

MADAGASCAR FAUNA GROUP

Monthly from MADAGASCAR



February 2006

By Gareth Kett, Ivoloina Forest Manager

Photos by Karen Freeman, Programme Manager

It seems that Madagascar seldom gets off to a sprint start in the New Year, but rather gradually eases itself back into the work routine. Yet, despite the now sweltering heat, the MFG has been quick off the blocks as the Saturday classes get going again, construction continues, and students get stuck into new projects.

It was party time at Ivoloina on the 7th January as the MFG held its annual New Year's party. The Ivoloina staff and their families were joined by the Betampona agents as the projects combined to celebrate a successful 2005 and to see in the New Year. Everybody had a great time!



New Year's party in full swing.

Betampona Reserve

These days you do not have to walk far up the Piste Principale trail, which leaves the village of Rendrirendry taking you into the forest, before you come across the tell-tale signs of the reserve's largest mammals. The ground has been disturbed and periodically there are droppings sometimes containing seed such as palm seeds. It is uncertain whether the bush pig (*Potamochoerus larvatus*) was introduced to Madagascar or (less likely) rafted the Mozambique Channel on large detached reed beds.

In Madagascar, they are superficially divided into two subspecies. The subspecies *P.larvatus hova*, found in eastern rainforest regions, is larger and greyer in colour than the nominate race *P.l.larvatus*. They exist in groups of between two and ten individuals, normally including a dominant male, which is estimated can weigh up to around 70kg. Females are estimated to reach around 55kg in weight and give birth to litters of one to four piglets between October and December. They can be found in primary forest and disturbed areas but are generally hard to see due to their secretive nature (Garbutt, 1999).

At Betampona, they present a problem as they often venture into areas of guava for food, thus acting as dispersers of guava seed. They are widely hunted in Madagascar, sometimes with dogs.



Bush pig (generic image)

Research in the Villages

Laurette Vavilisy Be-Jean from the École Normale Supérieure teacher training college in Antananarivo began a socio-economic study of the villages surrounding Betampona for her placement project last month. Her study will explore how people live in the area around Betampona, what their needs are and how the MFG as an organisation can help to alleviate any problems. It is an ambitious study and we wish her well.

Agents Increase Lemur Monitoring

For the second successive season the wild and released black and white ruffed lemurs (*Varecia variegata variegata*) at Betampona do not seem to have bred successfully. It is not clear why not as food seems to be abundant and there is no obvious disrupting factor in the forest. In an attempt to get a better appreciation of the situation, the Betampona agents are planning to intensify their work monitoring the black and white ruffed lemur for a stretch of time.

Ivoloina Park

The Piste Reboisement forms part of Parc Ivoloina's current network of five trails, which covers approximately 8km. 1.5km of the Piste Reboisement was, historically, passable with a 4x4 vehicle. However, three broken or non-existent wooden bridges have in recent years rendered the track impassable -- until last week. A concerted effort by Parc Ivoloina staff supported by local labourers has resulted in the replacement of these bridges with earth-and-tunnel bridges that can reasonably be expected to last 50 years or more. This has opened up the possibility of more concentrated management and reforestation activities in areas of the park so far not focused upon due to practical inaccessibility.



Replacing the bridges.

Good News for Bamboo Lemurs

It was while walking on one of these trails, the Piste Cascade, that Karen and I came across a small group of eastern lesser bamboo lemurs (*Haplemur griseus griseus*) including two babies. The adults were released in the Ivoloina Forest in 1999 but are secretive and seldom seen. This sighting was especially pleasing as it proves that the Ivoloina secondary forest habitat is well enough suited to the lesser bamboo lemurs that they can breed successfully.

Chatting to Bernard a few days later I learnt that there is also a new born baby in the group. The small, grey eastern lesser bamboo lemur is one of the most adaptable lemurs and so able to survive in relatively degraded habitats. Plans are afoot to plant more bamboo in the Ivoloina forest in order to improve the habitat for the lesser bamboo lemurs.



Eastern lesser bamboo lemurs in the Zoo.

New Exhibit for Breeding

Historically, there have been incidents with lemurs giving birth to young in cages adjacent to other lemurs. Sometimes when the young have ventured from their mothers and inquisitively reached through the mesh, they have encountered aggression from adults in the neighbouring cage. Now, to address this problem we are having a cage specifically designed for breeding constructed by *Enterprise « K »*. These are the contractors who built the Training Centre.

New Edition: Lemurs of Madagascar

Following its first publication in 1994, *Conservation International's Field Guide to the Lemurs of Madagascar* has been a wildly popular field guide. So popular that it has been sold out for quite some time. Used copies on the internet are being listed for \$559 US. But if you want to save \$534 and get information on the lemurs discovered and studied in the past decade, go Conservation International's site at www.conservation.org and click on the newsroom section. Look for the February press release which includes a link to the order form. Just \$25 and it includes domestic US shipping. (The form is also reproduced in this newsletter.) Write in that you heard about this through the MFG!

Staff Member of the Month

Beny

Zoo Keeper - Tortoise Keeper

There are two species of tortoise on display in the zoo; 407 radiated tortoises (*Geochelone radiata*) and 6 spider tortoises (*Pyxis arachnoides*). Beny is responsible for all of these, including 143 babies born between 2001 and 2005.

49 year-old Beny, a regular in the beginners' English class, began work at Ivoloïna in 1989 having previously worked as a banana grower and then as part of the team planting native trees on the Parc Ivoloïna peninsula.

He regularly cycles 5km to collect vegetation for the tortoises, which he stacks on the back of the bike for the return journey.



Hannah outside Gite Mahatsinjo !

Aquatic Work Continues

In January, we welcomed Hannah Betts to Ivoloïna from England. Following the great work carried out a couple of months ago by St. Louis student Nick Lang, Hannah will be creating a photographic inventory of the Ivoloïna aquatic life. She will also be assisting in some of the Park Ivoloïna reforestation activities.

Professional Training for Staff

Environmental Education centre assistant Onésime has left us for three months to go on a management and computing course, which will enable him to progress in his work and to further improve the overall functioning of the education centre. Tamatave student Elijean Lama is gaining some valuable experience (and much needed money to support his studies) by covering for Onésime in his absence.



Elijean – standing in for Onésime.



Dances with Tortoises!

From a very poor background Beny had no formal education, but has taught himself French and has become a very competent and valuable zookeeper. He was born in the village of Vohiadrotra where he still lives today with his wife and 3 children. He also has 3 grown up children no longer living at home.



John Behler, We'll Miss You

It is with profound grief that we must tell of the passing of John Behler on Tuesday, January 31.

John served as Curator of Herpetology at the Bronx Zoo and so much more. John was a great scientist and conservationist and an important member of many conservation efforts in addition to serving on the steering committee of the Madagascar Fauna Group.

His wife Debbie announced that memorial contributions may be made to either of these organizations:

Wildlands Preservation Fund, Wildlands Conservancy, 3701 Orchid Place, Emmaus, PA 18049

John L. Behler Chelonian Conservation Center
49 Bleeker Street, Suite 101, New York, NY 10012

Remembering John:

Charlie Welch & Andrea Katz, MFG Technical Advisors

How sad it is to lose John. He was truly such a worker for conservation and bridged the zoo - field conservation gap in a way that few have been able to. His contribution in so many areas has been enormous. His voice in the Madagascar Fauna Group was always one of practicality and realism which helped keep the MFG moving forward. For us, we will never forget his unwavering support for the MFG projects at Ivoloina and Betampona, and his support of us personally. We will miss him.

Ingrid Porton, MFG Vice Chair

This morning I received the extremely sad news from Paul Loiselle that our very dear friend John Behler passed away. John was an MFG institution. His love and knowledge of Madagascar, his research, his activism to protect Madagascar's herps from the pet trade were invaluable contributions he made to the MFG. But it is John who we will miss; his wit, his kindness, even his love of kitty-cats. I will always be grateful for John's support when, in Madagascar at the MFG meeting, I learned that my father had passed away. We all have special memories of John; he was a special person.

Richard Lattis, Senior VP for Living Institutions & General Director, Wildlife Conservation Society

We are all saddened by the loss of a great scientist and conservationist. His work in the field and for the Reptile Department continued the long history of WCS conservation work. John was a member of numerous community and conservation boards and committees, as well as a willing advisor to the DEC, Westchester Parks Department and other state and local agencies.

His love for turtles resulted in an incredible program for the conservation of radiated tortoises and the assemblage of the largest breeding group of these endangered species outside of Madagascar. Not stopping with that success, he spent many devoted years working with this and other Malagasy species. As the coordinator for the Chinese Alligator SSP, John not only created an outstanding example of a well-organized SSP for others to follow, but once again, combined his field work with his Zoo programs on behalf of these species.

Like Beebe, Ditmars and other WCS scientists and curators before him, John exemplified the remarkable qualities of a scientist who was at home in the zoo and the field. His work is known and appreciated world-wide.

John was my long-time friend and I will miss him. I am certain all of us are equally saddened by this loss.

Lemurs of Madagascar
Mail and Fax Order Form * * * MFG UPDATE * * *

Book Title: *Lemurs of Madagascar* by Russell A. Mittermeier, William R. Konstant, Frank Hawkins, Edward E. Louis, Olivier Langrand, Jonah Ratsimbazafy, Rodin Rasoloarison, Jorg U. Ganzhorn, Serge Rajaobelina Ian Tattersall, and David M. Meyers. Illustrations by Stephen D. Nash. ISBN: 1-881173-88-7. Soft cover. Second Edition.

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