

MADAGASCAR FAUNA GROUP

Monthly from MADAGASCAR



April 2005

By Gareth Kett, Ivoloina Forest Manager

Photos by Karen Freeman, Programme Manager

For us it is amazing to think that a year has already gone by since we arrived in Madagascar to begin work with the Madagascar Fauna Group. But it has, and so at the beginning of May, we returned to England for a pleasant month's break. On returning, it was great to see that the teams at Betampona and Ivoloina had done a great job in our absence and that the projects are running smoothly. The cold season has arrived since we left Madagascar and while the daytime temperature still hovers around 20°C, the Malagasy are wrapped up in woolly hats, big coats and scarves.

MFG Annual General Meeting Köln, Switzerland 21-24 May

Despite a small turnout the meeting was valuable and defined some key objectives for the MFG projects in Madagascar. Our gratitude goes to our hosts, Köln Zoo, whose hospitality was extremely generous.

Our thanks also goes to Alex Rubel, director of Zoo Zürich, who kindly invited us to the zoo and showed us around the extraordinary Masoala Kely rainforest exhibit. It's like walking into the real rainforest, minus the leeches and mozzies! Back in February/March, a small team of Alex's keepers used Ivoloina as a collection point for animals on an expedition to translocate a number of small animals from some Madagascar forest fragments to the Masoala Kely exhibit.



Masoala Kely exhibit, Zoo Zürich.

Betampona Reserve

University of Missouri-St. Louis graduate student Carl Toborowsky was joined by Tahiana Andriaharimala, also a graduate, from the University of Tana. Tahiana's botanical background is already complementing Carl's knowledge of the white-fronted brown lemur (*Eulemur fulvus albifrons*). MFG guide Justin from Rendriendry, who was initially hired by Carl as a guide has worked so well that he's effectively become the third member of the team allowing the lemurs to be kept under continuous surveillance during daytime hours. Justin's ability to spot animals at distance in dense vegetation has been invaluable.



Carl Toborowsky.

June 5th - World Environmental Day. Two tree-planting ceremonies were organised by the Betampona team at schools in Ambodirafia and Ambodriana respectively on the 5th and 12th June to mark the occasion. Both events proved to be a great success with the combined involvement of around 500 children, who performed traditional song and dance and a ceremonial football match at Ambodirafia.



On parade! Ambodriana schoolchildren.

As at Ivoloina, there's a small nursery at Rendrirendry where plants suitable for agro-forestry, forest restoration, and sustainable agricultural practices are propagated. The young plants and trees are given to or sold very cheaply to villagers in the areas around Betampona. The team have just begun to grow large numbers of cloves as they are easy to grow on poor soils and the crop has a potentially strong market value. It is essential that villager income, both short-term and long-term, is not compromised by environmentally friendly agricultural and agro-forestry practices if their adoption is to be successful. Recognition must go to the tremendous work done by Rendrirendry handymen Inah and Dieu in the upkeep of the nursery and reforestation plots at Rendrirendry.

The wildlife continues to use Rendrirendry as an extension of the forest. Following in the footsteps of a leaf-tailed gecko (*Uroplatus lineatus*) a couple of months ago a crepuscular snake (*Madagascrophis columbrinus sp.*) has taken to entering the kitchen at night, probably in search of food or perhaps warmth. There are four subspecies of *M. columbrinus* (*M. c. columbrinus*, *M. c. occidentalis*, *M. c. pastoriensis* and *M. c. septentrionalis*) of which only *M. c. columbrinus*, distinctive by its lack of a white tipped tail, is known from the east coast (Glaw and Vences, 1994). Yet interestingly some of the Betampona snakes have white tips to their tails. Reptile expert Chris Raxworthy who visited Betampona in 2003 was unable to classify these individuals to subspecies, advising that more research was needed. *M. columbrinus sp.* feeds on frogs, geckos, skinks, chameleons, other snakes and small birds, but although mildly venomous, this rear-fanged snake is not aggressive, which is just as well as it's often found in the immediate surroundings of villages.



***M. columbrinus sp.* on kitchen floor. Photo: C. Toborowsky**

Congratulations go to the youngest Betampona agent Olivier and his girlfriend Petti, who recently gave birth to the couple's first child – a baby girl. Mother and daughter are both doing well.

Ivoloina Park

The meeting held in St. Louis between MFG management personnel, Tamatave local government, ANGAP and University of Tamatave representatives along with American university and Missouri Botanical Garden representatives (see April update) to discuss the progress of and set core objectives for the training centre proved challenging, but productive. The President of the Tamatave Province reaffirmed his support for the training centre project and some key US collaborators were identified for the training programme. We hope that the new relationships forged will prove fruitful. A special mention should go to Dr. Gene Garrett, a specialist in agro-forestry, and Dr. Rick Mayden, a fish biologist, for their enthusiastic commitment to help take the training centre forward.



Taking in a baseball game.

Whilst in St. Louis the Malagasy representatives were treated to some American life-style experiences such as a tour around St. Louis Zoo and a baseball match between the St. Louis Cardinals and the Philadelphia Phillies. Despite the home-team's resounding defeat the visitors were blown away by the atmosphere. We take our hats off to MFG advisor Andrea Katz who has taken on the task of seeking additional funding for the development of the training centre programme.

The onset of the cold, rainy season has held up construction on the training centre, but the project remains on schedule due to the jump-start it received from the dry weather during the initial phases. A problem has cropped up, however, as the ever-escalating prices of raw materials in Madagascar has driven up the construction costs, eating into the budget for furnishing the buildings.

Ivoloina Education Officer Randriambelona was also in America, having won a scholarship from the American Zoo and Aquarium Association for a course in environmental education in Sacramento, California. As expected Randria excelled and also proved very popular in his visits to St. Louis Zoo and Durham, organised by the MFG. Our thanks go to Andrea Katz, Charlie Welch and Ingrid Porton for hosting Randria in Durham and St. Louis, respectively.

French student Stephanie Gillard has began work on a six-month project studying the use of medicinal plants in the Ivoloina area, assisted by University of Tamatave student Landry Harison Donatien and on occasion Bernard, Jacques, Randria and Rostand. In addition to Stephanie's written project, the team is putting together a medicinal garden on agro-forestry model-station ground. The garden will feature both native and exotic plants found at Ivoloina and in the surrounding area, together with information placards concerning the basic uses of the plants in Malagasy and French. A pamphlet will also be available in Malagasy, French, and English giving more detailed information to visitors.



Jacques, Jacquis and Sosten on the medicinal garden site.

References:

Glaw F. and Vences M., 1994, *A Field Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Madagascar*. Second edition. Moos Druck, Leverkusen and FARBO, Koln.

Staff member of the month

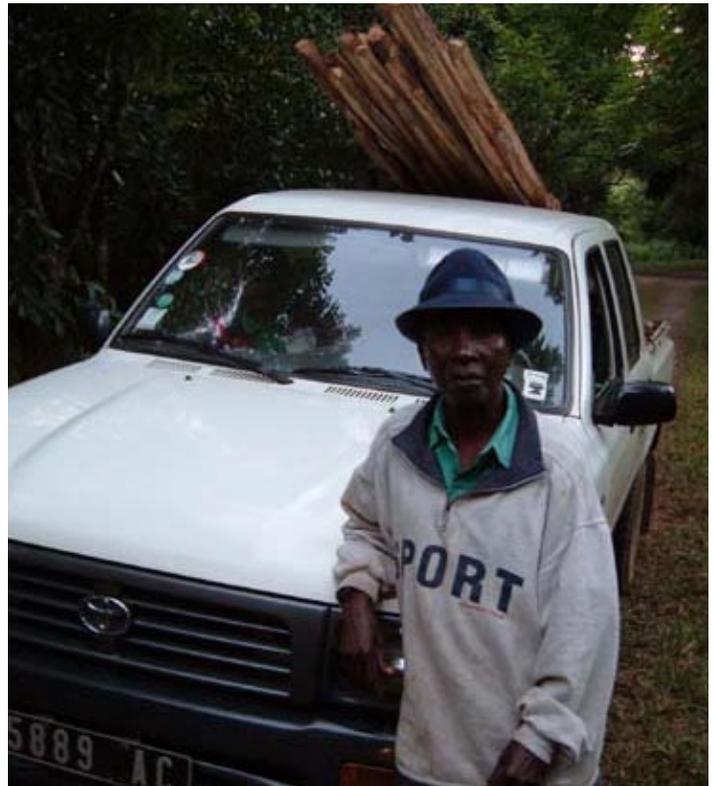
Todivelo

MFG Chauffeur

It's a 12km drive from Tamatave to Ivoloina, the final 4km of which is on a demanding dirt road. The upkeep of the zoo, and food demands of the animals require frequent trips to and from Tamatave and to the villages near Ivoloina with the park vehicle – a 1999 Toyota Hi-Lux crew-cab - often heavily loaded.

Damage to the vehicle means wasted time and logistical problems, with only moderately reliable mechanic available. Then there are the twice-monthly project supply/researcher transport trips along the 20km broken road to the washed away bridge at Nosibe. It is Todivelo who shoulders the responsibility for these trips, the safety of the personnel in the truck and the maintenance of the vehicle.

At 63, he is the oldest member of the MFG staff and despite a disarmingly jovial personality he takes his responsibilities very seriously, calling on his years of experience to nurse the truck through it's work with a minimum of wear and tear.



Todivelo with the truck.

Previously a truck-driver on the treacherous Tamatave-Tana road, Todivelo lives with his family at Antsampanana 4km from Ivoloina.