



**BIRDING TOURS MADAGASCAR:
GENERAL INFORMATION**



*The bizarre **Long-tailed Ground Roller**, part of an endemic Madagascar family.*

BIRDING IN MADAGASCAR

Despite the fact that Madagascar is only 250 miles (400 kilometers) from the African mainland, it is absolutely nothing like Africa. Some of its birds have more affinity to Asia than to Africa, but the most striking thing about Madagascar is how different its bird, animal, and plant life is from ANYWHERE else in the world. Madagascar is simply *the* ideal place to see unique wildlife! With four (or five for the Malagasy region with **Cuckoo-roller** that also occurs in the Comoros) endemic bird families, and about half the bird species endemic, and with every single native terrestrial mammal species being endemic, including endemic families such as lemurs and the hedgehog-like tenrecs, it's a fabulous wildlife country. However, there are also a few items that you need to mentally prepare for so that you can gain maximum enjoyment from your trip.

Madagascar is about quality and not about quantity. Some birders are disappointed by the small numbers of individuals and species seen – it's **one of the countries with the fewest number of species relative to its size**. However, birders need to realize that the relatively few birds that one does see are incredibly special. Don't expect lots of species or big numbers of any one species. Also, much of the country is covered in rice paddies, and most of the natural habitat has been destroyed, so be prepared to drive through a lot of relatively sterile (from a wildlife point of view) monoculture. In no way does this make Madagascar any less impressive. It has many endemic bird, mammal, and plant families and contains some of the planet's most unique wildlife!

There are some reasonably strenuous walks in Madagascar, so please bring hiking boots and hiking poles as well as comfortable shoes to change into during the evenings if your boots get wet or you get blisters. There might be opportunities for swimming and snorkeling (especially when it is too hot for birding). Sun protection, such as sunblock, sunglasses, etc., is advised.

On days in which we're doing forest birding, please kindly be considerate of the other tour participants, since it can get frustrating when only the front people see the birds. Please do not be offended when the tour leaders enforce the "rules for group tours", such as not spending all your time at the front with the tour leader on the trails but staying only five minutes at the front before dropping to the back again to give everyone a fair chance. The tour leaders work hard to get everyone onto every bird species, and with patience, everyone should see everything. The practice of rotating seats on the vehicle(s) is also something that the tour leaders will oversee.

We often do night walks in Madagascar to see nocturnal lemurs, reptiles, and birds – so bring a flashlight/torch/headlamp!

In Madagascar, it's a legal requirement to employ park guides, a local guide and a driver. These highly competent people are, of course, extremely useful, e.g., the park guides keep track almost daily of the whereabouts of some of the more difficult species, thus minimizing the chance we'll dip on anything important. But some people are thus understandably surprised that these trips seem a bit "over-staffed" (including also our full-time international tour leader) with so many people to potentially tip. Tipping is not compulsory, but most trip participants do like to tip staff who have worked hard to provide them with a great experience on their tour – our tipping guidelines and advice are shown here.

This last point does not apply to our usual set departures, but only to unusual remote Madagascar trips we sometimes arrange by request. In addition to our set departures, we also sometimes run some remote Madagascar tours from time to time, as private trips. These remote custom trips can include the worst roads you'll ever experience, and some camping. The camping at Bemanevika

(where we target four extremely rare species) can be cold, so jackets and thermals for sleeping in are recommended (especially at certain times of the year). Depending on the exact itinerary, we can send you further details for custom remote area trips separately.

Please don't let any of these concerns dissuade you from visiting Madagascar; it's an essential destination for any serious world birder and a "must-visit" place for those wanting to see the world's most bizarre wildlife.

ITINERARY AND SPECIES RECORDING (BIRD LISTS AND ANIMAL LISTS)

In advance of our Madagascar birdwatching tours, we will email you a detailed daily itinerary (along with your arrival instructions). We will provide you with a printed version of your itinerary at the beginning of the tour. We will also provide you with a bird list and lists of other animals that may be encountered on the tour (or a blank sheet to write in any interesting wildlife sightings). At Birding Ecotours, we use the latest AviList taxonomy for birds. For all other wildlife recorded, we follow the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) taxonomy, so all our itineraries and checklists follow these taxonomies.

In addition to the AviList checklists, we will complete eBird checklists for all birdwatching time during the tour. If you would like us to share eBird checklists with you, please provide your eBird user details to us at the beginning of the tour so we are able to do this.

Each evening, after we've finished our birding for the day, we will go through the daily bird and animal list, noting all the species recorded. The list session is totally optional. Not everyone is interested in the "bird listing" side of things, and that's fine, but we also know that many of you are very much interested in that aspect of the tour. The lists are usually completed once we've ordered our meal as we wait for our food to be prepared. Each evening, we will go through the plans for the following day by providing you with information on what clothes and equipment will be needed, when we will be having breakfast, departure time from the hotel, and key target species we will be looking for, among other points.

Once the tour is completed, we will email you a PDF copy of an illustrated trip report. This will include a complete checklist of all wildlife recorded during the tour, and if we are able to get any interesting bird, animal, or landscape photographs, these will be included in the trip report.

PASSPORT, VISA, AND LOCAL LAWS

As of January 2018, visitors to Madagascar have been using the e-visa system, either getting an e-visa in advance online ([link here](#)) or on arrival in Tana (the commonly used abbreviation for the capital Antananarivo). Please carefully check the latest visa requirements for your nationality, though. Madagascar does give free visas to certain nationalities from time to time (e.g., for South Africans); otherwise, they usually cost around 30-60 euros. Visas on arrival are payable in major currencies or the local currency (ariary, MGA) and usually also by card, if the system is working. It is recommended to organize an e-visa/Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) (all nationalities are eligible for e-visas) in advance of your trip, which should help streamline the arrivals process in Tana, but even if you arrange your e-visa in advance, expect some disorganization when you arrive in Tana. E-Visas/ETAs can be applied for one week to six months in advance of your arrival (normally costing around 35 euros). However, we'd recommend applying at least one month in

advance. The e-Visa/ETA should be issued within 72 hours and needs to be printed or kept on your smartphone to show to customs officials upon arrival in Madagascar.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

As stated in our standard Terms and Conditions, we strongly recommend that you purchase comprehensive trip cancellation insurance to protect against unexpected events that might cause delays and interruptions to travel. Your insurance should also cover illness, medical issues, accidents, repatriation, loss of luggage or valuable items, flight delays/cancellations, etc. Failure to purchase adequate insurance could be costly if something unexpected occurs.

CRIME AND SAFETY

Madagascar is generally considered a safe country; however, caution needs to be taken, especially whilst in large towns and cities (as in most other countries around the world), such as the capital Antananarivo (Tana). It is not advisable to walk around unescorted without a guide in towns and cities.

We recommend that you do not leave personal items of value in the vehicle while it is unattended (while the vehicle is parked at the hotel overnight, for example) – if you are ever in doubt, please check with the tour leader. Much of Madagascar is very rural, and we spend the bulk of our time in these rural areas/small villages. Petty theft is a risk, though most of the people we encounter are friendly.

If Africa is the third world, then Madagascar is the fourth world, and you'll see extreme poverty.

HEALTH AND PESTS

Please visit your doctor or a travel clinic before your trip to get precautions against possible “travelers’ diarrhea”, as this is horribly common in Madagascar, even when eating at good restaurants, staying at comfortable accommodations, and when being careful about drinking only bottled water and avoiding unpeeled/uncooked vegetables/salads. Imodium, Valoid, and an antibiotic such as Cipro, in bad cases, should be carried (but please consult your doctor for proper advice before the trip).

It is also advisable to use bottled water while brushing your teeth and to avoid ingesting any tap water while showering/bathing.

Please visit your travel clinic or doctor for antimalarial medications and possible vaccinations, and please also take a close look at the CDC's (Centers for Disease Control) advice for comprehensive health information about Madagascar. Some people also opt for leech socks, since leeches do occur in Madagascar, although we don't usually encounter many of them.

DANGEROUS ANIMALS AND PLANTS

Madagascar is well-known for its unique and interesting wildlife; however, there are a few species that are considered dangerous to people, for which caution would need to be exercised.

Nile Crocodiles occur in Madagascar (especially in the northwest) and caution should be taken when in freshwater habitats such as rivers, estuaries, wetlands and swamps. Although none of Madagascar's terrestrial snake species are highly venomous, some are considered mildly venomous and should not be touched. Highly venomous sea snakes occur in the seas surrounding Madagascar, and if any of these snakes are encountered while swimming or snorkeling, you should stay well away.

All wildlife should be viewed from a safe distance to prevent disturbance and care should be taken when walking in the forest, particularly where you put your hands and feet when moving through vegetation. A wide range of “creepy crawlies” are to be expected throughout Madagascar, such as biting or stinging scorpions, spiders, ants, ticks, centipedes, wasps, mosquitoes, etc. Before you put your boots on in the morning, please check that there is nothing hiding inside them.

Many tropical plants are protected by rather ghastly spikes, needles, or sharp thorns so that they don't become food to a wide range of animals. Sometimes these appendages are used to help pull themselves through other plants to reach the canopy and the sun. These projections can be rather painful if they pierce the skin and can catch and rip clothing. Please do not just grab plants without checking for any potentially sharp or painful spikes, etc. (this is also a good way of reducing the chance of getting ant, spider, and snake bites).

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Please ensure you are suitably covered with comprehensive medical insurance in the event of any emergency situation while on our Madagascar bird tours. Without insurance, the cost of medical care will likely be very high. As detailed in Birding Ecotours' general [Terms and Conditions](#), we require you to notify us of any medical conditions we should be aware of when signing up for this tour. The sort of things we should know about include, but are not limited to, any walking/mobility issues, diabetes, epilepsy, food and medicinal allergies, heart conditions, long-term illnesses, etc.

Many of the places we go to during our Madagascar birding tours are very remote and without many medical facilities. If medical treatment is required, this might necessitate flying to a different part of the country with suitable medical facilities. The costs of this sort of situation can be extremely expensive (requiring extra flights, etc.), and so you must be suitably covered for any eventuality.

WEATHER/CLIMATE

It's good to have an idea of what the climate in Madagascar is like. Rain is possible, but usually not a big problem in the “dry” season when we run our tours. It can be very hot and humid, but it can also be surprisingly cold in the highlands, where we spend a fair amount of time. So bring layers, expecting cold to very hot weather, and possibly rain. The desert areas, such as Ifaty in the southwest, can be extremely hot and dry, and in fact, we are sometimes forced to cram birding activity into the first hour or so of daylight (with some very early starts) because of the sweltering heat.

FOOD AND DRINK, INCLUDING WATER

It is not safe to drink the tap water in Madagascar. Bottled mineral water is safe and available everywhere (please bring a reusable water bottle to help us reduce the amount of plastic waste generated during the tour). As previously mentioned, ‘traveler’s diarrhoea’ is a particular concern in Madagascar, and extra caution needs to be taken when choosing what to eat. As a general rule, all uncooked/unpeeled vegetables and salads should be avoided.

Coffee and tea are commonly found across the country. However, they are usually not of the taste/standard familiar in the West, so if you have particular preferences for hot drinks, it would be worth bringing your own supply with you. Note that getting fresh milk is sometimes not possible on many of our tours; powdered milk or UHT might be possible in most places, but shouldn’t be taken for granted.

Mealtimes are likely to be somewhat flexible depending on our birding or travel plans for the day. So if you need to eat food at a specific time of day (e.g., to accompany any medication you are on), we recommend that you bring snacks to supplement the meals, such as cereal bars/protein bars, dried fruit, etc. There may be the opportunity to purchase some snacks from a convenience store/bakery while we are passing through the cities on some tours; however, if you want recognizable items, then it is probably best to bring these from home.

If you have any dietary requirements or food allergies, please let us know when you book the tour, so we can advise whether it will be suitable for you and notify the people who will be preparing meals ahead of time.

CURRENCY AND MONEY

You may wish to draw local currency (ariary) for tips, souvenirs, drinks, etc., at the airport ATM just after arrival. You can also speak to your guide when your money starts running short, so you can stop in the next few days when you drive through the next town with an ATM. You can also change most major currencies, but in general, euros will give you the best rate in Madagascar. When you do change money, ask for more small bills; these will come in handy for tips. (You can also use one-euro coins and one-dollar bills for tips if you have these.)

ELECTRICITY

Accommodation is, in general, fair and quite comfortable, but not luxurious. Generally, there is warm to hot water for baths or showers, and there is electricity for charging camera gear. But not everything works 100 percent of the time here in the “fourth world”, so expect the worst and be pleasantly surprised if it’s better than expected. Sometimes, there is power for charging only in the lodge restaurants and not in the rooms, or only when the generator is on. Electrical sockets are the same as in Europe (except the UK) – 2-prong and 220 Volts **ITA Type C** (please note that a lot of South African equipment can be plugged directly into these – it’s the same socket as the common 2-prong adapters South Africans use in their homes).

DOMESTIC/INTERNAL FLIGHTS

Air Madagascar has the monopoly as far as domestic flights within the country go (and, since it's a massive island with bad roads, one has to fly between some of the sites). Air Madagascar flights are, unfortunately, completely unreliable, and scheduled flight times can change on the day of the flight until as late as one hour before departure. On our usual two-week circuit ("The Best of Madagascar"), we only have one flight at the end of the trip, back to Tana. However, on comprehensive trips (when you do all the extensions/pre-trips shown on our website, basically), we can have six to eight local flights. One has to be philosophical about the fact that, because of Air Madagascar, the itinerary is never set in stone and changes invariably happen!

WHAT TO BRING: CLOTHING

Loose, lightweight field clothing with green, brown, or dark colors works best while we are birding in the forest. Sand and khaki-type colors are fine for birding in coastal and desert areas. Please avoid bright colors for birding time; for example, no pale colors in forests and no white, red, orange, etc., anywhere during birding time.

Given the potential insect issues in the forest (and the intense tropical sun), we suggest trousers/long pants and long-sleeved shirts (these can be rolled up should you get too hot) for all birding activities. Some people may be more comfortable wearing shorts at the coastal sites, though again, please be aware of biting insects, spiky plants, and the sun, which can all result in lots of discomfort.

Rain is considered unlikely, though not impossible, so light rain gear (and a small umbrella) is always worth having as a backup.

Casual and informal dress is appropriate for the hotels/accommodations we use on these tours. Sunglasses, sunhat, and sunscreen (rated SPF 30 or higher) are essential.

Lightweight walking boots are recommended for all our Madagascar tours as they give extra ankle support while walking (necessary given some of the trails we will be birding on) and added protection against animal stings/bites (e.g., potential snake issues). A pair of sandals (flip-flops) or trainers (tennis shoes) can be useful when in vehicles and walking between your room and restaurant in the hotels/towns.

WHAT TO BRING: OTHER ITEMS

Do not forget: Binoculars, camera, field guide (see "Books" section below), flashlight (torch – e.g., headtorch), spare batteries, power bank, converter plugs, plug adaptors, chargers, prescription drugs (please bring the generic names for these drugs with you), toiletries, prescription glasses (and a spare pair), insect repellent, sunscreen, sunglasses, money pouch, personal medical kit, and daypacks.

Our tour leader will have a communal telescope for use during the tour. The communal scope will allow everyone opportunities to look at birds briefly on a rotation basis. If you like to take "digiscope/phone-scope" photographs through a scope, or you would like to take prolonged scope views of the birds, please bring your own scope to do so. The communal scope will be for everyone to look at the birds, but not for photography. Please note that much of our birding in Madagascar

will be forest birding, where a scope will be cumbersome and of little use, and on forest walks, the tour leader may not carry a scope.

Some additional items to remember to bring include important travel documents, passport, cash (or ATM/credit cards to draw money), proof of vaccinations, and your travel or health insurance cards – photocopies of all can be carried by the tour leader in case of emergency.

Bringing a couple of different colored pens along with a 12-inch (30-centimeter) ruler can make the checklist session easier to follow on the longer tours.

Please refer to the tour-specific documents for further information on items to bring on the individual tours (where relevant). Additionally, very general details on what to bring on a birding tour can be seen on the blog post [here](#).

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

The official languages of Madagascar are Malagasy and French, with Malagasy being spoken throughout most of the country. French is spoken by around a quarter of the population. English is spoken at some of the accommodations we stay at, but unlikely to be spoken in more remote areas. Our local guides will help with translating when needed.

BOOKS

Bird guide – please see our [recommended field guides](#) to the seven continents and islands web resource.

Bird guide – **Birds of Madagascar and the Indian Ocean Islands** (Hawkins, Safford and Skerrett, 2016). This impressive guide is our go-to guide for exploring Madagascar and the Indian Ocean islands. The illustrations are well done and take into account the region's many subspecies, with the distribution maps and species texts opposite the illustrations.

Mammal guide – **Mammals of Madagascar: A Complete Guide** by Nick Garbutt.

We suggest you look for plant, chameleon (Madagascar has over half the world's chameleons!), and other guides, too! **Wildlife of Madagascar (Wildlife Explorer Guides)** is a guide to all of Madagascar's wildlife, including birds and even some plants, with excellent text and pictures.

