

COMORO ISLANDS AND REMOTE MADAGASCAR TRIP REPORT NOVEMBER 2014

By Justin Nicolau



Red Owl - Tyto soumagnei, voted bird of the trip



ITINERARY

Date	Location	Overnight
01 November 2014	Grand Comoro	Grand Comoro
02 November 2014	Grand Comoro	Mohéli
03 November 2014	Mohéli	Mohéli
04 November 2014	Mohéli	Anjouan
05 November 2014	Anjouan	Anjouan
06 November 2014	Anjouan	Mayotte
07 November 2014	Mayotte	Mayotte
08 November 2014	Mayotte	Antananarivo
09 November 2014	Antananarivo	Mahajanga
10 November 2014	Mahajanga	Bealanana
11 November 2014	Bealanana	Bemanevika
12 November 2014	Bemanevika	Bemanevika
13 November 2014	Bemanevika	Antananarivo

Overview

This remote Madagascar and Comoros tour allows for the rare opportunity for any serious lister to connect with some of the most range-restricted species on the planet. The iconic islands of the Comoros boast in the region of 28 endemic species (depending on the current status of lumps and splits), while Madagascar yields well over 100 endemics of its own, and countless near-endemics are spread across both destinations. Not only is the birding spectacular, but so too is the scenery and the variety in the fauna and flora that one picks up along the way. The trip, however, is quite strenuous, especially the Comoros leg of the trip, as the climbs are steep and the camping fairly basic. But the birds available soon make one forget about the lack of common luxuries.

Day 1: 1 November 2014, Grand Comoro

Flying into the largest of the Comoro Islands from Antananarivo, we immediately set to work after leaving the airport. While outside waiting for our taxi we were welcomed by House Sparrow, Pied Crow, Madagascan Spinetail, and the blistering heat. Cars packed, and all we required for our expedition into the forest crammed into the smallest of cars, we headed for the hills, the base of Mount Karthala, to be exact. Here we hiked up about two thirds of the volcano's slopes to set up camp. Along the way we enjoyed Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Malagasy Black Swift, African Palm Swift, Comoros Fody, Malagasy Green Sunbird (often split as Comoros Green Sunbird), Malagasy Bulbul, Grand Comoro Bulbul, Greater and Lesser Vasa Parrots, and a number of endemics and near-endemics such as Kirk's White-eye, Comoros Thrush (often split as Grand Comoro Thrush), Comoros Cuckooshrike, and Humblot's Sunbird. As night fell, the target of the trip (this was predominantly an owling trip, after all) started to call, and we wasted no time in rushing out into the undergrowth to seek it. After a bit of work we located a pair high up in the forest. While we were working hard to follow them, the pair of **Karthala Scops Owls** slowly made their way to the lower reaches to feed. This was as good a start as one could ask for, and when we settled into our tents for the evening the owls still serenaded us in the background.





Karthala Scops Owl - Otus pauliani



Humblot's Sunbird - Cinnyris humbloti



Day 2: 2 November 2014, Grand Comoro to Mohéli

With our target out of the way on the first evening, we packed up camp in the dark and worked our way down the slopes at first light. En route toward the airport we located Olive Bee-eater, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Malagasy and Grand Comoro Bulbuls, Comoros Thrush, Grand Comoro Brush Warbler, Comoros Fody, Comoros Blue Pigeon, Rock Dove, Malagasy Turtle Dove, Madagascan Spinetail, African Palm Swift, Malagasy Black Swift, Humblot's Sunbird, and a small number of others before arriving at the minute airport and hopping onto our charter flight to Mohéli, the next one of the Comoro Islands on our itinerary.

Touching down in Mohéli, we again wasted little time before heading for the forests, and with this island being so much smaller it took no time at all to do so. House Sparrow was once again present, along with Western Cattle Egret, Common Myna, Pied Crow, Humblot's Sunbird, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Rock Dove, African Palm Swift, Comoros and Red Fodies, and countless flying foxes, which fed on the mango plantations scattered along the hillsides. Just before dark the first calls of Moheli Scops Owl started to pierce the air, and it was not long before we had great views of both color morphs – and of a complimentary Western Barn Owl too.



Moheli Scops Owl - Otus moheliensis

Day 3: 3 November 2014, Mohéli

Content with the views we had of the owls the night before, we set out to do some general birding on the island. Although there is not much in terms of diversity, we did enjoy great views of other specials such as Comoros Thrush (often split as Moheli Thrush), Comoros Blue Pigeon, Blue Vanga, Cuckoo Roller, Tambourine Dove, Malagasy Turtle Dove, Greater Vasa Parrot, African Palm Swift, Moheli Bulbul, Malagasy White-eye,



Malagasy Green Sunbird, Yellow-billed Kite, and spectacular flybys onto the volcanic ridges of Peregrine Falcon and a pair of the sought-after Malagasy Harrier before we headed back to town to prepare for our departure in the morning.



Blue Vanga - Cyanolanius madagascarinus (Comoros subspecies, potential split)

Day 4: 4 November 2014, Mohéli to Anjouan

Today necessitated a sudden change of plans, when we heard that our charter flight had been cancelled. This set mild panic across our faces, as we had to be in Anjouan in the evening to have a good chance at connecting with our next target owl species. Having to unfortunately give the endemic Moheli Green Pigeon a wide berth, which had been our final target for the morning, we headed for the coast, where we tried to find a boat that could transfer us to the next island. A fair amount of time was spent between police stations and the local fishing village, but eventually well after midday we had arranged our departure and set across the Indian Ocean towards the blur that was Anjouan in the distance, after enjoying **Comoros Thrush** and **Malagasy Harrier** on the roadside. During the boat trip we picked up a few pelagic species, including **Sooty Tern, Masked Booby, Tropical Shearwater**, and a number of **Brown Noddies** as well as a cracking pair of **White-tailed Tropicbirds**.

We touched land in the late afternoon and, without organizing tents, quickly made up lost time and started our climb up the hillsides. The climb was a long one, and no doubt the steepest, but it slowed us down just enough for us to reach our target locality about half an hour after dark, an ideal time for calling owls. Without sufficient time to catch our breath, the first bird started calling, and within minutes we had a pair of **Anjouan Scops Owls** at eye level, with their most unique of calls echoing down the valleys, while our camera shutters rattled off echoes of their own. The descent was much quicker than the ascent, and we even had time to sneak in hot pizzas and cold beers before bed after returning back to town, with the main target in the bag.

Day 5: 5 November 2014, Anjouan



Today was now ours to make, and we chose to explore a new section of the island. Tents and supplies packed, we headed for a sacred lake nestled between the volcanic ridges, where we would set up camp for the evening. Traversing a variety of habitats along the way we had no trouble locating all the other endemics of the island, such as **Anjouan Sunbird**, **Comoros Thrush** (often split as Anjouan Thrush), and **Anjouan Brush Warbler**. Other species along the way and at the lake itself included **Pied Crow**, **Comoros Fody**, **Common Quail**, **Common Moorhen**, **Little Grebe**, **Comoros Blue Pigeon**, **Ring-necked Dove**, **Common Myna**, and the most remarkable views of what appeared like prehistoric pitch black creatures, a handful of Livingstone's fruit bats circling overhead – the largest bats in the world, with wingspans matching that of small airplanes, or so it seemed. Meals cooked, we settled for bed to the calls of **Anjouan Scops Owl** calling around the lake's edges.

Day 6: 6 November 2014, Anjouan to Mayotte

Waking up in the mist, on the edge of a lake situated on an island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, was an absolute highlight. The calls of **Anjouan Scops Owl** were still carrying through into the first hour of dawn. We spent the duration of breakfast absorbing the beauty of it all, before making our way back down the slopes and towards the airport, our final Comorian island was now calling – although Mayotte politically is a department of France, the island's culture and language are Comorian. On our descent we picked up the usual suspects, such as **Pied Crow**, **Red Fody**, **Malagasy Bulbul**, **Western Cattle Egret**, **Common Myna**, **Malagasy White-eye**, and the three other endemics once again, **Comoros Thrush**, **Comoros Brush Warbler**, and **Comoros Sunbird**, as well as a courtesy **Malagasy Harrier**.

The flight to Mayotte was a brief one. Being a department and region of France, this was the island with undoubtedly the best infrastructure. Bags in hand we had a short drive to the local ferry, which then took us from the small island on which the airport is situated to the main island, where we had a quick lunch after enjoying more **White-tailed Tropicbirds**, and then we headed for our accommodation. No need for tents or climbs here. The landscape was flat and the lodge accommodation well forested; we were fairly sure we would not have to travel far tonight. In the afternoon we worked the lodge grounds, locating **Striated Heron**, **Malagasy Pond Heron**, **Western Cattle Egret**, **Malagasy Bulbul**, and endemics such as **Mayotte Drongo** and the colorful **Mayotte Sunbird**, which were found nesting in the gardens. Night fell, and the work began. We walked all of 15 steps from the car park and were onto no less than three **Mayotte Scops Owls**, drawn to the lights, which were attracting large moths and other edible insects. Tonight was a celebratory one!

Day 7: 7 November 2014, Mayotte

We had found all but one of the island's endemics yesterday, and with adequate images of the owls the night before we focused on our missing bird. Again we tried in the lodge gardens, turning up Malagasy Pond Heron, Mayotte Drongo, Pied Crow, Olive Bee-eater, Comoros Fody, Malagasy Turtle Dove, the gigantic Comoros Olive Pigeon, Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher, Malagasy Bulbul, Common Myna, Mayotte Sunbird, and a drenched Mayotte Scops Owl, trying desperately to dry itself off after the heavy downpour we had during the course of the day. So far unsuccessful, we returned for lunch, ate, and packed our bags for a second attempt at improving our images of the owls at a sight down the road. While loading the vehicle, a flock of diminutive birds moved through overhead, the call



unmistakable, and it was not long before we caught up with them: **Mayotte White-eye**, our final endemic for the island! We left to go owling, with serious smiles all around. The little night walk produced a hefty common tenrec, sleeping brown lemurs, and then the most amazing views of a pair of **Mayotte Scops Owls** calling to each other and then sidling up to one another above our heads, where they then began to preen each other – a great end to our visit to the islands of the Comoros and Mayotte.



Mayotte Drongo - Dicrurus waldenii

Day 8: 8 November 2014, Mayotte to Antananarivo

Today marked our departure from Mayotte as we headed for Madagascar, flying directly into the island's capital, Antananarivo, and slowly making our way to our hotel, where we picked up **Malagasy Brush Warbler**, **Red Fody**, and **Madagascan Wagtail** in its diminutive city garden. The afternoon was somewhat of a rest time, as we had no set targets within the boundaries of the capital city, so we worked on our images, story telling, and gin and tonics until the eyes grew heavy.

Day 9: 9 November 2014, Antananarivo to Mahajanga

In the morning we waited patiently at the airport as flight times were delayed in true Air Madagascar standard, and delayed again, until we eventually reached cruising altitude sometime in the afternoon and headed off to the north-west of the country, landing firmly in Mahajanga. In time for a casual stroll along the beach, it almost felt like a holiday, one that was much sought-after, having spent the last week climbing steep hills in humid conditions, showers being somewhat tough to come by in the forests. Refreshed, we prepared ourselves for the long haul, because in the morning we would be heading towards Bealanana for Madagascar's true avian gems.





Madagascan Wagtail - Motacilla flaviventris

Day 10: 10 November 2014, Mahajanga to Bealanana

Today we headed west, a full day's drive, of which most was spent in the rain. We did, however, have to pass through Ankarafantsika National Park briefly, and a short stop at the reception yielded **Broad-billed Roller**, **White-headed Vanga**, **Madagascan Hoopoe**, **Crested Drongo**, and the most unique of the vangas, **Sickle-billed Vanga**, a flock of which came feeding overhead, their calls reminiscent of a small and exceptionally loud baby. A small family group of Coquerel's sifakas entertained us for a while before we pressed on, well into the dark, when we enjoyed a couple of close views of three **Western Barn Owls** before reaching our hotel at some or other hour in the dark. Exhausted, we ate and then slept.

Day 11: 11 November 2014, Bealanana to Bemanevika

In the morning we had breakfast while waiting for two motorcycles to join us, just in case the road was too bad to travel by vehicle after the rains and we had to ferry things into camp that way instead. The road was roughly 45 kilometers long, and we reached camp four hours later, covered in mud and full of excitement. The road was indeed wet, and we got stuck a number of times, but of course did a little birding along the way. Olive Bee-eater, Malagasy Kestrel, and Madagascan Cisticola were common in the grasslands, while African Palm Swifts and the occasional Madagascan Buzzard followed our journey overhead. Helmeted Guineafowl and a group of eager camp staff welcomed us to the pristine environment that they and the Peregrine Fund maintain and conduct research in. The rains once again commenced, and we got drenched setting up our tents and preparing lunch, the perfect setting perhaps to watch a White-throated Rail and her chicks feeding on all the insects driven to the surface by the now waterlogged soils.

Later in the afternoon we took a lengthy hike into a nearby forested area, picking up Common Quail and Madagascan Lark and flushing a Madagascan Nightjar along the



way. Passing a small lake we added **Red-billed Teal**, **Meller's Duck**, and **Malagasy Kingfisher** before entering the forest, where we immediately set out to seek the main target of this trip, **Red Owl**, by far the most uncommon of the owls the island has to offer and one which very few world birders have laid eyes upon. It took us a fair amount of time, but a little way off the beaten track we struck gold with an adult bird, hidden neatly in the cavity of a very large tree. We spent over an hour with the bird, watching it watching us. We finally had to leave only due to the fading light and not to our lack of interest in the sighting. A **Malagasy Harrier** again put the cap on the day, hunting low over the grasslands in the late afternoon's golden light.



White-throated Rail - Dryolimnas cuvieri

Day 12: 12 November 2014, Bemanevika

Today we had a full day to explore our surrounds, and we could do it at leisure now that the Red Owl had been firmly added to our list the day before. The first order of the day was a visit to a nearby wetland; around here and en route we notched up Madagascan Partridge, Madagascan Harrier-Hawk, Namaqua Dove, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Blue Coua, Malagasy Black Swift, Malagasy Brush Warbler, and Malagasy White-eye. A wooden walkway extending into the marsh gave us a great platform on which to try getting visuals of one of the island's more sought-after species, Slender-billed Flufftail. We struck luck, with splendid views of a male, before picking up a pair of Madagascan Flufftails a few minutes later in the undergrowth. Leaving the marsh for a nearby lake, we saw Grey Emutail, Madagascan Lark, Madagascan Starling, Madagascan Mannikin, and a stunning Madagascan Cuckoo-Hawk low overhead.





Slender-billed Flufftail - Sarothrura watersi



Madagascan Cuckoo-Hawk - Aviceda madagascariensis

Arriving at the lake we encountered Malagasy Bulbul, Cuckoo Roller, African Palm Swift, Common Moorhen, White-throated Rail, Madagascan Rail, Malagasy Harrier, and undoubtedly the bird of the day, and perhaps one of the rarest birds in the world. The bird in



question, **Madagascan Pochard**, is a species previously thought to be extinct in the wild, until a population of less than a dozen birds was located on this lake. Through conservation efforts the population now stands at 28 birds, 16 of which we saw that day, including freshly hatched chicks. In the evening we quickly located **Rainforest Scops Owl** and **Madagascan Owl**, another two prime targets of the owling trip.



Madagascan Pochard - Aythya innotata

Day 13: 13 November 2014, Departure

Today was our final day of the remote Madagascar tour. We worked the grasslands and nearby wooded areas and produced Madagascan Cuckoo, Malagasy Coucal, Common Quail, Lesser Vasa Parrot, Madagascan Lark, Mascarene Martin, Malagasy Bulbul, Madagascan Buzzard, Malagasy Kestrel, and countless Olive Bee-eaters. Again we bumped into Malagasy Harrier and bycatch such as Crested Drongo, Madagascan Magpie-Robin, Malagasy White-eye, Madagascan Cisticola, Purple Heron, Great Egret, Namaqua Dove, and Malagasy Turtle Dove before heading for the airport after the most successful of the Comoros and remote Madagascar trips, littered with great memories and 99 outstanding birds, 45 of them endemic to their respective countries.

COMORO ISLANDS AND REMOTE MADAGASCAR BIRD LIST 1 - 13 NOVEMBER 2014				
Status: NT = Near-threatened, VU = Vulnerable, EN = Endangered, CR = Critically Endangered				
Common Name (IOC 6.01)	Scientific Name (IOC 6.01)	Trip		
	ANSERIFORMES			
Ducks, Geese and Swans	Anatidae			



Meller's Duck (Endemic) - EN	Anas melleri	1
Red-billed Teal	Anas erythrorhyncha	1
Madagascan Pochard (Endemic) - CR	Aythya innotata	1
	GALLIFORMES	
Guineafowl	Numididae	
Helmeted Guineafowl	Numida meleagris	1
Pheasants and allies	Phasianidae	
Madagascan Partridge (Endemic)	Margaroperdix madagarensis	1
Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix	1
	PROCELLARIIFORMES	
Petrels, Shearwaters	Procellariidae	
Tropical Shearwater	Puffinus bailloni	1
	PODICIPEDIFORMES	
Grebes	Podicipedidae	
Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	1
Madagascan Grebe (Endemic) - VU	Tachybaptus pelzelnii	1
	PHAETONTIFORMES	
Tropicbirds	Phaethontidae	
White-tailed Tropicbird	Phaethon lepturus	1
	PELECANIFORMES	
Herons, Bitterns	Ardeidae	
Striated Heron	Butorides striata	1
Malagasy Pond Heron - EN	Ardeola idae	1
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	1
Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea	1
Great Egret	Ardea alba	1
	SULIFORMES	
Gannets, Boobies	Sulidae	
Masked Booby	Sula dactylatra	1
	ACCIPITRIFORMES	
Ospreys	Pandionidae	
Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus	1
Kites, Hawks and Eagles	Accipitridae	
Madagascan Harrier-Hawk (Endemic)	Polyboroides radiatus	1
Madagascan Cuckoo-Hawk (Endemic)	Aviceda madagascariensis	1
Malagasy Harrier - VU	Circus macrosceles	1
Yellow-billed Kite	Milvus aegyptius	1
Madagascan Buzzard (Endemic)	Buteo brachypterus	1
	GRUIFORMES	
Flufftails	Sarothruridae	
Madagascan Flufftail (Endemic)	Sarothrura insularis	1
Slender-billed Flufftail (Endemic) - EN	Sarothrura watersi	1





Cuckoo Roller	Leptosomidae	
Cuckoo Roller	Leptosomus discolor	1
	CORACIIFORMES	
Rollers	Coraciidae	
Broad-billed Roller	Eurystomus glaucurus	1
Kingfishers	Alcedinidae	
Malagasy Kingfisher	Corythornis vintsioides	1
Bee-eaters	Meropidae	
Olive Bee-eater	Merops superciliosus	1
	BUCEROTIFORMES	
Hoopoes	Upupidae	
Madagascan Hoopoe (Endemic)	Upupa marginata	1
	FALCONIFORMES	
Caracaras, Falcons	Falconidae	
Malagasy Kestrel	Falco newtoni	1
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	1
	PSITTACIFORMES	
Old World Parrots	Psittaculidae	
Greater Vasa Parrot	Coracopsis vasa	1
Lesser Vasa Parrot	Coracopsis nigra	1
	PASSERIFORMES	
Vangas	Vangidae	
Sickle-billed Vanga (Endemic)	Falculea palliata	1
White-headed Vanga (Endemic)	Artamella viridis	1
Blue Vanga	Cyanolanius madagascarinus	1
Cuckooshrikes	Campephagidae	
Comoros Cuckooshrike (Endemic)	Coracina cucullata	1
Drongos	Dicruridae	
Crested Drongo	Dicrurus forficatus	1
Mayotte Drongo (Endemic) - VU	Dicrurus waldenii	1
Monarchs	Monarchidae	
Malagasy Paradise Flycatcher	Terpsiphone mutata	1
Crows, Jays	Corvidae	
Pied Crow	Corvus albus	1
Larks	Alaudidae	
Madagascan Lark (Endemic)	Eremopterix hova	1
Bulbuls	Pycnonotidae	
Malagasy Bulbul	Hypsipetes madagascariensis	1
Grand Comoro Bulbul (Endemic)	Hypsipetes parvirostris	1
Moheli Bulbul (Endemic)	Hypsipetes moheliensis	1
Swallows, Martins	Hirundinidae	
Mascarene Martin	Phedina borbonica	1



Reed Warblers and allies	Acrocephalidae	
Malagasy Brush Warbler	Nesillas typica	1
Anjouan Brush Warbler (Endemic)	Nesillas longicaudata	1
Grand Comoro Brush Warbler (Endemic)	Nesillas brevicaudata	1
Moheli Brush Warbler (Endemic)	Nesillas mariae	1
Grassbirds and allies	Locustellidae	
Grey Emutail (Endemic)	Amphilais seebohmi	1
Cisticolas and allies	Cisticolidae	
Madagascan Cisticola	Cisticola cherina	1
White-eyes	Zosteropidae	
Malagasy White-eye	Zosterops maderaspatanus	1
Kirk's White-eye (Endemic)	Zosterops kirki	1
Mayotte White-eye (Endemic)	Zosterops mayottensis	1
Karthala White-eye (Endemic) - VU	Zosterops mouroniensis	1
Starlings, Rhabdornis	Sturnidae	
Common Myna	Acridotheres tristis	1
Madagascan Starling (Endemic)	Hartlaubius auratus	1
Thrushes	Turdidae	
Comoros Thrush (Endemic)	Turdus bewsheri	1
Chats, Old World Flycatchers	Muscicapidae	
Madagascan Magpie-Robin (Endemic)	Copsychus albospecularis	1
Madagascan Stonechat	Saxicola sibilla	1
Humblot's Flycatcher (Endemic) - EN	Humblotia flavirostris	1
Sunbirds	Nectariniidae	
Malagasy Green Sunbird	Cinnyris notatus	1
Humblot's Sunbird (Endemic)	Cinnyris humbloti	1
Anjouan Sunbird (Endemic)	Cinnyris comorensis	1
Mayotte Sunbird (Endemic)	Cinnyris coquerellii	1
Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches	Passeridae	
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	1
Weavers, Widowbirds	Ploceidae	
Red Fody	Foudia madagascariensis	1
Comoros Fody (Endemic)	Foudia eminentissima	1
Waxbills, Munias and allies	Estrildidae	
Bronze Mannikin	Lonchura cucullata	1
Madagascan Mannikin (Endemic)	Lepidopygia nana	1
Wagtails, Pipits	Motacillidae	
Madagascan Wagtail (Endemic)	Motacilla flaviventris	1
TOTAL		99

