

MADAGASCAR FAUNA GROUP

Monthly from MADAGASCAR



March 2006

By Gareth Kett, Ivoloina Forest Manager

Photos by Karen Freeman, Programme Manager

Power-cuts have become part of the routine over the past few months as Madagascar's main electricity distributor, JIRAMA, has been operating on a substantial deficit over the past few years and are now introducing systematic power cuts to reduce operating costs. Fortunately, they have been helped out financially by international aid and are soon to be assisted in their management by a group of Germans.

While Europe remains gripped by a winter cold snap it's good to see some migratory European birds such as ruddy turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) and whimbrels (*Numenius phaeopus*) on the Madagascar east coast beaches. None have ventured inland to Ivoloina or Betampona yet though!

Betampona Reserve

Looking back to the February 2005 update readers may remember that, whilst resting on the Piste Principale, the Betampona agents were approached by an inquisitive pair of ring-tailed mongooses (*Galidia elegans*). Amazingly, the same thing happened to Karen and me at the same spot soon after we set out on a four-hour hike to the north of the reserve. Such experiences with animals in their unspoilt natural habitat really bring home the importance of preserving rainforest fragments such as Betampona as well as the better known National Parks and Special Reserves.



Gareth in the company of mongooses.

Travelling to Betampona

Management visits are made to Betampona twice a month, once by Karen and me and once by Bernard, to plan, discuss, and see the work being carried out by the MFG Betampona team. In this way, we stay in touch with the progress of the Betampona project, iron out any problems, and are able to keep the field station supplied and in good working order. Sometimes we make extra visits in order to accommodate visiting specialists. The trip from Tamatave to Betampona normally takes about six hours due to rough roads, a short pirogue (dug-out canoe) trip, seven river-crossings to wade across and a steep climb to finish off with!

As the Swallows Return to Capistrano, so the Pigeons to Rendrirendry



Each year a pair of Madagascar blue pigeons (*Alectonenas madagascariensis*) nest in and usually fledge a couple of chicks from a tree within the village of Rendrirendry. This year was no exception and Betampona bird specialist Arsene saw two chicks leave the nest one afternoon in late January. Arboreal and fairly gregarious but nesting in lone pairs, this endemic pigeon was originally a primary rainforest species but has adapted to east Madagascar's changing landscape and can be found in degraded forests, plantations and parks (Langrand, 1990). Madagascar's other pigeon, the Madagascar green pigeon (*Treron australis*), can also be found at Betampona. Both species have adapted to the secondary forest at Parc Ivoloina.

Tana Student Gets Stinging Send-Off

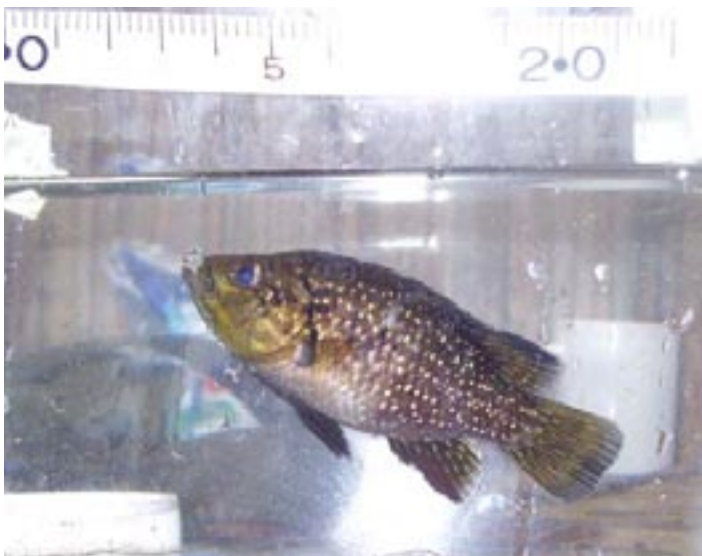
All too soon the time has come for University of Tana student Yedidya Ratovonamana to leave Betampona. It has been great having Yedidya work with us and it is hoped that his project mapping the guava (*Psidium cattleianum*) and longoza (*Aframomum angustifolium*) in and around the Betampona reserve will provide the spring-board for future intensive research into invasive species, their impact and how to manage them at Betampona. Unfortunately, Yedidya's last couple of weeks didn't go entirely to plan as he was stung by a scorpion during the course of his work! Whilst painful, stings from the scorpions at Betampona are only serious if a victim has an allergic reaction. Yedidya luckily did not. We wish him all the best for the future.

Parc Ivoloina

British researcher Hannah Betts has struck quickly, catching a *Paratilapia typus* in Lake Fulgence (Parc Ivoloina's biggest lake). *Paratilapia sp.* are large perch-like cichlids, which grow to a maximum standard length of 30cm, although the individual caught by Hannah with a minnow-trap was much smaller.

The genus *Paratilapia* are carnivores feeding on aquatic invertebrates, stranded terrestrial insects, and small fish. They are monogamous and practice long-term defence of their fry. They were formally widespread and high enough in abundance to support fisheries, but ranges have declined and populations have disappeared over the last century due to habitat destruction and predation by aggressive exotic species such as the introduced Asian snakehead (*Channa*) (Loiselle, 2003).

Paratilapia typus is now critically endangered. Their discovery in Lake Fulgence underlines the importance of Parc Ivoloina as a conservation refuge in its own right.



Up close with a *Paratilapia typus*

Mouse Lemur Rescue

As well as being a zoo, park, and education facility, Ivoloina is a sanctuary for animals confiscated or handed in from the pet trade. Animals are often taken in by the staff at Ivoloina where they are either cared for at the zoo or released into the forest after a period in quarantine. So it was, that at the end of January a female brown mouse lemur (*Microcebus rufus*) and her infant were brought into the office.



A new life in the Ivoloina forest awaits the new *Microcebus* - rescued from this dreadful cage.

The genus *Microcebus*, of which the brown mouse lemur is one, are the smallest living lemurs and probably the most abundant, widespread, and adaptable of all Malagasy primates (Mittermeier, 1994). The pair brought to Ivoloina are now in quarantine and are due to be released into the Parc Ivoloina forest by the time of this report. There is already a population of wild mouse lemurs in the forest.

Amenities Improvement for Visitors

There are countless attractive features to Parc Ivoloïna, but until recently there has been one bad point – the toilets. I am happy to report that this is no longer the case. While the traditional long-drop style of toilet is still available in parts of the park should visitors be caught short, new western-style toilets are now in place next to the car park. A great improvement!

Thanks to Tiger Aspects!

The December 2005 update mentioned a documentary filmed by the British Film company 'Tiger Aspects' covering the aye-aye (*Daubentonia madagascariensis*) and traditional rural Malagasy life. Since then Tiger Aspects have contacted us again and very kindly said that some of the proceeds will go directly to the MFG projects in Madagascar. Many thanks Tiger Aspects!

Save on Lemur Gear thru March 14

Now through March 14, 2006 you can get \$4 off purchases of \$40 or more at the MFG online store. So pick up a cool Parc Ivoloïna shirt or mug or a Madagascar mouse pad!

Just go to www.savethelémur.org and click on the online store. Use coupon code "March4" when you check out.



Make www.goodsearch.com your homepage!

Now you can fund conservation work every time you do an internet search. Here's how it works: Go to www.goodsearch.com (powered by Yahoo!)

Put "Madagascar Fauna Group" in the *I support* box and click on *Verify*. Then do your search. GoodSearch also has a toolbar you can download so that you can search right from the top of your browser.

The more people who use this, the more money is donated, so please spread the word! With just 150 people using this search a couple times a day for a year, we could pay the annual salary of one conservation agent!

Staff member of the month **Georges** Betampona Conservation Agent

Congratulations go to Georges and his wife Vaviline this month as the couple have just celebrated the birth of their fourth child – a healthy boy. The couple also have two girls and another boy.

35-year-old Georges joined the MFG at Betampona in early 2001, strengthening the team monitoring the released black and white lemurs (*Varecia variegata variegata*) and last year took on the challenging small mammal micro-project, with the objective of furthering our limited knowledge of this section of Betampona's fauna.



Georges – quiet, knowledgeable, and determined

One of the nicest guys you could hope to meet, Georges is quiet, patient, knowledgeable, and determined. He was born in Andratambe, near Betampona, studied in Tamatave – even learning some English, before returning to the countryside to farm and eventually to join the MFG.

Online Shopping Update: UK & Germany

Our online affiliate program with Amazon.com for North America has been up and running for a while. Now we're expanding to include the United Kingdom and Germany. Just click on the www.savethelemur.org website to bring your shopping in the appropriate search box.



Why do it? A portion of each purchase you make is donated to the MFG's programs. So when you want to go online and begin shopping for magazine subscriptions, books, CDs or DVDs, office supplies, baby supplies, furniture, and more, just start at the MFG website. Click the Amazon.com logo on the top left and go. You get all the same offers and prices. Free for you. Priceless for wildlife!

References:

Langrand O., 1990. Guide to the Birds of Madagascar. Vail-Ballou Press, Binghamton, New York.

P.V. Loiselle, 'Cichlidae: Paratilapia, Marakely, Fony, Fiamanga', in Goodman S.M. & Benstead J.P., 2003, The Natural History of Madagascar. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA.

Mittermeier R. A., Tattersall I., Konstant W. R., Meyers D.M. and Mast R.B., 1994, Lemurs of Madagascar, Conservation International.

What Swims Here?

If you're curious about Madagascar's aquatic creatures, the MFG website will soon feature quality photos of the fish and habitats of Madagascar. Text and images are provided by MFG scientific advisor Paul Loiselle.

Dr. Loiselle is curator of freshwater fishes at the New York Aquarium and has authored multiple books. His research has taken him throughout the world. Look for new images to be posted sometime in April!



Once feared extinct, a species of fish known as *Rheocles wrightae* inhabits the Mamovo River.