol. It is not cheap on Madagascar and the cars tend to consume a lot. With Melvín, we agreed that the consumption was 14 liters per 100 km, the price of petrol being Ar2.740 per liter. Each day, I paid the petrol according to kilometers. On average, I ended up paying around €70 per day for the new 4x4, petrol and driver. It is a lot by Malagasy standards, but all in all relatively reasonable. If it is possible to share the costs, the cost of car rental becomes quite affordable. As usual on Madagascar, the corrupt police occasionally requested some 'backsheesh' at roadblocks, having seen the foreign customer on the front seat. Eric gave them a bottle of water or a token sum of money. I gave him a small tip in the end.

In retrospect, most of the trips could have been arranged with a taxi, for a lower rate (and reliability!). For La Table, this would be an especially practical solution, as it is not far away and the road is tarmac all the way.



Fig. 8. Melvín – the car rental operator in Toliara.



Fig. 9. Toliara, a well-balanced mixture of modernity and rural village life...



Fig. 10. Towards the town center, things get busier.

BIRDING SITES

Motel Capricorne

Madagascar Nightjars, **Madagascar Bee-eaters** and **Madagascar Kestlers** were very common everywhere on the coast, including Le Capricorne grounds. Once, a **Madagascar Long-eared Owl** visited the courtyard at night. One or two **Madagascar Turtle Doves** could always be located in the trees, but the shy doves were not that easy to see well. A few times I took one of the many wooden reclining chairs and focused on the smaller birds in the canopy. **Madagascar Bulbul** was the dominant species, with smaller numbers of **Common** and **Stripe-throated** (best place for this species) **Jerys**, **Souimanga Sunbirds** (common to abundant everywhere) and **Madagascar Fodies**. The garden also had a resident couple of **Madagascar Mannikins** (seen in Reniala and Zombitse, as well).

La Table

Southeast of Toliara, along the highway to Zombitse and Tana, a flat hill of La Table dominates the landscape. This is the most well known birding spot in the southwest. The surrounding dry, stony plateau is covered by low bush, and trees. The unique trees have mostly disappeared, or are disappearing fast, as hundreds of villagers keep on cutting everything down for charcoal production, a situation tragically common in most parts of Madagascar. I tried several tree-cutting tracks off the highway.

The most productive location proved to be a relatively drab bushy ravine to the right of La Table (track right in a highway left hand curve, top of the steep ascent), towards a hill with a white statue of a Madonna. The track (to a quarry behind the hills) crosses the ravine close to the above-mentioned hill, and a stony trail can be followed downhill. Soon afterwards, another (small) ravine meets the first one on the left, in a place with particularly thick vegetation (**Fig. 12**). In there, it is good idea to wait and see what the bush has to offer. Chasing skulking bird species through thick, spiny bush rarely works well.

Madagascar Button-Quails and **Hoopoes** are easy to see at La Table, especially very early in the morning and just before sunset. **Sub-desert Brush Warblers** had a healthy breeding population, **Thamnornis Warblers** being scarce but present (only once). The best records were a superb male **Madagascar Sandgrouse** in the first afternoon, the only record of the species, a few **Verreaux's Couas** (the ravine), my only **Lafresnaye's Vanga**, and altogether thirteen **Red-shouldered Vangas**, seen on four occasions (once a 'family' of 8), also by the ravine. The last vanga is the special of the site, a species only recently discovered and with a restricted range.

Other interesting bird species included **Madagascar Buzzards**, **Madagascar Kestrels** (common all over, also seen at Le Capricorne), **Madagascar Green Pigeons**, **Running Couas** (common but skulking), a **Crested Coua**, **Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher**, **Madagascar Cisticolas** and **Larks** (both common everywhere on the coast, in dry habitats), **Common Jerys**, **Chabert's Vangas**, **Crested Drongos** and **Sakalava Weavers** (common in the region). This is also one of the places on Madagascar where the introduced **Helmeted Guineafowl** can be located, on the stony hills beyond the above-mentioned ravine.



Fig. 11. Sunset at La Table.



Fig. 12. The spot for **Verreaux's Coua**, **Red-shouldered Vanga**, **Madagascar Sandgrouse** and other goodies. The hill has a white Madonna statue on top.



Fig. 13. Many ox-cart tracks cross the degraded bushland of La Table.

St. Augustine Road

The rough gravel road to St. Augustine is nothing special in terms of birdwatching, even though the high plateau just before the final descent has the same species as La Table. A few nice birds were, however, recorded while passing through this route. One or two kilometers after the highway - St. Augustine junction, towards St. Augustine, one sees shallow pools of water on the right side of the road, surrounded by grassland with cattle. In there, **Madagascar Plovers** were seen. In one occasion, a superb **Green-capped Coua** gave great views on the road, close to Sarodrano Peninsula. One evening, by sunset, a **Littoral Rock Thrush** hopped on the road closer to Toliara.

Bandits have at least once robbed (and killed) tourists at La Grotto, the popular swimming hole by the road. It is difficult to estimate if this is going to happen again, but I must admit that we did not feel secure when the Pajero had a mechanical problem right on the spot, an hour before dark. Fortunately, mobile phone worked there and help was readily available.



Fig. 14. Trouble at La Grotto, St. Augustine road, but saved by Eric's (center) brother Michél (left), a former paratrooper officer in French Army and a business man of some influence in Toliara. He brought two mechanics to release the jammed rear wheel.

Sarodrano peninsula

This spectacular sandy peninsula is located N of St. Augustine, at the end of a short side road (great scenery!). There is accommodation available, but the end of the road requires a 4x4, because of moving sand dunes and tidal waters. The peninsula has vegetated dunes, spiny forest, mudflats and mangroves, but the habitats looked more promising than the reality proved to be. I looked for **Littoral Thrush**, but failed. Nevertheless, great views of flocks of **Grey-headed Lovebirds** (low numbers in other places), and a good variety of other common Madagascar endemics. The extensive mudflats north of Sarodrano had 40 **Greater Flamingos**, a few **Striated Herons**, 30 **Greenshanks** and a lone **Bar-tailed Godwit**.



Fig. 15. The sands of Sarodrano Peninsula: lots of seashells but unfortunately no fossilized eggs of the mythical **Elephant Bird**!



Fig. 16. Mangroves: large mudflats are exposed on the Toliara side of Sarodrano at low tide, but hold only few birds in July/August.

St. Augustine/Onilahy Delta

St. Augustine is a relatively village at the delta of the Onilahy River. The estuary has a small stand of mangroves, on the other side, and a variety of birds. A pair of **Peregrines** bred right in the village, despite the close presence of many people. Boat trips to the estuary can readily be arranged on the spot. Just go to the riverside with pirogues (local boats), and somebody will soon approach you. I paid Ar20.000 (did not haggle as it was a fair price) for a one-and-half hour trip to the mangroves and back, with two young men paddling against the currents of the river. In the mangroves, a **Madagascar Kingfisher**, **Hamerkops**, **Grey Herons**, **Great** and **Dimorphic Egrets** (common everywhere), **Madagascar Magpie Robin** and other common birds were seen. **Humblot's Herons** gave great views on the way there. There were also ducks and shorebirds around.

All in all, it is not an essential site, but a great fun to visit. At the end of the road in the village, an industrious Malagasy lady with a French husband had started a new business. In two months, they had already established a small beach restaurant with a toilet (the only toilet in the village). In the near future, bungalow accommodation will be provided for visitors, at the 'Hotel au Paradis & Esperance'. She already had a stamp for the hotel and judging by her actions, the bungalows should be ready now!



Fig. 17. A **Dimorphic Egret** – white phase.



Fig. 18. A pirogue trip from St. Augustine to nearby mangroves is not too expensive.



Fig. 19. A **Humblot's Heron** at the estuary of the Onilahy River. I wish I had a proper camera!



Fig. 20. The new beach restaurant serves great, fresh seafood. Only Ar7.000 (€2.75) for a three course meal! (Drinks were Ar1.500 each)

Arboretum

The arboretum of Toliara lies a few kilometers south of the city and has some limited interest in terms of birdwatching. It is nevertheless an interesting place to stop during the less birdy hours of the day. The entrance fee is Ar10.000 (€4) and includes an educative walk around the collections. There are good plant photography opportunities and, most importantly, a chance to observe some habituated **Running Couas** in semi-open forest habitat. The species is common around Toliara, but not easy to see well. Some endangered turtles (in an enclosure) and a variety of lizards were seen there, as well.



Fig. 21. Another interesting gecko species on a baobab, at the arboretum.

Lac Belalanda

The only freshwater lake in the Toliara region, Lac Belalanda is located seven kilometers north of the city, close to the village of Belalanda. A popular shortcut towards Ifaty utilizes the flat sands of the lake's edge, and provides a ready access to the site. It is a marshy lake, with several completely overgrown marshes around it, and many birds hiding in the thick vegetation. In the center of the lake, there is a small peninsula with low 'grass'. In there, careful scanning revealed a nice pair of **Painted Snipes**, a species in general difficult to spot. It was easy to walk around the lake, the grassy pasture being a nice location for a picnic lunch. Small water holes by the pastures apparently held some noisy frogs, which I never managed to see.

40 species were identified on the lake, **Little Grebes**, **White-faced Whistling-Ducks**, **Hottentot Teals** and **Madagascar Kingfishers** being particularly common there. Among other species, a single **Lesser Flamingo**, a juvenile **Banded Kestler** (my second in Toliara region), a **Madagascar Squacco Heron** (most of them in Kenya this

time of the year), two **Little Bitterns**, a **Black Egret** (scarce in the lower SW) and a **Baillons's Crake** were the highlights of the four visits, in addition to the above-mentioned **Painted Snipes**.



Fig. 22. Part of the marshy Lac Belanda, with cars passing by, along the shortcut towards Ifaty. Beyond Mangily, the road gets worse and I canceled the idea of visiting the estuary there.

Lac X

At La Table, I had noticed a large salt lake down towards the coast. On my request, Eric asked around and found out the correct access road (track), and got the landowner's permission to visit the place. The track starts few hundred meters to the right (in a curve) before the two ponds (and the brick-baking village) by the Tana/Zombitse highway, immediately south of Toliara. The Lac X (name unknown) is on private land, away from public roads, and therefore quite peaceful. There were more birds to see than at Lac Belanda, but no freshwater marsh, and consequently less variety in species.

Among the birds observed at Lac X, during the single short visit, were a pair of **Madagascar Grebes** and six **Madagascar Plovers**, hundreds of shorebirds (**Black-winged Stilts** (120), **Turnstones**, **Greenshanks** (160!), **Kittlitz's** and **White-fronted Plovers** and **Curlew Sandpipers** (40), and about 70 **Greater Flamingos** and four **Caspian Terns** (a few also at other coastal sites). The only ducks were 140 **Red-billed Teals**. This is an interesting and scenic place with potential for rarities, and a good stakeout for the endemic plover, a speciality of the southwest.



Fig. 23. The salty Lac X, the best wetland south of Toliara, early in the morning: flamingos, shorebirds, wildfowl and terns.

Ifaty

After high expectations, Ifaty was a disappointment in terms of birdwatching, as the habitats had degraded too much. The forest around Le Paradiseur was not very productive, the proper spiny forest being far away (still visible from dunes) on the other side of the coastal road. The forest is behind a number of recently cleared cassava fields, which are surrounded by walls of opuntia cactuses. The spiny fences made the approach difficult and potentially painful. I tried to get through the maze of farming plots, but eventually gave up. Around the resort, it is sandy dune forest with goats, and therefore not too many birds.

The main positive exception was the presence of **Littoral Rock Thrushes**, supposedly not to be expected north of Toliara, but nevertheless seen (one pair) on the east side of the coastal road. By the Le Paradiseur section of the public beach, a small group (4) of **Madagascar Plovers** were frequently seen at low tide, towards the village of Ifaty. Otherwise, **Madagascar Buzzards**, **Madagascar Hoopoes**, **Sub-desert Warblers**, **Madagascar Magpie-Robins**, a **Running Coua**, a **Stripe-throated Jery**, and other common species.

An extra treat of Le Paradiseur are the great night views of the Milky Way. It is very clear there, if you walk away from the few lights, along the access road. The rings of Saturn were clearly visible, with other planets, countless stars, and dozens of shooting stars. During the two stargazing trips I made, a **White-browed Owl** was heard once and a cute little **Reddish-Grey Mouse-Lemur** seen in a roadside bush. Several **Madagascar Nightjars** were also present. Off the lagoon, opposite of Le Paradiseur, several (breaching etc.) **Humpback Whales** could frequently be seen, with **Fin Whales** on two occasions. Once a **Fin Whale** had a look around, towering high above the surface of the sea, in an erect position!

From the restaurant patio, **Grey Plovers**, **Caspian Terns**, a **Swift Tern** and **Grey-headed Gulls** (2) were record. The hotel has a small natural history library, with a selection of bird guides in French. They also arrange transportation to birding sites (e.g. Reniala) on request, and will help in contacting the local bird guides. Initially, they insisted on their own guide instead of Moussa, who was said to be unreliable. I never met their guide, and can therefore not say anything on his competence. Moussa delivered, and delivered well.



Fig. 24. The lagoon is wide in Ifaty. **Madagascar Plovers** were frequently seen on the left, close to the Le Paradieseur resort.



Fig. 25. Pirogues take tourists out to observe the lagoon and the whales by its edge.



Fig. 26. During the hot mid-day hours, birds can oftentimes be located in the shadows of bushes. A **Madagascar Magpie-Robin**, at Le Paradiseur.



Fig. 27. According to earlier trip reports, there used to be fine spiny forest next to the Le Paradiseur, but not anymore. There is a row of trees here and there, but...

Reniala Forest Reserve ('Parc de Moussa'), Mangily

In Mangily, a magnificent remnant of the unique coastal spiny forest has been preserved at the Reniala Forest Reserve. People visit the place to see the beautiful baobab-trees (several species in Madagascar) and the endemic bird species. It is a tourism business run by Moussa, his family and other villagers. I was guided by Moussa himself, and one of his sons, the latter doing most of the tracking. We started early, half an hour before sunset, in order to be in the right spots at the right moment. It was not a long walk along well established, level paths, but nevertheless a long standing in the sand. The charge was Ar15.000 per morning, including guiding and entrance. For the transport between Le Paradiseur and Reniala, I had to pay Ar60.000 per day, the resort therefore taking the lion's share of my expenses.

The star species, **Long-tailed Ground-Roller**, was located first in the morning, after following the bird's footprints through the bush. We heard five individuals before one was finally at our feet, running around like a giant mouse! Another great species, a **Sub-desert Mesite**, was a strange sight frozen in its defence posture, in one of the thousands of spiny bushes. An **Archbold's Newtonia** was seen on five occasions, but only one stayed around long enough to give excellent views. My only **Sickle-billed Vangas** were also seen at Reniala, a pretty pair of 'overgrown sunbirds' with grey-and-yellow bills. **Banded Kestrel** failed to appear in the first morning, but a rather tame individual was located the next morning, in the village with many **Madagascar Kestrels**.

Other 'goodies' included **Madagascar Harrier-Hawks**, **Madagascar Green Pigeon**, both **Vasa Parrots**, excellent views of **Crested** and **Running Couas**, **Common Newtonias**, a **Stripe-throated Jery**, a pair of **Thamnornis Warblers**, a **Madagascar Spine-tailed Swift**, a **Madagascar Green Sunbird**, **White-headed Vangas**, a **Red-tailed Vanga** and several other more common endemics. As the list indicates, this is a 'must' place to visit, together with La Table, Zombitse and one of the plover sites. **Ring-tailed Lemurs** represented the mammal variety of the region.

My recommendation: Try to find accommodation within a walking distance of Reniala, and spend two to three days exploring and photographing the beautiful forest. I had not enough time to look for the accommodation options there.



Fig. 28. Moussa (on the right) and his son, the bird guides at Reniala, an excellent remnant of Madagascar spiny forest. The main paths have been lined with stones. They did a great job, with proper effort and excellent local knowledge.



Fig. 29. Reniala, a haven for birds, trees and plants.



Fig. 30. A Banded Kestrel, one of the difficult-to-spot species of Madagascar.



Fig. 31. A party of **Lesser Vasa Parrots**, Reniala. They are caught for sale (or food?) on the coast. At Mangily, I saw a man with six live parrots hanging in his hands.

Zombitse Forest Reserve

This important forest reserve, the southern sector of the small Zombitse-Vohibasia National Park, is a 2 hour 15 minute drive from the center of Toliara (altogether 4,5 hours, 350 km), and a must for a visit to the southwest. The entrance fee was Ar10.000 and the (compulsory) guide cost Ar20.000 per day. Out of the latter figure, the guide gets a mere Ar5.000, the rest ending in the ANGAP coffins. Please, consider giving a tip if everything has went well. The five thousand (€2) is really a pittance for a full day's (10+ hours) work in a job which, after all, requires considerable knowledge and skills.

Initially, the arrival in Zombitse was disappointing one as the gate was closed at 7.15 AM. Thierry, the bird guide arrived at 8.15 AM, when Eric was already in Sakaraha (the close-by town), trying to locate the ANGAP office to get a key. I myself was pretty frustrated for wasting the best hour of the day for nothing, after a rather early start in Toliara. On the other hand, the guides were quite flexible in the evening, staying with us till dark and helping to locate the target owl species. The owls were aplenty and started to call already at 5.45 PM, reaching peak soon after 6 PM. There were at least three **Torotoraka Scops Owls** and five **White-browed Owls** right around the Zombitse parking lot and office. One of the latter was particularly tame, letting our close presence not to disturb it (**Fig. 36**).

After the necessary paperwork and further delay, Thierry took me across the main road. We spent a couple of hours doing a circular walk through the forest, along well-maintained tracks. Good birds were aplenty, just like lemurs. We saw two **Giant Couas** (+7 heard in the area) and four **Coquerel's Couas** (+8 heard, one partial albino). The star species of the forest, the hyperactive and very restricted range **Appert's Greenbul** was readily present with more than 10 individuals. **Long-billed Greenbuls** were abundant, with more than 100 birds seen during the day. A male **Rufous Vanga** gave very close and prolonged views (camera battery empty!). According to Thierry, it is not often seen along the nature trail.

A shorter walk was made on the other side, late in the afternoon. Altogether five **Madagascar Crested Ibises** were seen in the forest, the birds showing well. Otherwise, many of the same species as on the other side of the forest. Early in the morning, the grassy edges of the access road between the highway and the parking lot produced, among others, a **Madagascar Partridge**, **Crested Couas** and a **France's**

Sparrowhawk. **Madagascar Button-Quails** were very common in the area, just like on the coast. It was a pleasure to observe them making their 'plates' on the forest floor. A **Red-capped Coua** was recorded close by, completing the coua set. **Alpine Swifts**, two **Madagascar Spite-tailed Swifts** and a single **Madagascar Black Swift** circled above us.

Altogether nine **Red-tailed Sportive Lemurs** were seen in the forest. They are common and easy to observe during the day, being blinded by the sun. It is, however, not easy to approach them. The lemurs have good hearing and will hide in their tree-holes as soon as one walks too close. Another good mammal record was a family of five **Verreaux's Sifakas**, a much anticipated sight of these beautiful animals! I was told that tenrecs are difficult to see in the dry season, but readily observed during and after the rains.

All in all, great birding and mammal observations. Meals, drinks and accommodation can conveniently be purchased at the close by 'diamond-town' of Sakaraha. The Palace appeared to be a fine (birder-friendly) place to stay, with maps of the national park and the manager feeding wild **Yellow-billed Kites** (widespread in the region) with pieces of meat. The clean rooms with private toilets were Ar27.000 per night. Between Zombitse and Sakaraha, there was a small overgrown pond full of roosting **Cattle Egrets** (400!), and another stunning village belle posing for the visiting birders...

A desolate section of the highway east of Sakaraha, towards Toliara and after the last village, has earlier been plagued by bandits. It was not an altogether comfortable feeling to drive through this part of the road at night, knowing that there is a chance, however minor, of getting a rifle bullet through one's head (the usual tactic, according to Eric, who drove as fast as he could). On the other hand, this was also the road which proved to be fatal for Phoebe Snetzinger, who died in a car accident soon after seeing her last new species (8400), the **Red-shouldered Vanga** at La Table. The tarmac was in fine condition, but her fate came into my mind as we passed other equally fast drivers. On our way back, a nice **Barn Owl** showed well in the lights of the car and a fat, long snake was also surprised on the road.



Fig. 32. Thierry, the bird guide of the Zombitse forest.



Fig. 33. Zombitse Forest has no less than four species of couas – a **Coquerell's Coua**.



Fig. 34. The forest has eyes... in this case, blind in the sunlight. The **Red-tailed Sportive Lemurs** cannot see much at daytime.



Fig. 35. A **White-browed Owl**, photographed with a pocket camera. Incredibly, the bird was able to pre-detect the flash and turn its eyes away on each shot!



Fig. 36. Another splendid tree-dwelling lizard, ready to enter its cosy tree-hole home.