



# MONTHLY From MADAGASCAR

Vol: 3 Issue: 6 Month: September 2006

## Greetings from Karen & Gareth

It has been an exceptionally busy period for the MFG projects in Madagascar.

The new Ivoloina Conservation Training Centre (ICTC) was opened, the MFG annual meeting was held at the ICTC and members of the MFG

steering committee took part in an eventful trip to Betampona.

In a change from the normal layout of the update we'll focus initially on activities at Ivoloina before recounting the trip to Betampona.

## Parc Ivoloina

We welcomed back Professor Christof den Biggelaar from Appalachian State University, Missouri. Christoff visited Ivoloina and parts of the Tamatave province with Dr. Gene Garrett last year to assess and advise upon the current agricultural and agro-forestry practices in the Tamatave area. Christof will be spending a six-month sabbatical at Ivoloina, beginning in January 2007, during which time he will work with Ivoloina staff and the University of Tamatave improving agro-forestry practices in the area. As well as attending the MFG meeting, Christof used his time in Madagascar to do some groundwork in preparation for his sabbatical. We are also grateful to him for his help during the preparations for the meeting and the opening of the ICTC.

Despite the damp weather, the opening of the Ivoloina Conservation Training Centre was a resounding success. It was attended by around 60 authorities, including the Minister of the

Environment, Water, and Forests plus about 500 people from villages surrounding Ivoloina. In the morning the traditional "Joro", a sacrifice of two cattle, was performed to bless the building, then speeches were given and the invitees were shown around the new ICTC conference room, computer room, and laboratory. Jacques then led everybody on a guided tour of the agro-forestry model-station and the authorities were treated to a cocktail in the buvette and enjoyed a large communal feast. Credit must go to the MFG Ivoloina and office staff for their efforts in preparation for this event, particularly as the Minister of the Environment, Water and Forests only announced that he would be attending the opening a week before the planned opening date, and requested that the opening be rescheduled for two days earlier! All the invitations had to be re-issued, mostly by Rostand on his bike! Still it was good training for next month's Foulpointe - Tamatave bike-race



Photos: Dr. Karen Freeman  
Programme Manager

Text: Gareth Kett  
Ivoloina Forest Manager

to raise money for the campaign against sexually transmitted diseases!



The Minister of the Environment, Water and Forests addresses the crowd

## Farewell, Jeff - Welcome, Eric!



**Dr. Eric Miller**

In addition to the Betampona and Parc Ivoloïna teams, nineteen representatives from thirteen MFG member institutions took part in the MFG annual general meeting, which was fittingly the first major meeting to be held in the ICTC. A wide range of topics were covered assessing the progress of the Ivoloïna and Betampona projects to date and planning for the future. The meeting went well and provided an opportunity for MFG members to see the projects first hand.

During the MFG meeting Dr. Jeff Bonner, Director of St. Louis Zoo, who has been the MFG Chairman for the past couple of years, stepped down and was replaced by Dr. Eric Miller, also of St Louis Zoo. Jeff has been a great chairman and we wish him all the best for the future. We also wish him success with his first book *Sailing with Noah*, which has just been released. We welcome Eric as the new MFG Chairman and are confident of a successful future with him.



**Dr. Jeff Bonner**

## Meet Our New Voluntary Rangers

Two new voluntary rangers have started work at Ivoloina: Zanna Clay, a recent graduate from Bristol University, England and Tamatave resident Elijean Lama. Elijean recently began working with the education team at Ivoloina, having taken over the conservation, maintenance, education and

patrolling work of previous rangers. Elijean recently finished studying in Tamatave and hopes to pursue a career in conservation. Zanna's two months at Ivoloina mark the beginning of fourteen months for her as a conservation volunteer in Madagascar and South Africa.



## Betampona Reserve

After the MFG meeting Karen, Bernard and I took a group of eight representatives from MFG member institutions and a professional photographer, Mike Favazza, up to Betampona to visit the forest and the project there. We set off on Thursday 13 July and returned the following Saturday. Below is a brief account of the trip...

### To Betampona and Back: An Unusual Story

The MFG meeting went well but was plagued with minor vehicular problems. The last of these was a flat tyre on the Landcruiser late on Wednesday, the day before we had planned to take it and the Hi-Lux as far as the village of Anosibe on the way to Betampona. We would have to leave the vehicles guarded at a school at Anosibe because the 100m bridge spanning the river was destroyed by Cyclone "Kessine" in 2002. The river must now be crossed by boat. On Wednesday evening I took the tyre to be repaired and was assured that it would be ready by 0730 on Thursday morning.

We had planned to pick everyone up from the "Joffre" hotel in town and to set off at 0700 on Thursday,



Mike & the Mechanics

but straight away we were delayed by having to pick up the tyre, which of course wasn't ready - a fact emphasised by the curse spurted by the tyre repairer as we pulled up. So Mike took out his camera and the repairs were filmed, naturally drawing in an interested crowd of locals.

So we left town an hour behind schedule on a showery Thursday morning, cruised past Ivoloina, and drove on without a hiccup until we came to a large colonial iron bridge. Numerous iron sections form the floor of the bridge -- but many are now missing. A few more had fallen down into the river 40m below since our last crossing a month previously, such that I did not feel that it was safe to cross

without rearranging the remaining iron sections. So Bernard who was driving the Hi-Lux and I rearranged the puzzle of the iron sections until it seemed to us that the vehicles could safely straddle the gap down the centre of the bridge, and with most of our passengers walking, we tentatively drove the vehicles across.



Karen (showing faith!) and Bernard prepare to straddle the bridge.

Mike had repeatedly asked us to stop so that he could take moving shots of the vehicles going along the broken, drenched road, so we were falling even further behind schedule. Karen had asked Celestin (Head Betampona agent) to arrange a "voyage special" taxi-brousse trip for us, which we were supposed to meet at 0900 (ish). It was by now already gone 0900. So we picked up the pace, ploughing straight into an unexpectedly deep, water-filled hole in the road. There was a loud thump as the rear left wheel of the Landcruiser dropped into the hole and the chassis area behind the wheel hit the ground, damaging the exhaust pipe and knocking off a section off our rear bumper. Fortunately, Ingrid, travelling behind us in the Hi-Lux with Bernard and Karen, saw the bumper section drop off and picked it up.

So on to Anosibe, where we left the vehicles at the school and made our way down the slippery, muddy slope down to the boats. Suddenly, Mike Favazza's feet went from under him and he landed with an emphatic splat in the mud. We didn't realize at the time that this was to be the pattern of things to come - particularly for Mike. Credit to him though - he was quickly on his feet and sprinting in a sliding uncontrolled descent towards the boats, much to the amusement of the locals. He managed to remain upright though - this time . . .

The ferrymen at Anosibe have done so well in the four years since the bridge came down that they've recently been able to upgrade from dugout pirogues to metal boats. Soon we were aboard one of these and across the river. Reaching the top of the bank on the other side we realised that we had another problem. It was now almost 1100. Our "voyage special" taxi-brousse had waited until 1000 and then caved in to pressure from other would-be-passengers and left. Mike passed the time waiting for its return

by filming delighted local children and playing back footage for them.



**Mike plays back film footage for the local children.**

The taxi-brousse returned at midday, lurched into the sugar cane beside the road as it attempted to turn around, lurched out again, and came to a halt. The last time that we had ridden in this taxi-brousse the battery, positioned beneath one of the benches had exploded! Now we saw that a sheet of transparent polythene had taken the place of the windscreen, which we learnt had been broken when the taxi-brousse hit a bike a couple of months ago!

Immediately one of the taxi-brousse crew of three dived under the rear of the taxi-brousse and began working on something. From underneath he shouted to us to get in, but most of us, fearing injury to him waited for him to emerge. Then, bags secure on the roof, we piled in and they push-started the van. I was perched on the spare wheel on the floor as there wasn't enough room for all of us on the benches. After a kilometre or so a weird noise started coming from beneath Karen who was sitting above the back left wheel. Soon the noise developed into a painful grating and it became apparent that the wheel was rubbing

on the bodywork of the vehicle, but the driver was showing no sign of stopping - in fact he was revving harder to counteract the resistance of the tyre on the bodywork. At this point we became mildly concerned and shouted to Bernard, at the front of the van, to tell the driver to stop. In English Bernard replied "He knows, he's just trying to get to a downhill slope where we can bump start again!" Eventually the van stopped, having failed to reach a suitable bump-starting hill and so with the engine still running, one of the crew again dived under the vehicle. It appeared that the repair may take some time and so we decided to walk - Bernard and the taxi-brousse were to follow with the bags once it was repaired.

After about 100m I realised that, with 15km to walk, I'd left the plasters in my rucksack on the roof of the van and so with Mike Bungard (The Living Rainforest) I went back to the taxi-brousse while the others went on. By the time that we had got to my first-aid kit amongst the baggage on the roof, the taxi-brousse crew of three reckoned that they had repaired the vehicle. They had somehow jammed a piece of wood and a spanner between the axle and the chassis so that the wheel no longer rubbed on the bodywork. So we got in, caught up with the walkers and once again we were all on the move. Then a "ding" as the spanner flew out from under the vehicle and once again we came to a standstill. This time they made sure of the repair by tying the spanner and wood in place with an old piece of cord and on we went, with me and Ingrid now hanging off the back to make more room inside. Actually it felt a lot safer standing on the back and holding onto the roof rack, but it became mildly uncomfortable when it started pouring with rain! It was worse for the guy sitting on the roof with the baggage though!

*continued on next page*



We rattled on, but kept going through the village of Ambodiriana and onwards for another 3km or so. There's a concrete bridge spanning a river tributary 3km out of Ambodiriana, which has at some point broken at one end so that now you have to drive up wooden ramps onto a handrail-less, wooden secondary structure bridging the damaged part of the bridge. The left side ramp off the secondary bridge onto the main bridge had rotted away and had been replaced with a combination of wood and rocks to form a sharp ramp down onto the main concrete bridge. Descending this ramp our taxi-brousse came very abruptly to a halt – stuck on the bridge. The left hand rear leaf-springs had become separated by, and wedged onto, an iron brace holding a section of the secondary structure of the bridge together on the apex of the ramp. Out we got once again. With lots of wheel-spinning the driver freed the van... and tried again... this time getting a run up and building up some speed... once again the leaf springs caught on the iron brace and the taxi-brousse came to an a crunching halt, the back wheels coming off ground and the secondary bridge shaking violently. My water bottle flew off the roof and over the edge of the bridge, coming to rest 15m below in the vegetation next to the brook.



This time no amount of wheel spinning could free the stricken van so the driver got out a hammer and bolster and began trying to break the iron brace holding the van. Without much success I tried to get some bystanders to push the van while the driver continued whacking the bridge. He eventually succeeded in dislodging the iron brace, but not in freeing the vehicle.



**Firmly wedged onto the bridge... the driver attempts to free the taxi-brousse.**

However, with Bernard's help I finally managed to muster enough of the bystanders to push/lift the van free of the iron brace, but once free the van stalled. Having persuaded the driver that modifying the ramp was preferable to another charge at the bridge, we extended the ramp using stone and wood and finally pushed the van onto the main bridge. We bump started it and again got in.

It is the rainy season in a tropical rainforest region and just before you reach Fontsimavo, where the walk to Betampona begins, the tarmacked road has in the past fallen away into the river below the road and a new road has been dug into the bank, so that this section of the road is now just earth with a bit of stone. Sure enough we got stuck here too - the little taxi-

brousse slipping backwards and burying its exhaust pipe in the mud. Fortunately, one of the crew pulled out a shovel and freed the exhaust pipe before anything exploded. Out everyone got again and some of the group began pushing but to little avail. We were now only 500m from Fontsimavo so Karen led most of the group onto Fontsimavo by foot to meet the porters while Bernard, Eric Miller, Alex Rübel (Zurich Zoo), Dave Morgan (Director of PAZAAB), and I stayed back to help free the taxi-brousse with our luggage still on the roof. A lot of pushing, spinning, sliding and digging later the van was freed and finally, at 1400 the taxi-brousse made it to Fontsimavo and the waiting, by now slightly drunk, porters.



**Time to push...again!**

After a two-hour, wet, slippery hike incorporating seven river-crossings the party made it to Rendrirendry and Betampona four hours late.



The Betampona team had prepared a fantastic welcome for them including speeches, dancing, snacks and drinks. During the meal that evening the nerves of the visitors were tested when the cooler temperatures lured five snakes (all *Madagascarophis columbinus*) into the kitchen area. Anastasie's cooking was delicious though.

*continued on next page*



**Flowers of welcome for the ladies.**  
(Photo:A. Rübél)

The following day the MFG team led the guests into the forest in search of lemurs and any other wildlife that could be found while Mike Favazza

continued in his quest to interview just about everyone present - during Karen's interview a leech, hoping to get in on the action, attached itself to her cheek! Despite damp conditions the Betampona agents managed to locate two groups of black and white

lemurs (*Varecia variegata variegata*), a group of white-fronted brown lemurs (*Eulemur fulvus albifrons*), a group of indri (*Indri indri*), numerous birds including a pair of red-breasted couas (*Coua serriana*), an eastern ashy cuckoo-shrike (*Coracina cineria*) and a group of Ward's flycatchers (*Pseudobias wardi*) and a variety of reptiles and amphibians.

It was an early start the next morning for the return. The group slid their way back down to Fonstimavo, but managed to get a slightly more respectable taxi-brousse back to Anosibe as the original one had (not too surprisingly) broken down!

The return trip to Tamatave was smooth but the staff at the Joffre hotel must have wondered what was going on as the muddy, bedraggled but happy group of adventurers returned to their rooms for well earned showers.



**In the Forest**



## Staff Member of the Month

### Pascal Zoo Keeper & Guardian

Volunteers and students working at Ivoloïna will be familiar with Pascal, who in addition to his regular job as a zookeeper, is the guardian for the new training centre and Gite Mahatsinjo. Quiet, dependable and helpful, with a better grasp of French than he lets on, Pascal began work for the MFG in 2002, having previously worked for 12 years for the Department of Water and Forests (Eaux et Forêts).

Pascal was born in Ambonivato in 1967 and schooled in Analakolsy, near Ivoloïna, and Tamatave. He lives on-site at Ivoloïna with his wife and young son and daughter.



## Free E-Newsletter

Wondering what's happening on your favorite island beyond the specific updates from Ivoloïna and Betampona? Sign up for the free e-newsletter for info from around Madagascar at [www.savethelemur.org](http://www.savethelemur.org).

Questions or comments on these updates or the e-newsletter?

Please e-mail [tim@savethelemur.org](mailto:tim@savethelemur.org)

Madagascar Fauna Group  
c/o St. Louis Zoo  
1 Government Drive  
St. Louis MO 63110 USA

[www.savethelemur.org](http://www.savethelemur.org)

