

Madagascar – 7-18 March 2018



For spring break 2018, Peter Wolter, Olivier Sam, and I took a group of 14 students to Madagascar as part of an Iowa State University Study Abroad course. The course emphasized Madagascar's diverse ecosystems (with a focus on rainforest and spiny forest), lemurs, and birds during a 12-day trip. The trip benefitted from a summer 2016 scouting trip, although we ended up adding a couple of sites we had not visited in 2016. Overall, the trip went smoothly and the students learned first-hand about the diverse ecosystems of Madagascar.

7-8 March

We departed Des Moines on time at 11 a.m. on 7 March, flew to Minneapolis, then Paris, and finally arrived in Antananarivo at 10:45 p.m. local time on 8 March. It took about an hour to exit through customs and get our visas, after which we met our driver outside. It was a 1-hour drive to Hotel Shangai, where we arrived at about 1:30 a.m. We quickly checked in and got some much-needed sleep!

9 March

We met for breakfast at 7 a.m. (bread and croissants with butter and jelly, juice, and coffee), loaded the bus, checked out of the hotel, and drove east towards Moramanga, arriving there at noon. We made a brief stop for cash at an ATM machine but otherwise it was a smooth drive. En route we got an introduction to some of the common Madagascar birds including Great, Little, and Cattle egrets, Black Heron, African Stonechat, Common Myna, and Madagascar Fody. We stopped at a gas station along the way and purchased snacks and drinks for a simple lunch because we didn't have time to stop for a sit down meal.



Clockwise from top left: Indri, Eastern Brown Lemur, Madagascar Sparrowhawk, Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur, Goodman's Mouse Lemur, and Leaf-tailed Gecko (9 March).

We then drove straight to Mitsinjo Park, arriving at 1 p.m. We met our guides and immediately began our search for Indri. On the way we stopped to enjoy a cooperative Leaf-tailed Gecko. We were quickly led to a group of 5 Indri, which were quite active and approachable. Our group spent about a half hour with them and enjoyed fabulous close looks. Later we encountered a second group of Indri plus a troop of 12 Eastern Brown Lemurs. The birding was slow although we encountered Madagascar Wood-Rail, Madagascar Bee-eater, Madagascar Paradise-Flycatcher, Common Jery, Common Newtonia, and Madagascar White-eye. Our hike ended at 4:15 p.m. and we drove to Hotel Feon'ny Ala for the night. After checking in and getting a little rest we met at 6 p.m. for dinner. Everyone ordered off the menu (I had grilled fish with rice and fresh vegetables). After dinner we drove back to Mitsinjo Park for a night hike. Simply put, the night hike was fabulous! We saw two Goodman's Mouse Lemurs, 3 Eastern Woolly Lemurs (including an adult with a baby), 2 Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemurs, and 2 Eastern Brown Lemurs, plus a roosting Madagascar Sparrowhawk. The icing on the cake was a Fat-tailed Dwarf Lemur along the road that was feeding on some red fruit at close range, providing fantastic photo opportunities! We finally called it quits at 8:15 p.m. and returned to the hotel. [clear to partly cloudy, temperature 66-81°F, winds calm]

10 March

This was our day to visit Mantadia National Park. We met at 6 a.m. for breakfast (bread with jelly and butter, bananas, pineapple juice, and coffee) and then loaded into 3 4WD vehicles for the long, rough drive to the park. We rented two of the vehicles, but some of us were able to hitch a ride with a guide who was retrieving a scientist (this allowed us to spread out a bit). The road was not as rough as it was in June 2016, although it was washed out in several places. The only notable wildlife sighting on the slow drive was a Madagascar Flufftail. At 7:45 a.m. we arrived at the Taskoka Trail parking lot to begin our hike. Our guides for the hike were Roget, Alan, and Lesabuchi. While we were in the parking lot we spotted a small group of Black-and-white Ruffed Lemurs and got great looks at a couple of them; at one point they even vocalized. We also quickly located a pair of Red-footed Lemurs; one of the vehicles had seen some along the drive in but this was a first for the entire group. Birds seen in the park included Madagascar Cuckoo-hawk, Madagascar Green-Pigeon, Red-fronted Coua, Madagascar Coucal, Madagascar Pygmy Kingfisher, Long-billed Tetraka, White-throated Oxylabes, Yellow-browed Oxylabes, Dark Newtonia, Blue Vanga, Madagascar Cuckoo-shrike, Tylas Vanga, and Nuthatch Vanga. We also saw and heard many groups of Indri, found a cooperative group of 5 Diademed Sifakas, saw a couple of unidentified small snakes, and encountered several small *Ameiva* lizards. After our long hike we ate lunch at the parking area and then began our return drive. On the way we stopped at the Rianasoa Trail for a short hike to a waterfall. The trail was rough, slippery, and washed out at the river crossing, but still passable. We spent a little more than an hour on this hike and the only wildlife were a couple of Indri. We then drove a short distance and hiked another trail, looking for Eastern Bamboo Lemurs in the numerous patches of bamboo (no luck). Afterwards we headed for Andasibe, leaving the park at 3 p.m. and arriving at the hotel a short



Clockwise from top left: Blue Vanga, Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher, Red-footed Lemur, and Black-and-white Ruffed Lemur (10 March), Eastern Bamboo Lemur and snake (11 March).

time later. We relaxed a bit before dinner and enjoyed close looks at a troop of a dozen Eastern Brown Lemurs plus a Purple Heron. We ate dinner at the hotel and had them prepare a family style meal consisting of grilled steak and chicken, steamed rice, roasted garlic and herb potatoes, fresh fruit, and pineapple juice. It was delicious! We opted out of another night hike because we were tired and it was raining. [mostly clear, temperature 65-79°F, winds light and variable, intermittent light rain in late afternoon]

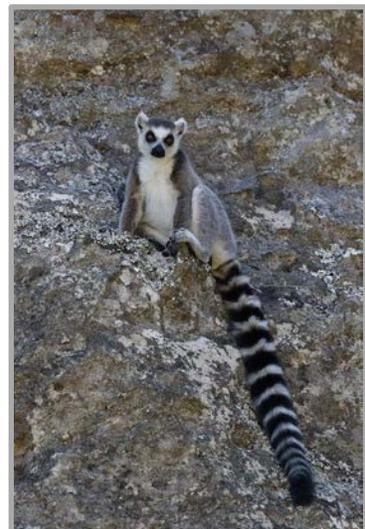
11 March

Today we arose at 6 a.m. for breakfast (bread with jelly and butter, bananas, guava juice, and coffee) before heading to the Special Reserve of Madagascar National Park for a morning hike. It rained moderately hard until about 5 a.m., but then the rain stopped and the weather cleared for the rest of the day. After breakfast we made the short drive to the Special Reserve where we arrived at 7:30 a.m. Our guides were Roget and Alan from the previous day and we immediately set to work to locate our target for the day, Eastern Bamboo Lemur. We saw and heard several groups of Indri, spent 30 minutes with a cooperative group of about 15 Eastern Brown Lemurs, and located a group of 9 Diademed Sifakas that allowed very close approach (one of the was wearing a radio collar). Finally, after much effort Alan found a pair of Eastern Bamboo Lemurs that were somewhat cooperative and everyone managed to see them well. During the course of our hike we also encountered a few birds than included Madagascar Green-Pigeon, Broad-billed Roller, Cuckoo-Roller, Blue Coua, Madagascar Spinetail, Madagascar Swamp Warbler, and Madagascar Starling. We also found a small tree frog and at the conclusion of our hike saw a large Madagascar Boa near the main office. Our hike concluded at 11:45 a.m. and we returned to the hotel.

We ate a family style lunch again at Hotel Feon'ny Ala (grilled steak and chicken, steamed rice, roasted garlic and herb potatoes, fresh fruit, and guava juice). Our original plan was to relax for the afternoon and then depart around 1 a.m. for morning flight from Antananarivo. However, our driver was hesitant to do so much driving at night, so we altered our plans and left at 3:15 p.m., planning to spend the night in Antananarivo. On a disappointing note, Hotel Feon'ny Ala initially refused to refund our rooms (we had paid for them in advance), but then reluctantly agreed to refund about 20%. Needless to say, we will not be staying there again! The drive to Antananarivo was uneventful and we arrived at Les Trois Métis Guest House at 6:30 p.m. After getting settled in our rooms we met for dinner at their restaurant, La Table D'Épiqueure, at 7 p.m. (everyone ordered from the menu and the food was excellent). [rain early then clearing, temperature 68-82°F, winds E 5-10 mph]

12 March

This was our travel day to southern Madagascar. We met in the hotel lobby at 3:30 a.m. to load the bus and have breakfast (cinnamon bread, crepes with chocolate, and fresh fruit). We were expecting lots of traffic, even at this early hour, but the drive was very smooth and we



Clockwise from top left: Spiny Lizard, scorpion, Jewel Chameleon, Ring-tailed Lemur, Verreaux's Sifaka, and Forest (Benson's) Rock Thrush (13 March).

arrived at the airport at 4:15 a.m. The check-in process was quite chaotic, and after several long waits in a couple of lines we were finally checked in by 5:45 a.m. Our flight departed at 7:30 a.m., stopped in Toliagnaro, and then continued to Toliara where we arrived at 9:45 a.m. After checking out of the airport we boarded the buses (2 mini buses instead of a single large bus) and headed for lunch. We finally settled on a beachfront restaurant, although it took more than 2 hours (!) to get served (everyone ordered off the menu, with many choosing seafood dishes). The restaurant overlooked the ocean and we were there long enough to watch the tide come in. The beach was home to Common Greenshank, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, and Common and Lesser Crested terns. Afterwards we began the long drive northeast towards Sakareha, arriving at 4:45 p.m. From there it was another hour and a half to the hotel. Along the way we transitioned from the arid coastal scrub to a weird palmetto savannah interspersed with lonely Grandidier and Za baobabs, and then finally to a dry grassland in a region of stark rock outcrops. Wildlife seen along the drive included Madagascar Buttonquail, Common Sandpiper, Madagascar Turtle-Dove, African Palm Swift, and Madagascar Bee-eater. Our final destination was Satrana Lodge, and it was beautiful! After checking in we had a round of hibiscus fruit drinks and then settled down to a buffet dinner by the pool (grilled steak, grilled chicken, vegetable pasta, grilled vegetables, and steamed rice). We were the only guests, so we had the pool, restaurant, and bar to ourselves for the evening. [clear to partly cloudy, temperature 68-94°F, winds W 5-10 mph]

13 March

Today was our chance to visit Isalo National Park and experience the dry forest. We met at 6:30 a.m. for a buffet breakfast (toast with butter and jelly, croissants, bananas, sliced pineapple and guava, fruit juice, and coffee) and left at 7 a.m. We drove east and north and entered Isalo National Park from its eastern edge where we arrived at 7:45 a.m. Our guide for the day was Roland, a former national park employee who spoke excellent English and had a broad knowledge of the wildlife, plants, and local cultural history. It was a bit of an extra hike into the park because recent rains had washed out the road. We did a moderate 7-mile hike up to the top of an escarpment, then across a grassy savannah, and finally down the escarpment into a narrow forested canyon. The wildlife and scenery on the hike were awesome! We had great looks at 3 troops of Ring-tailed Lemurs plus a single Verreaux's Sifaka. Birds included Gray-headed Lovebird, Madagascar Cuckoo, Madagascar Cisticola, Madagascar Hoopoe, Madagascar Bushlark, and Forest (Benson's) Rock Thrush. We also had great looks at a male and a female Jewel Chameleon, a Leaf Chameleon, 2 scorpions, and a Walking Stick. A great day! Afterwards we returned to the hotel for some relaxation and pool time. Dinner was a buffet again (grilled steak in sauce, Thai chicken, vegetable pasta, grilled vegetables, steamed rice, fried herb potatoes, and chocolate mousse and eu Claire for dessert). [clear to partly cloudy, temperature 74-93°F, winds NW 5-10 mph]



Clockwise from top left: Malagasy Giant Chameleon, Madagascar Scops Owl, Carpet Chameleon, Zombitse Sportive Lemur (center), Verreaux's Sifaka, Malagasy Giant Chameleon, and White-browed Owl (14 March).

14 March

Today we left Satrana Lodge to head west towards the spiny forest. We met for a buffet breakfast again at 6:30 a.m. (pancakes with syrup, toast and jelly, fresh fruit, fruit juices, and coffee) and then loaded the buses for our drive west. We left at 7:40 a.m., a little later than we hoped, for the more than 1-hour drive west. Our first stop was at 9 a.m. for a morning hike in Zombitse National Park. We met our group of five guides (two were women, a first on this trip) and proceeded to hike in the forest to the north of Highway 7. The guides quickly found a group of 4 Verreaux's Sifaka and we stayed with them for half an hour to take photos and observe their behavior. Up next was a Zombitse Sportive Lemur, which they had found at a day roost nearby. The reptiles were also cooperative with good looks at a Green Gecko, the endemic Carpet Chameleon, and several individuals of the Malagasy Giant (Outstalet's) Chameleon, an impressive species that reaches three feet in length! The bird activity for much of the hike was very slow although we managed to find Appert's Tetraka and Coquerel's Coua with some effort. However, at the end of the hike we had great looks at a roosting Madagascar Scops Owl and then a pair of White-browed Owls. Our hike ended at noon and from there we drove to Sakaraha for lunch (ordered off the menu at a hotel restaurant – I had grilled beef with rice and vegetables).

We were back on the road at 2 p.m. for the long drive to Toliara, where we arrived at 4:30 p.m. One of the buses had a flat tire along the way, which was an adventure because of all the attention we attracted from the locals. By the time we got it fixed, there was a small crowd of adults and children gathered around both vehicles! Along the drive we saw a few birds that included Madagascar Harrier-Hawk and Peregrine Falcon. From Toliara we continued west to Ifaty after putting fuel in the buses; we arrived at Hotel Ikotel in Ifaty at 5:20 p.m. [mostly clear, temperature 72-96°F, winds W 5-10 mph]

15 March

Today we hiked in the private Mosa spiny forest reserve north of Mangily. We met our guide, Relatsy (the same guide we had in 2016) at 5:30 a.m. and hiked into the forest as the sun was rising. Even at this early hour it was hot and muggy! This 60 ha preserve has many nice trails and we spent the morning traversing many of them multiple times in search of wildlife. The group enjoyed the spiny forest, complete with scattered baobabs and other assorted “spiny” plants. Our adventure began at about 6:15 a.m. with a Long-tailed Ground Roller hunt. The guides spotted some tracks in the sand and quickly located the bird. We spent ~45 minutes and were able to get a couple of excellent looks at the bird at close range. Afterwards, we moved on to Subdesert Mesite and the guides quickly located a perched male that was very cooperative! We eventually saw at least 5 mesites during the morning hike. After that we looked unsuccessfully for vangas and instead enjoyed good looks at two different snakes, several lizards, a couple of geckos, and a huge Golden Orb Weaver (a spider). We finished our hike at 9 a.m. because the heat was becoming unbearable. Then we headed back to the hotel for a short rest before driving to Toliara for lunch. We arrived in Toliara at 10:50 a.m., stopped at the bank



Clockwise from top left: Subdesert Mesite, Long-tailed Ground Roller, Running Coua, Western Brown Mouse Lemur, Golden Orb Weaver, and lizard (15 March).

for some cash, and then retired to a nice waterfront restaurant for lunch. Lunch lasted more than 2 hours and was a nice break from the heat! After lunch we stopped at a shopping center and purchased supplies for a local school with donated funds we brought on the trip. After lunch we returned to Mangily and donated our school supplies (approximately \$300 worth) to the local children during their afternoon session. This was an hour-long process that involved us entering each of the five classrooms and handing out supplies individually. The kids cheered us in each classroom and it was a great feeling to help them. We were back at the hotel at 3:45 p.m. for some beach time and relaxation before meeting at 5:30 p.m. for dinner. Dinner was at a wonderful seaside restaurant just down the beach from Hotel Ikotel, and was excellent. We finished dinner by 7 p.m., returned the hotel to change and retrieve our field gear, and then met our guide for a night hike at 7 p.m. The hike was in the Mosa spiny forest private reserve and we saw 2 Western Brown Mouse Lemurs, a Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec, Hissing Cockroaches, and lots of other critters. We were back at the hotel by 8:30 p.m. to call it a day! [clear but becoming overcast at dusk, temperature 81-92°F, winds W 5-10 mph]

16 March

This morning we returned to the Mosa spiny forest reserve for an early morning hike to see a giant baobab tree. The hike in was approximately 45 minutes and the tree was indeed very large – an estimated 10 meter circumference! It was a quick trip, starting at 6 a.m. and ending by 8:30 a.m. and we saw only a few birds such as Subdesert Mesite and Stripe-throated Jery, but little else. We rested back at the hotel until 11 a.m. when we left for lunch in Toliara (same restaurant as yesterday). After lunch we took a drive along the coast north of Mangily for approximately 30 km in the hope of seeing some large Grandidier Baobabs. We saw a few, but they were all distant. We were back at the hotel by 4:15 p.m. for some beach time and rest before dinner at 6:30 p.m. (same beachfront restaurant as last night). [clear, temperature 80-97°F, winds W 5-10 mph]

17 March

Today we slept in a bit and had breakfast at 7 a.m. at Hotel Ikotel (pancakes, fresh pineapple, fruit juice, and coffee). We lingered at the hotel to enjoy our last beach time and a last minute shower before departing at 10:30 a.m. for Toliara. Once there we again visited Amazone Restaurant for lunch before heading to the airport at 12:45 p.m. For the past 48 hours we had been closely monitoring the weather because a tropical cyclone had formed in the western Indian Ocean. The storm eventually made landfall in northern Madagascar on 16 March, but thankfully fizzled and drifted back east without affecting our travel plans. The flight left on time from Toliara, briefly touched down in Toliagnaro, and the continued on to Antananarivo where we arrived at 5:40 p.m. Other than a few bumps and rain in Antananarivo the flights went smoothly. In Antananarivo we found a nice restaurant in the upper level of the airport where we claimed a few tables, ordered dinner, and just relaxed for about 7 hours until boarding began for our flight to Paris.

18 March

This was our long travel day home. We boarded our plane from Antananarivo on time at 1:50 a.m., but were delayed 1 hour in departing because of fueling and delays loading the baggage. We had a tight connection in Paris, making the gate with about 10 minutes to spare. From Paris we had a short flight to Amsterdam, where we had an approximately 3-hour layover before another long flight to Minneapolis. The Minneapolis flight went smoothly and we were able to pass through customs, although one student was selected for a lengthy baggage search. We had to pass through security again, and two students were turned back and required to have their boarding passes reissued (for unknown reasons). But everyone made it through and our final flight to Des Moines was uneventful and arrived about 15 minutes early. After some delays with our bus transport to Ames we finally arrived at ISU at 12:45 a.m. A very long trip home!

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Mammals (13 species)

Indri
 Eastern Woolly Lemur
 Eastern Brown Lemur
 Goodman's Mouse Lemur
 Western Brown Mouse
 Lemur
 White-footed Sportive Lemur
 Eastern Bamboo Lemur
 Diademed Sifaka
 Verreaux's Sifaka
 Black-and-white Ruffed
 Lemur
 Red-footed Lemur
 Ring-tailed Lemur
 Lesser Hedgehog Tenrec

**Birds (106 species;
 endemics in italics)**

Long-tailed Cormorant
 Hamerkop
 Purple Heron
 Great Egret
 Little Egret
 Black Heron
 Cattle Egret
 Striated Heron
 Black Kite
Madagascar Cuckoo-hawk
Madagascar Harrier-Hawk
Madagascar Sparrowhawk
Madagascar Buzzard
Madagascar Kestrel
 Peregrine Falcon
Madagascar Partridge
Subdesert Mesite
Madagascar Buttonquail
Madagascar Flufftail
Madagascar Wood-Rail
 Black-winged Stilt
 Black-bellied Plover
 Common Ringed Plover
 Kittlitz's Plover
 Three-banded Plover
 White-fronted Plover
 Greater Sandplover
 Common Greenshank
 Wood Sandpiper
 Common Sandpiper

Whimbrel
 Bar-tailed Godwit
 Ruddy Turnstone
 Sanderling
 Curlew Sandpiper
 Lesser Crested Tern
 Common Tern
 Rock Pigeon
 Madagascar Turtle-Dove
 Namaqua Dove
Madagascar Green-Pigeon
Madagascar Blue-Pigeon
Madagascar Cuckoo
 Barn Owl
Madagascar Scops Owl
White-browed Owl
 Marsh Owl
Gray-headed Lovebird
 Lesser Vasa Parrot
Coquerel's Coua
Red-fronted Coua
Running Coua
Crested Coua
Blue Coua
 Madagascar Coucal
 Madagascar Nightjar
 Madagascar Spinetail
 African Palm-Swift
 Madagascar Kingfisher
Madagascar Pygmy-Kingfisher
 Madagascar Bee-eater
 Broad-billed Roller
Long-tailed Ground-Roller
 Madagascar Cuckoo-roller
Madagascar Hoopoe
Tylas Vanga
Dark Newtonia
Common Newtonia
Archbold's Newtonia
 Blue Vanga
Nuthatch Vanga
 Madagascar Cuckoo-Shrike
 Crested Drongo
 Madagascar Paradise-Flycatcher
 Pied Crow
Madagascar Lark
 Plain Martin
 Mascarene Martin
 Barn Swallow

Appert's Tetraka
Gray-crowned Tetraka
Long-billed Tetraka
 Madagascar Bulbul
Forest Rock-Thrush
 Madagascar Brush-Warbler
Subdesert Brush-Warbler
Madagascar Swamp-Warbler
Thamnornis
Common Jery
Stripe-throated Jery
White-throated Oxylobes
Yellow-browed Oxylobes
 Madagascar Cisticola
 Madagascar Magpie-robin
 African Stonechat
 Madagascar White-eye
Madagascar Starling
 Common Myna
 Souimanga Sunbird
Madagascar Wagtail
 House Sparrow
Nelicourvi Weaver
Sakalava Weaver
Madagascar Fody
Madagascar Munia

**Reptiles and Amphibians
 (7+ species)**

Leaf-tailed Gecko
 Lined Day Gecko
 Peacock Day Gecko
 Short-horned Chameleon
 Parson's Chameleon
 Malagasy Giant Chameleon
 Green-headed Lizard